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Lucy Rayfield, *Poetics, Performances and Politics in French and Italian Renaissance Comedy*. Oxford: Legenda (MHRA), 2022. 228 pp. Notes, references, timeline, and index. £85.00 (pb). ISBN 9781781885161.

Review by Corinne Noirot, Virginia Tech.

Lucy Rayfield's doctoral thesis in comparative literature, initially supervised at Oxford by Richard Cooper and Martin McLaughlin, was published by the organization that partly funded it, that is, the Modern Humanities Research Association (Legenda imprint). The resulting book offers new insights on the literary and cultural history of theatre in France, especially neo-classical comedy, between 1540 and 1580. It contests the undervaluation of French comedy from the sixteenth century and delineates shifting attitudes towards Italian influence in the period, from humanist reverence to wartime resistance. The study follows a roughly chronological outline over six chapters, two for each of the three broad categories spelled out in the title: part one, "Poetics" (on Estienne's, Sébillet's, and Pleiade's paratexts; about the theory of comedy and the drive to revive it); part two, "Performance?" (on *La Calandra* and Jodelle on stage, i.e., the practice of comedy); and part three, "Politics" (on anti-Italianist polemics in Grévin, Larivey, and Turnèbe). A timeline of key dates, synopses of the plays, plus an index and bibliography round out the volume.

Lest the title mislead the prospective reader, let us first specify that Rayfield's study deals with French and Italian Renaissance comedy within France, in a French national context. It "brings to light the complexity of the genre's emergence in France: it tells not a story of success, but one of experimentation, contest, and dispute," she states (p. 9). The Italian plays mentioned in this comparative study appear as sources, but also as pioneer translations, as well as performances staged in court or festival settings. Forays into said festival culture constitute the greatest achievement of this study.

The argumentation is a little unassured, partly because it posits a "standard narrative" held by scholars of French comedy, while the idea of a "linear development" (p. 8) has been nuanced in the past decade or two (beyond Brereton, Chasles, or Lawton, quoted as references in literary history [1]). If the central idea is that of a seesaw development of the genre, then how can all the authors studied be deemed forerunners? The author may also be overstating the disruptive force and weaponization of comedy, since very few of those plays reached a sizable audience. Likewise, it is hard to fully see the ideological shift Rayfield identifies in the tone of the cultural rivalry. Do we truly go from literary "attempts to surpass Italian models" (p. 6) to more political attacks? Was there such a stark shift towards "overthrow[ing] the Italian cultural dominance in Europe"

[p. 6])? And to support that general argument, can we so easily conflate anti-Italianism with anti-Catholic or anti-Papist sentiment in *Les Contens*, as chapter six does? Likewise, hiding, or not explicitly naming, one's sources was the norm in the humanist practice of imitation rather than the exception. Therefore, it is a stretch to treat it as evidence of a particular intent, especially deceitful.

The broad thesis and dual intent to show “the tense and largely unstable relationship between those two cultures” (p. 6) and the “the forward-and-backward movement of comedy in France” (p. 8) partly explain why the chapters tend to read more like a series of stand-alone articles. (The prevailing format for doctoral dissertations also explains that.) Effective textual parallels tie together the Grévin and Turnèbe chapters in the book. Because authors such as Jean de la Taille, Baïf, Amboise, and Belleau teach us less about performance culture and Franco-Italian rivalry than some of the comedies selected, they are excluded from the corpus. Yet these authors' comedies may well illustrate the book's claim that dramatic innovation and nationalistic positioning characterize the genre.

It is when examining performance records, among other archival documents, that Rayfield finds her stride. In the most involved chapter of the book, she sketches out the layered context for the public staging of Bibbiena's *La Calandra* (in the original language) as part of the royal entry into Lyon in 1548. She documents the contributions or influence of various Italian artists surrounding that performance, including the Florentine sculptor Lastricati, as well as professional Italian actors. She also emphasizes the goal of the Lyonese “nation florentine” to please the royal couple, especially Catherine, long familiar with *La Calandra* and its Tuscan author. To help us visualize that royal entry, Rayfield uses not only Scève's published account of the festivities, but also local archives, contemporary translations and transcriptions, and historiographical sources. Judiciously selected paintings, city maps (specifically for *La Trésorière* and *Les Contens*, whose plots mention Parisian spots), mythological plates, and architectural engravings (especially Sebastiano Serlio's) serve to successfully anchor comedy in the social fabric and cultural atmosphere of the cities concerned. Similarly, Rayfield sheds new light on the courtly and urban networks responsible for printing and producing humanist plays. She convincingly hypothesizes that the orchestration of the royal entry, including the staging of *La Calandra*, was the work of influential Italian patrons, among those: Ippolito d'Este, whose family, like Catherine's, had personal ties with Bibbiena and who had introduced theatre in Ferrara and Fontainebleau; and the Lyon-based Ridolfi, Gondi, and Guadagni.

The pointed biographical information Rayfield provides regarding various authors, artists, and patrons of the arts adds much value to the work. Robert Estienne's prominence as *Imprimeur du Roy*, for instance, illuminates Charles's connection to his brother's Latin milieu and the pre-Pléiade authors that discussed the nature and status of comedy in the early 1540s. Rayfield also underscores the fact that Charles Estienne's Italian sojourns in the 1530s, first as a student then as young Baïf's tutor, explain his Italianophile stance and his learned connections—with the Venetian Manuzio, among others. He was, moreover, Simon de Coline's stepson, and Coline's publications fed the debate over the imitation of the Ancients. We learn just as much about Grévin's family and circle, thanks to Rayfield's concise and precise biographical notes. Catherine and Marguerite's involvement is equally made clear, as in the revelation that Catherine de Medici *de facto* stopped commissioning tragedies after the tragic death of her husband.

Paratextual and didactic publications form the bulk of the corpus. They allow a rich contextualization, as well as a few intertextual discoveries. We owe Rayfield and Cooper credit for unearthing Estienne's *Livre des jeux et theatres antiques* (ca. 1543). The manuscript, held by the Vatican Library, is briefly presented in the book. Rayfield identifies other overlooked sources; she contends that Estienne's definition of a scene derives from Cinzio's *Discorso intorno al comporre delle commedie e delle tragedie* (likely circulated in the 1530s and 1540s). In addition, she transcribes De Mesmes's short prefatory letters to his translations, thus offering the first modern edition thereof. Unfortunately, the methodological interplay between text, context, and paratext promised in the introduction is thin. Textual analysis is sparse, except for that of Grévin's *Les Esbahis* (1561) and Turnèbe's *Les Contens* (1580). Jodelle's *L'Eugène* is virtually reduced to its prologue. The textual analysis of *Les Esbahis* is more inspired, as is the excellent character analysis of Turnèbe's Rodomont. In short, Rayfield's prose flows most easily when examining paratextual sources such as letters, prefaces, treatises, and commemorative booklets.

Finally, humanist comedy turns out to have been a laboratory for linguistic innovation, especially lexical—from metadramatic vocabulary to neologisms and Italianisms. Rayfield's book makes valuable discoveries on that topic. Such linguistic value is partly due to the generic mandate of following rhetorical plain style (*sermo*, occasionally sprinkled with *sprezzatura*) when writing comedies. The prescribed imitation of conversational speech initially made (neo-Latin) comedy a choice learning tool. A brief note on that would have been welcome. Focusing on thinkers and practitioners who strove to reach a wider audience—unsuccessfully so, except for the Italians—Rayfield provides examples of linguistic experimentation.

One conclusion the reader might draw is that we most definitely could use a rich monograph on Charles Estienne's far-reaching contributions to humanistic knowledge, from anatomy to theatre. With his pioneering translations of *Gl'ingannati* (*Les Abusez*), *L'Andrie*, and their groundbreaking accompanying paratexts such as the "Lettre au Dauphin," Estienne appears as an exceptional transferrer of knowledge, something Rayfield insists upon. We also need more performance studies research digging through first-hand accounts and transcriptions, as the author successfully does. In short, Rayfield thinks like a historian and this book provides in-depth socio-cultural and cross-cultural context. She has contributed an unusual study of the very small world of French humanist comedy, stimulatingly expanding it both from the inside and from the outside, schoolboys, polygraphs, and printers brushing elbows with French royals and wealthy Florentines.

#### NOTE

[1] See, in particular: Marie Bouhaïk-Gironès, *Les clercs de la Basoche et le théâtre comique (Paris, 1420-1550)* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2007); Patrizia De Capitani, *Du spectaculaire à l'intime: un siècle de commedia erudita en Italie et en France (début du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle-début du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2005); Madeleine Kern, *Corps et morale entre geste et parole. La représentation de la séduction dans la comédie humaniste française de la Renaissance (1552-1612)* (Geneva: Éditions Slatkine, 2009); Goulven Oiry, *La comédie française et la ville (1550-1650). L'Iliade parodique* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2016); and Jean-Claude Ternaux, "La comédie humaniste et la farce: *La Trésorière* de Grévin," *Seizième Siècle* 6 (2010): 77-93.

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