

into the negative legacy of Félix Gaiffe or Michel de Grèce. Professor Goldstein's book is a must-have for the collections of both scholars and neophytes attracted by Versailles, and an excellent companion to Gérard Sabatier's monumental *Versailles ou la figure du roi* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999).

Nina Ekstein. *Corneille's Irony*. Charlottesville: Rookwood Press, 2007. 210 pp. \$49.95. Review by SUZANNE TOCZYSKI, SONOMA STATE UNIVERSITY.

Positing herself as an “interpreter of [Pierre] Corneille's ironies” (8), Nina Ekstein offers in her recent monograph an extremely thorough and cogent study of one aspect of the dramatist's work that had previously received little to no systematic attention by scholars. From her brief overview of irony and its various components to a series of close readings of several plays from Corneille's repertoire, Ekstein offers a clearly written and in-depth analysis of the pervasive—yet never dominating—place of irony in Corneille's theater and critical writings. Moreover, the very nature of irony itself, containing as it does a fundamental ambiguity, results in a multifaceted and often open-ended reading that, rather than providing all the answers, provokes Ekstein's reader to ask still more questions—a very satisfying challenge for any *dix-septième*.

Ekstein has divided her study into two parts. In Part I, “Evident Irony,” while she acknowledges that “there exist numerous taxonomies of irony” (4), Ekstein nonetheless manages to lay out very clearly several basic elements necessary to any ironic reading of a piece of literature, including doubling, ambiguity, and an “edge,” as well as an intending subject or ironist, an interpreter, and signals of irony. From here, Ekstein goes on to examine irony that has a “manifest and substantial presence” (13) in Corneille's work, with explicit attention to dramatic irony (both stage-centered and authorial), verbal irony, and situational irony (including reversals of fortune, irony of fate, and oracles). In Part II, “Signals of Possible Irony,” Ekstein explores cases of “reduplication and excess where there should be similarity” (76) as well as “gaps where there should be continuity”

(*ibid.*). While the cases examined in this half of the book are patently less cut-and-dry, their very undecidability makes for an inherently dynamic re-reading of Corneille as staged in the implicit dialogue between Ekstein and her reader. Thus, any potential for monotony in the cataloguing of ironic “types” is mitigated by the active role of the reader in the critical process.

Significantly, Ekstein is constantly aware of the possible pitfalls and dangers associated with the study of a topic that is itself characterized by dissimulation or ambiguity. She notes one particular danger of seeking the ironic reading: “Certain readers of Corneille, needless to say myself included... have seen irony materialize in the space between two elements, and once it materializes, it never disappears” (76). However, Ekstein is careful always to delineate the limits of her terrain, distinguishing, for example, mere coincidence from coincidence that might be interpreted as ironic, but also expressing doubt that the exaggerated flattery of Louis XIV found in plays such as *Attila* or *Tite et Bérénice* is ironic while simultaneously questioning Corneille’s motives for such excess. Corneille’s tragedies in particular offer an “unstable” (108) terrain for interpretation, and yet the majority of Ekstein’s attention is given to this genre rather than to comedy or tragicomedy. It is refreshing to read a critical work so willing to question its own conclusions, so open to stating that a single, definitive answer remains elusive.

At the level of character analysis, Ekstein repeatedly complicates simplistic readings of dramatic personages by attending to curious or disturbing contradictions or possible “insincerities” that have not previously received satisfactory attention from literary critics. Summarizing past analyses of the characters of Sabine, *Attila*, *Livie*, *Cedipe* and others, Ekstein goes on to propose alternative readings of their seemingly inexplicable actions or problematic situations; while she does not reject out of hand past Cornelian scholarship, Ekstein does offer, in her careful attention to detail, a more nuanced portrait of many intriguing Cornelian heroes and heroines. The attention given to developing more complex readings of Corneille’s female characters is especially appreciated. Ekstein’s Sabine “disrupts the traditional structure of symmetries and the values that undergird it” (97); her study of *Livie*, while equally intriguing, leaves the reader with more

questions than answers—but in both cases, our understanding of the character is enriched by Ekstein's approach.

Although the previous two examples might suggest otherwise, Ekstein's focus in *Corneille's Irony* is not the canonical tetralogy of *Le Cid*, *Horace*, *Cinna* and *Polyeucte* (though each of these plays does receive generous attention). Remarkably, some of Ekstein's richest interpretations elucidate plays that generally fall under the traditional critical radar. Indeed, it may be at times precisely because of the key role of irony in a given play that the piece has likely been judged less successful. Corneille's use of a double register in *Théodore, vierge et martyre* (religious vocabulary in a sexually explicit situation) results in a play that resists synthesis, a gap that, for Ekstein, "invites an ironic reading" (131). Ekstein's reading of what she calls the "margin" between *Le menteur* and *La suite du menteur* is particularly satisfying, as it accounts for many of the unsettling similarities and, more importantly, differences between two plays ostensibly linked by a common character. For Ekstein, the irony of *La suite* is inextricably tied to its own subversion of its autonomy as a play. Corneille, in short, was engaging in self-deprecation in this less-loved sequel to his previous blockbuster.

Indeed, Ekstein's repeated attention to Corneille as author and his own possible ironic intentions is especially interesting, as it points to a more playful side of Corneille that may often be overlooked, both in his plays and in his critical and paratextual writings. Corneille's very willingness to disconcert seems to signal for Ekstein a greater depth of authorial identity, although she is careful to distinguish between obviously ironic intent and less definitive interpretations of intent. Ekstein clearly demonstrates Corneille's keen sense of irony in the various ironic clues he embeds in his plays, in his use of surprise to create situational irony, in his penchant for binaries and symmetries to create incongruities, in his occasionally playful dedications, in his ironic challenges of contemporary dramatic authors and critics, and especially in his own self-parody. Ekstein's reading thus enriches our knowledge of Corneille as author in particularly solid ways.

Throughout this study, Ekstein is acutely aware of the inherently dramatic nature of irony, a condition that fundamentally strengthens the ties she posits between irony's ambiguities and the nature of the-

ater itself. Her study attends to every one of Corneille's thirty-three plays (including *Psyché*), some in greater detail than others, but it is the close analyses of particular plays—*Attila*, *La Suite du Menteur*, *Cinna*, *Edipe*, *Horace*—that are the most satisfying, and the most fun, sections of this monograph. Some of Ekstein's conclusions—particularly those dealing with heroism and the sublime, and Corneille's occasional subversion of both—are perhaps not surprising. And at times she posits a particular case of irony without clearly explicating the precise object of ironic intent. But then again, is it not this very undecidability that makes Corneille's theater, and Nina Ekstein's book, so very fascinating in and of themselves?

Tim McHugh. *Hospital Politics in Seventeenth-Century France: The Crown, Urban Elites and the Poor*. Aldershot & Burlington: Ashgate, 2007. x +191 pp. £55.00; \$99.95. Review by SUSAN BROOMHILL, THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA.

It has become commonplace in studies of hospitals, charity and poverty to set their particular focus against the backdrop of struggle between local and state, of an aggrandizing crown keen to gain control of the country through charitable institutions and policies. Tim McHugh's new text proposes to examine thoroughly the truth of this oft-told tale, not only examining the policies of central government but importantly those of the local communities delivering these services across France. McHugh argues that the dominant historiography of early modern charity has seen in royal edicts the trace of an emerging strategy of crown control, often with little attention to the evidence of extant local records. His study will go some way towards showing the interpretive possibilities of remaining local evidence for offering a more complex narrative of early modern hospital politics. Concentrating on the seventeenth century in its own right, rather than as a stepping stone in a broader trend, and studying the archives produced at the local level for poor relief and hospitals, McHugh reveals communities that endeavored to meet their obligations, and enacted care that typically reflected the evolving tenets of Catholic Reformation belief about the salvation of the poor and redemptive