

Pascal's thought and those anachronistic elements which make it seem so alien today. His work should find a broad audience among students of philosophy, the history of religion, theology, and French letters and culture.

Georges Forestier. *Essai de génétique théâtrale: Corneille à l'oeuvre*. Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2004. 387 pp. SF 28.00. Review by JOHN D. LYONS, UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA.

This is a high-quality facsimile republication of the first edition of this work (published in Paris by Klincksieck in 1996) in the smaller format *Titre courant* series. A re-edition would not necessarily merit a review, but given Forestier's meteoric ascension to a position of uncontested dominance in the French academic study of seventeenth-century French theatre, it is important that this title both remain in print (now that Klincksieck is out of business) and be appreciated as the start of a lively new current in the history of dramatic literature. Since first writing this *Essai*, Forestier has gone on to edit the new Pléiade edition of Racine's dramatic works, to write an overview of seventeenth-century dramatic theory (*Passions tragiques et règles classiques*, 2003) and a huge biography of Racine (*Jean Racine*, 2006). He is now directing the new Pléiade edition of Molière's works, and thus decisively influencing, for a whole generation, the study of the three major dramatists of seventeenth-century France. Moreover, the significance of the *Essai de génétique théâtrale* is different today from what it was a decade ago, even though not a word has changed. We can now see in it something that became abundantly clear only in the Pléiade Racine. Forestier challenges one of the most entrenched principles of literary history, the privilege generally given to the last edition published during the author's lifetime and, even beyond that, the acceptance of traditions of reading which transform our views of an author by selecting certain works for the canon and by rejecting others into obscurity. By preferring instead the first edition of Racine's plays, Forestier's Pléiade edition directs attention back to the historic moment of initial publication with a view to restoring a vision of what the work was at the moment it first appeared and, in many cases, created literary and cultural turmoil.

The *Essai de génétique théâtrale* places Corneille's work as writer at the center. Such an approach is not as obvious as it may seem; Forestier sets himself against the large number of critical and literary-historical works that prefer to describe and evaluate Corneille's drama, like that of other "classical" authors, through a filter of thematics, politics, and psychology. These filters correspond to the interests of the reader and her or his cultural moment rather than to the specific situation of Corneille. Although it may at first glance be quite different from what is generally understood as the historical or new historicist criticism, Forestier's approach is in fact doubly historical. It attempts to place Corneille within the world of his period but then, instead of seeing him as "representative" in some general sense of his epoch, of his gender, or of his class, it endeavors to look at the characteristic that made Corneille stand out as different, and thus specific, within that period: his unusual success at dramatic writing.

In studying how Corneille wrote, Forestier sets himself the task of determining the problems facing the author with each new subject. Forestier makes use of Corneille's statements about composition in texts such as prefaces, dedicatory letters, *examens* (written for the 1660 edition of Corneille's collected dramatic works and giving retrospective commentary on the plays from the period 1632 to 1660), and the three *Discours* on dramatic poetry (which appeared also in the 1660 edition), a resource that Forestier calls the "*inestimable appareil critique et théorique*" (29) left by the playwright, as well as contemporary texts by Corneille's fellow dramatists and critics. These resources have been available to readers for over three centuries and have been the basis for such admirable studies as Marie-Odile Sweetser's 1962 study *Les conceptions dramatiques de Corneille d'après ses écrits théoriques*. Yet Forestier makes an entirely new and brilliantly creative use of these sources by looking at the plays themselves with a new and speculative eye. He simply imagines himself in the position of Corneille writing play after play, each with a different compositional challenge.

Forestier's procedure is based on an insight that will be familiar to many readers of French structuralist criticism, and particularly to those who recall Gérard Genette's influential essay "Plausibility and motivation" (published in *Figures II* in 1969—significantly Genette himself was first a scholar of seventeenth-century French literature): that the reader's (or spectator's) point of view on the story sequence is opposite that of the writer. The reader, for

instance, will think, or rather feel, that love or jealousy or a chance encounter causes what happens later in the plot. The writer, on the other hand (according to Forestier), looks at the desired plot outcome and then arranges the earlier elements of the sequence to lead to, and to justify, the outcome, whether comic or tragic. As Forestier notes, sometimes the only historic “fact” included in a tragedy by Corneille is the denouement; so that the playwright’s work is to write what we would call the back-story by freely inventing a set of supposed events that would plausibly lead to such an ending.

It would be difficult to convey in any detail the account Forestier gives of the writing of such plays as *Le Cid*, *Rodogune*, *Don Sanche d’Aragon*, *Polyeucte*, and *Cinna*. Ranging over the full gamut of Corneille’s dramatic writing, and not confining himself to the small fraction of plays that entered the traditional canon, Forestier gives a lively and persuasive narrative of how Corneille set and then met specific compositional challenges. The book is not a play-by-play consideration, however, but rather a problem-by-problem approach. Concepts such as “deduction” and “reduction,” “doxal causality” and “logical causality,” “tragic matrix” and “embellishment” are introduced and illustrated by examples from the plays alongside more familiar terms like plausibility, decorum, and character coherence.

This reading of Corneille’s theatre, like all criticism, is based on a series of argued hypotheses, buttressed by documentation and usually determined by the detection of recurrent patterns. We cannot know, for instance, what went through the playwright’s mind when he chose to have Rodogune ask Cléopâtre’s sons to kill their mother when he composed *Rodogune*. Perhaps, as critics inspired by psychoanalysis might have it, the playwright was swayed by unconscious misogynistic pulsions. Forestier’s preference is to see the writer as a professional who sought to make rational and conscious decisions with a view of attracting and satisfying an audience. He consistently presents Corneille as the artisan of literary and aesthetic, rather than psychological and political, creations. Throughout, Forestier is rigorously historical. This is a refreshing, powerful, and thoroughly informative work. Whether readers choose to emulate Forestier in their own approach to Corneille, it is clear that this critic’s work must be reckoned with.