

Charles Sorel. *Description de l'île de Portraiture et de la ville des Portraits (1659)*. Critical edition by Martine Debaisieux. Preface by Michel Jeanneret. Textes Littéraires Français, 582. Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2006. 199 pp. + 8 illus. SF 38.00. Review by VOLKER SCHRÖDER, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY.

1659 was the banner year for verbal portraiture in France, marking the apogee of a *mondain* vogue that impelled seemingly all members of polite society to “paint” each other and/or themselves. Illustrated first and foremost in the novels of Mademoiselle de Scudéry, the craze culminated in the publication of several collections of stand-alone portraits, in prose and in verse, placed under the auspices of Mademoiselle de Montpensier, cousin of Louis XIV. A shrewd observer of social and literary trends, Charles Sorel (best known, then as now, as the author of the immensely successful *Histoire comique de Francion*, 1623-33) wasted no time in (de)riding the wave of portraiture and presenting his personal take on this “bizarre and agreeable constellation” (73). Despite its highly topical and precisely dated character, however, Sorel’s *Description de l'île de Portraiture et de la ville des Portraits* is more than a mere *œuvre de circonstance*: as Martine Debaisieux’ superb edition makes abundantly clear, this novella-length capriccio encapsulates the prolific writer’s entire career and reflects his lifelong preoccupation with art, truth, and society.

The *Description* is in fact a “little story” (67), that of an imaginary voyage to an island “in the middle of the world” (69) whose inhabitants all share the same single obsession and occupation, that of producing, commissioning, and distributing portrait paintings. The narrator-traveler Périandre is accompanied by two of his “old friends” (69), named Erotime and Gélaste, and guided by the wise and expert Egemon. They explore the island’s capital, where each street is dedicated to a specific type of portraiture: heroic, amorous, comical, satirical, self-portraits, etc. Egemon gives a lecture on the history and general utility of portraits and leads Périandre to the old painter Mégaloteknès, who laments the public’s frivolous lust for novelty and its disregard for serious and instructive works, such as his own latest productions. They return to the center of the city to attend a judicial ceremony during which “bad” portraits (i.e. offensive, scandalous, or simply “useless” ones; 108) are publicly burned and their authors reprimanded, whereas the “good” painters in each genre are crowned and rewarded. Finally, Périandre learns about the political organization of the island-state (a senatorial, meritocratic

republic) and sees how chariot-loads of portraits are shipped off to France, where he himself returns shortly afterwards.

While the first half of the *Description* is predominantly satirical, exposing life on the island as a universal masquerade and mocking the vain foibles of models and portraitists alike (with the exception of the virtuous and veracious “peintres censeurs”; 86), the second is more serious and didactic, albeit in a still playful manner. The distinction between “good” and “bad” portraiture becomes increasingly paramount, and the judicial and political passages take on a utopian dimension, which is of course a classic feature of the genre of the imaginary voyage. In this geographical allegory (a mini-genre which had itself become fashionable in the 1650s: see for example Scudéry’s famous *Carte de Tendre*), the Isle of Portraiture is a transparent stand-in for the world of Letters; but the text actually operates on both levels and, although ultimately about writers and writing, also discusses painters and painting in their own right. Rather than sacrificing the literal to the figural plane, Sorel’s allegorical fiction constantly intertwines the visual and the verbal, thus reflecting the concept of *Ut pictura poesis* and the closeness between the two sister arts in seventeenth century France.

Debaisieux’ edition of the work ensures perfect readability by modernizing the spelling and punctuation, adding paragraph breaks, and inserting section titles based on the marginalia of the original. She provides the reader with a comprehensive array of relevant background information and concise analysis: the text is framed by a 35-page introduction, 136 footnotes, eight illustrations, as well as a 50-page annex of annotated excerpts from the 1659 portrait collections and, especially, from six of Sorel’s novels. The latter document the writer’s longstanding interest in painted portraits (such as those of Nays in *Francion* and Charite in *Le Berger extravagant*), which often play a pivotal role in the narration’s overall economy and serve to problematize the relation between art and reality. Throughout his diverse oeuvre, Sorel pursues a reflection on the charms and perils of figurative representation, denouncing “the impostures of mimesis” (61) and advocating truthfulness and *naturel*. Debaisieux demonstrates in detail how the “critical fiction” (55) of the *Description de l’île de Portraiture* not only echoes Sorel’s earlier novels but also announces his subsequent works of literary criticism, *La Bibliothèque française* and *De la connaissance des bons livres*. What’s more, the story’s protagonists seem to represent the many faces of Charles Sorel himself: the comical Gélaste, the senti-

mental Erotime, the “curieux” Périandre, the “savant” Egemon, and, last but not least, the venerable and embittered Mégaloteknès. As it turns out, Sorel’s caustic depiction of the Isle of Portraiture is also, tacitly, an intriguing and poignant self-portrait.

A final bibliographic note: the *Description de l’île de Portraiture* had not been reedited since 1788, when Charles Garnier included it in his 36-volume collection of *Voyages imaginaires, songes, visions, et romans cabalistiques*. By a curious coincidence, this little gem has suddenly sprung to life again in not one but two modern editions, which appeared almost simultaneously last fall: perhaps attracted by the “insular” element of the title, the Parisian publisher *L’Insulaire* printed its own modernized transcription of Sorel’s text, with extremely sparse annotation and an introductory essay by Pierre-Henry Frangne, a specialist of symbolist esthetics. While this inexpensive brochure (105 pp., 13 euros) may help introduce Sorel and his work to a wider circle of *curieux*, it is Martine Debaisieux’ authoritative and well-furnished edition that should find its way into all good libraries.

Catherine Marchal-Weyl. *Le Tailleur et le fripier. Transformations des personnages de la comedia sur la scène française (1630-1660)*. Geneva: Droz, 2007. 399 pp. CHF 150. Review by ROLAND RACEVSKIS, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA.

Catherine Marchal-Weyl is right to say that studies of seventeenth-century French theater have underestimated the significance of the Spanish *comedia* for early modern aesthetics. *Le Tailleur et le fripier* accomplishes the significant scholarly task of correcting this tendency while providing a wealth of information, both about the *comedias* themselves—authors include Pedro Calderón de la Barca, Carpio (Félix) Lope de Vega, Francisco de Rojas Zorrilla, and Gabriel Téllez a.k.a. Tirso de Molina—and about their adaptations by French playwrights. The latter include principally François Le Métel de Boisrobert, Jean Rotrou, and Paul Scarron, and more incidentally Pierre and Thomas Corneille, Antoine Le Métel, sieur d’Ouille, and Philippe Quinault. Marchal-Weyl argues convincingly that Gallic interest in the plots and characters of three sub-genres of the *comedia*—then *comedia palatina* (“palace comedy”), the *comedia de capa y espada* (adventure stories about the nobility) and the *comedia de figurón* (comedies centered on a single ridiculous character, the better to highlight