Muratore, Mary Jo. *The Evolution of the Cornelian Heroine*. Studia Humanitatis. (Madrid: Ediciones José Porrúa Turanzas, 1982). 158 pp.

When Maria Tastevin published her *Héroïnes de Corneille* in 1924, she based her conclusions on a detailed study of only six of Corneille's female characters. Sixty years later Mary Jo Muratore examines almost all the important female roles in the dramatist's tragedies and *comédies héroïques*. Tastevin was interested in developing an essentially static definition of *the* Cornelian heroine, one that might account for Cléopâtre *and* Chimène, for Camille *and* Bérénice. Muratore, on the other hand, proposes an evolving image of Corneille and his heroines, who pass, she claims, from "native idealism to an incipient realism" (7).

To trace this evolution, Muratore fashions a rather rigid taxonomy in which each of Corneille's female characters is classified as an idealist, a public servant, an individualist, or a reactive heroine. The idealists are depicted mainly in the early plays by a Corneille presumably committed to the absolute, to moral scruples, and to social independence. The reactive, or reacting, heroines come from his late plays and reflect a pessimistic post-Fronde Corneille, concerned with the pragmatic, with Machiavellian ideas, and now committed to the notion of social interdependence. During his middle period, Corneille peoples his dramas with women who seek either to serve society at large (the public servants) or themselves alone (the individualists).

In order to classify each heroine, Muratore focuses her attention upon that moment when the character is called upon to make the choice or decision that will define her personality, and the bulk of the author's presentation consists of analyses of these decisive moments. For example, Chimène, Muratore's first case of an idealistic heroine, is examined in terms of a sense of duty that culminates in an ideal of honor so strong as to prevent her ever marrying Rodrigue: "Chimène's heroism resides solely in her intransigent refusals of the king's order at the end

of the play" (17). And Chimène's transformation of duty into an abstract ideal is characteristic, the author declares, of other idealistic heroines, including Emilie, Pauline, and Cornélie, who seek "a perfection transcending practical concerns and representing a greater and absolute good" (61).

Yet by the mid-1640s Corneille begins depicting females whose duty has a more pragmatic bent. These are women who are concerned with matters of state and who "consider their role as governing leaders their first and most essential priority" (43). The earliest of these is Rodogune, whose duty to a peace treaty that will make her queen of Syria overrides any idealistic concern with avenging the death of her fiancé Nicanor. Other such aspiring monarchs are Doña Isabelle, Dircé, Viriate, Sophonisbe, and Pulchérie.

At several points the author admits to having difficulty deciding, based on textual evidence, whether certain of these last-named heroines are acting in the interests of public service or in their own personal interest. With others, however, it is clear for her that they "have no intention of allowing themselves as individuals to be sacrificed to the needs of their societies" (67). These individualistic or self-indulgent heroines Muratore then divides into three subgroups. The first consists of women who define themselves in terms of a personal code of ethics rather than in terms of society's demands upon them. Yet such characters as the Infante, Sabine, Camille, and Cléopâtre (*Pompée*) still act with integrity, virtue, and sincerity. The heroines of the second subgroup—Cléopâtre (*Rodogune*), Marcelle, and Arsinoé—seek to nourish their own ambition even by dishonorable means, but they do so in a bold and energetic manner that elicits our admiration. Later heroines—the third subgroup, including Doña Elvire, Honorie, and Domitie—are still ambitious, but lethargic, and attempt to hide their real selves behind a screen of hypocrisy. These subgroups reflect Corneille's changing conception of the heroine, which in turn mirrors the historical moment, since "between 1643 and 1650, the

social order, threatened by a new emphasis placed on self-interest, showed signs of decay" (80).

It is a lack of independence that particularly marks Muratore's final category of heroines, those who "do not act, but react" (106). Once again she further subdivides her category, this time into two subgroups. The first consists of women who have been betrayed by a husband or lover and who therefore seek revenge: Médée, Eduïge, Aristie. In the second subgroup, where the author discusses, among others, Laodice, Bérénice, and Eurydice, the heroine's reaction is a more positive one: a desire to save her lover from an external threat.

This final category, as the author points out, is analogous to the first in its emphasis on external motivation and on the roles of love and duty; yet the difference between the two categories underscores again Muratore's notion of Corneille's evolution. The early idealistic heroines are motivated by "a duty which is supported by their love, whereas the reactive heroines are spurred by a love which has evolved into a kind of duty" (144). Thus, the early heroine's independence is superseded for later Cornelian heroines by interdependence, proposed as the only viable way of life in a complex and changing world.

Despite the neatness of her typology and the clarity of her presentation, Muratore's classification of Corneille's heroines at times seems arbitrary and forced. Other categories might well be conceived, characters might be transposed from one category to another, etc. Also, a study of Corneille's feminine characters will disappoint some readers by not calling upon recent literary theory for a truly feminist reading of the plays. Nonetheless, the taxonomy that Muratore presents is useful. While I am not convinced that the real "heroism" of Corneille's female characters can be fully understood separated from its interaction with male "heroism," I do applaud the author for her insistence upon the dynamism of this heroism and for her clear and coherent investigation of the dramatic role played by the female characters in many of Corneille's

plays. One final question does come to mind, however: To what extent do her categories of heroines exist in the comedies, which she has chosen to ignore, and how might their presence or absence there affect her notion of the evolution of the Cornelian heroine?

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