

Pierre Corneille. *Rodogune*. William C. Clubb, translator. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974. Regent's Continental Drama Series, xxxviii). 132 pp.

This prose translation of one of Corneille's more problematic plays is included in the Regent's Continental Drama series, a collection of plays in translation intended to make Western European drama more accessible to the American student. The paucity of French dramatic literature in English testifies to the genre's resistance, almost hostility, to translation into English from French, and unfortunately, this translation of *Rodogune* exemplifies, and occasionally compounds needlessly, some of the difficulties encountered in transforming majestic French tragic drama into an equivalent English register.

The translation is prefaced and documented throughout with a substantial amount of relevant biographical, historical and textual data illuminating the text for both the professional and the casual reader of French literature. The thirty-eight page preface contains a brief biographical sketch, followed by an outline of the author's career and impact on literature of the French Classical period. Thereafter, the prefatory focus is on the play itself: public and critical reaction to it from the seventeenth century to the present; its historical sources and Corneille's modifications thereof; its textual dilemmas.

Professor Clubb does an outstanding job of highlighting notoriously problematic areas within the text: Cléopâtre's unmitigated villainy, the author's questionable choice of a titular heroine, Rodogune's Machiavellian spasm in Act III, the fragmented, awkward, overly-conventionalized exposition. The translation itself, however, seems at times only slightly less strained and contrived than Corneille's oft-criticized first act. In the introduction, the author admits to having puzzled over how best to render the drama's (and Corneille's) characteristically ceremonial

style and stately alexandrines into modern English and subsequently concluded that rhetorical power would serve this aim far better than archaic language, heroic couplets or blank verse. Asserting from the outset that literal fidelity to the original is not his highest priority, the author strives to stimulate effects rather than concepts, and although this promise of non-literality is kept, it is often at the expense of the original's poetic metaphors, figurative language, and overall comprehensibility. The unfortunate result is yet another French masterpiece that the monolingual reader will dismiss as surprisingly mediocre.

Despite the translator's expressed intent to avoid archaic vocabulary, outdated expressions abound. The effect produced is one of pompous foolishness rather than hoped-for stylistic vigor, and since the dramatic plot of *Rodogune* is somewhat complicated, these semantic distractions add up to a cumulative annoyance that adversely affects one's opinion of the drama. For example to render the French "couche verte" into "green couch" (p. 107) invites needless confusion. More significantly, dated expressions such as to "loose my complaint" (p. 47), "perforce" (21), "slew" (p. 93) and "poltroon" (p.93) palpably change the work's texture in the English version and in my opinion, the added dimension distorts rather than translates the original meaning. Syntactical oddities also mar the text's readability ("she must reveal now", [p.5]), though here (and elsewhere) the ostensible aim is simply to poeticize rather than jeopardize referentiality.

Since it seems unlikely that this particular drama has been translated with an eye to performance, more attention should have been given to punctuation and conjunctions that would have significantly reduced the number of ambiguous passages. Many sentences require re-readings to render them intelligible; some defy comprehensibility outright. A key line in the exposition regarding the death of Cléopâtre's husband ("In the Parthian rout the King died, they say, by the queen's own hand" [p.21]) leaves ambiguous whether it

is the King's death, or Cléopâtre's role in it that sparks the rumors, an ambiguity that the French text avoids by inserting "and" before "they say". Moreover, syntactical and linguistic awkwardness is in evidence throughout ("There we learned nothing of these great calamities but rumour, which brought them to us, but as if in a babel of tongues, obscured in hundredfold disguise" [p. 7]; "A mention of you brought upon the one who spoke his wrath, and Trypnon he had conquered only to take his place" [p. 30]), forcing readers to sacrifice dramatic suspense to semantic decipherment as they grope for meaning amidst familiar words that will not quite cohere. Finally, in avoiding a "literal" translation, the author occasionally tramples over deliberately inserted poetic devices, thereby violating the text's aesthetic integrity. Repetitions in the original are eliminated in translation (pp. 13, 45, 51); antithetical pairings lose their force (Cléopâtre's opening soliloquy in Act II); metonymical-conventions ("un bras refusé" [p. 96]) have an oddly unfamiliar ring ("for the *arm* they have refused to lend me" [p. 97]):

In sum, while the translation contains many passages artistically faithful to the original text, the overall impression is one of belabored *préciosité*. I fear that the uninitiated student who happens upon this text would find it difficult to comprehend Corneille's celebrated status in the world of French letters, and seriously question the judgement of the translator who in the introduction cites Corneille's reputation as Europe's greatest tragic poet.

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