

McCready on Melai (2015)

Melai, Maurizio. *Les Derniers Feux de la tragédie classique au temps du romantisme*. P de l'U de Paris-Sorbonne, 2015, pp. 442, ISBN 978-2-84050-964-6

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As its title suggests, Maurizio Melai's new study of French theater from 1814 to 1854 focuses on the last examples of *la tragédie classique*, "un code dramaturgique éclipsé par le drame romantique" (7) against the backdrop of the latter genre's rise to dominance. Arguing that the tragedies of this period have been wrongly denigrated, Melai proposes a serious examination of the form in the tumultuous political context of Restoration, Revolution, and Empire.

In his erudite introduction, Melai argues against the facile formulation by which the fall of the Ancien Régime spelled the instant death of tragedy and the birth of a new dramatic form. His readings of the last *tragédies classiques* uncover the fundamental continuities between these plays and the Romantic *drame*, and blur generic lines that critics and historians have tended to draw too starkly. In this way, Melai's work can be compared to Jean-Marie Thomasseau's 2009 *Mélodramatiques*, which made a similar argument for generic nuance with respect to the elevated *drame romantique* and its unsophisticated cousin, the melodrama. Like Thomasseau, Melai demonstrates an elaborate network of influence and borrowings running between the supposedly distinct forms, and makes a strong argument for a reexamination of these plays in and of themselves and as part of the larger story of Romanticism.

The book's first seven chapters are devoted to a structural analysis of plays, and make a convincing argument in favor of the author's main hypothesis, that "le drame romantique résulte bien plus d'une évolution que d'une révolution" (365) in form. The second part of the book is less successful. Over these nine chapters, Melai examines different themes within the plays he studies, in an attempt to make a social/historical argument that never quite gels. For example, the chapter "La Scène emblématique du couronnement factice ou temporaire" catalogues a number of plays in which a pretender temporarily wields royal power. Melai correctly, in my opinion, identifies in these plays an undercurrent of suspicion of the monarchy, and an anxiety over eroding social values, but his analysis goes no further. If, as he argues, these plays hint at the spectacular and spectacularly artificial nature of royal power, how is the theater itself, especially the form of *tragédie classique*, which is so historically wedded to royal power, implicated in that (dramatic) illusion and its dramatic undoing in the plays? Moreover, how is the treatment of this theme different from similar scenes in Romantic *dramas*?

In addition to a "cahier d'illustrations," with twenty-two full-color plates, the volume includes an extensive bibliography of tragedies written between 1814 and 1854, along with the record of their *début*, where applicable. The catalog will be an excellent resource for scholars wishing to delve deeper into the theater of the period, especially those interested in treatments of a given theme. Melai's well-researched book is written in clear and cogent French, with an admirable attention to detail. Despite the limitations of Melai's approach, he is absolutely right to point out that these plays, which were important cultural touchstones in the period in question, deserve serious attention, and his study launches that important work.

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