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Déborah Blocker. *Instituer un « art » : Politiques du théâtre dans la France du premier XVIIe siècle*. Paris : Honoré Champion, 2009. 540 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. 109€ (hb). ISBN 978-2-7453-1921-0.

Review by Stephen Bold, Boston College.

Déborah Blocker's book *Instituer un « art »* is an important study that directly examines questions that often linger in the background of scholarship dedicated to seventeenth-century French literature. Foremost among these questions: what was the political dimension of Richelieu's cultural initiatives in support of dramatic literature and its performance in Paris? And how should we understand the presumption of literature's "*utilité*" in the larger classical context against Richelieu's more focused "*instrumentalisation*" (pp. 127, 183 and *passim*) of tragedy and tragic-comedy? In its original form as a 2001 doctoral thesis, Blocker's work focused more on the second of these questions, or the topic of *utile dulci*. As Blocker notes, however, she chose to "rethink, redepoly, and rewrite" in its entirety her thesis, arriving at a broader formulation of the problem in terms of a history of *politics* and "*art*" during the time of Richelieu (p. 9).

Though it is sometimes a bit distracting, the word "*art*" is bracketed by *guillemets* every time it appears in the text (except as part of a quotation) in order to underscore the complex implications of this word as it was understood in the early modern context: art v. science; liberal arts v. mechanical arts; art as theory v. art as practice or method; everyday arts v. *beaux-arts*, etc. Blocker's work focuses exclusively on theater, showing how this multi-faceted form of expression became recognized as an art in the modern, aesthetic sense of the word, or as "un ensemble de compétences techniques instituées" (p. 11). Significantly, from the first pages of her book, Blocker refers to this art as a "savoir-faire," thereby implying all at once a theory, practice, method, institutionalization and *habitus*, and seeking an alternative to the standard histories of literature focused on formal issues (p. 15).<sup>[1]</sup> The sociological and political readings proposed are articulated through a critical vocabulary and reservoir of ideas that owe much to the interdisciplinary work of Alain Viala, Christian Jouhaud and Jacques Rancière.<sup>[2]</sup> Moreover, Blocker proposes her own "histoire littéraire rénovée" (p. 29) in contrast not only to the Lansonian tradition pursued by Bray and Schérer but also to the Anglo-American "Cultural Studies" and "New Historicism," which tend to treat art as "préxistant aux conflits politiques, sociaux ou économiques" (p. 23) and are thus unable to consider "certaines questions, comme celle de l'institution sociale et politique des 'arts'" (p. 22).

After a rich introduction in which the text's critical approach is carefully articulated, Blocker pursues the question of French classical theater's institutionalization through five chapters that cluster around the *moment Richelieu*. First comes a chapter on Jean Chapelain, the inaugural president of the Académie française (1635) and the model for classicism's worldly, political and post-pedantic *homme de lettres*. Chapter two focuses on the all but official *arts poétiques* of the Cardinal's men: Scudéry, Sarasin, La Mesnardière, and d'Aubignac, while chapter four concerns the Royal Declaration of 16 April 1641 in relation to the social and moral status of the actor; and chapter five Corneille's enunciation and manipulation of poetic discourse in his theater and his critical reflections. The central chapter, chapter three, "Les Théâtres de Richelieu," is focused naturally enough on Richelieu himself as patron and organizer of court theater.

Chapter one describes the curious career of Jean Chapelain not only as a major proponent of the desire that the emerging Parisian theater be morally committed and rationally conceived, but most of all as a model for the new critic who strikes a delicate balance between erudition, social prominence, and political service, a will-o'-the-wisp of cultural self-fashioning. It seems entirely consistent with the author's description of intertwined influences of social and political agency that one should finish the chapter on Chapelain not knowing how much of his serious "doctrine"—really a piecemeal accumulation of suggestions, pronouncements and judgments—came from personal intellectual conviction and how much from political calculation or compulsion. This hesitation is important throughout Blocker's study. Poetic discourse in the time of Richelieu seemed always to bend to the magnetic force of the Cardinal's needs, which in turn created a field of opportunities for a cadre of ambitious but socially untethered young men. In the end, Chapelain emerges as the first in a series of "tacti[cians] of distinction" who taught social elites how to use poetry as a "tempered commerce of good taste."<sup>[3]</sup> Blocker ends the chapter with Chapelain's least pleasant moment in the sun: as the author—or mouthpiece—of Richelieu's reprimand to Corneille, also known as the *Sentiments de l'Académie française sur la tragédie comédie du Cid* (1637) in which "les modalités de son service [au Cardinal sont entrées] en conflit avec la nécessité de flatter l'éthos nobiliaire" (p. 95) on which he relied equally for his public identity. Attacking Corneille's immensely popular play meant criticizing the taste of the elites on whom he counted for recognition. Richelieu's prerogatives required Chapelain for the first time to suggest that the dramatist (and, implicitly, his public) must "inféoder pleinement les représentations [dramatiques] aux nécessités politiques de la paix civile" (p. 99).

Chapelain was just the first example of Richelieu's exercise of political power and patronage in the theatrical realm in pursuit of further political power and stability. Chapter two shows how Richelieu used the ambition and willingness of young would-be writers (Scudéry, Sarasin, La Mesnardière, and d'Aubignac) to articulate a utilitarian and moralizing doctrine of theater "à l'exemple des discours de la raison d'Etat [pour] faire le bien du peuple à son insu" (p. 129). Staying consistent with the dictates of the moral persuasion of the theater they proposed, these writers were careful about showing their motivations: "l'action de Richelieu en faveur du théâtre se trouvait [...] désignée et cachée tout à la fois" (p. 131)—and their goals: "le théâtre serait d'autant plus utile que son utilité morale et politique demeurerait un secret d'Etat" (p. 133). Great dramatic art had to be consistent with the disciplinary concepts of reason and regularity, civility, and "bonnes mœurs—c'est-à-dire la raison" (pp. 149, 162 and ff., and 161).

Chapter three shows how this doctrine, along with material pursuit of the means of representation, was put into service to produce exemplary plays that would inspire further dramatic practice and proper civic devotion to the King. In these pages, Blocker examines plays produced for Richelieu and represented in the state of the art theater that he had built in his own palace, plays that she argues have been neglected in prior studies on Richelieu and the theater.<sup>[4]</sup> Civic virtues are illustrated and celebrated, for example, in the plays written by Richelieu's *cinq auteurs*: *La Comédie des Tuileries* and *L'Aveugle de Smyrne* (both 1638) illustrate, in comic and tragic settings, the virtues of "l'obéissance filiale" (pp. 220-21) and also "une acceptation plus générale de l'ordre du monde" (p. 223).

In more overtly political plays, including Scudéry's *L'Amour tyrannique* (1639), itself a response to Corneille's morally dangerous *Le Cid* (1637), the monarch is shown in the best possible light: "le prince devait être vertueux parce qu'il était un exemple, tandis que le peuple était dit imiter son prince pour la raison qu'il était prince" (p. 231). To amplify the imperatives of this political cohesion, d'Aubignac's *La Pucelle d'Orléans* and *Cyminde* (both 1642) show acts of civil piety and *don de soi* that suggest how virtuous devotion to the King can bring its own reward of greatness. A surprising result of this logic, as Blocker convincingly demonstrates, is that tragedy itself, at least in its purest Hellenistic form, becomes problematic inasmuch as it shows flawed monarchs and their often violent ends. Though literary history presumes that the common goal for dramatists of the time was to bring the French stage to a par with its Greek models, Blocker shows that Richelieu's initiative was to perfect tragic-comedy, idealizing this

culturally suspect form as “tragédie à fin heureuse” (p. 274) because it was more useful for representations of his political vision.

This ministerial “control” of theater led also to the *Déclaration royale du 16 avril 1641*, examined at length in chapter four. This famous declaration, certainly authored by Richelieu, sought to legitimize theatrical activity as a morally acceptable practice consistent with the civic service he hoped it would mobilize. Blocker studies at once the prehistory of this initiative, specifically in the Roman and ecclesiastical counter arguments to social acceptance of actors, and its questionable outcomes in the later seventeenth century and into the pre-revolutionary eighteenth century. Blocker reads closely the declaration itself showing how its conditional promotion of the actor’s status (assuming proof of moral rectitude) serves also to confirm the *bien fondé* of prior condemnations it sought to oppose and thereby to codify the humiliation of actors, even in their service of the State.

The book’s final chapter is an extended examination of Pierre Corneille, the playwright and theorist, as a cagey and recalcitrant beneficiary and opponent of Richelieu’s statist “domestication” of theatrical production. As she acknowledges, Blocker’s approach is somewhat unexpected, in that it treats *L’Illusion comique* (1636) as a primary focus for the discovery of Corneille’s poetic discourse and his conception of dramatic art. Using prominently Furetière’s *Dictionnaire universel* (1690), as she does elsewhere in this study, she articulates a complex and somewhat paradoxical idea of “art” and shows how the magician Alcandre (in *L’Illusion*) embodies its elusive virtues: service and secrets, magic and moral healing. The second part of the chapter turns principally to Corneille’s *Discours* and *Examens* published in the 1660 edition of his collected works. Though near the end of his career, he was ostensibly adding his voice to the chorus of erudite doctrinal performance. Corneille, in Blocker’s reading, mastered the literature of poetic doctrine inherited from Aristotle and sixteenth-century Italian commentators, only to suggest his independence from this often obscure tradition (pp. 414–5). Blocker describes this as, in Corneille’s view, *un savoir secondaire* which could easily and beneficially be substituted for the model of “sa propre pratique [qui] pouvait être comprise comme s’accordant avec les exigences d’Aristote [... et pouvant] légitimement servir de fondement à l’énonciation de règles plus générales pour le théâtre” (p. 418). This doctrinal sleight of hand, Blocker suggests, is truly worthy of the magician-cum-playwright that Corneille had shown himself to be in *L’Illusion comique*.

Though quite lengthy, the preceding summary cannot reflect all of the many important facets of Blocker’s investigation. Her scholarship is exemplary, reflecting a detailed knowledge of period sources, historical discussions, and contemporary theory that she mobilizes to make her argument. Her sizeable bibliography is by itself of considerable value for researchers interested in pursuing the questions of politics and theater. That Richelieu’s cultural initiatives were guided by political aims is hardly a surprising idea, but Blocker uses this principle to rediscover and bring into a new light many important and well-recognized texts of early classical theater, from Chapelain and d’Aubignac to Scudéry and Corneille. Were this a court case, one would have to say that there is no “smoking gun” to join definitively the various parts of this cultural conspiracy (my phrase, not the author’s) and that fact does linger in the mind after reading the early chapters of this book. I find another nagging issue in Blocker’s near silence on Corneille’s “political plays,” especially those of the 1640’s, in a discussion that links so fundamentally “*politiques*” and “*théâtre*” (see the book’s subtitle). Blocker’s argument is nonetheless compelling and ultimately convincing. She manages to weave myriad issues into a historical canvas that never loses focus on its thesis. I began to read this book hoping to find the much-needed discussion of utility and pleasure in classical theater that I had understood to be the object of her doctoral thesis. I found that and much more. This book should be read by literary scholars and historians alike, who will share in this *histoire littéraire renouvelée* of *le moment Richelieu*.

## NOTES

[1] See René Bray's *La Formation de la doctrine classique* (Paris: Hachette, 1927) and Jacques Schérer's *La Dramaturgie classique en France* (Paris: Nizet, 1962).

[2] See especially C. Jouhaud, *Les Pouvoirs de la littérature: histoire d'un paradoxe* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), J. Rancière, *Le Partage du sensible: esthétique et politique* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2000) and J. Rancière, *Politique de la littérature* (Paris: Galilée, 2007). Viala's relevant work can be found in his important *Naissance de l'écrivain: sociologie de la littérature à l'âge classique* (Paris: Minuit, 1985) and in a series of articles on literary institutions, also the focus of his own earlier *thèse de doctorat d'état*.

[3] Blocker says the idea of putting himself on the level of mere dramatists would have appeared to go against Chapelain's "tactiques de distinction" (p. 84); and she describes his practice of poetry "en gentilhomme" as a game [*jeu*] and a "production destinée seulement à nourrir des échanges tempérés et de bon goût entre gens de bien" (p. 76).

[4] On this point she singles out Georges Couton's *Richelieu et le théâtre* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1986) (Blocker, p. 211, n. 54).

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