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Perry Gethner and Theresa Varney Kennedy, eds., *Madame de Maintenon, Proverbes dramatiques*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, "Bibliothèque du XVII^e Siècle," 2014. 343 pp. Bibliographie. 49€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-8124-3233-0.

Review by Anne L. Birberick, Northern Illinois University.

Françoise d'Aubigné, Marquise de Maintenon, figures among the most fascinating cultural personae of seventeenth-century France. Not only biographers but also Mme de Maintenon, through her letters and writings, have traced her journey from Protestantism to Catholicism, from wife of the libertine author Paul Scarron to mistress and then secret wife of Louis XIV, from governess of the king's children to founder of Saint-Cyr, a school for the daughters of impoverished nobles. Of the diverse roles Mme de Maintenon held in her lifetime, the one that has captured the most historical interest is that of the educational reformer desirous of promoting a new model of female pedagogy. Despite this interest, however, there have been few scholarly editions of key works written by Mme de Maintenon until very recently. John J. Conley's 2004 edition of Mme de Maintenon's *Dialogues et adresses* offers contemporary readers one example. To this, we may now add the superb edition, edited by Perry Gethner and Theresa Varney Kennedy, of Mme de Maintenon's *Proverbes dramatiques*.

The edition comprises forty proverbs written by Mme de Maintenon to be performed by the younger pupils of Saint-Cyr. Individual proverbs contain between five to ten scenes and have a performance time of approximately fifteen minutes depending upon their length. In the process of establishing their text, the editors examined closely the two earlier published editions of Mme de Maintenon's work: the Paris 1829 edition by M. de Monmerqué entitled *Proverbes inédits* and Théophile Lavallée's reproduction of the proverbs in his 1857 *Conseils et instructions aux demoiselles pour leur conduite dans le monde*, a two-volume edition of Mme de Maintenon's pedagogical texts. Gethner and Kennedy pay close attention to these earlier editions, noting that the previous editors made changes to the original text such as assigning proper names to characters (Mme de Maintenon identified characters by numbers), altering the order of the proverbs, suppressing potentially controversial passages, and modernizing language. Although Gethner and Kennedy adhere closely to Mme de Maintenon's original text, they continue the practice of identifying characters by name and indicate in the notes to each proverb where they retain the names given by Monmerqué or Lavallée as well as signal when they have made their own modifications. The editors have also modernized spelling and provided consistency in the use of capitalization and punctuation. As a result of these select changes, a contemporary audience will find the work more accessible while still experiencing the original organizational structure of the *Proverbes dramatiques*.

In their introductory essays, Gethner and Kennedy reveal the degree to which Mme de Maintenon was a pioneer in the field of women's education. The opening essay, which provides biographical information, focuses primarily on Mme de Maintenon's efforts to create an inviting space at Saint-Cyr so that the *demoiselles* could cultivate those noble qualities worthy of their position in society. Within this new instructional space, theatrical performances served as a useful pedagogical tool for promoting virtuous behavior as well as correct French usage. Although the performance of Jean Racine's biblical play *Esther* by the *saint cyriennes* became a catalyst for the transformation of Saint-Cyr into a more traditional

convent school, theatrical exercises continued to figure prominently in Mme de Maintenon's educational strategy as she reworked and repurposed literary forms such as dramatic proverbs.

During the seventeenth century, dramatic proverbs were a popular salon game in which the audience divined what lesson was being illustrated. Mme de Maintenon repurposed this worldly pastime to privilege moral utility over aesthetic concerns and, by doing so, ultimately created a new literary form. In the introductory essays entitled "Thèmes et idéologie" and "Une Dramaturgie insolite," the editors expertly chart the ways in which the dramatic proverb, in the hands of Mme de Maintenon, departed from the worldly subject matter of love and passion as well as the key principles informing classical dramaturgy.

The content of the proverbs frequently touches upon the realities of marriage and the preservation of one's reputation along with issues related to money such as the management of household budgets and the dangers of gambling. An underlying theme of many of the proverbs is the important role played by the mother in shaping appropriate behavior and the editors rightly note the influence of Fénelon on Mme de Maintenon. From the opening lines of the *Traité de l'éducation des femmes* (1681), Fénelon deplores the lack of education for young girls and holds mothers responsible in large part for the current state of affairs: "Rien n'est plus négligé que l'éducation des filles. La coutume et le caprice des mères y décident souvent de tout: on suppose qu'on ne doit donner à ce sexe peu d'instruction." [2] Fénelon then goes on in his treatise to outline a program designed to produce hard-working, dutiful, and virtuous women whose primary concern would be taking care of household affairs.[3] Similar to Fénelon, Mme de Maintenon emphasizes the influence of mothers on the education of their daughters while she also advances the idea that women are destined for the domestic—not public—arena. The *demoiselles* should be provided an education commensurate with their socio-economic position as a means of preparing them for the roles of mother and spouse. The proverbs become a means through which to instill and reinforce this perspective.

The primacy afforded the message conveyed by the proverbs is reflected in their form, which although suggestive of an abbreviated play, does not adhere to the rules of classical dramaturgy such as the respect for the unities of time, place, and action or the principle of *vraisemblance*. The volume's introductory essay devoted to the "dramaturgie révolutionnaire" (p. 43) of Mme de Maintenon is learned and illuminating in the way it meticulously charts not only the deviations from convention but also the larger effect and purpose of the changes. What emerges is a sense of how Mme de Maintenon's violations of dramatic norms led to a new literary form, one whose function is to instruct rather than please.

In brief, Perry Gethner and Theresa Varney Kennedy have produced an impressive edition of the *Proverbes dramatiques*, one that is destined to become the standard scholarly text. Their introductory essays provide appropriate historic and literary context, draw attention to recurring themes, and illuminate Mme de Maintenon's innovations in the areas of dramaturgy and female instruction. To this, we may add that the material production of the volume within the Classiques Garnier series is of high quality. This edition should prove valuable for specialists and non-specialists alike who are interested in Mme de Maintenon, Saint-Cyr, female education, and the use of theater as a pedagogical tool.

NOTES

[1] Madame de Maintenon, *Dialogues et adresses*, ed. and trans. John J. Conley, S. J. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

[2] François Fénelon, *Oeuvres. Traité de l'éducation des filles*, "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade" (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), p. 91.

[3] Ibid., pp. 91-171.

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