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Vincenzo De Santis, *Le Théâtre de Louis Lemercier: entre Lumières et romantisme*, Paris: Classiques Garnier, séries « L'Europe des Lumières » vol. 35, 2015. 726 p. 59€ (cl). ISBN 978-2-8124-3312-2.

Review by Susan McCready, University of South Alabama.

As the subtitle of Vincenzo De Santis's book suggests, the career of playwright Louis Jean Népomucène Lemercier is difficult to classify. He belongs to both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He was both an adherent of neoclassical tradition and an early innovator with form, experimenting with generic hybridity and the limits of the classical unities as early as 1800. As a member of the Académie Française, he was an outspoken critic of the romantic school, but he was nevertheless claimed as a precursor by them. In North America, Lemercier is known principally by reputation; he is little read or studied on this side of the Atlantic. He is known to many mainly as the author of *Pinto*, and then only because Stendhal praised this pre-romantic play in both versions of *Racine et Shakespeare*. He fares somewhat better in France, where eighteenth and nineteenth-century theater receives more critical attention, but, as De Santis admits, Lemercier is "souvent oublié dans les histoires littéraires" (p. 22). This monograph, the first to offer a systematic treatment of Lemercier's theatrical oeuvre, is an attempt to remedy that critical neglect.

The vagueness of the title and the thickness of the volume (over 700 pages) are both indications of the ambition of this project, which attempts a bit too much, but does most of it very well. De Santis relies not only on literary analysis of the plays, but also on a careful reading of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century theoretical texts. He gives refreshing attention to staging and the importance of stagecraft in elucidating Lemercier's oeuvre and in situating it between the two centuries and the two aesthetics and against the backdrop of the cutthroat theater scene in which he made his way. De Santis's monograph is also a study of reception, of the ebb and flow of Lemercier's literary reputation over the course of his career and since his death in 1840, and he explores the complex relationship of the author, whom De Santis characterizes as practicing a "dramaturgie de la dissidence," (p. 364) with the multiple regimes he had to navigate.

The organization of the book is somewhat unconventional. De Santis privileges a thematic rather than a strictly chronological arrangement, but follows chronology within each subsection. He begins with a discussion of tragedy, moves toward comedy, and then returns to Lemercier's late-career tragedies. This allows him to focus on aesthetic concerns, specifically Lemercier's experiments with neoclassical form as they relate to various genres and sub-genres, and to loop back around to considerations about politics and performance at various points in Lemercier's career. Some of the parsing of various tragic sub-genres becomes rather tiresome. *Tragédie classique*, *tragédie historique*, *tragédie antique*, and *tragédie royale* are explored in rather too much detail, but to the extent that these distinctions were important to his audience and to his contemporary critics, they certainly reflect the reception of his work and so are worthy of mention.

The book is anchored by analyses of two major works by Lemerrier: his 1797 *Agamemnon* and his 1800 *Pinto*. De Santis has chosen these works because they represent the two poles of the author's oeuvre. *Agamemnon* is his most complete and successful neoclassical tragedy, and *Pinto* is the "comédie historique" that would win the praise of Stendhal and major success on stage in an 1834 reprise. One cannot help but remark, however, that these two works were written early in a long career that produced more failures than successes.

De Santis reads *Agamemnon* against the backdrop of the French Revolution and the Terror, and convincingly explicates its pro-Republican, anti-tyranny political message at the time of its staging. His reading is deft and nuanced and demonstrates a profound understanding of the neoclassical theatrical tradition and the political moment in which the play was produced. *Agamemnon* was often cited by critics of the early nineteenth century as the last successful neoclassical tragedy, but De Santis highlights Lemerrier's innovations on the form, including the expanded role he gives to Oreste. The "enfant parlant" was not entirely new to neoclassical tragedy, but De Santis argues that Lemerrier deploys the figure in a new and more thorough way, to advance the didactic and essentially Republican message of the play.

De Santis's attention to stagecraft lends a critical depth to the analysis of the play's aesthetics. He spends a great deal of time on the play's use of antiquity, but is not breaking any new ground when he argues that under the Directoire, "Théâtre et peinture établissent ... une relation osmotique au sein de laquelle le présent est réinterprété par le recours au mythe de l'Antiquité" or that "la collaboration entre David et Talma" (p. 32) is the most important example of this phenomenon. That said, De Santis adds a third term to the much-studied David-Talma coupling: Lemerrier, who had briefly been a student of David's and who owed the success of *Agamemnon* in large part to the performance of Talma in the role of Égisthe. Lemerrier's painterly eye lends a visual appeal to a form rooted in auralty, and gently nudges the theater toward the visual aesthetic that would dominate the boulevard in the nineteenth century.

Pinto, ou la journée d'une conspiration was inspired by what De Santis terms a "muse bâtarde." Characterized as a "comédie historique"—Lemerrier's coinage—it combines elements of the *drame historique* with comic elements and even song. De Santis situates the play in the context of late eighteenth-century comedy, and suggests that its "amphibious character" (p. 229) made it unclassifiable for contemporary critics, who gave it an icy reception. Here again, De Santis's attention to performance is extremely useful: *Pinto* might have been successful on the boulevard, which was more open to hybrid genres, but Lemerrier chose to stage it at the Théâtre Français, where it was doomed by the expectations of a more conservative audience. Although De Santis takes pains to demonstrate the extent to which Lemerrier was engaged with eighteenth-century theatrical traditions, contemporary critics focused on his deviations from the norm, dubbing him "Népomucène Le Bizarre" (p. 303).

Despite the obvious structural innovations Lemerrier introduced into plays like *Pinto* and later *Christophe Colomb*, De Santis claims that Lemerrier's lasting contribution to the evolving theatrical aesthetic lay in his presentation of character. Indeed, the author presents a convincing case for the Duc and *Pinto* as at once heirs of Beaumarchais and precursors of Hugo.

With both *Pinto* and *Agamemnon*, and in the less lengthy analyses of other plays he offers, De Santis takes into account the performance of the play, separate from the moment of composition, which becomes relevant to his discussion of reprises. This allows him to separate to some extent the literary (Lemerrier's antique models, the development of romantic theater, etc.) from the contemporary, and to get at the impact of these plays at different moments. This is especially important for *Pinto*, which had its most successful run in 1834, at the very apogee of theatrical romanticism in France, at the Port-Saint-Martin, the theater at the center of the movement. That reprise starred Bocage, one of the leading boulevard actors of the 1830s and 40s, who had famously premiered as the lead in Dumas's *Antony*, the 1830 romantic blockbuster that was probably the most commercially successful play of the period.

Lemercier's tardy success on this romantic stage complicated his reputation permanently. Lemercier was no longer simply the author of *Agamemnon*, the last of the great neoclassical tragedies, but was now, problematically for the staunch critic of Hugo, arguably a romantic. De Santis suggests that what he calls Lemercier's aesthetic "duplicité" (p. 367) by placing him in the curious space between the Lumières and romanticism, was both the source of the playwright's many failures during his lifetime and what makes him worthy of study today.

Lemercier's career unfolded against major upheaval in French political life and in the art and business of the theater. Joséphine Bonaparte had been an early patron, but as the Empire tightened its grip on the theaters, Lemercier was abandoned and silenced. The Restoration opened the stage to him once again, but a series of failures suggests an author out of synch with his audience. The picture of Lemercier that emerges from De Santis's analysis is one of paradox: a dissident establishment figure, a conservative innovator, a classical romantic. Ultimately, Lemercier's failures more than his successes illuminate the evolution of the romantic aesthetic and highlight the continuities of that aesthetic (too often read simply as rupture) with what came before.

De Santis is an erudite scholar whose knowledge of eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature and aesthetics is matched by an uncommonly thorough understanding of theater and stagecraft. I was surprised by references to Cocteau and Claudel, which add depth and relevance to this study. De Santis is also a very good writer. He is clear without pedantry and elegant without preciousness.

The last 300 or so pages of the book are devoted to the presentation of a new edition of the two plays that most mark Lemercier's oeuvre: *Agamemnon* and *Pinto*. De Santis is also a thorough editor. He notes the variations in the several print editions of the plays as well as those introduced to the texts during the initial performance and in their reprises. In addition to the plays themselves, he includes Lemercier's introduction to the 1804 edition of *Agamemnon*, itself a useful document for understanding Lemercier's aesthetic, his sense of genre, and his thoughts about his audience. Along with several other documents relating to *Pinto*, De Santis includes the sheet music for the air sung by La Duchesse in Act III, a document that enhances the reader's feel for what the play must have been like in performance.

While I found the plays and their supporting documents useful, I cannot understand why the author (and his editors at Garnier) thought it best to include all of this between the covers of this single volume. The "two-for-one bargain" is all very well, but the result is an enormous and unwieldy tome. Were I to assign either or both of these plays by Lemercier, I would certainly want to use De Santis's editions with their well-chosen supporting documents, but the size of the volume in which they are contained makes them impractical for use in the undergraduate classroom. This may seem like a minor quibble, but it is rather a shame that an editorial decision of this nature may prevent this very fine book from reaching the wide audience it deserves.

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