

BOOK REVIEWS

Edited by Kathleen Clark

Du Ryer, Pierre

Lucrèce, tragédie. Ed. James F. Gaines et Perry Gethner. Genève: Droz, 1994. Pp. 131. Paper. 30.60 Swiss francs.

Though Du Ryer's plays have gradually appeared in twentieth-century editions, his first tragedy, *Lucrèce*, has hitherto been overlooked. It was given in 1636, the year after Scudéry's *Mort de César*, and helped to set the fashion among French dramatists for Roman subjects. It antedates all of Corneille's Roman tragedies; as the editors remark, however, it differs from them in belonging to the alternative tradition of subversive commentary on the concept of monarchy. This may explain why it had only one edition in the playwright's lifetime and was never revived. Yet, it is a truly classical play, respecting the unities and the *liaison de scènes* (there is a *liaison de recherche* in the last act) and featuring, in Collatin, a virtuous hero who provokes the catastrophe by one fatal error: in this case, his naive boasting about his wife's chastity to the envious and malevolent Tarquin, who promptly seeks to seduce her and, having failed, rapes her.

Once the situation has been expounded, dramatic tension is created by the interplay of characters, not by the irruption of external events. Whilst the sort of intractable internal dilemma that characterizes the best of Corneille is absent, personal uncertainty is experienced by *Lucrèce*, unsure whether to believe slander directed against her husband and later, having been disgraced, trying to decide whether and to whom she should explain her intended suicide. The first part of the final scene is particularly dignified, but the denouement, her family's declaration of their determination to avenge her, may seem an anti-climax to those who feel that Collatin's boasting should have led also to his personal downfall: as the editors point out, such was indeed the eventual outcome in the source. The source, in fact, lies in the history of Livy, which Du Ryer, an accomplished translator of classical authors, evidently knew well. The editors emphasize the intrinsic interest of Livy's account, and show how Du Ryer's discerning choice of episodes and characters ensures unity of action. The introduction also situates the play clearly within Du Ryer's career, with some useful biographical details, and reminds us that he was once reputed the equal, if not the superior, of Corneille. It gives Du Ryer more credit for his contribution to the

development of the French classical model than does, for example, René Bray, who all but ignores him. Naturally, his allegiance to the antimonarchist camp is discussed, though the editors are careful not to make too much of it: rightly so, for it may have acquired exaggerated significance when considered with the benefit of hindsight, given Corneille's contrary philosophy.

Elsewhere in the introduction, perspicacious comments on the play's dramatic structure follow some evaluative character studies, not least on Tarquin. He is the son of King Tarquin, properly named Sextus, but by calling him Tarquin throughout, Du Ryer obfuscates the distinction and the editors wisely clarify the character's status and explain the playwright's intentions. As one might expect, the study of *Lucrece* is the longest, and if the coverage of *Brute*, *Collatin*, and the minor characters is more concise, it is always clear and thought-provoking. Besides, brevity is no less than such characters deserve. *Brute*, for example, tactlessly voices his criticism of *Collatin*'s behaviour and thus simply underlines his friend's stubbornness in pressing on with his foolhardy plan to prove his wife's virtue; he urges Tarquin not to test her, though even he does not guess at the lengths to which the tyrant will go. Despite these scenes, there was never any serious chance that *Collatin* would have second thoughts or that Tarquin would renounce his criminal desire. Thus, *Brute*'s contribution, though striking and carefully crafted, is effectively that of a confidant. *Collatin* himself, "le moins dynamique des quatre personnages principaux," is a worthy but dull citizen whom one could imagine entertaining *Tartuffe* as readily as Tarquin, and with the same moral blindness.

Good sections on the political themes of the play and on Du Ryer's rather allusive poetic style complete the introduction. In their bibliography, the editors unaccountably fail to mention Zilli's splendid edition of *Clitophon* (1978) and, less surprisingly, Antoine Adam's history of seventeenth-century literature, but his half/dozen pages on Du Ryer are still valuable. Readers who want more than Adam's brief survey can turn with confidence to the monograph published nearly a decade ago by James Gaines himself.

The text is handsomely presented and the discreet footnotes inform without being intrusive. As noted, there was only one edition in Du Ryer's lifetime, but it exists in several states, a fact which, incidentally, suggests that it was a bookselling success, allowing new errors to creep in whilst others were corrected as the printer renewed his plates. The editors have chosen sensibly among the

readings available. I welcome their undertaking all the more sincerely since, many years ago, I dutifully plodded through *Lucrèce* in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, with no editorial help. I was unimpressed, but I now understand that the Arsenal copy contains some of the more grotesque mistakes, not least the attribution to Brute of most of Collatin's important speech after *Lucrèce*'s death. Latterly, I have come to esteem Du Ryer thanks to modern editions, but would have remained blissfully sceptical of the quality—and importance—of *Lucrèce*, had Professors Gaines and Gethner not caused me to re-evaluate it. The essence of series such as the *Textes Littéraires Français* is their textual reliability and judicious exegesis. For this example, the editors and publisher are to be congratulated.

William Brooks