

Muratore, Mary Jo.

Mimesis and Metatextuality in the French Neo-Classical Text: Reflexive Readings of La Fontaine, Molière, Racine, Guilleragues, Madame de La Fayette, Scarron, Cyrano de Bergerac and Perrault. Geneva: Droz, 1994. Pp. 162. Paper.

Those of us who teach seventeenth-century literature are all too familiar with students' criticisms of the limitations of the neo-classical aesthetic. Our post-Romantic students wonder how writers could possibly have consented to stifle the creative impulse, adopting without vigorous objection the rules which governed much of the literary discourse in the second half of the seventeenth century. Mary Jo Muratore's study of eight authors of the period works hard to dispel this myth of complacency. Muratore argues that if many neo-classical writers submitted their pens to constraints imposed from without, their ostensible compliance was nevertheless attenuated by a persistent subtext which put into question—and at times even openly repudiated—the aesthetic dictums of their time. Muratore's study (which collects and augments articles published from 1990 to 1994) focuses upon the immanent metatextuality of neo-classical literature as a space within which writers could interrogate or challenge a mimetic model of literary discourse. Linking pervasive metatextual elements to a provocative theoretical premise, Muratore contends that the authors' creative urges impelled them to establish a self-referential subtext which became the battleground for the conflict between mimetic and anti-mimetic models of writing. By the end of the century, the generative model of the subtext prevailed over the derivative mimetic model, paving the way for the narrative advances of the eighteenth century.

In her introduction, Muratore explains clearly and concisely the thorny dilemma of the seventeenth-century author who was called upon to navigate a path between Plato's categorical condemnation of mimesis and Aristotle's celebration of that concept. After presenting her thesis on the role of metatextuality in this endeavor, Muratore divides the eight chapters of her book into two parts (a division which is not obvious in the table of contents). In the first five chapters, Muratore studies in chronological order five authors whose texts stage the conflict between mimetic and anti-mimetic models of literary discourse without going so far as to reject outright the model which contributed so much to their success. In the final three chapters, Muratore reads less conventional texts from the beginning and end of the period which break unequivocally with the

literary prescriptions of the time and propose in their place a liberating model based on imagination and the author's reappropriation of authority over his text.

In La Fontaine's *Contes*, Muratore foregrounds narrative obstacles which force the reader to question the linguistic decorum which prohibits the narrator from telling his story in a linear, uninhibited fashion. La Fontaine focuses not so much upon the offensive content of his contes as on the textualization process itself. The narrator's interventions, and particularly his stammer defer the pleasure we take in reading the text, increasing its intensity, but also causing us to criticize a poetic which can only limit discursive freedom. Muratore's study of *Le Misanthrope* posits Alceste as the natural man who valorizes (not without a dose of bad faith) mimetic representation over linguistic creativity, a stance which causes him to abandon, at least temporarily, a society which glorifies the generative power of language to transform reality. Muratore questions the tragic nature of Andromaque in which most characters cannot escape a past which dominates and dictates their every action. Only Hermione, says Muratore, attempts to reject the past and create a new future, but the fictional texts she creates in so doing are not sufficient to establish her new order; her suicide demonstrates that it is only by violently quashing individual creativity that mimetic representation is possible. Muratore's study of *Les Lettres portugaises* demonstrates Guilleragues' progressive abandonment of the rules of the epistolary genre in favor of a creative, auto-generative writing model which becomes an end in itself. Finally, Muratore challenges the dominant role of history in *La Princesse de Clèves*, arguing that historical reality progressively loses ground to the more productive fictions of the Princesse herself, who valorizes invention, digression and non-conformity over simple historical mimesis.

Muratore begins the second half of her study by proposing that narrative self-consciousness in Scarron's *Roman comique* serves to effect a definitive break from the traditional strictures of the prose text, as Scarron repudiates mimetic conventions in favor of anti-mimetic invention. Unfortunately, this chapter rather lacks the straightforward clarity which characterizes the rest of Muratore's book. By contrast, her study of *L'Autre monde* offers a lucid and innovative interpretation of Cyrano's position in the battle for aesthetic freedom in the seventeenth century. Muratore reads *Les Etats et empires de la lune* as a textualization of mimesis and, ultimately, of mimetic failure: during his voyage, the narrator discovers that the moon is but an inverted reflection of the earth in which narration is

limited by intertextuality and repetition. *Les Estats et empires du soleil*, on the other hand, has no textual antecedent, no mimetic model to which to conform, and thus this second text provides a space in which imaginative potency is valorized. Finally, Muratore demonstrates Perrault's usurpation of authority from Ancient models by retelling and reinterpreting their stories. In particular, Perrault's revisions of his predecessors' *moralités* represent a subversive effort to undermine past masters and valorize the creative talents of modern writers.

Muratore's study of neo-classical writers' preoccupation with the limits of mimetic representation effectively accounts for the centrality of metatextual references in a vast body of literature by associating them with a theoretical polemic, namely, the latent battle for aesthetic supremacy between mimetic and anti-mimetic models of literary representation. While this binary opposition is perhaps exaggerated, the book nonetheless enriches our conception of the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*. Muratore's text is marred by the occasional use of jargon (theaterician, veridicality, fantasization, etc.) where an already existing term would have sufficed. Unfortunately, the book lacks conclusion. While each chapter, internally coherent, contributes to our appreciation of neo-classical writers' subtle subversion of the classical aesthetic, the book would have benefitted from a final chapter restating and developing the theoretical problematics advanced in the introduction, and particularly the nature of the compromise forged between Plato and Aristotle's contradictory conceptions of mimesis. At the end of chapter 7, Muratore suggests that the aesthetic battle she is attempting to elucidate "serves to point France and its literature into the political and narrative revolution of the following century" (137); a conclusion developing this notion of transition would have been welcome. Yet these minor criticisms do not in any way detract from Muratore's solid account of metatextuality in the literature of the second half of the seventeenth century. Her work puts an interesting spin on our understanding of the classical aesthetic and its limitations.

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