

Corum, Robert T., Jr.

Reading Boileau: An Integrative Study of the Early Satires. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 1998, 170 pp. ISBN: 1-55753-110-2.

Robert T. Corum, Jr.'s *Reading Boileau* offers a clear, concise, and rigorous study of Boileau's *Satires I-IX* and the *Discours au Roy* that accompanies them. From the outset, Corum informs the reader that he will be going against the prevailing trends of Boileau criticism by taking Boileau seriously as a poet and by examining his poems as aesthetic units. Thus Corum applies formal principles to reading the poems, while also situating these works both within the traditions of Greek and Roman antiquity that influenced Boileau and within the early modern context of Louis XIV's France.

The book's structure is strictly linear: after a brief introduction, Corum proceeds through close textual analyses of the *Discours au Roy* and the early *Satires* in succession. While the frequency of references to specific lines of verse can at times be illuminating, at other times the author's adherence to the texts makes for disjunctive reading and blurs the distinction between scholarly monograph and study guide. Still, the overall result, with the benefit of the methodological and conceptual framing provided in the introduction and conclusion, is a highly informative and well-crafted scholarly book.

Corum's readings focus respectively on the centrality of poetic self-construction in the *Discours au Roy*, the satirical opposition between city and country life in *Satire I*, "the societal status of the poet in relation to his personal happiness" in *Satire II* (33), the use of culinary metaphor in the construction of a literary credo in *Satire III*, self-conscious examination of the satirist's own subject position in *Satire IV*, notions of true and false nobility in *Satire V*, threshold imagery and images of penetration and obstruction in *Satire VI*, the solipsistic interrogation of the poet's muse in *Satire VII*, the philosophical inquiry into the role of Reason in *Satire VIII*, and the recapitulation of the previous *Satires* in *Satire IX*, which ends on a note of cautious authorial withdrawal. Thus Corum

traces an evolution of the speaking subject, from freewheeling, acerbic satirist to careful, self-conscious observer.

Reading Boileau gives a much fuller account of Boileau's poetic persona than has been available before. Corum draws on an extensive knowledge of the satirical tradition in ancient Greece and Rome to frame these readings. He also examines nuances of meaning in seventeenth-century French terms and pinpoints elements of versification and theme. He includes very useful formal commentaries as well as historical and intertextual references both during the course of the textual analyses and in a well-organized set of endnotes. As if emulating Boileau's valorization of quality over quantity, Corum gives only the necessary material and, as a result, both teaches us a great deal about Boileau's early poems and leaves us wanting more.

This elegantly written textual study provides a fresh perspective on a notoriously cantankerous author, from the vantage point of that author's younger days of high aspirations and poetic verve. Perhaps Corum himself most clearly explains what he has brought to light in this very fine book: "When read and analyzed as a coherent work within a self-referential context, the first nine *Satires* and the *Discours au Roy* exhibit a lyrical impulse. Boileau desired to record in his poetry not only his sincere attitudes and opinions, but more importantly the inner turmoil, fears, pleasures, and ambitions of a poet in the age of Louis XIV" (128).

Roland Racevskis