

**Lyons, John D.**

*The Tragedy of Origins: Pierre Corneille and Historical Perspective* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996. Pp. xv + 236. Cloth. \$37.50.

In this cogent study of five plays by Pierre Corneille, John Lyons goes one step beyond traditional readings of history in Corneille's theater by positing a fundamental conjunction between history and tragedy as complimentary ways of relating or restructuring human experience. Each of the dramatic works studied here – *Horace*, *Cinna*, *Polyeucte*, *Sertorius* and *Attila* -- stages a moment of origin, a confrontation between the past and the present (of the represented world) which results in the foundation of a new political and social order. Unlike Racine's representation of mythic, circular time, Corneille's plays focus on the singularity of the moment; a tragedy of origins is thus "a drama that illustrates the characters' struggle to act according to a framework of references to the past precisely at the moment when that past is rendered obsolete by a new structure that will itself in retrospect convert their present into a beginning" (76). Such tragedies naturally privilege the events which alter the course of history rather than the hero himself. Yet, most often, only the hero recognizes as the play closes the magnitude of the originary shift which has taken place before his eyes. Any such radical change is of course viewed as transgressive by those who live it; ironically, the hero, who is instrumental in any movement toward change, is, in the end, excluded from the new order established by his actions.

Lyons' critical trajectory takes him from the founding of Rome (*Horace*) to the originary moment of the French nation (*Attila*), and he is particularly interested in episodes of retrospection which take place within each play, for each moment of reflection calls into question the usefulness of history as an explanatory concept, while simultaneously operating a shift in values and value structures within the dramatic world. In *Horace*, for example, Corneille presents the account of the battle between the Horace and Curiace brothers as a text which is constantly revised as new information becomes available; the characters' retrospective inter-

pretation of the events which constitute the origin of Rome points to a revisionist perspective essential to Corneille's tragic vision, a vision based upon the notion of historical relativism and difference. Similarly, the characters in *Cinna* foreground the relationship between the past and the present: Cinna, for example, suggests to Auguste in II,i that the present can shape the value of acts in the past. He later (in II,ii) disclaims this assertion, yet Auguste, the visionary emperor privileged with multiple viewpoints and historical perspective, will ultimately reject history as a model, focusing instead upon shaping his world in the present. *Polyeucte* presents a similar rejection of past models, but with a religious twist: linking the historical with the visual, Polyeucte destroys icons so as to place himself outside of history and free to benefit from the world-altering force of grace, which is itself extra-historical. Corneille himself seems to have been fighting a related battle here, for *Polyeucte* puts into question not only the usefulness of history, but the very possibility of representing the historical origins of Christianity.

The fourth chapter of Lyons' book, entitled "Sertorius' White Hind," is the shortest and least satisfying of the study. Like his dramatic predecessors, Sertorius finds himself a victim of the very shift he has helped to operate, and is unable to function in a culture according to whose codes he himself is obsolete. Lyons' reading of Corneille against his historical source, Plutarch, is provocative, yet one wishes for more development of the themes which ostensibly link the five plays as tragedies of origin. Fortunately, the chapter devoted to *Attila* returns to the themes in question, elaborating a theory of Attila-as-other with the critical support of Benjamin's work on baroque drama. Lyons posits the moment of origin of the French nation as imbued with mystery and confusion: Attila is the monstrous other beyond history, the outsider against whom France as a nation will be defined. As transgression incarnate, Attila's dramatic function must end in a bloody death, so that social and political order can unite the nation that would be France.

*The Tragedy of Origins* is illuminating in its examination of Pierre Corneille's historical consciousness. As Lyons explains, Corneille's notion of cultural relativism, the product of this conception of historical difference, is the logical next step following

sixteenth-century studies of what was termed “continuous history.” Yet it is the linking of the historical with the tragic in an attempt to represent moments of origin which points to a particularly modern conception of historicity on Corneille’s part; John Lyons’ analysis of the conjunction between history and tragedy in Corneille’s theater is a very welcome and thought-provoking treatment of a subject which has long merited further critical development.

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