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Review on Rameau's Nephew (Editor: M. Hobson. Translators: K.E. Tunstall and C. Warman)

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Marian Hobson, ed., and Kate E. Tunstall and Caroline Warman, trans., *Denis Diderot's Rameau's Nephew: A Multi-Media Edition*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016. 264 pp. Introduction, original text, English translation, embedded audio-files, explanatory notes, interactive material. £18.95 (pb). ISBN 978-1-9092-5490-9; £32.95 (hb). ISBN 978-1-9092-5491-6; £5.99 (PDF). ISBN 978-1-9092-5492-3; £5.99 (eb). ISBN 978-1-9092-5493-0; £5.99 (mobi). ISBN 978-1-9092-5494-7.

Review by Andrew S. Curran, Wesleyan University.

Let me begin by identifying just what I am reviewing, for this is no typical book. In my hands is the new 264-page Open Book critical edition and English-language translation of Denis Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*. On my computer screen is the publisher's multi-media version of the same translation and critical apparatus, which I am looking at in a PDF format on Acrobat Reader. In keeping with the generous philosophy of the publisher, one can also consult a free, web-based version of the same book, although it is far more useful to purchase the PDF or e-publication.

The print and digital versions of the *Nephew* that I am discussing here are the second iterations of this undertaking. The new versions now feature a slightly revised preface by Marian Hobson. They also incorporate a "mirror version" of the original French text that allows the reader to toggle between languages from the endnote section.^[1] The most stunning aspect of this digital enterprise, however, remains the edition's "hypertext notes." Far more than simple endnotes, these references contain a wide variety of oil portraits, sketches, maps (all in full color) and, most spectacularly, eighteen MP3 recordings performed by the *Conservatoire national supérieur de musique et de danse de Paris*. It is no exaggeration to say that Hobson, Tunstall, and Warman, with the aid of Pascal Duc and his students at the aforementioned *Conservatoire*, have attempted something truly remarkable: reconstructing the cultural context of one of the most complex and important works in eighteenth-century literature.

There is much to say about this extraordinary work of scholarship. The translation itself provides a new and daring take on what Hobson calls the "hailstorm of allusions" and the "multitude of moods" filling the dialogue (p. 12). Witness the translators' treatment of the famous first lines of the text, which comes off as light and effortless as the original French: "It is a habit of mine to go for a walk in the Palais Royal pleasure gardens every afternoon at five, whatever the weather. That's me you see there, always by myself, daydreaming on d'Argenson's bench. I have conversations with myself about politics, love, taste or philosophy. I give in to my mind's every fancy. I let it be master and allow it to pursue the first idea that comes to it, good or mad, and to behave just like those young libertines of ours we see chasing some flighty, pretty courtesan with bright eyes and a snub nose along Foy Walk, leaving her for another one, stalking them all and sticking to none. In my case, my thoughts are my sluts" (p. 15). The last sentence in this paragraph—translated from "mes pensées sont mes catins"—has long been the emblem of the headiest forms of Diderot's freethinking, the mental seraglio that was his mind. In French, this final phrase means, quite literally, "my thoughts are my whores." Previous translators have chosen to render "catin" as "flirts," "wenches," "strumpets," or "trollops," often for reasons of decorum.

I must admit that I was startled when I read “sluts,” but this is the point, isn’t it? Throughout this new edition, the translators have restored the freshness of the text: not only the dialogue’s biting tone, rapid shifts in mood, and aphoristic dueling, but the overall feeling and intent of Diderot’s language. In stark contrast to the frustrated sensation one often gets while reading translated masterpieces, one is very rarely interrupted here by the memory of the original model. This version of the *Nephew* stands on its own, and will be a wonderful text to teach in translation.[2]

Accurately rendering the texture of Diderot’s thoughts, speech, and ideas was the challenge taken on by Tunstall and Warman. Providing the historical, intellectual, and social context for the *Nephew*’s dialogues was delegated to Hobson. This is an equally daunting task. As Diderot (the character) and Rameau spar, the conversation shifts topics rapidly, often with little to no transition—from obscure goings-on in the anti-enlightenment press, to third-tier hack writers, to all-but forgotten pieces of music. The first time that one reads *Rameau’s Nephew* can be quite tedious since, much like *D’Alembert’s Dream* (1769), the text is a highly personal work filled with inside jokes and references that are not only specific to *ancien régime* France, but destined primarily for Diderot himself.

Resolving some of this haziness is where the digital version of this book excels, far surpassing what traditional printed endnotes can do. This is particularly true when the conversation turns to the treatment of the intense (and quite political) debates regarding the French musical scene.[3] This is not the place to recapitulate the aesthetic and political complexities of the dispute, which divided Versailles and the philosophes regarding the relative merits of the Italian *opera buffa* and the far loftier tradition of the *tragédie lyrique* endorsed by the Paris Opera. Suffice it to say that the ability to jump quickly to some of the musical pieces alluded to in the text brings more intelligibility to what has been, at least for me, one of the more obscure portions of *Nephew*.

Let me demonstrate how this works. Consider the comic scene where *Nephew* fulminates against Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, one of the *Buffoni* composers whose *Serva Madonna* (referred to as the *Servante maîtresse* below) contributed to the huge debate that broke out in 1752. Rameau, who does not dispute the artistic merits of Pergolesi’s music, nonetheless lambasts the man for challenging national tradition and, more importantly, for upsetting the apple cart, of which he considers himself a possible trickle-down beneficiary. He is so angry, in fact, that he recommends—and here is a joke that I had not understood before using this edition—that Pergolesi’s piece of sacred music be treated exactly like his own *Pensées philosophiques*, which is to say, destroyed on the Place de Grève: “[Pergolesi’s] *Stabat* should have been burnt by the public executioner. Good God, these wretched Italians with their opera buffa, their *Servante maîtresse*, their *Tracollo*, have really bugged us up the arse. In the past, pieces like *Tancrède*, *Issé*, *Europe gallante*, *Les Indes*, and *Castor*, or *Les Talents lyriques*, used to run for four, five, six months. Now that’s all come tumbling down like a house of cards” (p. 74).

The many endnotes that pepper this particular paragraph not only lead to a short biography and portrait of Pergolesi, but to an MP3 recording of his *Stabat Mater*, transcribed for solo violin. There are also YouTube videos of his opera, *Tracollo*, interspersed with commentary regarding the melodic and graceful musical transitions of Italian music (compared to the theory-driven harmonics of the French school). The remaining links in the paragraph direct us to further video selections including André Campra’s *Issé* and *Europe galante*, as well as a number of Rameau pieces, including his *Ballet héroïque*, *Les Indes galantes*.

Musicologists may grouse about the juxtaposition of small arrangements with full-scale orchestration. Some may ask if this uneven comparison really instructs us about the differences between Italian and French styles. I, for one, have certainly derived a good deal of information from working through the endnotes. The only real problem I can envision here is actually technical, since the videos reside on an independent server. The press or the editors will need to check the URLs from time to time (as they

have indicated they will do). Ideally, one day, these, or even superior videos, will be embedded, like the MP3s, in the evolving project.

One can certainly read through this delightful new translation of *Rameau's Nephew* without signing up for the edition's crash course in eighteenth-century French culture. But poring over the richness of this critical edition unquestionably allows for a deeper understanding of what is arguably Diderot's most multifaceted and brilliant text.

NOTES

[1] The French text comes from Hobson's 2013 edition. See Denis Diderot, *Seconde Satyr: le Neveu de Rameau* (Geneva: Droz, 2013).

[2] I would be remiss if I did not mention that Tunstall has rendered a similar service to Diderot scholars--French and English--in her remarkable contextualization/translation of Diderot's *Letter on the Blind*. See *Blindness and Enlightenment: An Essay: With a new translation of Diderot's 'Letter on the Blind' and La Mothe le Vayer's 'Of a Man Born Blind'* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

[3] See Mark Darlow, "Diderot's voice(s): music and reform, from the *Querelle des Bouffons*, to *Le Neveu de Rameau*," in *New Essays on Diderot*, ed., James Fowler, (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

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