

METROMANIA MANIA

Frankly, I fell in love with the title.

Having enjoyed myself enormously adapting two French comedies of the 17th and 18th centuries for Michael Kahn and the Shakespeare Theatre Company, I was casting around for a third. In the course of reading in and about that period, I stumbled again and again upon mention of an obscure play from 1738 with a superb title: *La Métromanie*. It means, more or less, *The Poetry Craze*. (“Metro” from “metrum,” Latin for poetic verse, and “mania” from... Oh, never mind.) As it happens, Drew Lichtenberg, STC’s omniliterate literary manager, had noticed the title as well: potentially a real find for STC’s wonderful ReDiscovery series, dedicated to bringing to light classic plays that had remained too long in undeserving darkness. It was via the ReDiscovery series that Michael and I had developed our two previous happy collaborations, *The Liar* and *The Heir Apparent*.

So I ordered the French text from the Internet and it arrived in a blurry offprint of an 1897 edition with an English introduction by a huffy scholar who loudly disapproved of the play and all its characters. Now I was interested. When I read that the play’s author, one Alexis Piron, had failed to make the Académie Française because he’d written a lengthy poetic *Ode To The Penis*, I was *really* interested. And the play’s premise looked like pure gold.

So what kind of play did the Bard Of The Hard-On write?

A very chaste and wonderfully delightful one. Upon inspection *La Métromanie* turned out to be a farce based on a brilliant idea, if given sometimes to long-winded declamations on Art. Its world is the airy, unmoored, Watteau-ish one that Piron’s contemporary Marivaux would also put onstage. There’s not much like realism in *The Metromaniacs*. We’re in a levitated reality

that's the exact counterpart of the vernacular, set-in-an-inn comedies the English were writing at the same time. This is champagne, not ale. Since it's about people who are mad for poetry, champagne is apropos, as is the fact that it's in verse. To dump this delicate play into prose would be to clip the wings of Pegasus and harness him to a plow.

The play was a lip-smacking scandal in its time, spinning into art what had been real-life comedy. It seems that all Paris had fallen in love with the poems of one Mademoiselle Malcrais de La Vigne, a mysterious poetess from distant Brittany (read: Appalachia). The celebrated satirist Voltaire publicly declared his love for the lady and her great works, only to have it revealed that Mlle de La Vigne was a guy named Paul Desforages-Maillard, very much living in Paris and taking his revenge on the poetry establishment for not appreciating his genius. Needless to say, Voltaire wasn't pleased when Piron's satire showed up (and showed *him* up). Worse than that for Voltaire, the show was a hit.

Upon reading the play, I found that its premise was indeed comic gold. Its structural mechanics turned out to be something else. Piron was a wit and a poet but not much of what I'd call a *farcifactor*, often all too content to let his characters intone his ravishing couplets without paying much attention to who just exited where or why anybody's doing anything. Besides those fatal disquisitions on Art, the play had not one but two male leads, a lackluster female ingénue and, like so many French plays of the period, it simply came to a stop rather than resolving. This is all by way of saying I've fiddled a good deal with Piron's masterpiece in bringing it into English. (This is the first English version ever, to my knowledge, but I'm open to correction).

When my friends ask me what it's about, I always say that *The Metromaniacs* is a comedy with five plots, none of them important. On the other hand, that's the beauty of the play, its purpose and part of the source of its delight. We go to certain plays to inhabit *a world*

elsewhere, and *La Métromanie* is that kind of play in spades. Piron doesn't want plot. He wants gossamer and gorgeousness, he wants rarified air and helpless high-comic passion. A purer world. Characters drunk on language, fools in love with love. In other words, the way the world was meant to be.

Given what's in our newspapers day by day, a few yards of gossamer may be just what the doctor ordered. So gossam on, *mes amis*, gossam on...

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