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Sämi Ludwig, *Resurrecting the First Great American Play: Imperial Politics and Colonial Ambitions in Frontier Detroit*

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Sämi Ludwig, *Resurrecting the First Great American Play: Imperial Politics and Colonial Ambitions in Frontier Detroit*. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020, 270 pages, ISBN: 978-0-299-32540-4, 79,95\$

- 1 Sämi Ludwig, Professor of American Studies at the Université de Haute Alsace (Mulhouse, France), successfully takes up any author's challenge to pique his potential readers' curiosity from the front cover. His enigmatic title *Resurrecting the First Great American Play. Imperial Politics and Colonial Ambitions in Frontier Detroit* acts as an incentive for any inquiring minds who would immerse themselves in the book to unravel the mystery about the forgotten original American dramatic piece. We quickly discover from the first lines of the introduction that the play behind the intriguing title is the little-known and greatly underestimated work by frontier soldier Robert Rogers (1731-1795), *Ponteach, or the Savages of America: A Tragedy* (1766). The play written by the American colonial frontiersman, who served in the British army during both the French and Indian War and the American Revolution, deals with the rebellion led by Odawa war-leader, Pontiac (Ponteach). Being one of the early accounts of the Indians' attempt to capture British bastion Fort Detroit (Michigan, 1763), the play has been acknowledged as a precious testimony from the pre-history of the United-States: Rogers had first-hand knowledge of the rebellion as he took part in it after having offered his services to General Jeffrey Amherst; although on the side of the British, Rogers' account centers on the Native Chief and thus adopts a surprising standpoint

contrasting with the contemporary narratives starring white heroes. The latter point and the fact that Rogers fought on the side of the Loyalist may explain, as Ludwig argues, that the play was never performed and fell into oblivion as did Robert Rogers who fled to England after the American Revolution. Despite this early disgrace, the soldier made a comeback in the nineteenth century when (graphic) novelists, children book writers, and later filmmakers resurrected him as a legendary fictional character, similarly to Pontiac who also fueled popular imagination from the nineteenth century onwards. As Ludwig recalls, *Ponteach* was dug out in the early twentieth century when Allan Nevins edited the first reprint (1914). Yet, in his introduction, Nevins demeaned the "artistic qualities" of the play (103) and it was not until 2010 and Tiffany Potter's "lovingly edited" Canadian publication (103) that the play was eventually addressed with the reverence it deserves. The author's ambitions in this book is to pay tribute to the aesthetic value of this long disregarded play. Sämi Ludwig successfully lends cachet to Rogers's tragedy and replaces it in the grand narrative of American drama, after having been for a very long time reduced to a mere footnote. Ludwig's targeted readerships are both specialists and learners. Throughout the volume, he insists on the great pedagogical qualities of the play and he seems to have conceived his development with students in mind as he goes step by step to list the specificities which make of *Ponteach, or the Savages of America: A Tragedy* both a valuable and teachable piece.

- 2 *Resurrecting the First Great American Play. Imperial Politics and Colonial Ambitions in Frontier Detroit* is divided into two parts, preceded and succeeded by an introduction and a conclusion. The structure of the book is very clear which makes the reasoning very accessible to a wide range of readers. The illustrations (from book covers or book pages to original letters) inserted throughout the volume are most pleasant and liven up the reading. In the introduction, Ludwig explicitly presents the objective of his work, that is redeeming the literary reputation of the play. He then gives a scene-by-scene summary of the play and defines his approach, which consists in studying the play within the context of production to avoid any interpretative anachronisms (a pitfall from which the work has long suffered). The author underlines Rogers's creativity as he wrote a tragedy that "falls between the categories" (9) and consequently "forces us to reconsider our categorizations" (9). Ludwig defines the playwright's style as a "centrifugal aesthetics of contradictions" since the text mixes different traditions. These contradictions, which have been considered as literary weaknesses, should be reassessed as the evidence of Rogers's artistic mastery, according to the scholar. To further come to terms with these seemingly ambivalences, he introduces the Bakhtinian notion of "dialogized heteroglossia" (10). This concept, which is usually applied to the novelistic genre, opens new perspectives when analyzing a dramatic script. As the scholar explains, it should enable to decipher the author's intentions by making sense of discursive hybridity. Yet, Ludwig comes back only implicitly on this notion. If he does bring forward the myriads of both cultural and literary discourses that Robert Rogers uses in *Ponteach*, he does not explicitly develop his application of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept, which is slightly frustrating. The title of his conclusion, "Centrifugal Insights," hints back at his introduction. The scholar summarizes the author's hidden designs behind the play, or what the Russian intellectual would call the "authorial intentions" expressed in a "refracted way" through a multiplication of speeches (Bakhtin 324): he shows how the ambivalences are telling of the soldier's political ambitions as regards the British Empire and of his approach to Indian culture. This final demonstration brings us back to "heteroglossia" but, to the disappointment

of literary and dramatic specialists, Ludwig refrains from using the term as if this theoretical prism might have obscured the readability of his final pages and alienated students to whom the book is also intended.

- 3 Part I of the volume, “Outside *Ponteach*: The Players and the Historical Context,” is a contextual presentation of the play. The scholar broaches the portraits of both the Indian Chief and the British soldier by giving biographical elements and by coming back on their representations in American culture. He then very precisely drafts the historical background of the play, underlines the political and cultural issues in the Old Northwest before the revolution and describes the Indian uprising of 1763. This first part is very enlightening as it helps the readers understand the complexity of the imperial situation in the area West of the Appalachian Mountains and therefore grasp the inner inconsistencies of the play.
- 4 The second part, “Inside *Ponteach*: The Play Text and Its Literary Qualities,” appears as the most original section since it reads as a demonstration of the artistic value of Rogers's tragedy. After an overview of the negative assessments the play has suffered from throughout history, Ludwig lists literary elements which, to him, are worth praising. He first devotes a subpart to what he calls the “realistic dimension” of the play. If, in his introduction, he refers to “realism” (9), a term which is used now and again throughout the volume, he is right to adopt the phrases “realistic dimension” or “realistic referentiality” (127) to define the play as it is not realist in the dramatic sense of the term. Historical or even ethnographical, the play depicts real people (that Rogers met) or realistic ones (inspired from real life) and is set in a historical context. Yet, the scholar questions the authenticity of the descriptions of Indian family relations and stresses Rogers's ethnographical paradoxes which betray the playwright's subjectivity. This aspect may be linked to what Ludwig calls “Brechtian didactics” (105) as the playwright is implicitly sharing his view of the situation, a viewpoint oscillating between pro-imperialism and anti-imperialism. In the sub-part that follows, “The Power of European conventions,” the scholar shows how Rogers toys with the European tradition of the heroic tragedy and how he adapts the European bestiary of “tygers” and “viper,” or the Christian imageries and plotlines, or the concept of royalty. In “The Aesthetic Dimension,” the scholar first describes what he sees as Rogers’s “art of prosody” and he lists many of the figures of speech that can be found in the play (from anaphoras to oxymorons to synesthesias) (140, 141); he also presents the formal aesthetic qualities of the tragedies and Rogers’s “art of composition” as scenes alternate from dramatic relief to dramatic tension (148); the artist’s “art of language innovation” is also stressed with, notably, the use of pidgin in blank verse (155). In “Important issues,” the academic notes that *Ponteach* offers a “constant discussion of private versus public ambitions” (158): this remark echoes Matthew Roudané's theory about the essence of American theatre which translates “the public issues of the nation and the private anxieties of its citizens” (xiii). He also underlines the rather moralistic dimension of the work which displays “bad teachers,” “good and bad French,” “good women” and “bad Christians” (160, 163, 165, 168). In his ninth subpart, Ludwig raises “open questions” which are indeed worth considering: why was the play never performed? Has Rogers co-written the piece? Why is the Indian Chief’s name spelled “Ponteach” instead of “Pontiac”? The scholar convincingly argues that the origins of the rejection of the play, which has never been performed despite its theatrical qualities, lay in the absence of any “identification figure to a European audience” as “all the white characters [...] are negatively charged” (175). Due to Rogers’s poor education,

many have argued that he could not have written a play in blank verse. Ludwig introduces Nathaniel Potter, Rogers's secretary, as a possible co-author. Finally, the spelling of the protagonist's name may be explained by the playwright's Scottish origins. The scottization of the name "may well reflect a literary exploration of the powerful wave of Scottish nationalism after the unification of Britain in the Acts of Union of 1707" (182).

- 5 To conclude, Sämi Ludwig's *Resurrecting the First Great American Play. Imperial Politics and Colonial Ambitions in Frontier Detroit* is a valuable contribution to the fields of theatre studies and history. The scholar successfully resurrects Robert Rogers's *Ponteach, or the Savages of America: A Tragedy* by demonstrating that the play is of genuine artistic quality. Clear and engaging, the volume is a stimulating read which would, hopefully, inspire many teachers and students so that this early American tragedy will find its way to academic syllabi.

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