

By Melisa Lindholm (MA 2006)

Les Oeuvres de Monsieur de Bensserade

Issac de Benserade (1613-1691) was one of the most important poets at the court of Louis XIV. He was a member of l'Académie Française and was under the protection of Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin. He associated with Corneille, La Fontaine, Molière, and Lully. In fact, Benserade and Lully were famous collaborators for such legendary court spectacles as the *Triomphe de l'amour*.¹ In addition to his ballets and poetry, he also wrote several tragedies and a comedy.

This two-volume work by Charles de Sercy, *Les Oeuvres de Monsieur de Bensserade*, is a posthumous collection of Isaac de Benserade's writing, containing a short biography, and several sonnets, odes, epitaphs (called "Cy gist," here lies) as well as the texts for many of his court ballets. In a dedicatory letter ("*epistre*") that opens the first volume, de Sercy presents Benserade's works to his patron, the Comte d'Armagnac. Not only does de Sercy praise Benserade's writing ability, but he also explains that the collection contains many poems not discovered until after Benserade's death.

The "*epistre*" is followed by a "*Discours sommaire*," which resembles a witty eulogy of Benserade's personality and sense of humor. In the biography, Monsieur L.T. (one of Benserade's contemporaries) shares short stories about Benserade and his dealings with the people of the court. He tells us of one occasion when Benserade commented jokingly on the lines of one of Molière's ballets. Molière sought revenge by writing verses in a style similar to that of Benserade. Cardinal Mazarin recognized the verses as Benserade's hand and praised Benserade instead of Molière.

These volumes contain librettos, as well as a series of sonnets about the body comparing its beauty and ugliness (a twist on the *blason poétique* of the Renaissance) and several epitaphs, which are also witty and risible. Not only are the epitaphs fun to read, but they help us more fully understand the character types of the seventeenth century. In addition, the second volume also lists the people of the court in connection with the various roles they played in these spectacles. The most important of these was the king himself. Louis XIV danced in nineteen of Benserade's twenty-five ballets.

Each volume in this edition boasts a frontispiece by P.D. Shoonebeeck, although neither volume is in its original binding. They appear to have been rebound during the eighteenth century and are both in excellent condition. There are only eleven known copies of this two-volume work in libraries today.

Prunières, Henri. *Le Ballet de cour en France avant Benserade et Lully*. (1914) New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1970.

Silin, Charles I. *Benserade and his ballets de cour*. Baltimore: John's Hopkins Press, 1940.

¹ Link to the musical score of *Le Triomphe de l'amour*:
<http://www.library.unt.edu/music/lully/Triomphe1681/background.htm>