Jean de la Taille remains an undeservingly overlooked author, even though his œuvre concentrates on the identity crisis that beset the French nobility in the late sixteenth century. This crisis – questioning assumptions on gender, nation, faith, cultural norms, and polity – acutely affected a nobleman doubly marginalized within his class or “estate,” as a collège-educated and “poor” rural aristocrat. With little success, La Taille endeavored to negotiate the relative estrangement an extensive humanist education begot in him. In an ongoing book project that also reexamines this author’s supposed sympathies with French Protestantism, I eschew the “imitation-bound” approach toward minor Renaissance authors, regarded as emitting merely reflected light. Accordingly, the reader should not see Jean de la Taille’s Les Corrivaux (Les Corrivaus, as originally spelled, or The Rivals, in modern English translation), the very first original prose comedy published in French (1573), as a montage of imitated sources; it serves a pragmatic agenda.

Set right before and published during the Wars of Religion, Les Corrivaux supports the national reconciliation effort that this noble soldier-poet strove to foster in his works. Secret identities, broken families, and rivalries woven into the plot encourage an allusive and political reading, because they echo tensions within the aristocracy, deeply divided and estranged from the crown during the long civil war. In this respect, the dichotomy of the familiar and the strange – in the sense of “from elsewhere,” “foreign,” “unfamiliar,” and “not ours/not one of us,” which étrange in French encompasses – plays a prominent role in this comedy featuring three unknowingly intertwined families. How so?

Two young men (Euverte and Filadelfe/Philadelphe) initially set out to abduct the woman they both love (Restitue and Fleurdelys/Fleurdelys). Formerly strangers, the two men become rivals, although with no direct contact. Each has a (single) parent who gets involved in the imbroglio as though haphazardly (Fremin and Benard). Predictably, the comedy converts unacquainted or antagonistic individuals into relatives, partly through the Aristotelian recognition scene in Act IV, which reveals that Fleurdelys and Filadelphe are siblings. Certain clues, however, suggest higher stakes. Filadelfe almost commits incest with Fleurdelys, but only “for want of knowing his relatives” (“faute de connoistre ses parents”) (5.2.88), Fremin informs us. The latter also recounts how, because she calls him “Father,” he raises as his (“comme mienne”) that little girl left behind during the siege of Metz (4.5.83-84). Filadelphe, an extended-stay visitor in Restitue and her mother’s house (“jeune gentilhomme qui se tient en nostre maison”) (1.1.15), acted with excessive familiarity by

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impregnating Restitue – without much consequence perhaps since he is from out of town (“d’autant qu’il est estranger”) (1.1.18). Both the notion of strangeness/foreignness and the term étrange(r) and its semantic field – including possessives, connaissance (“to be familiar/acquainted with”), family roles, pais (land), voisin(e) (“neighbor”), and their negation – play a crucial role in the play.

How do the term and its cognates further materialize in the text? Most characters are strangers, at first glance. Benard, Fleuredelys’ real father, is literally a newcomer (“nouvellement arrivé”) (5.2.89). Fremin, her closet adoptive father, is defined as from another province in the paratextual list of characters itself: “FREMIN, Picard” (12, 41, 84). As a non-native, however, he is not berated but praised, and is saluted by Benard as being far more benevolent and courteous than the locals (“Et veu vostre courtoisie, ie ne puis croire que vous soyez de ceste ville, où ils sont si mal-gracieux”) (78). In the opening scene, both Fremin and Benard are said to have left their “native lands” (“quit[é] son pais”) (19, 20) and the epithet “estranger” is applied to to Filadelphe (18). Fidalelphe and Benard’s Lorraine roots are set in contrast with the French (“nos gens”) in Restitue’s mouth (19). The French nation is circumstantially defined based on a paradox; some of those who come from newly-conquered territories, and who now live here as “voisins” (19), may or may not have followed the emperor versus the king of France (siege of Metz) (81). They could be regarded as bad subjects (“mauvais François”) (81) for having fled out of fear. (A clear parallel with noblemen who fled the court or the country when or before being accused of heresy.) Benard is a true Frenchman and a false outsider; his offspring made the motherland home, and he is misguided, as Fremin points out (“vous vous abusez”) (83), when assuming his son’s target is from another land (“pays”) (83). As misguided as Benard is Filadelphe, in denial about his remarkable “ressemblance” with Fleuredelys, as his servant notes: “se ce n’estoit que ie vous ay ouy dire que vous n’auiez point de seur, ie croyois qu’elle vous fuss de quelque chose, tant elle vous ressemble” (“If it weren’t for the fact that you told me you had no sister, I would believe she is somehow related to you, for she resembles you so”) (27). This remark announces the fraternal bond to be unveiled so as to prevent an incestuous rape. All were strangers only at first glance, in short. All dangers stemmed from the illusion of strangeness. The theme is paramount and linked to the destiny of France.

At the onset, families are jumbled and scattered. A dramatic convergence of characters initially foreign or strange to each other – étrange or étranger in Middle French bearing several meanings: ethno-geo-political foreignness (les nations étrangées); interpersonal/spiritual estrangement (s’estranger); and sometimes, religious difference. How significant then is such convergence? How are we to interpret the characters’ confusion, followed by their union in the same extended family? The play shows that the strangeness that creates conflicts has no reason to exist and, for everyone’s sake, should be debunked and reinterpreted. Once the truth concerning their identity is revealed, the young rivals simply accept that they are destined to be brothers and, therefore, have no reason to fight