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Ellen R. Welch, *A Theater of Diplomacy: International Relations and the Performing Arts in Early Modern France*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, Haney Foundation Series, 2017. 302 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 (cl). ISBN 978-0-8122-4900-2.

Response by Ellen R. Welch, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

To begin, I wish to thank *H-France Forum*'s editors for choosing to focus this issue on my book and the four readers for sharing their time and insights. Books at some point are "finished," but the inquiries they represent are never truly complete. It is a privilege and a pleasure to continue discussing the central questions explored by *A Theater of Diplomacy* in the company of such a diverse group of scholars.

As Stephen Bold rightly observes, the question that sparked the research for this book had to do with the ubiquitous theatrical metaphors in early modern writing about diplomacy. I wondered what kinds of theater these writers had in mind when they made their poetic comparisons, and how those particular aesthetic performances influenced their understanding of theatrical representation. This question led me to court spectacle, the form—or collection of forms—that most directly engaged diplomatic actors as patrons, performers, and spectators. Monarchs staged grand festivities incorporating theater, music, dance, poetry, and pageantry to welcome foreign dignitaries or to commemorate peace treaties. Resident diplomats occupied places of honor at routine court entertainments such as court ballets and masques. And embassies occasionally hosted spectacular celebrations of their own. Such court spectacles received extensive attention during the twentieth century from scholars including Margaret McGowan, Roy Strong, Robert Isherwood, and Jean-Marie Apostolides, whose work often emphasized their effectiveness as projections of monarchal might.[1] Revisiting these entertainments in the context of diplomatic culture yielded many new perspectives, perhaps the most significant of which is to challenge the perception of court spectacles as propagandistic, as univocal expressions of sovereign will. As several case studies examined in the book show, in their role as spectators, foreign ministers exerted subtle but important pressure on the creators of court spectacles, influencing both the content and the conditions of performance. In addition, diplomats often made use of the theatricalized social environment surrounding a ballet or masque to assert their own interests. Viewed in this light, diplomatic entertainments appear less as monologic representations of power, more as collaborative works exemplifying the contingencies and exigencies of diplomatic negotiation.

This conception of court spectacles as highly complex orchestrations of multiple competing interests required a wider-angle analytical method than the semiotic interpretative strategies employed by previous generations of scholars of the genre. The dynamic, eclectic field of Performance Studies inspired my approach to the entertainments featured in *A Theater of Diplomacy*. In addition to offering a framework for thinking about performance conditions alongside the performance text, accounting for the active role of entertainments' spectators as well as their producers, Performance Studies helped to address the book's originary question regarding

the relationship between the metaphorical “theater of diplomacy” and the aesthetic performances that played a role within it. Following the model of Erving Goffman’s analyses of the theatricality of everyday life and the many subsequent studies they have inspired, my book identifies a set of dramatic techniques or performance practices that appear both on the literal stage and the larger diplomatic one.[2] This could be seen as a “blur[ring] of any line that would sharply divide diplomacy and theater,” as Bold phrases it. *A Theater* describes the relationship via the figure of *mise-en-abyme*. However the connection between diplomacy and theater is described, what my book aims to show is that theatrical modes of representation and reception were crucial to diplomatic culture and practice, and that the political realm cannot be fully understood without a grasp of the theatrical concepts underpinning it.

One of the key diplomatic tasks carried out by court entertainments had to do with representing the international community and the relationships among its members. In entertainments, this occurred through poetic and musical evocations of harmony, through personifications of “nations” who acted out conflict or alliance, and through allegories representing collectivities such as Europe. Off-stage, it manifested in seating arrangements and ceremonies, the elements of diplomatic practice governed by customs of precedence. As Bold and Brian Sandberg note, Victor Turner’s notion of “social drama”—which, for all its limitations, remains a key reference in the field—provided a starting place for analyzing the redressive function of diplomatic entertainments on international diplomats’ idea of themselves as a community.[3] My book also takes inspiration from Jill Dolan’s recent revision of Turner’s ideas and her insistence on the temporary, provisional nature of the communities formed by performance (what she terms “utopian performatives”).[4] The transitory and contingent quality of the visions of harmony projected by diplomatic entertainments is critical to my study, which also draws on elaborations of performance temporalities and meditations on performance’s reworking of history by theorists including Richard Schechner, Joseph Roach, and Rebecca Schneider.[5]

These theories entered into fruitful dialogue with existing approaches to understanding the status of artistic practices within existing International Relations theory. The work of Hedley Bull, a founding luminary of the “English school” of IR, may seem traditional, as Sandberg charges, in some respects, but he departed from more conservative Realist colleagues in acknowledging the role of cultural norms—including diplomatic conventions and artistic practices and tastes—in facilitating diplomatic engagements.[6] My book argues that the insights gleaned from thinking about diplomacy in terms of performance can productively revise Bull’s approach to theorizing the diplomatic force of convention, culture and the arts. These cultural underpinnings are not static or “civilizational” but must be continually rehearsed, which means they can adapt to changing conditions—affording a less important role to the Papal nuncio in negotiations among Catholic and Protestant states, for example, or favoring vernacular languages over Latin when drafting treaties. My argument about the importance of the Congress of Westphalia bears clarification in this context as it is more nuanced than Sandberg’s abbreviated summary implies. Rather than reify obsolete views of the Congress as structurally transformative, I argue that it revised European diplomacy’s performance practices, particularly the normative ceremonial conventions observed at international summits, as the obsessive references to Westphalia in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century manuals and compendia demonstrate. In contrast to Bold, I do not find this a particularly “dark” view, since the idea that political alliance is a performative category means that it contains endless potential for renewal.

Although it analyzes a series of case studies, then, the book takes an approach that is quite different from earlier historicist readings of similar spectacles and the anecdotes surrounding them which characterized these events as reflective or symptomatic of broad structural forces. Others have done the kind of extensive contextualization of entertainments with respect to sweeping historical conflicts that Sandberg finds lacking here. Such careful historical exegeses by scholars including Victor Graham, W. McAlister Johnson, Jonathan Goldberg, and Marie-Claude Canova-Green, to name a few, certainly informed my work and remain important references in *A Theater of Diplomacy*.^[7] My analysis aims to do something different, however. It explores how theatrical entertainments provided a space, a time, and a set of representational and interpretative strategies that allowed diverse actors to participate in momentarily crystalizing their diplomatic relationships in performance.

This approach—engaged with the perspectives of a variety of actors and spectators as well as the patron-author—also required recruiting an extensive array of sources. Most court entertainments were multimedia events, incorporating music, dance, costume, and set design as well as text, each element documented (or not, in the case of choreography) in a different form. Audience accounts offer another important perspective, not so much for the details they record about the entertainments as for the acts of spectatorship they perform. The spectator’s point of view is particularly difficult to locate in the historical record. Having spent the better part of two summers trawling through diplomats’ manuscript correspondence at the Archives Diplomatiques for comments on the entertainments they witnessed, I can confirm Margaret McGowan’s observation that letters and memoirs frequently reference the occurrence of spectacles “mais de façon si générale!”^[8] Ultimately, I selected the diplomatic entertainments analyzed in the book according to their relevance to international relations (which meant marginalizing internal conflicts such as the Fronde) and the richness of their documentation. Of course, even the most well recorded events emerge from the archive with some obstructed views. The kinds of sources at my disposal profoundly shaped the analysis of each case study and led me, for example, to use Antoine de la Boderie’s trove of letters—unique among diplomats’ correspondence for their compulsive attention to court masques—to focus on diplomats’ performances of spectatorship in chapter two. Meanwhile, Louis XIII-era ballets, beautifully documented in librettos and some visual depictions but remarked upon only in vague, banal terms by the statesmen who witnessed them, lent themselves to an analysis of representational modes such as personification and allegory in chapters three and four.

The kinds of sources documenting diplomatic entertainments are also the result of an evolution in media culture that occurred in tandem with the shifts in diplomatic culture traced in *A Theater*. Sarah Alyn Stacey lucidly summarizes the major trends in the entanglements of theater and diplomacy from the mid sixteenth to early eighteenth century, which are sketched out in the book. Several of the most important of these changes had to do with the expansion of print culture, and particularly with the upsurge of the periodical press, during this long period. Throughout the early modern era, important diplomatic entertainments were commemorated in print, from sumptuous festival books accessible only to the most privileged elite to cheaper pamphlets narrating the highlights. In France, Théophraste Renaudot’s *Gazette* mentioned ambassadors’ presence at court spectacles from its inception in 1634. Media coverage of diplomatic entertainments became increasingly ubiquitous in the second half of the seventeenth century through the early eighteenth

with the appearance of new periodicals. Articles in the *Gazette*, *Mercure Galant*, and other publications remain rich sources for the historian (as Scott Sanders's reading of the *Mercure* coverage of the 1725 Illinois delegation attests). The importance of these outlets for disseminating accounts of diplomatic events had an impact on diplomatic culture, expanding its audience to include the thousands of readers who would consume them vicariously. Increasing concern for this larger "public" marks the memoirs and notes of ministers and court officials charged with stage-managing diplomacy in France, who attempted to constrain foreign ambassadors into a disciplined routine of conventional ceremony that would not disturb the portrait of French preeminence they wished to display to the world. The cases of the embassies from Asia and Africa examined in chapter seven demonstrate the ambivalence of public curiosity about diplomacy, which had the potential not only to flatter French hosts by showcasing them as worthy of outsiders' appreciation but also to humiliate the state when a foreign observer failed to recognize its magnificence before the public gaze. In addition, publication of diplomatic events to individuals who had no official part to play in negotiations and little power to influence them encouraged the creation of skeptical, often satirical imaginings of what was happening behind the diplomatic fourth wall. This phenomenon was already present at the time of the Bayonne Entertainments, but became overwhelming in early eighteenth-century sources and remain a staple of media representations of diplomatic theater into the present. This may be a modernizing narrative, but at base it reflects material innovations in media culture whose impact continues to be felt in the conduct of international relations today. I hope that the evolutions in diplomatic and performance culture over the early modern period traced in my book will prompt critical comparisons between past and present.

Books need to stop somewhere, and *A Theater of Diplomacy* ends in the 1713-1715 period, marked by the Congress of Utrecht, the death of Louis XIV, and the completion of François de Callières's landmark manual *L'art de négocier avec les souverains*. This choice of endpoint is admittedly somewhat arbitrary and the need for narrative closure perhaps prompted an overstatement of the achievement of a "modern" diplomatic culture and a modern approach to public diplomacy at that historical moment. Sanders's engaging analysis of the 1725 Illinois embassy points to the significant continuity through the Regency and into Louis XV's reign with respect to the staging of diplomatic ceremonial and its representation in state-supervised periodicals. Ambassador Chicagou's charismatic presence and (possibly strategic) breaches of protocol bear comparison with the problematic embassy of Persian envoy Mohammed Reza Beg at the end of Louis XIV's rule. What other kinds of continuity might be found across the 1715 watershed? And how else could we restore a sense of the productive performativity and theatricality of earlier diplomatic culture to the media-saturated age of the eighteenth century and beyond (and perhaps alleviate Stephen Bold's despair)? Several compelling examples of eighteenth-century diplomatic performance feature individuals who exploited a difference from standard European diplomatic cultural norms to command the attention of both the public and state actors across various stages. A performance-oriented study of embassies such as those of Mehmed Said Efendi, Benjamin Franklin, or the gender-bending Chevalier d'Eon might reveal how strategic displays of distinction through theatrical techniques such as costuming brought forth new configurations of international alliance.[9] To bring these questions further up to date, Diana Taylor's invitation to consider "memes" as performances could restore an active role to the contemporary public of diplomatic theater. [10] For example, how might social media users participate in diplomacy when they replay and manipulate Donald Trump's series of handshakes with world leaders as a virtual spectacle?

The theatricality entailed in diplomatic work certainly has to do in part with dissimulation, deceit, the concealment of counter-strategic or embarrassing truths. But, as I hope to have shown in my book, theatricality is also a profoundly creative tool for diplomatic work, allowing for the enactment of cooperation among actors with conflicting interests, and producing hopeful visions of concord.

While the study performed in *A Theater* could be extended chronologically in either direction, the readers also usefully gesture toward several potential future projects that would bring its analytical approach to bear on different kinds of political contexts and different art forms. Sanders's demonstration suggests how diplomatic theater might operate in the context of imperial relations. Sandberg's proposal to consider the political performances of the Fronde suggests how internal conflicts, and not only international relations, could be viewed through this lens. Stacey's astute point that poetry such as the ambivalent odes of the Savoyard court poets could be analyzed as performance is particularly inspiring and provides a bridge between *A Theater* and more text-focused studies (such as those in Nathalie Rivère de Carles's edited volume) that have recently appeared. A decade's worth of scholarship in what John Watkins called the "New Diplomatic History" has shown not only that the history of international relations is entangled with the histories of literary and art forms and cultural practices but that the concept of diplomacy can open up a range of objects of historical study and reveal the multiple agencies and interests negotiating within them.[11]

NOTES

[1] Margaret McGowan, *L'art du ballet de cour en France, 1581-1643* (Paris: CNRS, 1963); Roy Strong, *Art and Power: Renaissance Festivals, 1450-1650* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Robert Isherwood, *Music in the Service of the King: France in the Seventeenth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973); and Jean-Marie Apostolidès, *Le roi-machine: Spectacle et politique au temps de Louis XIV* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1981).

[2] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

[3] Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, ed., Richard Schechner (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1986) and *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982).

[4] Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 15.

[5] Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985); Joseph Roach, "Performance: The Blunders of Orpheus," *PMLA* 125, no. 4 (2010): 1078-86; Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

[6] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 15.

[7] Victor Graham and W. McAlister Johnson, *The Royal Tour of France by Charles IX and Catherine de' Medici: Festivals and Entries, 1564-6* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979); Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Donne, Shakespeare, and Their Contemporaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); and Marie-Claude Canova-Green, *La politique-spectacle au Grand Siècle: Les rapports franco-anglais* (Paris: Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature, 1993).

[8] McGowan, *L'art du ballet de cour*, 51. I consider some explanations for diplomatic reticence about the spectacles they attended in "La critique des spectacles par les diplomates au XVIIe siècle," *Littératures Classiques*, Special issue: "Naissance de la critique dramatique," eds., Claude Bourqui and Lise Michel, 89 (2016): 103-114.

[9] These examples are inspired by art historian Ashley Bruckbauer's forthcoming dissertation "Dangerous Liaisons: Ambassadors and Embassies in Eighteenth-Century French Art," which uses concepts of performance among other analytical approaches to study the visual images inspired by these and other embassies.

[10] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 4.

[11] John Watkins, "Toward a New Diplomatic History of Medieval and Early Modern Europe," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38, no. 1 (2008): 1-14.

Ellen R. Welch
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
erwelch@email.unc.edu

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