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Venita Datta, *Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-Siècle France: Gender, Politics, and National Identity*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xi +264 pp. Figures, bibliography and index. \$83.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0521195959; \$25.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-521-18652-0.

Review by Victoria E. Thompson, Arizona State University.

In *Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-Siècle France*, Venita Datta explores the presentation and reception of heroes in the mass press and the theater during the period 1880-1914. Datta's multi-faceted argument weaves together an analysis of attitudes toward gender and religion with a discussion of the role of the press and the theater in overcoming political divisions and forging national unity. The result is a study that is both entertaining and thought-provoking, and that reveals the complexity of fin-de-siècle culture.

Datta's analysis focuses on five case studies that follow a rough chronological order. The book opens with a discussion of the 1897 Bazar de la Charité fire, in which 125 people, almost all of them women of high society, burned to death. The fire and its aftermath were extensively covered in the press, and quickly became divisive events, with Catholic and secular journalists taking sides on issues such as the proper way to mourn the victims. The fire took place a few months before the press battle over Dreyfus exploded, and Datta sees the debates over the fire as a precursor to the Affair, in that it demonstrated both the growing importance of the press as an arena for national debate and the disintegration of the *ralliement* of Catholics to the Republic. Chapter two focuses on responses to Edmond Rostand's play, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, first performed in December 1897, two weeks before the publication of Emile Zola's "J'accuse." Chapter three moves to an analysis of novels and plays about Napoleon written after Boulanger's defeat finally discredited Bonapartism in order to explore how a less-powerful Napoleon depicted in these works contributed to a new vision of the hero who could unite the country. In chapter four, Datta examines two plays, *Jeanne d'Arc* (1890) and *Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* (1909), both of which starred Sarah Bernhardt in the title role. The final chapter discusses press coverage of the Ullmo spy case (1907-1908), in which anti-hero and naval ensign Charles-Benjamin Ullmo was convicted of high treason, stripped of his military rank, and sent to Devil's Island. Ullmo's clumsy spy capers seemed to be drawn from the pages of a melodrama, and captivated both journalists and readers. Yet although Ullmo was Jewish, his case was "a failed replay of the Dreyfus Affair" (p. 183).

Each chapter develops several themes, the first of which is the development of a new type of hero during this period. Datta argues that the heroes (and anti-heroes) that emerge in plays, novels and the pages of the press were those best suited for the age of emerging mass culture. These heroes were accessible to the expanded audiences of the period who could identify with them, seeing them as better versions of themselves. From Cyrano's failure in love, to Napoleon appearing as only "a shadow of himself," these heroes were, as Datta wrote of Bernhardt's Joan of Arc, "saint[s] for a democratic age" (pp. 115, 159). In addition to emphasizing their humanity with all of its weaknesses, playwrights and novelists also emphasized the disinterestedness of their heroes. While Datta notes that these heroes were consumed by audiences, not only in plays, novels and newspapers, but also in advertising and on a wide range of products, the heroes themselves were honorable because they did not care about wealth or fame. The working-class men who went into the Bazar de la Charité fire to save women were a good example of

such heroes, who took action “for no monetary recompense,” and who “were not publicity seekers” (p. 48). By contrast Ullmo, the ultimate anti-hero of the period, tried to sell state secrets to support his mistress.

In addition to defining these heroes as appropriate to an age of mass culture, Datta explores how they were shaped by the background of the Franco-Prussian war. These heroes were forged in the wake of the defeat of 1871. By depicting France as a martyr to a stronger, more barbaric Germany, the French transformed their loss into a “moral victory” (p. 13). The heroes of the fin-de-siècle reinforced this message with their own martyrdom. Joan of Arc was perhaps the most iconic martyr of the age, but Datta demonstrates that the other heroes she examines were also viewed positively as martyrs. A good example is the women who sacrificed themselves to save others in the Bazar de la Charité fire. Datta’s analysis of the press coverage of these women shows how they were celebrated for their willingness to sacrifice themselves for others, while the aristocratic men who were reputed to have escaped the fire by using their canes to beat their way to the exits, were derided as dishonorable anti-heroes. While ultimately male journalists rallied to defend the aristocratic men, for a period following the fire the press depicted the fire as an event in which “gender roles had been reversed in a sort of grotesque carnival. In this world turned upside down, it was the women who had displayed courage and the men who had behaved like stereotypical women” (pp. 58-59).

As the above example indicates, Datta’s analysis of her case studies allows her to make some interesting observations concerning changing attitudes toward gender roles and characteristics. One of her most significant conclusions is that during this period, characteristics typically associated with women—self-sacrifice, but also physical weakness—were defined as heroic and were applied to men, as well as women. Furthermore, the accessibility of these heroes was made possible in part by depicting them as weakened. Her discussion of plays depicting Napoleon provides some good examples. In Victorien Sardou’s *Madame Sans-Gêne*, Napoleon is a jealous husband clothed in his dressing gown; in Edmond Rostand’s *L’Aiglon*, Napoleon’s son, the Duke of Reichstadt, is sickly and suffering.

Datta acknowledges that these plays were produced during a period in which gender roles were unstable, and demonstrates the ways in which fears of degeneration and the emergence of the New Woman shaped how some critics responded to these plays. Yet at the same time, she offers an original take on these “gender wars” (p. 168), arguing that the fluidity of gender categories characteristic of the period may have allowed more unity among audiences. An excellent example of this is her discussion of Sarah Bernhardt’s portrayal of Joan of Arc. Known for her “trouser parts” (roles in which she donned male clothing), in both the 1890 play and that of 1909, Bernhardt played a historical character who also wore male dress. Yet, while one might expect this double-transvestitism to create a great deal of unease in audiences, Datta shows how Bernhardt’s Joan of Arc was a figure both men and women could admire. Men could identify with her strength and exceptional courage, without seeing her as threatening, since she appeared more girl than woman, while her virginity served as an antidote to the metaphorical rape of France in the Franco-Prussian war. Women could see in her a model of Catholic womanhood, or a model of Marianne. Even those seeking to subvert gender roles found something to admire in Bernhardt’s Joan: her “heroic qualities [that were] were associated with a male chivalric code of honor and represented the usurping by a woman of the male prerogative of individual action in the public sphere” (p. 171).

Datta’s analysis of gender and heroism is fascinating, yet her overarching argument that audiences came to the theater searching for heroes with whom they could identify and over whom they could agree does not completely suffice to explain this apparent acceptance of fluid gender roles and characteristics. Datta persuasively argues that Bernhardt in particular was extremely talented at crafting her public persona so that people of widely different political and social views could identify with her. Yet more explicit discussion of why the attribution of masculine qualities to women and feminine qualities to men became more acceptable during this period would have allowed Datta to more fully develop this theme.

That caveat aside, Datta is successful in arguing that shifting attitudes toward gender, as well as class and religion, meant that traditional outsiders—workers, women and Jews—were “incorporated to some extent in the national consensus” to the degree that their potential for heroism was increasingly accepted (p. 15). Both workers and women were seen as heroes in the Bazar de la Charité fire, and, as discussed above, typically feminine characteristics such as self-sacrifice were attributed to male heroes. Datta also demonstrates an apparent decline in anti-Semitism. The Jewish actress, Sarah Bernhardt, was not criticized for her roles as the Duke of Reichstadt or Joan of Arc by the anti-Semitic press and, although Ullmo was Jewish, relatively little was made of that fact in the press coverage. For Datta, this trajectory shows a coming together of various political and ideological factions over the qualities of heroism and thus serves as an indication of national unity. “The fact that the Ullmo case did not assume the proportions of the Affair was due in great measure to the public’s weariness of the internecine quarrels that had marked the earlier fin-de-siècle period. In light of an impending war with Germany, French men and women put aside such differences, thereby increasingly accepting Jews into the national consensus” (p. 184).

Datta defines national identity as “an abstract identity, which means that one is French first and foremost, with personal affiliations of gender, religion, and ethnicity relegated to the private realm” (p. 9, note 20). She argues that the increasingly commercialized culture of the fin-de-siècle presented new avenues for articulating models of national identity and for transmitting those models to a wide public. In both the theater and the press, audiences could “consume” heroes and anti-heroes, while critics discussed and debated the characteristics that made one a hero. Datta’s study thus complicates Benedict Anderson’s argument that the press forges a sense of national belonging through the practice of simultaneous reading. Datta demonstrates that shared consumption of heroes in the theater and the press did create a sense of community, but that within this community, divisions and disagreements still existed.

While, over time, members of the press demonstrated more agreement over what characteristics a hero should possess and who could qualify as a hero, journalists still used their discussions of heroism (or the lack of it) to make political points. For example, Jules Lemaitre, president of anti-Dreyfusard Ligue de la Patrie Française argued that popularity of *L’Aiglon* revealed a yearning for a past when France was not corrupted by the Republic. Others criticized it as Bonapartist propaganda. By the end of this period, however, Datta argues that there was less division evident in press coverage. The Ullmo affair, discussed in the last chapter, became a diversion, a source of entertainment, rather than fodder for political quarrels. “The Ullmo affair was a case of treason transformed into a *fait divers*, uniting the nation as much around the consumption of the news as around the theme of national defense” (pp. 184-185).

Here, as Datta acknowledges, her analysis dovetails with others who have studied fin-de-siècle culture as a source of national unity.<sup>[1]</sup> It also provides an interesting twist on the Frankfurt School’s analysis of mass culture, in which the political passivity of consumers of culture is criticized. Jürgen Habermas, for example, stated that “[t]he world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only,” where critical discussion gives way to entertainment, a focus on “tastes and preferences” and, ultimately, to political indifference.<sup>[2]</sup> One might infer from Datta’s argument that in fin-de-siècle France, wracked by the trauma of military defeat and political divisiveness, a dose of passivity prompted by consuming mass culture was just what the French needed.

While Datta’s overall argument is both convincing and compelling, the extent to which Datta’s conclusions are applicable to the French in general, rather than to the world of journalists, playwrights, and theater critics is not completely clear. This is, of course, a dilemma that all cultural historians face, as they seek to understand widely-shared cultural attitudes on the basis of a much more restricted set of sources. The plays that Datta analyzes were clearly extremely popular; they all had long runs and large

audiences. However, the qualitative data that allows her to analyze why the plays were popular comes from a much more restricted circle, and her presentation of this data does not always make clear that it is difficult to know the extent to which audiences shared the views of critics. For example, in her discussion of Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*, Datta notes that, because the playwright was a Dreyfusard, anti-Dreyfusards called for a boycott of the play. Datta concludes: "[t]he fact that these anti-Dreyfusard partisans were unable to affect the popularity of the play is telling, because it illustrates the public's desire to reject partisan politics in favor of unity in the theater" (p. 92). While clearly a reasonable inference, an acknowledgement that it is impossible to know precisely why theater-goers rejected the boycott would have been appropriate. Nonetheless, this is a small critique of what is otherwise a significant contribution to our understanding of fin-de-siècle culture and politics.

## NOTES

[1] On the contribution of the mass press, and the *fait divers* in particular, to the formation of national identity, see Dominique Kalifa, *L'encre et le sang. Récits de crimes et société à la Belle Époque* (Paris: Fayard, 1995) and Marine M'Sili, *Le fait divers en république: Histoire sociale de 1870 à nos jours* (Paris: CNRS, 2000). On urban mass culture as a source of cultural unity, see Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

[2] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), p. 171.

Victoria E. Thompson  
Arizona State University  
[victoria.thompson@asu.edu](mailto:victoria.thompson@asu.edu)

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