
H-France Review Vol. 14 (May 2014), No. 85

Cecilia Feilla, *The Sentimental Theater of the French Revolution*. Burlington and Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2013). 274 pp. £58.60 (cl). ISBN: 978-1-4094-1163-5.

Review by Marie-Hélène Huet, Princeton University.

Studies on the culture of the French Revolution have long been motivated by a desire to understand the links between the surge of patriotic displays and the awakening of a popular political ideology. Starting with F.-A. Aulard's groundbreaking study on the Cults of Reason and the Supreme Being, scholars have focused on the rich corpus of celebrations and revolutionary plays related to the various episodes of the birth of the Republic.[1] In her well-documented study on the theater, Cecilia Feilla offers a new understanding of what she calls the "sentimental assumptions" informing Revolutionary aesthetics on the stage. She notes that in spite of their considerable success, sentimental plays have been largely neglected. Going beyond interpretations of these plays as political artifacts, the author re-examines the strategies that were so powerfully displayed on the stage, clarifying the role of sentimentality in social and political relationships during the revolutionary years.

As Feilla notes in her introduction, recently published data about the Paris repertories from 1789 to 1799 allow us to measure the astounding success of sentimental plays written both during the pre-revolutionary years and at the time of the Revolution. In her first chapter, Feilla focuses on what she calls the four "bestsellers" of the Paris stage during the Revolution: Beaumarchais's 1792 *La Mère coupable*, Sedaine's 1769 *Le Déserteur*, Chénier's 1793 *Fénelon*, and Marsollier des Vivetières's 1789 *Les Deux petits savoyards*. If Beaumarchais's play is well-known, the other three have received little or no attention. Sedaine's was adapted in 1786 as a comic opera and a ballet, becoming that playwright's greatest success (despite of the fact that the story's happy conclusion depended on the kindness of a king.) Pathos and sensibility are also at the heart of Chénier's *Fénelon*, written after censorship returned in 1793. The plays offer another variation on the theme of religious victims. The happy release of a young woman from a cloister and her reunion with her father and mother who were believed to be dead allowed the audience to enjoy the happiness promised by principles of humanity and freedom from oppression. When the Théâtre Italien produced *Les Deux petits savoyards* at the end of July 1789, the success was immediate. The comedy featured two appealing young boys from Savoie, a well-intentioned marquis who turned out to be their lost father, and a perfect blend of comic verve and sensibility.

The second chapter is dedicated to aesthetic principles and the *tableau*, an artistic device Diderot had theorized and put to the test in his own work. Feilla examines in detail the visual components and didactic principles that made the *tableau* so appealing to revolutionary authors. We know that David's paintings were the subject of living *tableaux* during ceremonies or at the end of patriotic plays, and Feilla examines plays that included a series of *tableaux* reminiscent of engravings by Moreau le Jeune and Greuze. Interestingly, in many of these scenes, a staged beholder anticipates the reactions of the audience. As Feilla rightly notes, *tableaux* prescribed a form of sociability "in which the beliefs of the private and the natural were joined with the political and patriotic" (p. 91).

Following the Oath of the Tennis Court, which signaled the legal beginnings of the Revolution, the theme of oath-taking became a central part of revolutionary rhetoric. In the third chapter, Feilla

provides an excellent analysis of Collot d' Herbois' *La Famille patriote* and the various ceremonies that combined a celebration of civic oath and sentimental vows. The distinction between oath-taking as speech act and the representation of oath-taking as ritual is particularly illuminating. Feilla convincingly argues that the theater played a "mediating role" by throwing light on the power and limits of the foundational act of the political state.

The idea of virtue, both as moral principle and political imperative, informs the following chapters. Although the play inspired by Richardson's novel *Pamela* was quickly censored, the novel and the text of the play circulated freely during the Revolution. Feilla argues that the play was censored not because of the way virtue was described or defined, but because it was a performance. Revolutionary anxieties regarding performance, legitimacy, and transparency are the themes of many political discourses, but the history of *Pamela* as a play, and the long plea entered by its author, François de Neufchâteau, demonstrate that the principles behind the idea of republican virtue implied a strict ordering of the genders. Moreover, as Feilla remarks, virtue had to appear as transparency itself, making the staged performance of virtue an inherent contradiction that led to complex and at times slightly incoherent deliberations on the value of revolutionary exemplars.

Brutus, the stoic Roman father who sacrifices his children because they have conspired against the Republic, came to represent an ideal model of political virtue. Feilla examines the long debates that took place at the time of the Enlightenment that described Brutus as admirable or repulsive, a ferociously virtuous father. Voltaire's play, *Brutus*, had initially not been successful. In her analysis, Feilla identifies the various elements that inspired admirers and detractors alike, and the heated quarrels that divided philosophers over the respective merits of Brutus's idea of justice and sentimentality. Between the creation of *Brutus* in 1730 and its revival on the revolutionary stage, much had changed, not only in the political sphere but also in the relationship between spectators and spectacle. The image of Brutus also informed the trial of the king, and the story of the stoic father would dominate the stage for several years. By 1795, however, a drama entitled *Encore un Brutus, ou le tribunal révolutionnaire de Nantes*, used the character of Brutus to indict the Terror's excesses. A page had been turned.

The last chapter, devoted in part to the great actor Talma, focuses on his capacity to move the spectator and his ability to produce emotions by his presence alone, without recourse to words. Talma's tremendous success in his impersonation of virtue heightened the visibility of the body as the place where sufferings are inscribed for all to see.

Feilla's book is remarkably well-documented. The author has been scrupulous in her reading of the literature and offers genuinely original insights on the sentimental character of a corpus that has largely been ignored. *The Sentimental Theater of the French Revolution* contributes to our understanding of the Revolution in two essential ways: It shows that the public taste for sentimental expression remained undiminished during a period dominated in part by Roman ideals of stoicism. It also demonstrates how sentimentality became part and parcel of the patriotic lessons the stage—and the arts in general—were meant to give their weary, yet receptive audience.

Note

[1] Alphonse Aulard, *Le culte de la raison et le culte de l'être suprême (1793-1794)* (Paris: Félix Alcan, Éditeur, 1892).

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ISSN 1553-9172