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Jeffrey M. Leichman, *Acting Up: Staging the Subject in Enlightenment France*. Lewisburg, Penn.: Bucknell University Press, 2016. xxiii + 261 pp. Notes and index. \$85.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9781611487244.

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It is a commonplace of Western theatre history that the art of acting first attracted extended and serious critical analysis in eighteenth century France, and doubtless the best known essay among the many works devoted to this subject is Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, published in 1830, nearly fifty years after his death. Although there are deep ambiguities in this famous work, as Leichman demonstrates, especially when considered in the context of Diderot's extensive writings on this subject, the basic "paradox" is that the most effective actor gains this effect not by the sincerity of his feeling, but by his extensive mastery of the techniques of imitation.

The conflict between these two points of view existed from the first significant treatises on acting by Saint-Albine and Riccoboni, in 1747 and 1750 and has continued to resonate through discussion of the art ever since. Leichman's study, however, demonstrates that this conflicted perspective on the art of the actor was by no means restricted to discussions of this particular art, but reflected a much more central concern in French society as a whole during the Enlightenment, a period in which the dynamics of theatre were increasingly recognized as operating in society as a whole. With the gradual breakdown of the rigidly maintained social positions and hierarchies of the ancien régime came a new sense of the negotiability of the social subject, and a growing suspicion that the self was not given or innate, but could be altered and perhaps even created through performance. The question of whether a superior actor must truly feel the emotions she was expressing (a dynamic underlying the fascination with *sensibilité*) or whether she could be even more effective by mastering and employing the external signs of these emotions, reflected a vastly more fundamental but basically identical concern over whether a participant in social life was expressing an "authentic" self and emotions or only shrewdly imitating them.

Leichman demonstrates the ubiquity, complexity, and centrality of this concern in Enlightenment France by considering in detail and in context, not only a number of key dramatic works, but also a wide variety of other documents, literary, theoretical, and polemic. Each of the book's six sections explores how this central concern was reflected in a different cultural manifestation, in most cases taking a key text for a detailed analysis of how the rhetoric of this debate provided its fundamental organizing principle.

The opening chapter deals with one of the most familiar aspects of Western drama, most notably outlined by Jonas Barish in his 1981 *Anti-Theatrical Prejudice* (surprisingly never mentioned by Leichman).<sup>[1]</sup> This is the theatre's continual condemnation by various moral reformers, particularly those associated with the Christian Church. To a much greater degree than Barish, however, Leichman stresses the ambiguity of this antagonism, while insisting that *sensibilité* underlay the most effective preaching. Religious theorists were troubled by the often equal or greater effectiveness of technique,

even to the point of recommending that priests study the techniques of successful actors. Even within the discourse of particular treatises, Leichman traces a tension between these positions and an ambiguity about the appropriateness and validity of performance, a tension and an ambiguity not only in religious theorists, but in virtually every sort of social and artistic commentator who dealt with this widely discussed matter during this era.

The following chapters turn more directly to the theatre, examined through an overview of the dramatic careers, both in theory and practice, of the three literary figures most significant in shaping the dramatic practice and discourse of this era: Nivelles de la Chaussée, the major producer of the distinctively eighteenth century genre, the *comédie larmoyante*, Denis Diderot, similarly central to the creation of the period's other major new form, the *drame*, and in the chapter between them, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, famous as a negative commentator on theatre but in fact also an ardent supporter and creator of it. The two major new forms that achieved prominence in the eighteenth century closely reflected both a change in the class makeup of the audience and a desire on the part of dramatists to create plays that would not only reflect the social position and domestic concerns of this new bourgeoisie, but also their new interest in the expression and sharing of emotions, particularly the more sentimental ones. Chapter two deals with the today little respected *comédie larmoyante*, which Leichman removes from its traditional reputation as little more than an excessive exercise in sentimentality and places solidly within his overall argument as a genre developed in significant measure to provide the new bourgeois public with models of whether and how the role-playing so central to aristocratic society could be reconciled with bourgeois moral codes and commitment to virtuous conduct. Leichman's preferred strategy, which serves his argument well, is the close reading of key texts, and his choices here are the comedies of one of the masters of the genre, Nivelles de la Chaussée, within whose works Leichman traces a subtle and complex exploration of the intertwined dynamics of *sensibilité* and self-dramatization.

Although chapter three touches upon Rousseau's theatrical works, its emphasis properly remains upon the complex and wide-ranging *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles*, which Leichman connects not only back to the tradition of religious objections to the theatre with which the book began and which have often been remarked in the work, but also demonstrates how the necessary inauthenticity of performance is for Rousseau as dangerous for a modern secular state as it had been for a traditional religious one. A significant side point, even if not strongly developed, is Rousseau's concern with the emotional appeal of theatre, which troubled Rousseau as being both anti-rational and feminine.

Chapter four turns to another major enlightenment figure, Diderot, and another major new dramatic form, the *drame*, of which Diderot was the first important creator and theorist. Here Leichman examines not only the famous *Paradoxe* or the first *dramas* with their important justifying prefaces, but a number of other works, especially *Le Neveu de Rameau*, to provide a nuanced picture of Diderot's constantly shifting perspective on the role of the theatre in shaping a superior society, in the interplay between actor and spectator, and in the ambiguous role of seduction in that complex relationship. Performance and spectatorship are considered as constantly reversing as the audience seeks to find moral and social certainties in a theatre apparently attuned to their social reality, and the actors seek through performance to respond in a positive and effective way to that search.

The final two chapters move on to the latter part of the century. The fifth chapter is the weakest in the book, not devoted, as are the others, to a major author, a major genre, or a major controversy, but to two highly idiosyncratic works, the 1769 *Le Pornographe* and the 1770 *Mimographe*, two early and not highly regarded efforts by a distinctly secondary figure in either literature or theory, Rétif de la Bretonne. Granted, these rambling and idiosyncratic works, especially the second, touch in many ways on the social status and responsibilities of actors, but given the eccentric, marginal, and not at all influential nature of these speculations, it is hard to see why these minor works should be accorded attention equal to that given the contributions of Rousseau, Diderot, and even La Chaussée. To make matters worse, the first four pages of the chapter are devoted to a cursory discussion of the most

important theatre figure of the period, Voltaire, who is discussed only in terms of his dissatisfaction with the way France treated leading actresses. Within the chapter itself, the same amount of space given to Voltaire, or slightly more, is devoted to a detailed plot summary of *le Pornographe*, quite unjustified either on the basis of the work's intrinsic value or to the central concerns of this book. No other work covered in the book, even the far more relevant *Préjugé à la mode* or *Mère coupable*, is given such detailed summary.

Happily, the final chapter gets back on track with the obvious figure, both in the importance of his drama and his theory, to close the century: Beaumarchais. Although few would dispute the dominance of Beaumarchais in the theatre world of Revolutionary France, Leichman takes the unusual and satisfyingly justified position of focusing upon the much-neglected final play of the Figaro trilogy, *La Mère coupable*. Leichman reads this play as a kind of culmination of the attraction/repulsion to theatricality and performance in both political and social life that has been the focus of his study. In the process, he demonstrates the common phenomenon that dramas which have not proven to have a significant ongoing stage life can often provide important insights into the major social and cultural concerns of their own era.

*La Mère coupable*, characterized by Beaumarchais himself as the morally significant of his works, returns to the theme of hypocrisy, made central to the French theatre by Molière's *Tartuffe*, but now inflected by more than a century of a growing awareness of the threats posed to the integrity of the nation, the family, and the individual by this activity, along with an awareness of the inherent inescapability of theatricality at the heart of each of these formations. For Molière's audience, the awareness and unmasking of the hypocrite was the responsibility of an enlightened public, and, if they failed in this responsibility, justice was assured by that ultimate basis of authority and identity, personal and national, the King. In post-revolutionary France, that solid base, eroding for more than a century, had totally disappeared, and the audiences of *La Mère coupable* were confronted with the far more difficult challenge of exposing hypocrisy in a society riddled with it and significantly sustained by it, wherein they themselves were inescapably implicated. Representation had moved to a central position in the public consciousness, where it has arguably remained ever since.

#### NOTE

[1] Jonas Barish, *Anti-Theatrical Prejudice* (London: University of California Press, 1981).

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