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Jeffrey M. Leichman, *Acting Up: Staging the Subject in Enlightenment France*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; Lanham, Md.: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2016. xxiii + 261 pp. Bibliography and index. \$85.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-6114-8724-4.

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Jeffrey Leichman's book opens a new series, "Scènes francophones," launched by Bucknell University and edited by Logan J. Connors. Investigating fictional and non-fictional discourses on the actor's performance in ancien régime France, this study offers a very adequate opening to "the only North American book series dedicated to French-speaking theater" (as editors present it).

The title, "Acting Up," is situated in two interrelated semantic fields that are crucial for the historically optimistic, and perhaps somewhat utopian as I will argue, understanding of the actor's performance deployed in the book. On the one hand, to act up is to merely show off, to put oneself on display. On the other, acting up refers to unruly behavior, provocative or disrespectful of conventions. The book's goal is to demonstrate that, within the rigid social structures of absolutist France, the former meaning necessarily led to the latter. According to Leichman, stage acting is "an inherently rebellious gesture that...is essential to understanding the radical departure from a fixed and eternal order to one that takes its cues from the actor's freedom of self-invention, the uncanny ability to embody a convincing person where none existed previously" (p. 163). By developing this argument, the author reinvests the consensual, if regularly contested, historiographical narrative about the eighteenth century, but also nuances it through inscribing acting into the story of the gradual decline of the moral authority of the Church and religion: "The actor's endless perfectibility signaled a new age, which would severely challenge the authority of the Christian worldview. After the age of belief come the age of the actor; after faith enlightenment" (p. 33).

The book unfolds in six chapters, the chronology of which stretches beyond the eighteenth century. The story starts in seventeenth-century Paris, the setting of the institutionalization of French theater under the patronage of the cardinal Richelieu and reaches the late 1790s in the last chapter. After a short introduction and an excursus on the seventeenth-century "quarrel over acting" offered in the first chapter, each following chapter builds around a text or several texts and their authors: Nivelles de la Chaussée, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Diderot, Rétif de la Bretonne, and Beaumarchais.

Acting Up results from a doctoral thesis defended in 2008 at Yale, to which the author has added one new chapter (on Rétif de la Bretonne's peculiar work *La Mimographe*, chapter five). It is, in other words, a first book, which concentrates years of learning, cautious writing and revision, and the original ideas of an emerging scholar. At the same time, it is a book of a teacher, who not only patiently engages with original texts and secondary literature in two languages, but also recycles his readings into a clearly structured and highly readable, if sometimes packed, narrative. [1] The material economy of the book reflects these qualities of the work: there are some 175 pages of the core text and sixty-nine pages of notes.

The subject of the book is, more precisely, theories and “concrete manifestations” of acting, the latter being understood as a practice and a technique in which multiple tensions between social and political selves were negotiated, sometimes—as the author claims—for the first time in history. By “concrete manifestations,” Leichman does not mean historically reconstructed material practices, but normative and critical discourses on theater and performance: treatises on the acting authored by its detractors and its defenders, as well as dramatic paratexts. In addition, a corpus of dramatic texts is approached in the book from a similar perspective as a series of reflections on the actor-subject, attuned to the changing rules of poetics and to the social transformations related to the “rise of the bourgeoisie.”

While the study takes into account literature on the history of theatrical practices and material culture of performance, its assumption is that philosophical and aesthetic treatises are a more relevant source for the reconstruction of the “epistemological stakes of performance” and their affective scenarios than “a taxonomy of postures and grimaces whose evocative power is inaccessible to the present age” (p. xvi). Apart from refusing to take the path of this kind of semiotics, which are, in his view, historically irrelevant, Leichman also seeks to delineate himself from literary studies dedicated to eighteenth-century “theatricality.” If, for many of these studies, theatricality is a synonym for the artificially created illusion of existence, Leichman theorizes acting as an innovative “esthetic practice of personhood” (p. xiv) that offered the individual new ways of interaction with society and its power hierarchies: “...the subject who first stepped onto the stage of modernity was an actor” (p. xxiii).[2]

While the author affiliates his work with the broad field of “performance studies,” allowing a hybrid approach of the studied objects and sources, his book remains firmly inscribed in the broadly defined field of French cultural history, encompassing, in this case, literary studies, the history of theater, and intellectual history. In this respect, it follows a larger trend in the scholarship of the 2010s dedicated to pre-1800 France, including recent books by Logan J. Connors, Cecilia Feilla, and Joseph Harris, to name just those quoted in the footnotes of the reviewed book.[3] All these works reexamine French cultural history through the lens of the theories and practice of theater.[4]

Joseph Harris’s book, in particular, places the question of subjectivity at the center of the investigation into the spectator’s experience. Harris’s and Leichman’s studies could be seen as two parts of one broad inquiry, dedicated to the main individual human components of a theatrical event: spectator and actor, respectively. They engage with two dilemmas, or paradoxes, that still shape our thinking about human agency in the theatrical experience. These dilemmas problematize the juxtaposition, in performance, of esthetic and social experience, asking: should the actor/spectator be involved in the performance up to the point of forgetting him/herself and leaving all space to the theatrical illusion? What kinds of moral effect can such absorption or distance produce?

In France, these parallel debates culminated around 1750, generating hundreds of polemical texts and inspiring major writings by Denis Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, two emblematic representatives of the dispute. By no coincidence, the chapters dedicated to these two authors are at the center of Leichman’s book. Indeed, while the author of *Acting Up* demonstrates the importance of lesser known aesthetic treatises and dramatic texts, such as La Chaussée’s *comédies larmoyantes*, canonical texts by Diderot and Rousseau and their original interpretation are crucial to his argument.[5]

Concisely described, the architecture of the book is defined by the encounters between Leichman’s reading of marginal and lesser-known texts and the interpretations of more familiar texts stemming from the author’s broadened corpus. By addressing lesser-known texts with the canon in mind, Leichman revivifies both readers’ and his own interest and curiosity. The less positive side of this *remise en perspective* is that it seeks to nuance existing narratives and established views on the cultural history of the studied epoch rather than offer a critical reappraisal of them. Rousseau’s play *Narcisse* thus “prefigures a central concern uniting Rousseau’s literary and political works” (p. 65), Beaumarchais’s

drame La Mère coupable “also deserves to be considered in the company of its comic predecessors,” i.e. *Le Barbier de Séville* and *Le Mariage de Figaro* (p. 145), and so on—the canon provides a seemingly indispensable frame for Leichman’s analyses. Hence, too, passages legitimizing the author’s interest in a genre or a text in teleological terms, such as: “Saint-Albine and Riccoboni provide the initial framework for a debate that, through Diderot, would become fundamental to modern acting theory” (p. 28). Both attention given to the emergence of a phenomenon and perspective set by “modernity” are recognizable features of some versions of intellectual history.

Perhaps as a result of this approach, Leichman’s close readings, generally insightful, lead to sometimes trenchant conclusions. After stating the importance of the “emotional effusions and complicated intrigues” of the *comédie larmoyante* for posthumous literary developments, the author declares *sensibilité* a “mainstream affect in the eighteenth century” (pp. 58-59). The elimination of the comic in favor of the pathetic fails, I think, to account for the complexity of the theatrical repertoire featuring a heterogeneous corpus of performed texts, which include Molière and his epigones, as well as the moralizing comedy. Voltaire, in his comedies (e.g., *L’Enfant prodigue*, 1736), and Diderot, in his theoretical writings, stressed the interest of bringing comic and touching effects together in one dramatic narrative.

The overarching project of the study is to offer an account of the troubling and crucial link between the modern subjectivity and acting. In contrast to existing accounts, critical of the “society of the spectacle,” skeptical towards the status of the autonomous subject in modern societies or questioning the mechanisms of representation, Leichman’s book places the acting subject and its emancipation through performance at the center of discussion. The latter is defined as a praxis where philosophical discourse and “aesthetics of individual freedom” or “self-fashioning freedom” merge in a liberating and potentially socially transgressive interplay. “By framing and objectifying the individual subject’s interactions with the world, modern dramatic imitation allows spectators to recognize the theatrical structures that govern their lives outside the theater,” affirms, optimistically, Leichman (p. xviii). This claim, however, remains in the state of hypothesis, as the study investigates neither the lived experiences of theater, nor the lives of spectators: historical actors who occupy both the stage and the auditorium are substituted in the study by the different models they were offered to follow.

While Leichman posits that his book aims to look at both practice and “theoretical modeling” of stage performance, the study is primarily dedicated to discourses on acting. The link between performance and audience remains in the sphere of the author’s intuitions as in this hypothesis about the acclaim received by the *comédie larmoyante*: “...this success can be attributed to the genre’s representation of a status-conscious urban public overcoming social obstacles through carefully modulated domestic performances” (p. 45). Indeed, although recent studies of Parisian theatergoers by Jeffrey Ravel and others offer a variety of insights into the sociology of the eighteenth-century theater-going public, any claim about the mechanisms of dramatic success is bound to remain a guess that is more or less supported by fragmentary evidence.^[6] And Leichman’s study does not provide any original evidence on this aspect of theatrical life of the old regime.

The book’s thesis concerning the actor is more solid, but also raises a series of issues that are not addressed in the study. Leichman demonstrates, for instance, that acting becomes a laboratory where new concepts of the subject have been created, and this for a number of reasons. The primary historical reason was a tension shaping the actor’s social condition: both marginal, because of the ecclesiastical ban on the profession, and prominent, thanks to his/her place in the economy of urban entertainment. This feature of the socioprofessional status brought about a technique that later could be transferred into the broader realm of everyday interactions by various social groups: “Once the world is acknowledged as a mutable play-script, individual actors are empowered to take advantage of the formal limitations to the social world’s play-like structure in order to secure their personal goals” (p. 44). From this realization, Leichman comes to the conclusion that acting is always potentially “acting up,” that is “an infraction

against the established order that denies the authority to define the relationship between the individual and the expectations of his or her society” (p. 163). This thesis resonates with some of the influential projects of philosophical and historical reconciliation of performance practices and historically situated forms of social domination, such as Mikhail Bakhtin’s investigation into carnival or the Situationist International struggle against the oppressive structures of everyday life. However, the results of Leichman’s research sharply contradict the sociological paradigms with which I am familiar, starting with Pierre Bourdieu’s reading of symbolic interactions in the social world. In the closer disciplinary environment, Sarah Maza’s revision of the “myth of the French bourgeoisie,” referenced in the bibliography, is not addressed in *Acting Up* either. As a result, the optimistic narrative of Leichman’s study seems to belong to a different epoch in cultural history.

Bringing into this review issues and questions that are situated beyond the scope of literary studies and intellectual history, the original disciplinary domains of the book, may not seem entirely fair. In my view, however, this is justified by an important quality of performance studies—that of a heterogeneous and constantly developing discipline, a discipline to which Leichman’s study offers a valuable contribution.

NOTES

[1] The reader will enjoy the accuracy of translations from French, just as much as Leichman’s lively academic prose. Among minor disagreements regarding the former, should be mentioned the translation of Voltaire’s essay *Sur la police des spectacles*, rendered as *On the purity of spectacles* (p. 131). The ancien régime use of the word “police” referred to political and administrative organization and supervision of a given entity. Its meaning is broader and more technical than Leichman’s equivalent (see the translation of the discussed title in the 1760s’ London edition of Voltaire’s works: “On the management of publick shows”). Besides, Voltaire’s short piece on the issue of the excommunication of actors and actresses was originally published in 1745 in the Ledet/Desbordes edition of Voltaire’s works as a separate *Lettre sur les spectacles* and not as an entry in the *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764), as Leichman writes. Since Leichman cites David Williams’ critical edition of the essay (published in the Voltaire Foundation edition of Voltaire’s *Complete Works*), I assume that he is aware that the editors of the Kehl edition had the idea to print *Police des spectacles* as an entry in the *Philosophical Dictionary* in the 1780s (see *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. 28A [Oxford : Voltaire Foundation, 2006], pp. 65-75).

[2] Leichman’s study resonates with Ziad Elmarsafy’s book that looks at theoretical foundations of the self using a different dramatic and literary corpus from the same time period. See Ziad Elmarsafy, *The Histrionic Sensibility and Identity from Corneille to Rousseau* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2001).

[3] Logan Connors, *Dramatic battles in eighteenth-century France: philosophes, anti-philosophes and polemical theatre* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2012); Cecilia Feilla, *The Sentimental Theater of the French Revolution* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); Joseph Harris, *Inventing the Spectator: Subjectivity and Theatrical Experience in Early modern France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[4] The field of performance studies as such is much less represented in the book, as is the philosophy of the subject. It is noteworthy that performance studies have recently shifted their focus from the isolated study of onstage performance to collective theatrical events. See, for instance, William Sauter, *The Theatrical Event. Dynamics of Performance and Perception* (Iowa City: The University of Iowa Press, 2000).

[5] In this and some other respects, the closest model for Leichman’s book seems to be David Marshall’s *The surprising effects of sympathy : Marivaux, Diderot, Rousseau and Mary Shelley* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988).

[6] Jeffrey S. Ravel, *The Contested Parterre. Public Theater and French Political Culture, 1680-1791* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999).

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