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Annelle Curulla, *Gender and Religious Life in French Revolutionary Drama*. Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018. xii + 203 pp. Bibliography and index. \$99.99 (pb). ISBN 9781786941404.

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It was once de rigueur to start any writings on the theater of the French Revolution, including book reviews such as this one, by lamenting the remarkable degree to which this dramatic corpus had been ignored or, worse, reviled. This gesture has become harder and harder to justify. If beyond university walls French literary history continues to skip from Figaro to Hernani, within academia Revolutionary drama is a thriving subfield, transformed in the past twenty years by a long and growing list of important monographs.[1] *Gender and Religious Life in French Revolutionary Drama* represents a welcome addition to this list. As well-written as it is meticulously researched, Annelle Curulla's excellent first book not only illustrates the scholarly significance of Revolutionary theater, it also broadens our understanding of it, in two especially meaningful ways.

First, while the theater of the Revolution may no longer be neglected as an object of academic study, it has until recently tended to be viewed through a predominantly political lens.[2] This approach has produced groundbreaking studies that have altered our perception not only of Revolutionary drama but of the period's politics as well, but like any lens, it distorts even as it clarifies.[3] It is therefore to Curulla's credit that she shifts the focus onto less illuminated facets of Revolutionary theater. This represents no small feat, since the corpus she studies—forty-three plays (twenty-two extant) illustrating what Curulla dubs the “monastic trope” (plays set in or involving convents)—has long attracted political readings. For most scholars, these enormously popular plays “were simple anticlerical propaganda endured by the fearful masses” (p. 7). For others, they exemplified the kind of lighthearted escapist fare that appealed to vast audiences weary of Revolutionary politics and violence (p. 130). Curulla's corpus thus occupies a central, contested position in a longstanding debate that continues to divide the field today: should Revolutionary drama be understood as an escape from politics or as a reflection of it?[4] Shrewdly, Curulla transcends this diversion/propaganda binary by refusing to treat the plays she studies as mere extensions of a uniquely politicized moment in French history. She uncovers the longer, pre-Revolutionary history of the monastic trope and carefully charts the way that certain figures, themes, and plays took on layers of sometimes contradictory meanings, encouraging a more complex relationship to the stage than one of entertainment or indoctrination. What drew thousands of spectators to monastic plays was not, according to

Curulla, rabid anticlericalism, but rather the unique opportunity they offered to explore new conceptions of femininity, masculinity, sexuality, family, and sociability.

Second, Curulla rightly treats the plays of the Revolution as theatrical productions, not just as texts. Perhaps due to the political lens described above, there has long been a tendency among scholars of Revolutionary theater to focus on literary elements, particularly when a theme, leitmotiv, or plotline mirrors a particular ideology. While audience response has garnered considerable interest, a reflection of its political implications, other performative facets of Revolutionary drama have been mostly overlooked. How refreshing, then, to find in Curulla's work such attention to acting style, casting, costume, set design, staging, and lighting, the ephemera of theatrical experience carefully reconstructed via press reports, but also promptbooks and memoirs! For instance, Curulla often remarks on the congruence or dissonance between a particular actress (her personal life, acting style, and former roles) and her character, precisely the kind of information lost to modern readers but that greatly impacted the reception of plays. This hybrid methodology, combining literary criticism with performance studies, is particularly successful when applied to the monastic trope, as it allows Curulla to highlight in the figure of the theatrical nun "two culturally freighted emblems of the feminine: the actress, symbol of worldliness, hypersexuality and visibility, and the nun, symbol of devotion, renunciation and invisibility" (p. 13). The convent and the stage are, Curulla reminds us, both physical places and powerful cultural metaphors, and to study their interaction requires that attention be paid to the materiality of performance as well as to the text's symbolism.

Chapter one offers a particularly good example of this approach by charting the trajectory of a single play, Jean-François de La Harpe's *Mélanie, ou la Religieuse*, both as a text (three distinct published versions, in 1770, 1778, and 1802) and as a performance (in Parisian salons in the 1770s, on a public stage in 1791, and again, for a brief revival, in 1801). Where previous scholars had drawn a simple parallel between *Mélanie's* evolution and La Harpe's spiritual biography, a tale of youthful anticlericalism yielding with time to a more mature appreciation for the church, Curulla situates each variant of the play within its unique historical context, paying attention to the debates and fashions of the moment as well as to the circumstances, actors, and spectators shaping each new performance. Through this approach, Curulla succeeds in turning *Mélanie* into a compelling case study, "a striking example of the cultural fluidity of the monastic trope at different points in the history of late eighteenth-century French theatre: from Enlightenment critique of patriarchal authority, to patriotic celebration of Revolutionary progress, to a vehicle for questioning that very progress" (p. 42).

Whereas chapter one traces the evolution of a single play over several decades, chapter two examines a handful of plays (selected from fifteen, all performed during the 1790-91 theatrical season) depicting nuns or monks leaving their convents and habits behind. Curulla contends that this version of "the monastic trope was chronologically important to this period as a means of testing out new freedoms increasingly granted to the stage" (p. 14). In particular, the newly acquired right to depict religious costumes, practices, and settings onstage proved contentious, crystallizing diverse attitudes towards the proper function of theater. For some, representing religion onstage strengthened public esteem for it. For others, it weakened religious faith by desacralizing Catholic rituals. For yet another group, such plays presented an opportunity to express support or condemnation for the government's religious policy. According to Curulla, the practice of theater, like its (perceived) function, was transformed by the monastic trope. She draws connections between her corpus and broad evolutions in dramatic history (notably towards

more realistic costume, heightened sentimentality, and greater societal engagement), although as I will discuss below, it is not always clear how the monastic trope shaped these developments, as opposed to simply reflecting them.

One innovation--the "double scene"--does seem truly inseparable from the monastic trope, and Curulla's astute examination of it in chapter three constitutes one of her most original contributions to French theater studies. A double scene occurs when the stage is fragmented into two distinct spaces (for instance, via a convent wall), with the action unfolding in both spaces separately but tending towards unification (via a breaching of the wall). As Curulla notes in her history of the double scene, it has received little of the considerable attention lavished on Diderot's other great inventions, such as the fourth wall and the tableau. Curulla's analysis of Monvel's *Les Victimes cloîtrées* goes a long way towards rectifying this lacuna. It illuminates the affective power of the double scene, which replaces the linear constraints of language with a concurrent choreography of gestures, cries, and movement (p. 87). And it highlights the semantic flexibility found in the double scene's structure, which tends towards unity (the wall collapses, and past prejudices and abuses are brought to light) but which predicates this union on crude binary oppositions, including highly gendered ones.

The double scene thus provides a smooth transition to the central topic of the final two chapters: gender. In chapter four, Curulla studies Revolutionary constructions of femininity and maternity by tracing the evolution of mother-daughter relations in monastic theater over a span of thirty years (1760s to 1793). She contends that the convent proved an ideal site for exploring feminine identity because it was intended to serve as an obstacle to sexuality (and thus to motherhood) and yet opened up a space of close relationships between women, removed from the patriarchal and heterosexual norms of the outside world. This opportunity to reimagine gender roles and maternal relations attracted the likes of Olympe de Gouges and Marie-Joseph Chénier to the monastic trope, even if, as Curulla concludes, they ultimately set out less to challenge the patriarchy than to correct its most obvious abuses, notably by reintegrating unproductive, unmaternal women into the family and thus into the nation.

Chapter five shifts the focus from the objects of conquest (the women "liberated" from the convents) to the men who conquered them. Under the ancien régime, these men were suitors furtively entering convents in pursuit of love or lust, but they were replaced in the plays of the Terror by soldiers who breached the walls to rescue monastic victims (male and female) and to teach them the new norms of masculinity and fraternity serving as the republic's bedrock. As Curulla skillfully shows, however, the comic tone of these so-called rescue missions should not obscure their end result, a forced fraternity imposed on monks through violence, patriotism, and the army, and on nuns through a contractual definition of marriage that secularized the female body by making it available to all men. The plays thus disclose the costs of the Revolutionaries' vaunted fraternity: for women, who "are responsible for maintaining peace within and between the sexes in ways that reinforce rather than threaten masculinity" (p. 151), and for men, who must continually perform masculinity as a form of civic belonging vital to the legitimacy of the republic.

Curulla's book thus concludes with two absorbing chapters examining the contribution of the monastic trope to Revolutionary conceptions of gender, sexuality, religiosity, and sociability. It is in this aim, I contend, that the book is most successful, more so than in its other ambition: to show the impact of the monastic trope on the history of French theater. On several occasions,

Curulla makes the ambitious claim that, to quote the book's final line, "the monastic trope was tied to the origins of modern theatre itself" (p. 159). The double scene aside, however, I found myself wondering what, specifically, the convent plays contributed to aesthetic evolutions that were already unfolding. Engaging with Matthew S. Buckley's similar thesis in *Tragedy Walks the Streets: The French Revolution in the Making of Modern Drama* might have helped Curulla better support her claim. Readers might also find somewhat narrow her definition of "secularization" as the transfer of goods and people from the religious to the non-religious domain, and wish she had addressed more directly some of her work's fascinating implications--notably regarding such broader topics as the disenchantment of the world, the blurry frontier between theater and ritual, and the historical antecedents of today's *laïcité* (obsessed, it is true, with a different veil). This may, however, simply be the downside of writing a book that expands one's field of study: being faulted for not pursuing every avenue, when one ought to be thanked instead--as Curulla surely should be--for having opened these avenues.

NOTES

[1] Just in the past twenty years: Paul Friedland, *Political Actors: Representative Bodies and Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Susan Maslan, *Revolutionary Acts: Theater, Democracy, and the French Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Matthew S. Buckley, *Tragedy Walks the Streets: The French Revolution in the Making of Modern Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Mechele Leon, *Molière, the French Revolution, and the Theatrical Afterlife* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009); Suzanne J. Bérard, *Le Théâtre révolutionnaire de 1789 à 1794. La Déchristianisation sur les planches* (Paris: Presses universitaires de Paris-Ouest, 2009); Mark Darlow, *Staging the French Revolution: Cultural Politics and the Opéra de Paris, 1789-1794* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Cecilia Feilla, *The Sentimental Theatre of the French Revolution* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); Stéphanie Fournier, *Rire au théâtre à Paris à la fin du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Garnier, 2016); Philippe Bourdin, *Aux Origines du théâtre patriotique* (Paris: CNRS, 2017); and Yann Robert, *Dramatic Justice: Trial by Theater in the Age of the French Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019). This list does not include the many edited volumes on Revolutionary theater directed by Jean-Claude Bonnet, Philippe Bourdin, Isabelle Brouard-Arends, Bernard Gainot, Thibaut Julian, Laurent Loty, Gérard Loubinoux, Martial Poirson, and Vincenzo De Santis.

[2] A few exceptions to this rule, from the list above: Leon's *Molière*, Feilla's *Sentimental Theatre*, and Robert's *Dramatic Justice*.

[3] Foremost among them: Marie-Hélène Huet, *Rehearsing the Revolution: The Staging of Marat's Death, 1793-1797* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); and the above-cited works by Friedland and Maslan.

[4] The escapism thesis finds its first and most convincing formulation in Emmet Kennedy, et al., *Theatre, Opera, and Audiences in Revolutionary Paris: Analysis and Repertory* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996).

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