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Joy Palacios, *Ceremonial Splendor: Performing Priesthood in Early Modern France*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022. x + 271 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$54.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781512822786; \$54.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781512822779.

Reviewed by Eric Nelson, Missouri State University.

“All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.” declares Jacques in perhaps the most famous passage from *As You Like It*. While Shakespeare penned these lines as the opening to an extended reflection on the stages of life, after reading Joy Palacios’s fascinating study of performative priesthood in Counter Reformation France between *ca.* 1630 and 1730, I found myself reworking Shakespeare’s words to introduce instead a vision of competing stages and rival performances as a more professional and assertive secular clergy strove to institute on the ground an ideal understanding of the Christian community inculcated in their seminary training. As Palacios convincingly argues, performing priesthood extended outward from a priest’s dress and comportment, to the ceremonial life of the parish, to the ordering of the entire community.

This new type of parish priest, the *vray ecclésiastique* described by Palacios, embraced Shakespeare’s vision of the whole world as a stage and cast himself as a key character at the center of a performance in which the whole community participated in creating a well-ordered environment for worship. This performance spilled over from altar to church to public and private spaces in the parish, leaving little theoretical room for competing performances. It is this insight that provides the foundation for one of Palacios’s most important and novel conclusions, a reinterpretation of why many priests vehemently opposed the staging of plays in their communities. While Palacios accepts the standard interpretation that Jansenist moral rigorism played a role in priestly hostility to theater, she argues that earlier scholarship has ignored that “the post-Tridentine liturgy’s internal logic with its ceremonial dynamics and their relation to priestly identity also motivated ecclesiastical responses to the stage and stage players” (p. 27). This created a fundamental tension between the logic of liturgical life and the theater. “Whereas the liturgy’s internal logic” argues Palacios “sought to link bodies and objects in its all-encompassing extension, the theatrical repertoire tended to concentrate and mark off time and space in framed unities. Thus, even when a play or performer offered no direct threat to church doctrine or theology at the level of content, the theater’s way of organizing bodies and objects had the capacity to disrupt and erode liturgical relations” (p. 30).

To examine the inculcation of performative priesthood at seminaries and how these values were employed in parish religious life, Palacios relies primarily on the sources produced by bishops

and seminaries to train secular clergy—episcopal edicts, seminary rules and manuals, liturgical handbooks, etc. She focuses primarily on the archives of two leading Parisian institutions, the seminary of Saint-Nicolas du Chardonnet overseen by the Oratorians and the seminary associated with the parish of Saint Sulpice. But at several points Palacios expands her horizon beyond Paris to consider similar source material from across France. The most innovative aspect of this study is its use of modern performance theory to interrogate these sources. Palacios avoids overwhelming the reader with theory by integrating new theoretical insights into the narrative in direct contact with her sources. Combined with a broad overview in the introduction, this approach makes it easy to understand and digest the insights of performative theory even for those possessing just a passing familiarity with the field.

The thematic organization of this book is one of its strengths. Structured into five chapters, *Ceremonial Splendor* provides ever-wider perspectives on priestly performance, with each chapter building on those that came before. The first two chapters explore how seminaries trained priests to “play the role” of the *vray ecclésiastique*. Chapter one, “Clothing,” focuses on the long black robe known as the *soutane* that in the seventeenth century became standard dress for secular clergy and came to represent the professionally trained seminary priest. The scandal associated with the original staging of Molière’s *Le Tartuffe*, in which the main character wore a costume evoking the *soutane*, provides a revealing moment that Palacios uses to explore what priestly dress had come to represent by the 1660s. Chapter two, “Gestures,” examines the emphasis on comportment intended to convey clerical modesty and authenticity to observers. Comportment was increasingly codified from the 1640s, and seminaries trained priests to perform in public by practicing sacramental ceremonies within the seminary and modest comportment in the everyday life of the institution. As Palacios convincingly shows, seminaries relied heavily on techniques like rehearsals that were similar to those of actors to develop their priestly demeanor.

Chapter three, “Ceremonies,” shifts focus from the actions of individual priests to examine the ways that priests conducted liturgical rituals that one leading seminarian educator described as “preaching for the eyes.” These rituals required the coordinated actions of several priests to create what Palacios labels *éclat*, or ceremonial splendor, which she convincingly shows was modeled on court rituals associated with the presence of the king. Reflecting Tridentine theology of the Mass, producing *éclat* raised the stakes as poorly conducted ceremonies did not just reflect badly on the individual priest but also the doctrine of transubstantiation.

In Chapter four, “Publics,” Palacios shows how a priest’s role in leading religious ceremonies made him a “public person,” amplifying the possibility that the shortcomings of a priest in fulfilling popular expectations could result in a priest being labeled a “public sinner.” Here Palacios takes the opportunity to explore the nature of the “public person” and “public sinner” in seventeenth-century French society, providing a nuanced picture of a priest’s authority and also the fragility of his authority tied to his successful performance of public duties.

Finally, Chapter five, “Rivals,” takes the form of a microhistory set in the parish of Saint Sulpice where secular clergy confronted the growing influence of the theater in their community, first in the form of performers at a seasonal fair, and then from 1673 through the establishment of Molière’s former troupe of actors in a permanent theater near the parish church. While far from typical, this encounter between highly trained secular priests and a thriving theater scene allows Palacios to show how seminary priests used the ritual of last rites to reabsorb actors into the community while reaffirming their clerical vision of the performative parish. These dramatic

encounters between priest and actor emphasized the liturgical reach of the priest from church, through the public streets of Paris, to the private bedchamber of the actor. It was in this private space made semi-public by onlookers that the actor renounced the theater before a priest administered last rites, providing, as Palacios succinctly summarizes, “a symbolic victory over the stage by transforming an actor’s dying body into a central element of the church’s own ritual display” (p. 30). While focused primarily on interactions between secular priests and actors, this chapter also explores the wider concept of *étendu*, or extension, of the priest’s person well beyond his physical presence to the edges of his jurisdiction and beyond that to the community of believers. It is in this context that priests displayed their place in society by ritually reabsorbing actors labeled as public sinners back into the parish community.

Readers interested in how the performative priesthood of seminary trained secular clergy compared to other traditions of priestly formation in France or Catholic Europe more generally will be disappointed by *Ceremonial Splendor*. Comparison is nearly absent. This is a shame because the seminary training at the heart of this study did not take place in a vacuum. The Jesuits, for instance, who receive just two brief mentions in *Ceremonial Splendor*, loom large in the background. Through their educational network, they too were major educators of future priests. Indeed, many who attended the seminaries at Saint-Nicolas du Chardonnet and Saint Sulpice would undoubtedly have attended Jesuit colleges earlier in their educations. While studying with the Jesuits, these seminarians would likely have been exposed to theater in a positive light. Jesuit colleges embraced theater, putting on elaborate theatrical productions in which their students acted. How might these experiences have influenced the thinking of these seminarians on the performative aspects of the priesthood and theater more generally? The Jesuits and other groups in the French church were also active training missionary priests for overseas postings during this period. To what extent did the performative aspects missionary priesthood correlate to that of parish priests? What differed? To what extent were these two traditions in conversation? These are subjects that still await their scholars.

But this lack of comparative perspective should not in any way detract from the considerable contributions that *Ceremonial Splendor* makes to our understanding of how seminary education shaped the formation and professionalization of secular priests in France between *ca.* 1630 and 1730. This is a must-read study for anyone interested in the important and somewhat neglected subject of the professionalization of parish priests during the French Catholic Reformation and clerical attitudes toward theater in old regime France.

Eric Nelson
Missouri State University
EricNelson@MissouriState.edu

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