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Isabelle Martin, *Le Théâtre de la Foire: Des tréteaux aux boulevards*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2002. xix + 386 pp. Notes, illustratio

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In recent years, the Parisian theater of the eighteenth century has emerged as a rich and revealing focus of study. Several important monographs have shown how the theater reflected, and even contributed to, some of the major transformations of the French Enlightenment and Revolution. More than entertainment, the theater, we now know, was an institution through which identities were fashioned and hierarchies contested.[1] Some historians have even gone so far as to argue that contemporary theories of theatrical representation served as metaphors that structured late old regime and revolutionary politics.[2] At the very least, the evidence is convincing that the positions expressed in and about the theater—by actors, audiences, writers, and authorities—were politically potent, adding stress to the myriad fault lines running through eighteenth-century politics and society.[3]

Much of this recent literature has concentrated on the official, privileged theaters of the old regime and has been conceptually innovative. In her recent *Le Théâtre de la Foire: Des tréteaux aux boulevards*, Isabelle Martin adopts a more modest approach to the study of a more modest venue: the popular theaters of the Parisian fairgrounds. Leaving aside Bakhtin, Habermas, Bourdieu, Foucault, and Elias, Martin limits her study to description—not “thick description” with webs of significance teased out between the theater and society, but rather enumerative description, focusing on performance techniques, characters, playwrights, and themes. Although there are few historiographical or methodological surprises in this book—indeed, many of her observations have been made by other scholars—the great merit of Martin’s study lies in its broad synthesis and comprehensiveness. Informative about the conditions of the fairground theaters, their creators, and scripts, *Le Théâtre de la Foire* will serve as a useful source for further study of both the fairground theater and French values and attitudes in the early eighteenth century.

Le Théâtre de la Foire traces the evolution of the fairground theater from its spontaneous and popular form in the late seventeenth century, through the early eighteenth century when the genre of comic opera emerged, to 1762 when the non-privileged Opéra-comique of the fairgrounds fused with the privileged Comédie-italienne. Martin divides her study into two sections. The first, “Les Conditions d’une genèse,” offers a broad sweep of the institutions, politics, people, and literary influences that went into the creation of the genre of comic opera. The second, “Gestation d’une forme littéraire,” focuses on the plays themselves, identifying common theatrical techniques, topics, themes, and characters. In her conclusion, Martin provides a bullet-point list of important observations and arguments made throughout the study. Scholars of eighteenth-century France who are interested in the theater insofar as it relates to broader social and political trends will probably be most interested in her argument that the elite class, or what she calls “la classe des gens aisées,” gradually confiscated the popular theater, infusing it with bourgeois morality and free-market values. Finally, Martin provides an extensive

bibliography, including a list of over 1,000 fairground plays, many of which exist only in manuscript form.

In the first two chapters, Martin summarizes the physical, political, and financial conditions of the fairground theaters. She begins by tracing the evolution of the popular theater as a physical space, from the makeshift stages in the muddy corners of the Saint-Germain and Saint-Laurent fairgrounds to the more prominent and ornate, if flimsy and fire-prone, theaters situated on the outskirts of these fairgrounds. (Despite the book's subtitle, Martin does not study the theaters once they moved onto the boulevards after 1759.) According to Martin, the fairground playwrights were the driving force behind this gentrification. She claims it was they who demanded the entrepreneurs to invest in ever more elaborate theater houses to put on their ever more sophisticated plays, the effect of which was to "retenir les riches, mais aussi d'écarter les classes inférieures" (p. 17). Martin argues that, unlike the official theaters, which were bogged down with privileges, the fairground entrepreneurs were agile and able to mobilize sufficient investment capital to capture the expanding market for theatrical entertainment.

In chapter two, Martin recounts how the subaltern theaters were relentlessly hounded by the privileged ones, most notably the Comédie-française, which sought to enforce its monopoly on theatrical dialogue. The Comédie managed to have the fairground theaters closed for significant periods on two occasions, between 1719 and 1720 and again between 1745 and 1751. The subaltern theaters would likely have been closed more often had they not had influential protectors: the church, from which the theaters rented fairground space; the administration and magistracy, the ranks among which several fairground playwrights emerged; and even members of the royal family, who found the fairground troupes to be so titillating that they occasionally invited them to perform at Versailles. Even when restrictions were imposed on the fairground theaters, the *forains* proved to be wily and innovative, adopting alternative performance techniques such as pantomime, signboards, monologues, marionettes, and popular songs. Moreover, they frequently sought the public's sympathy by depicting their battles with the privileged theaters on stage. Although Martin does not explore the implications of this tendency or link it with other emerging political dynamics, the reader will see in it the early invocations of a politicized public opinion.

In chapter three, Martin provides an overview of the fairground playwrights. She begins with a sociological examination of their (or their families') professional backgrounds, showing how most were middle-class with a strong concentration in the liberal professions. Despite the fact that several, if not the majority, of the fairground playwrights were writers by trade, Martin states that few were willing to run the risk of wrecking their reputations by being associated with the subaltern theaters, which smelled of vulgarity and greed. Several, including Lesage at first, opted for anonymity, fearing not only the scorn of writers within the emerging Republic of Letters but also humiliation before disappointed spectators—spectators who might boo and hiss a play off playbills, thus depriving the writer of financial compensation. Such possibilities suggest that the public was, in fact, an important influence on writers. Martin spends a few pages describing the fairground public—a melting pot of nobles, professionals, artisans, students, and "thieves" (p. 100)—but she stops short of pursuing a lengthy study of the public and its influence on playwrights, stating that the subject, like that of the fairground actors, would take her too far afield (p. 105).^[4]

In leaving aside audiences and actors (not to mention authorities), Martin's study might be criticized for attributing the gentrification of comic opera too narrowly to the intentions of playwrights, particularly those of Alain-René Lesage, the most prolific comic opera playwright of the period and the one to whom Martin devotes most of her attention. She argues that, whereas most playwrights merely dabbled in comic opera, often writing only one or two plays anonymously to safeguard their reputations, Lesage, a former playwright for the Comédie-française, aspired unabashedly to elevate comic opera to the same artistic level as comedy and tragedy. To perfect the genre, Lesage believed it was necessary to curtail its traditional bawdiness, and his efforts to do so are apparent in the published collection of comic-opera

scripts, which he meticulously prepared between the 1710s and 1730s. In her comparison of the manuscript and published versions of his scripts, Martin believes she has found evidence of Lesage's mission to make the theater an instrument for moral reform. Whereas the original scripts left much room for improvisation (which amounted to room for actors to indulge in Rabelaisian ribaldry), Lesage suppressed the more crass elements from the published scripts and infused them with refined literary qualities. Martin's readers might assume that these changes were prompted by the royal censors or by the mentalities reigning in the elite households for which these expensive editions were destined. However, Martin gives little consideration to these influences. Rather, she stresses Lesage's "réel désir éthique de reformer les moeurs" (p. 90). Thus, her account runs simply from authorial intentions to social reality; Foucault's famous question "What is an author?" does not figure in her analysis.

Throughout the remaining chapters, Martin focuses on scripts, primarily those by Lesage. In chapter four, she identifies the popular and savant origins of the genre. Writing against a scholarly literature that has treated comic opera as if it had been created *ex nihilo* (and that has supposedly dismissed it for its vulgarity), Martin shows that the *forains* often drew inspiration from folkloric traditions, such as the medieval myths of sacrificed kings, magical forests, miraculous fountains, and battles with dragons.[5] Yet, in efforts to elevate the genre and attract more sophisticated audiences, playwrights also incorporated savant traditions, and Martin identifies the imprint of Molière, La Fontaine, Greek tragedy, the *comedia dell'arte*, and even Greek tragedy. However, Martin shows that Lesage frequently modified these references, particularly in his published scripts. Whereas the original stories (and even some of Lesage's own early canvases) involved ambiguous characters and complicated intrigues, the later Lesage, who associated such complexity with aristocratic decadence, often reduced them to simplistic tales of black-and-white morality. In these Manichean versions, honest, hardworking virtue triumphed over unproductive greed and unearned privilege.

In chapters five through seven, Martin continues enumerating and classifying, focusing on theatrical techniques, themes, and characters. There is much in these chapters that could serve as a starting point for more in-depth analysis of certain shifts in eighteenth-century attitudes and values. For example, Martin identifies the prevalent theme of money in the fairground theater (pp. 229-233), stressing its distinctively bourgeois treatment. "La domination n'est plus nécessairement, le fait des nobles, des armes...l'argent est devenu le garant du pouvoir" (p. 232). She cites several plays, nearly all by Lesage, about money and finance that appeared around the time of the John Law Affair. A Scottish banker who served as the Regent's advisor on finances in the late 1710s, Law created a national banking system largely based on speculation on the new French territories in Louisiana. The system boomed for many months before going bust in 1720, leaving deep scars on French financial culture for decades. In this climate, the legitimacy of all profit-seeking activities was potentially at stake. But as Martin shows, Lesage walked a fine line between giving voice to widespread moral aversion to profit making and the bourgeois imperative to prevent this aversion from going too far. He did so by castigating speculators while praising honest, industrious moneymakers. In Lesage's "bourgeois" scripts, *honnêteté* in business affairs implied that profits were made through hard work (a notion, by the way, consonant with Locke's Labor Theory of Value) and in such a way as to avoid inflicting suffering on the poor.

Another tendency that could be further explored is the frequent use of exotic (often oriental) and utopian settings to carry out social and political criticism (pp. 244-49). Martin sees in these criticisms the elaboration of secular bourgeois values, particularly equality before the law and the iniquity of feudal privileges—values that would find their ultimate expression in the French Revolution. Surprisingly, the *forains* rarely depicted christianity as the basis of moral values, a fact that Martin sees as indicative of the emergence of a secular morality. In any case, these final chapters suggest how the fairground theaters contributed to making a morally and politically sensitized public out of spectators, and scholars interested in the links between public opinion and the development of secular political morality will find some useful threads for future research in them.

Martin insists, modestly and repeatedly, on the limits of her study. The announcement is made so frequently that one is left with the impression that she regrets not having written a different book. In the introduction, she admits to having been tempted along the way to write a critical edition, and indeed, many parts of her study read like a critical edition of Lesage's collection of comic opera. Although she gives some attention in the early chapters to the pre- and post-Lesage periods, the bulk of the book is devoted to a much narrower time period than the one announced by the title. Ultimately, *Le Théâtre de la Foire* is principally about the twenty-five year heyday of Lesage.

Martin admits that her goal is less to advance novel historical insights than to provide a general description of the fairground theater. She leaves it to others to provide more in-depth analysis. "Puisse cette étude servir à des esprits plus vastes, qui y trouveraient partie des matériaux nécessaires pour peindre cette fresque des influences réciproques, entre théâtre et société...voilà pour les regrets." This said, she concludes with some important arguments. First, she claims to have shown how elites confiscated the popular theater "à leur profit et à leur usage" (p. 310). However, her evidence shows a more complicated relationship between the popular and the elite. For example, in chapters three and four, she shows that, despite Lesage's efforts to sanitize the fairground stage, the bawdy was never entirely removed from the stage even if it was reduced a great deal in the published scripts. Thus, she ends by reifying popular and elite cultures and arguing for the triumph of the one over the other when, in fact, they interacted and evolved together. On this point, she might have engaged with the work of Robert Isherwood, who shows how popular and elite culture mixed throughout most of the century, finally fusing in the 1780s at the *Palais-royal*.^[6]

Martin also argues that the fairground theater was intimately linked to free-market aspirations of the bourgeoisie--aspirations that challenged the feudal structure of French society that the Revolution would eventually sweep away. Yet, again, her evidence shows a more complex picture. In chapter two, she recounts how theater entrepreneurs struggled among themselves to secure exclusive access to the Opéra's privileges. Once an entrepreneur obtained it, s/he (there were women entrepreneurs) used it against competitors in the same way that the Comédie-française had tried to use its privilege to shut down the fairground theaters. Moreover, did not the Opéra-comique's fusion with the privileged Comédie-italienne in 1762 mark the former's incorporation into the so-called "feudal" system that she sees it undermining? Finally, as Michèle Root-Bernstein has argued, when the crown granted a fifteen-year privileged monopoly on all boulevard entertainment to the Opéra in 1785, investment capital poured onto the boulevard, creating a boom in popular entertainment on the eve of the Revolution.^[7] Ultimately, it seems that theater entrepreneurs were more interested in securing privileges, or access to them, than in overturning feudalism in favor of the free-market. Thus, the stark contrast Martin draws between laissez-faire market capitalism and hierarchical feudalism may be overdrawn.

Given its historiographical shortcomings and methodological timidity, it is doubtful that this study will work its way into the leading literature on the eighteenth-century French culture. Moreover, its high price (over \$100) will no doubt deter many potential buyers. Those who do purchase it may be disappointed that it includes few illustrations of the fairground theater--illustrations which, themselves, could have shed light on the place of comic opera in eighteenth-century life, complementing Martin's analysis of Lesage's edited collection of plays. Still, *Le Théâtre de la Foire* offers a wealth of information and will serve as a useful reference work for scholars interested in eighteenth-century French mentalities and the role of the subaltern theaters in shaping them.

NOTES

[1] Gregory Brown, *A Field of Honor: Writers, Court Culture, and Public Theater in French Literary Life from Racine to the Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Jeffrey S. Ravel, *The Contested Parterre: Public Theater and French Political Culture, 1680-1791* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999).

[2] Paul Friedland, *Political Actors: Representative Bodies and Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2002); Marie-Hélène Huet, *Rehearsing the Revolution* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1982); Susan Maslan, "Resisting Representation: Theater and Democracy in Revolutionary France," *Representations* 52 (1995): 27-51.

[3] The theater as a site of political contention during the old regime is given sustained treatment in Jeffrey S. Ravel's *The Contested Parterre*. For the late old regime and revolutionary boulevard theater, see Michèle Root-Bernstein, *Boulevard Theater and Revolution in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984). For a discussion of how competing notions of revolutionary justice clashed in the Parisian theater, see Charles Walton, "Charles IX and the French Revolution: Law, Vengeance, and the Revolutionary Uses of History," *European Review of History, Revue européenne d'histoire* 2: 4 (1997): 127-146.

[4] Readers will find treatment of the eighteenth-century Paris theater public in Henri Lagrave, *Le Théâtre et le public à Paris de 1715 à 1750* (Paris: Librairie C. Klincksiek, 1972).

[5] Martin does not cite this literature, but it is likely that she is referring to Philippe Vendrix's view in the first chapter of his *L'Opéra-comique en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Liège: Mardaga, 1992), published a year before the defense of her dissertation, on which the book under review is based. It must be said that Martin's depiction of this analytical standpoint is over-simplified, for the literature on the origins of comic opera is not so clear-cut in favor of the *ex nihilo* thesis. Robert Isherwood, for example, recognizes historical antecedents in his *Farce and Fantasy* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 60.

[6] Robert Isherwood, *Farce and Fantasy*. For his part, Frederick Brown attributes the rise of more "delicate fare" at the fairground to a general rise in economic conditions and attendant social changes. See his *Theater and Revolution, the Culture of the French Stage* (New York: The Viking Press, 1980), p. 53.

[7] See note 3 above.

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