

H-France Review Vol. 3 (April 2003), No. 33

Gregory S. Brown, *A Field of Honor: Writers, Court Culture, and Public Theater in French Literary Life from Racine to the Revolution*. www.gutenberg-e.org and Columbia University Press, 2002. 387 pp. Links, images, notes, and bibliography. \$49.95 U.S. (e-text). ISBN 0-231-12460-0.

Review by Emmet Kennedy, George Washington University.

Honor, like privilege, penetrated far down the social hierarchy of old regime France. Gregory Brown's excellently documented on-line study of old regime playwrights assesses judiciously how these authors "self-fashioned" (pp. 48-55) themselves as *honnêtes hommes/femmes* belonging to the society of *gens de lettres*. From the caning of Voltaire by the duc de Rohan's lackeys in 1726 to the censorship of the *Mariage de Figaro* in the early 1780s, the harsh treatment dealt to playwrights who challenged convention comes as no surprise. Less well known, but equally important, is how these authors internalized the regime's code of *honneur* and *honnêteté* in their search for recognition.

Brown focuses on one of the monarchy's three privileged theaters--the Comédie Française--whose archives he has thoroughly mined in addition to those of the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal and the Beaumarchais family. The book situates dramatic authors within the wider world of the touted *république des lettres* and proceeds through the old regime in rough chronological order, with individual treatment of writers such as Louis Sebastien Mercier, Charles Palissot, and Olympe de Gouges. The Comédie's rules of acceptance, the role of actors, official censorship, the court, the public, royalties, and repertoire are all well examined. Several approaches have been hitherto employed in examining old regime theater: literary, institutional, biographical, and quantitative. Henri Lagrave, for instance, wrote a renowned study of box office receipts aimed at gauging the size of the Parisian theater public in the mid-eighteenth century.[1] Brown makes use of all these works but focuses on close analysis of the language, attitudes, and values found in correspondence, petitions, and memoirs of the playwrights with a view to situating them in the hierarchy of honor.

In Brown's study the literary evaluation of theatrical works is wholly secondary to the issue of the playwrights' status within the company or the Société de la Comédie (composed of the actors) that accepted or rejected a play and determined how soon it would be performed (which in turn determined its rank in the repertory). No one to my knowledge has "exploited" these archives to recreate the cultural world of the playwrights as opposed to that of actors, administrators, or audiences. This is research that could only be executed adequately for the three privileged theaters that have archives: the Opéra, the Comédie Italienne, and the Comédie Française. The choice of the Comédie Française (familarly known as the Comédie) is logical because it was the largest, having a monopoly of all French plays, staging performances 300 days a year, and having enjoyed great longevity (1680-1793 and of course beyond).

The book begins with the theater regime of Louis XIV, which honored Corneille, Racine and Molière with privileges and pensions. The success of this regime proved itself by the recognition gained by these authors—a recognition that lasted through the old regime and, in the case of Molière, through the Revolution. [2] Louis XIV's patronage was not to be matched even by Napoléon I.

What were the constituents of theatrical recognition in the Enlightenment, the period on which the book concentrates? We begin with an author, a script in hand, who comes to the Comédie (he could have gone elsewhere first, such as to one of the provincial theaters relatively neglected by historians). He presents the manuscript to the *société d'acteurs*. If they agree to a "reading" then the author has cleared the first hurdle, though it could be months after the first visit. The author then reads his text. He may have considerable difficulty gaining the attention of the actors, who mill around distractedly. The actors take a vote to accept or reject the play. If it is accepted, then the play receives a numbered place in the repertory, which pullulates with plays that have never been performed. The author will then remind the director from time to time of his play. He does not have the right to submit it elsewhere, and it is always risky for him to publish it before performance, since that would weaken the impact of the premiere. At last, if he is fortunate, the author's play is scheduled and he gets to assign the roles to specific actors.

Cabales (orchestrated responses in favor of the play) and *clagues* (the reverse) help determine its success or failure. A poor reception on opening night, if repeated on subsequent dates, will most likely lead to infrequent performances and eventually to the lapse of the play *en règles*, which means that it belongs to the company and can be performed anytime without royalty payments. If it remains on the active repertory, it receives a royalty of one-ninth of box office receipts (excluding subscriptions to *loges*—a sore point for authors).

This regime was obviously hard on authors without talent or appeal. He or she was bereft of honor, which, according to Brown, is primarily what an author desired. If one were a Voltaire, the story was quite different. He first worked the chain of patronage appealing to a marquise to use her influence to obtain a reading for his *Oedipe*, the printed text of which he dedicated to the Regent. The tragedy was performed thirty-two times in 1718, which was a hit for a five-act play. By the middle of the century he was "the most successful tragedian in the history of French theater to that time" (p. 51). His success as a historian, philosophe, and writer of fiction compounded the popularity of his plays and vice versa. He was a man of great "respectability" to say the least. His subsequent plays were read and performed almost automatically. Voltaire had become an independent man of letters with clout.

Brown develops very well the thesis that these playwrights eagerly sought to conform to the expectations of the regime. Alan Kors, Robert Darnton, and others have described the desperate urge of obscure writers to find a function or sinecure in the regime. This is curiously evident in their relationship with the censors. Jean-Baptiste Suard has been studied before and is reintroduced here as an active censor as well as a fairly prominent man of letters (being a royal censor did not preclude membership in the *république des lettres*). The playwright, whose *livret* was submitted to censorship, evidently did not object to this, especially if it received an approbation or a *privilège*. The latter gave him perhaps as much prestige as the acceptance of his play by the Comédie. It was even an element in his "self-fashioning" as an *honnête homme*, a remarkable paradox since the self in question was fashioned by authority.

Indeed, Brown calls into question the traditional notion of "autonomy" in literary and cultural studies of the period, which he believes do not take into account how extrinsic were its components. Again, Brown's interest is not so much dissidence and revolt but a fashioning according to the demands of social and cultural forces. The influence of the late Pierre Bourdieu is evident and acknowledged.

But what about Beaumarchais, whose *Mariage de Figaro* has been considered the literary death certificate of the old regime? *Figaro* was understandably held up by censors for three years. In 1777 Beaumarchais formed the Société des Auteurs Dramatiques, a sort of lobby and collecting agency for playwrights having trouble collecting royalties. Like Diderot and Rousseau, Beaumarchais was a son of an artisan, but this did not prevent him from acquiring the Queen and the Count d'Artois as protectors by the 1780s. Brown gives no explicit attention to the question of social mobility or its relevance to the acquisition of *honnêteté*.

Beaumarchais was always engaged in some practical commercial activity, such as selling arms to American insurgents or organizing a company to supply Paris with water. But his *Eugénie* won a success of twenty-three performances in 1783 and 400,000 livres in royalties. The *Mariage de Figaro* was finally given the express approval of the King, a royal censor/academician, a minister, and the lieutenant général de police. Brown does not believe initial censorship deprived Beaumarchais of autonomy but rather proved that "Beaumarchais sought to negotiate between ideals of civility and autonomy throughout his entire public life" (p. 236).

Madame Olympe de Gouges concludes Brown's study of individual playwrights. Like Beaumarchais, she is often presented as a "modern free spirit" (p. 249). But again like Beaumarchais, Brown finds her in the corridors of power seeking favors for her works. "The modernity of Beaumarchais and Gouges resulted less from their autonomy...than from their creative adherence to norms of sociability or engagement..." (p. 249). Both "were far from socially marginal or intellectually radical" (p. 250).

After all, did not Gouges (although Brown does not mention it) present the lead actor at the Comédie, François-René Molé, with two orange trees,^[3] hoping to obtain a performance of her *Esclavage des Noirs*, which had been "read" and approved but then shelved because of the opposition of the colonial lobby? "Because she was a woman," Brown writes, "she enjoyed less access to the theater and had been treated less civilly than other writers" (p. 296). It would be interesting to know whether the gift of such *épices* at the Comédie and elsewhere was an old regime theatrical *convenance* if not *honnêteté*. This would sully somewhat Brown's rather flattering depiction of this culture (at least by present standards).

When Brown treats the breakdown of the old theater monopolies following the January 1791 Chapelier Law, he focuses on the transition from the court to the nation as the ultimate patron, audience, and censor. Again, his thesis is less libertarian than realistic in the sense that playwrights did not suddenly find themselves in a world free of all social and political restraints but rather encountered new restraints and new masters with whom they had to "negotiate" in order to succeed. The great change that took place was the substitution of *patriotisme* for *honnêteté*, not, Brown argues, the substitution of Rousseauian transparency for Molièresque courtliness. We can agree, otherwise it would be hard to understand why Molière was the second most performed playwright of the Revolution.^[4]

Brown draws intelligently from the vast scholarship on eighteenth-century theater to contextualize his playwrights. His writing is engaging and exact if not titillating or inspired. The subject of *honnêteté* is a story of strategy and survival, not one of Corneillean courage, literary *tours de force*, or even dramatic standoffs between actors, authors, and the *gentilshommes de chambre*, who were the official representatives of the King in the theater. The story here is one of instinct over free will; of ambition, interest, and self-fashioning over pure and simple autonomy. It is not as uplifting a story as the narratives of emancipation and maybe does not concede enough to them. But it is a story of how giants like Voltaire and Beaumarchais managed to beat the system, turn it to their advantage, and, in the case of Beaumarchais, make the Comédie work more in the interests of the profession.

But Brown does not neglect the authors whom the system beat. Some of these, like M.J. Chénier, were vindicated by the abolition of censorship (temporarily), the 1791 law on literary property rights, and the

Le Chapelier Law, which resulted in the multiplication of theaters by a factor of about ten and so produced much greater opportunity for hitherto unperformed playwrights. The lives of those who succeeded in the forty odd theaters of the Revolution were, I believe, far more irregular, impromptu, and at risk. They did enjoy more freedom and, in many cases, profited from more license of expression to satirize and flout the old regime. *Patriotisme* supplanted *honnêteté* but it did not bear out the revolutionaries' contention that *liberté* would produce masterpieces superior to those published under the hated tyrant. The conventionnel, M.J. Chénier, was one of those who would testify to the fact.

Considering the chronological sweep of Brown's book, the depth of its research, the coherence of its theme, the questions it opens up to further investigation, and finally its widespread availability as an e-text, it is certainly an exceptional contribution to theater and cultural history.

NOTES

[1] Henri Lagrave, *Le Théâtre et le public à Paris de 1715 à 1750* (Paris: Klincksiek, 1972).

[2] Emmet Kennedy, M. L. Netter, James P. McGregor, and Mark V. Olsen, *Theatre, Opera and Audiences in Revolutionary Paris, Analysis and Repertory* (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 383.

[3] Olympe de Gouges, *Adresse aux représentants de la Nation* (n.p., n.d.); see also *Mémoire pour Madame de Gouges contre la Comédie française* (n.p., n.d.).

[4] Kennedy et al., *Theatre, Opera and Audiences in Revolutionary Paris*, pp. 204-206. Robineau de Beaunoir was the most performed playwright, with 1968 performances to Molière's 1864.

Emmet Kennedy
The George Washington University
Ekennedy@gwu.edu

See also Gregory Brown's commentary on electronic publishing.