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Ellen R. Welch, *A Theater of Diplomacy: International Relations and the Performing Arts in Early Modern France*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. vi + 312 pp. Notes, bibliography, illustrations, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-8122-4900-2.

Review essay by Stephen C. Bold, Boston College

Ellen Welch's book *A Theater of Diplomacy* participates in a shift in recent scholarship on early modern French theater from text to aesthetic, cultural and political context. Perhaps the idea that the dramatic text yields, on its own, only a partial image of the performance art that it supports is as old as theater itself. Didn't Molière warn his readers that the simple, innocent reading of a play is an incomplete experience: "On sait bien que les comédies ne sont faites que pour être jouées; et je ne conseille de lire celle-ci qu'aux personnes qui ont des yeux pour découvrir dans la lecture tout le jeu du théâtre" [1]? And innocent reading seems especially problematic for complex court spectacles conceived in the service of complicated political goals. Like Molière, Ellen Welch asks us to sit up and imagine with different eyes the diplomatic pageants that she examines in *A Theater of Diplomacy*.

Welch describes her book more than once as the working out of a metaphor: "This project began as a simple thought experiment in taking metaphors seriously" (p. 301). She notes at the start of her introduction that "Metaphors of the performing arts abound in the talk about diplomacy" (p. 1). Diplomacy is a dance and, like music and ballet, it pursues the ideals of "order and harmony in the world" (p. 1). The diplomat is described, even at that time, as an actor on a particular sort of stage. This increasingly over-determined figure is set firmly in the socio-political reality that diplomats were recruited, at least at first, almost exclusively from the ranks of the aristocracy whose "soft power" was formed and augmented by courtly activities, including riding, dancing, acting and even singing (p. 2). One thinks inevitably of the more or less friendly debate between Monsieur Jourdain's *maître de musique* and *maître à danser* at the opening of the *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*. However enduring and reliable this vision of a world in harmony – or at least in *pursuit* of harmony – might be, it is just a matter of time before one recognizes the hollowness of the com/promise, both for diplomacy and the arts that serve it. (In a way, this was already the message of the opening acts of Molière's *comédie-ballet* – itself an ironic court entertainment.) And yet it persisted...

This ironic distance is fundamental to Welch's account of baroque court entertainment,[2] an account that, even in its approach, accepts and turns inside out comparable discussions of artistically performed diplomacy in recent scholarship. Welch's book begins, for example, similarly to Margaret McGowan's landmark study *L'Art du ballet de cour en France, 1581-1643*, which describes its object as "un nouvel art théâtral capable de tout exprimer" including "[l]es aspirations et [l]es réalités philosophiques, politiques, morales, et sociales de cette époque." [3] Welch, as I've already said, has chosen to focus not particularly on the aesthetic or *belles-lettriste* vocations of this form (e.g. as artistic innovation or as expressions of moral or social ideas) but

rather on the political and, of course, the diplomatic dimensions of its applications. McGowan is particularly interested in the formal evolution of the *ballet de cour*, which, in her view, was born of the fusion of four arts: music, dance, poetry and painting (or *décor*). The short history that McGowan traces follows the waxing and waning of this ideal aesthetic equilibrium, sometimes in parallel with the gains and losses of harmony against political discord. McGowan seems at times to show limited interest in deciphering the allegorical meanings of these works which she deems too obvious for words: “Il me semble superflu de commenter la signification politique de ce ballet...”;[4] and again “Il me semble superflu de commenter le sens de ce ballet.” [5] Welch, too, acknowledges the minimal ideological subtlety of some of these same performances but the expressive failures or contradictions that these projects display are in many ways the starting point of her commentary. The notion of an obvious message gives way to ambiguous or mixed messages: the surface transparency of allegory can be manipulated to refract and project multiple images, which she calls an “ambivalent utility” (p. 13). The artistic tool succeeds despite or even because of its unsuitability, while the continent waited for the birth of a modern, more systematic diplomacy that the cultural *bricolage* of political festivities *qua* diplomacy replaces, *faute de mieux*.

Welch develops this idea when she considers the “Bayonne Entertainments,” an example of diplomatic pomp during the Franco-Spanish summit of 1565. This entertainment was not a *ballet de cour* but a multi-media, wide-ranging celebration of European chivalric tradition. Ostensibly, the program expressed a spirit of community that could help the French and Spanish resolve their differences and find peace. But Welch notes that while the visual representation of Greek and Roman mythological figures during the festivities were legible to all the delegates present and seemed to project a shared aristocratic ideal of modern Europe (p. 22), the pageantry was accompanied by a poetic commentary – “encomiastic poetry [that] fêted the French king as the most noble, courageous, powerful sovereign” (p. 26) – provided only in French and, therefore, that remained largely opaque to the Spanish and Italian delegates. If French-language *ballet de cour* was destined to become a cornerstone and a *lingua franca* of diplomatic meetings, it could be willfully opaque (as in the Bayonne festivities), ironic (in the lowbrow national stereotypes of the *ballets des nations* discussed in chapter three), haughtily nationalistic (during Louis XIV’s early reign, in chapter six) or simply incomprehensible (for the exotic audiences of chapter seven).

Welch also suggests that her book be read as a kind of complementary companion piece to Timothy Hampton’s *Fictions of Embassy: Literature and Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe* which figures literature as “a space and tool of compromise” [6]. But Welch points out that her study, in turn, “shifts the focus from linguistic procedures to performance practices” (p. 7). The page from Hampton’s book that Welch cites (and that I have cited, too, following her brief reference) develops the argument that diplomacy has a profound kinship to literature in that they are both fundamentally symbolic or, to use as Hampton does the rather *passé* term, semiotic, “exchange[s] of signs.”[7] In fact, were Welch’s book written forty years ago, it might well have been aimed at constructing a sign system for the stages of diplomacy and, indeed, even today we can find elements of this analysis, minus the reference to systems. Importantly, Chapter four explores at length *allegory* as a recurrent form for the multiple ballets staged by Richelieu. Despite “allegory’s orientation toward transcendence,” it is the “Force of Allegory” as a “coercive or even violent poetic mode” (p. 83) that forms the center of Welch’s reading: “However beautiful or mystical they may appear, allegorical performances [like those commissioned by Richelieu] effectively forced spectators to accept a particular vision of ultimate reality” (p. 85). This “poetic move

through which the messiness of historical reality is resolved as a manifestation of an unchanging higher truth” serves to impose “a universal abstraction” (p. 97) as a simulacrum of true diplomatic negotiation. This strong chapter is somewhat of an exception though, not in terms of its quality but rather in its focus on the analysis of a primarily literary form.

A Theater of Diplomacy is primarily a chronicle of failed or false diplomacy and only subsidiarily about the history and practice of baroque theater. It studies a literature of faint and of phantom texts written by mostly forgotten or anonymous authors – Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin counts as a luminary author here –, having few overlaps with a European literary canon. Like a Stanley Fish of yore,[8] Welch seems to be asking if there is “a text in this class”– where the class is made up in this case of aristocratic diplomats. (As a literary scholar, I confess that I missed more than a little the class convened by Hampton’s *Fictions of diplomacy*, that includes works not only by Machiavelli and Richelieu but also Tasso, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Corneille and Racine, among others.) In the case, for example, of François Ogier’s extant text for the *Ballet de la Paix*, Welch laments the “frustratingly scarce [...] archival remains” (p. 114) that would inform us on the actual performance. This might strike literary scholars as a somewhat surprising complaint but one that alerts us rather clearly to Welch’s critical interests in these works. Although the historical arc of court entertainment as diplomacy is fairly strongly traced, the approach is mostly, for lack of a better term, episodic or anecdotal: the chapters describe in chronological order the ups and downs of artistic pageantry staged in diplomatic spaces, suggesting, over the roughly 150 year history, a general rise and fall. What might have been useful, however–alongside the interesting discussion of allegory, mentioned above–is a more sustained analysis of “performance practices” from a theatrical or anthropological perspective. Victor Turner’s *Anthropology of Performance*[9] is usefully cited in the introduction as a possible guide to understanding performance, especially through ritual (p. 5): Turner’s notion of *liminality* could well be invoked every page or two though, of course, it isn’t.[10] The overall slippery quality of Welch’s corpus would seem to be a result of the fact that these “social dramas” are never purely theatrical nor purely diplomatic. What is described in the end is a rather fraught relationship between theater and diplomacy: from a clearly mutual practical interdependence to a certain mixed identity or confusion – Welch asks at one point: “How might ballet have reflected on – or even helped generate – models for understanding political representation?” (p. 60) – and even occasional denials of their kinship in the “anti-theatrical bias of diplomatic manuals [...] in the early part of the seventeenth century” (p. 38). It seems to be one of the book’s aims to blur any line that would sharply divide diplomacy and theater – until modern bureaucratic diplomacy could confidently shed its theatrical chrysalis in the early eighteenth century.

Another way to appreciate the enduring interest of Welch’s history is as an illustration of early explorations of the potentialities of “soft power.” In the introductory chapter of a recent collection of essays published at the end of 2016, Nathalie Rivère de Carles makes a strong case for the usefulness of proto-soft power exerted by European playwrights in roughly the same timeframe: 1580 to 1655.[11] Like Welch, Rivère de Carles and her collaborators recognize a basic duplicity at the heart of diplomatic, positing key concepts such as “double vision”[12] and “ambiguation”[13] that allow the diplomat to pursue simultaneously “fiction and reality”[14] “reason and imagination”[15] or “action and reflexive perception.”[16] Rivère de Carles also describes drama’s double function “not [...] as a mere reflector but [also] as a true instrument, testing, challenging, informing and implementing a diplomacy of peace” [17] (4). This history of

“making peace” is not a naïvely described “golden world” but a record of “potential methodological successes and shortcomings of early modern diplomatic agents and agency aiming to balance mankind’s ‘unsocial sociability.’”[18] In short, though Rivère de Carles also pursues a string of representational paradoxes, she does not share Welch’s mostly dark – if I might suggest: *neo-baroque* – view of theater and diplomacy as mostly unfaithful manipulators of an evasive political reality, frequently downgraded into a series of “performative categories.”[19] Both projects are ambitious and stimulating and I would not presume to choose one over the other. But I can’t deny the slight feeling of despair that I felt reading the final pages of Welch’s provocative history of early modern French theater and diplomacy.

NOTES

[1] “Au lecteur,” *L’Amour médecin* in Molière, *Œuvres complètes* (2 vol.), ed., Georges Couton (Paris: Gallimard, 1971, II), 95.

[2] For example, commenting on the grotesque classism of the *Ballet de la paix* (1645), Welch notes: “War may devastate everyone else, but gentlemen will continue to dance” (p. 122).

[3] Margaret McGowan, *L’Art du ballet de cour en France: 1581-1643* (Paris: Editions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1963), 7.

[4] McGowan, *L’Art du ballet de cour en France*, 46.

[5] McGowan, *L’Art du ballet de cour en France*, 59.

[6] Timothy Hampton, *Fictions of Embassy: Literature and Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 5.

[7] Hampton, *Fictions of Embassy*, 5.

[8] Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980). Welch pays much attention to the importance of reader/spectators as shifting participants in the history that she traces: as occasional dancers/actors on the stage for court ballets; as participants in political meta-dramas (especially in Chapter 2, focused on the ambassador’s privileged but precarious role as target of diplomatic entertainment); and eventually as increasingly alienated, purely passive observers of a performed but closed diplomatic messages (in Chapter 6, “Entertaining Personalities at Louis XIV’s Court (1653-69) and Chapter 7, “Exotic Audiences (1668-1715”).

[9] Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance*, ed., Richard Schechner (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1986).

[10] This analysis is detectable in the book at various points. For example, though not citing Turner in this case, Welch observes that the ballet of the *Prospérité des armes* is “performed in a liminal space that is not the proscenium theater or the ballroom but made up of both at once. The ball that

marks the end of the ballet takes place between theatricality and reality, fictive time and real time” (p. 100).

[11] “The Poetics of Diplomatic Appeasement in the Early Modern Era” in *Early Modern Diplomacy, Theatre and Soft Power: The Making of Peace*, ed., Nathalie Rivère de Carles (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016).

[12] Rivère de Carles, *Early Modern Diplomacy*, 3-4.

[13] Rivère de Carles, *Early Modern Diplomacy*, 10.

[14] Rivère de Carles, *Early Modern Diplomacy*, 4.

[15] Rivère de Carles, *Early Modern Diplomacy*, 5-10.

[16] Rivère de Carles, *Early Modern Diplomacy*, 3.

[17] Rivère de Carles, *Early Modern Diplomacy*, 4.

[18] Rivère de Carles, *Early Modern Diplomacy*, 5.

[19] “‘Europe’ appears here as a performative category” p. 4; “the ‘common culture of European society’ was above all a performative category,” p. 130; Louis XIV’s decision to take on stage roles as Moor or Egyptian during *ballets de cour* “troublingly implies that monarchy itself is a performative category, just another role to be incarnated,” p.136.

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