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 Brian Sandberg, Northern Illinois University

Ambassadors represented privileged spectators at ballets in early modern France, gazing at performers who often played national roles and commented on international relations. The *ballet de cour* emerged as a hybrid performance genre in the mid-sixteenth century and quickly became an integral part of French court culture and diplomacy, in part because of its rich potential for dramatic representation and multisensory spectacle. These theatrical performances incorporated costumed acting, dancing, and recitation or singing of poetic lyrics with musical accompaniment and elaborate set designs. Printed libretti provided audience members with lyric and explanatory texts to interpret the complex messages of the ephemeral performances, but also expanded the possibility for critical debates and diplomatic incidents to erupt.

Ellen R. Welch's *A Theater of Diplomacy: International Relations and the Performing Arts in Early Modern France* explores the connections between theatrical performances and diplomatic practices in sixteenth-and seventeenth-century France. Welch emphasizes that "the emergent diplomatic culture depended on a set of theatrical practices that translated seamlessly from the scene of diplomacy (the court, the summit, the negotiating room) to the stage" (p. 3). She argues that there were three main forms in the theater of early modern diplomacy: "embodied representation, performance, and spectatorship" (p. 3). Focusing on the *ballets de cour* thus helps to reveal the ways in which resident ambassadors and diplomats represented crucial actor-spectators at the French court.

Welch claims inspiration from Timothy Hampton's analysis of early modern literature as "diplomatic poetics," but focuses on performance practices rather than linguistic techniques. She explains that her approach "adopts a way of interpreting theatrical court entertainments that is attuned to the presence and participation of members of the international community, and a way of analyzing diplomatic encounters that takes into account the theatricality of international affairs" (p. 7). The book focuses narrowly on the *ballets de cour,* rather that attempting to consider all of the performing arts. Closely related genres of theatrical and musical performance—such as comedies, tragedies, *ballets à cheval*, and *carrousels*—are acknowledged, but not fully analyzed. The book might have explored the connections between the *ballets de cour* and other forms of court spectacle: religious processions, civic entries, carnival pageants, farces, coronation ceremonies, royal funerals, court festivals, fireworks displays, garden entertainments, and banquets.[1]

The main sources for *A Theater of Diplomacy* are the *ballets de cour* performed at the French court between 1565 and 1715, contextualized with contemporary theatrical treatises, music histories,

gazettes, *relations*, and *mémoires*. The book utilizes classic diplomatic manuals and treatises by Ermolao Barbaro, Niccolò Machiavelli, Francesco Guicciardini, Juan Antonio de Vera, Alberico Gentili, Abraham Wicquefort, and François de Callières to explore the relationships between theatrical performances and contemporary diplomatic practices. Welch also exploits published correspondence, journals, and *mémoires*—as well as targeted archival sources such as the papers of the *introducteurs des ambassadeurs*—to explore the staging of specific theatrical performances and audience reactions to them. The book employs a chronological organization to explore these rich sources on court spectacle.

A Theater of Diplomacy begins its analysis with the court festivities organized by Catherine de' Medici at Bayonne in 1565, during the famous royal tour of the kingdom following the first War of Religion. Unfortunately, the book fails to situate the Bayonne celebrations within Catherine's broader pacificatory program or the confessional politics which would soon result in a resumption of religious violence. Welch focuses on the need for concord, following Denis Crouzet, but ignores the sweeping growth of Calvinism, the failure of heresy trials, growth of conspiracies, and the shocking wave of iconoclasm during the first religious war. The long French Wars of Religion (1562-1629) provide the backdrop for the *ballets de cour* discussed in book's first three chapters, but the ways in which the theatrical spectacles were connected to the religious conflicts remain unclear.[2]

Throughout the religious wars, ambassadorial perspectives on court culture were shaped by stagings of the rules of precedence at theatrical performances. Although courtly rules of precedence often appeared rigid, precedence practices were completely situational. Welch rightly emphasizes that "at the start of a treaty negotiation, representatives would deliberate to establish rules of precedence for the duration of the conference" (p. 34). This meant that every diplomatic meeting, court festivity, or procession was subject to a competitive "fluidity of hierarchy" (p. 34). Ambassadors were never mere spectators at court gatherings of any type. "When an ambassador took his seat for a court entertainment, he was every bit as much a part of the spectacle as were the dancers on the stage" (p. 35).

The demands of precedence and performativity in court culture frequently produced controversies and diplomatic incidents. Welch explores a diplomatic incident in which the French ambassador to London was not invited to the performance of Ben Jonson's *Masque of Queens*. Welch engages in an extended analysis of diplomatic exchanges surrounding this diplomatic incident, arguing that "diplomatic correspondence provides a window onto the political 'backstage' space of court entertainments. Before, during, and after the theatrical event, political actors maneuvered to spin gestures of hospitality in ways most favorable to their own agendas" (p. 52). This astute observation raises a crucial question: Why limit the analysis to published collections of correspondence? The author might have consulted manuscript collections that might reveal broader dimensions of diplomatic activity surrounding the *ballets de cour*.[3] Welch recognizes that "if court entertainments proved a center of gravity for diplomatic relations, they did not function as an exclusive focal point" (p. 56).

In the early seventeenth century, concepts of nation and empire increasingly defined theatrical representation and diplomatic activity. *A Theater* analyzes the performances of nationality in the *Ballet des nations* (1622), the *Ballet du grand bal de la Douairière de Billebahaut* (1626), the

Ballet de la Marine (1635), and the *Ballet des quatre monarchies chrétiennes* (1635). Welch claims that "ballets of nations produced new ideas and concepts for theories of political representation" (p. 69). But, these ballets were often performed during Carnival, and were thus part of a much broader carnivalesque culture. Figurations of the Four Parts of the World and national costumes could have been contextualized with the numerous cartographic, geographic, and allegorical representations produced during the early seventeenth century.[4]

The theatrical representation of political themes in *ballets de cour* took on added diplomatic significance after France entered the Thirty Years' War in 1635, expanding the conflict into a nearly pan-European international war. Welch focuses on plays commissioned by Cardinal Armand-Jean du Plessis de Richelieu during the Thirty Years' War – including the *Ballet de la félicité, sur le sujet de l'heureuse naissance de Monseigneur le Dauphin* (1639), which celebrated the birth of the future Louis XIV, and the *Ballet de la prospérité des armes de la France* (1641), which depicted French victories using dramatic stage machinery and pyrotechnics. Welch applies Jan Mieszkowski's interpretation of the "spectorial dynamics" of warfare to examine the blurring boundaries between participants and witnesses of violence. "The *Prospérité des armes* confuses that boundary even more profoundly in that some of the ballet's spectators and performers did in fact participate in the war as its military officers" (p. 97). Throughout the early modern period, noble military officers were indeed closely involved in military operations and the dramatic representations of them.[5] *Europe, comédie héroïque* (1642) presented the idea of a Europe of nations, but political pamphlets and satirical prints also depicted national characteristics. Drawing on contemporary sources such as the *Theatrum Europeaum* and anti-Spanish prints published in France during the Thirty Years' War, contextualized with histories of early modern news and information, could have buttressed the analysis of the *ballets de cour* in wartime.[6]

The book's treatment of the Peace of Westphalia reinforces its modernizing narrative by placing the theatrical performances during the extended peace negotiations in the central chapter. Welch argues that "the French delegation's performance effectively put a French stamp on an internationally shared cultural practice and aesthetic tradition, while also reinventing ballet as a diplomatic lingua franca for the post-Westphalian era" (p. 108). She acknowledges the problematic historiographical "myth" of the peace of Westphalia as creating modern international relations, but then immediately reifies that myth: "Although the political, legal, and religious ramifications of the treaties have been overestimated, the Congress of Westphalia remains significant as a turning point for European diplomatic *culture*" (p. 112).

The Fronde is curiously absent, however, as *A Theater of Diplomacy* skips entirely over the civil war that divided France between 1648 and 1653. The *commedia dell'arte* performances sponsored by Cardinal Jules Mazarin provoked controversies in this period. Relating the *ballets de cour* to satirical *Mazarinades* (anti-Mazarin pamphlets) and *fêtes frondeuses* organized by the Frondeurs would have been interesting.[7] These festivities sometimes included satirical poetry readings and theatrical performances held at noble residences, which were already important performative spaces beyond the royal court.

Welch recounts the famous emergence of the young Louis XIV dancing as the Rising Sun in the *Ballet royal de la nuit* (1653), performed shortly after the conclusion of the Fronde. Rather than focusing on the imagery of the Sun King, however, Welch examines anomalous diplomatic

situations at the French court. Diplomatic entertainments promoted Louis XIV's glory and imperial rhetoric, but simultaneously constructed a "theater of hospitality" toward exiles and non-state actors such as the exiled Stuart family, Christina of Sweden after her abdication, and prince Christian of Denmark. The *ballets de cour* during the early reign of Louis XIV emphasized royal power and domination using "imperialist and univeralist rhetoric" (p. 147).

Court spectacles helped reinforce Paris's status as an international city and cultural capital. Welch emphasizes that "by the late 1660s, with the emergence of the French court's image as a cultural capital, a bolder style of depicting the French sovereign's relation to other countries emerged on the court stage, whereby the persona of the king himself played host to foreign idioms" (p. 145). This finding underlines Orest Ranum's portrayal of the birth of modern Paris through related developments in urban planning, noble hôtels, consumerism, and elite culture.[8]

Welch asserts that "the shift in the figurative theater of diplomacy was mediated in part by a displacement of diplomatic entertainment from the exclusive space of the court to the more public stages of Paris, in particular the Opera, that landmark of public culture's appeal" (p. 187). She underlines the significance of Parisian elite culture through an interpretation of *Europe galante* (1697), an opera-ballet presented as a celebration of the peace of Ryswick. Yet, *galanterie* had already played a significant role in defining French noblemen's masculinity since the early seventeenth century.[9]

A Theater of Diplomacy concludes that public diplomacy emerged during the latter decades of Louis XIV's reign, as "the imaginary space that constituted the 'theater of diplomacy' expanded beyond the courts to encompass the broader public" (p. 186). Following the transfer of the royal court to the château de Versailles in May 1682, ambassadors seem to have found the "bureaucratic diplomatic culture" somewhat constraining. Welch argues that: "In the late seventeenth century and into the eighteenth century, proliferating media representations of international affairs and changing demographics within the diplomatic corps displaced this kind of cultural work away from aristocratic forms of theatrical pageantry toward public spectacle and especially published imagery" (p. 211). Yet, historians of diplomatic practice, print culture, and information management have found significant evidence of public diplomacy even earlier.[10] The growth of court spectacles and public diplomacy implicitly challenges Jürgen Habermas's conception of the "bourgeois" nature of the public sphere and his periodization of its emergence.

Throughout the book, methodological tensions surface between cultural (Timothy Hampton) and institutional (Lucien Bély) approaches to early modern diplomatic history. Although Welch depicts ambassadors as cultural actors, she frequently alludes to Hedley Bull's more traditional theories of international relations. The book seems overly reliant on Victor Turner's theory of performances as "social dramas," ignoring more recent anthropological interpretations of performance and ritual as contested, conflictual, and disruptive. The limitations of Turner's theory are revealed most starkly in the analysis of François Ogier's *Ballet de la Paix* (1645), which produced conflict and ridicule rather than any sort of "stable closure" (p. 113) as Welch suggests.

Partly as a result of these theoretical choices, *A Theater of Diplomacy* may overstate the coherence of "modern" diplomacy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The book constructs a modernizing narrative of international relations that is closely associated with older absolutist

narratives of state development. The book relies on historical interpretations stressing that the development of permanent ambassadors and continuous diplomacy in early modern Europe reflected an emergent "modern" system of international relations. Welch thus argues that "by the Congress of Utrecht in 1713, a coherent diplomatic system—which some commentators consider the modern one—had been established throughout the continent" (p. 2). The final chapter emphasizes this modernizing narrative through its close reading of the *Histoire amoureuse et badine du congrès et de la ville d'Utrecht,* a novel set in Utrecht during the negotiations for the 1713 peace that ended the War of the Spanish Succession.

A Theater of Diplomacy succeeds in rethinking "the composition of the 'audience' for international relations" by investigating the reception of the complex messages of the *ballets de cour* (p. 207). Welch finds that diplomats always represented actor-spectators while viewing and reacting to court spectacles. Welch also connects theories of the body politic to notions of the "public gaze" (p. 187), borrowing from "sovereign gaze" and "reverse gaze" studies.[11] The book develops an examination of extraordinary embassies from the Russian Empire, Ottoman Empire, Safavid Empire, and Thai Kingdom. These "exotic audiences" revealed the limits of legibility and cultural translation, often resulting in diplomatic incidents and disputes. Despite their fascination with "exotic" ambassadors, French spectators and writers could engage in vicious ridicule of foreign diplomats and their entourages. The book's sustained engagement with ambassadorial spectatorship and audience response to the *ballets de cour* furthers recent research on early modern performative arts and court culture by connecting staged performativity with diplomatic activity.[12]

NOTES

[1] Margaret M. McGowan, "The Arts Conjoined: A Context for the Study of Music," *Early Music History* 13 (1994): 171-98.

[2] Barbara B. Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Rites of Violence," in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 152-187.

[3] The analysis here relies primarily on the diplomatic correspondence published in Antoine Le Fèvre de la Boderie, *Ambassades de Monsieur de La Boderie en Angleterre 1606-1611* ([Paris], 1750), supplemented by English "calendars" of manuscript collections.

[4] Michael J. Wintle, *The Image of Europe: Visualizing Europe in Cartography and Iconography Throughout the Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[5] Erin Felicia Labbie and Allie Terry-Fritch, eds., *Beholding Violence in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012).

[6] Andrew Pettegree, *The Invention of News: How the World Came to Know About Itself* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015); Brendan Maurice Dooley, *The Dissemination of News*

and the Emergence of Contemporaneity in Early Modern Europe (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010); Hélène Duccini, *Faire voir, faire croire. L'opinion publique sous Louis XIII* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2003).

[7] Jeffrey Merrick, "The Cardinal and the Queen: Sexual and Political Disorders in the Mazarinades The Cardinal and the Queen: Sexual and Political Disorders in the *Mazarinades*." *French Historical Studies* 18 (Spring 1994): 667-699; Christian Jouhaud, *Mazarinades: La Fronde des mots* (Paris: Aubier, 1985).

[8] Orest Ranum, *Paris in the Age of Absolutism: An Essay,* rev. ed. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).

[9] Lewis C. Seifert, *Manning the Margins: Masculinity and Writing in Seventeenth-Century France* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

[10] Filippo de Vivo, *Information and Communication in Venice: Rethinking Early Modern Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[11] Kumkum Chatterjee and Clement Hawes, eds., *Europe Observed: Multiple Gazes in Early Modern Encounters* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2008).

[12] Margaret M. McGowan, *Dance in the Renaissance: European Fashion, French Obsession* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); Kate Van Orden, *Music, Discipline, and Arms in Early Modern France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Rebecca Zorach, *Blood, Milk, Ink, Gold: Abundance and Excess in the French Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

Brian Sandberg
Northern Illinois University
bsandberg@niu.edu