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Jennifer Ruimi, *La Parade de société au XVIII^e siècle: Une forme dramatique oubliée*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2015. 562 pp. Annexes, bibliography, and index. 90.00€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-7453-2861-8.

Review by Maria Teodora Comsa, Stanford University.

Jennifer Ruimi's book on *parade* is a much-needed addition to the collection of recent works on *théâtre de société* (society theater, a form of private theatrical entertainment popular in France for the greater part of the eighteenth century).^[1] This is the first book-length academic study of *parade*, a minor theatrical genre that flourished in eighteenth-century France. As the title suggests, the *parade* was a dramatic form that was forgotten for a long time, but Ruimi masterfully shows that this genre is worth investigating for its literary, theatrical, and historical significance.

"*Parade*" refers to a type of short play initially shown on the balconies of fairground theaters as advertising to attract spectators to the paid shows. Gradually, the *parade* migrated from the fairgrounds to the Boulevards, and eventually to salons and the private stage, becoming what the book refers to as "*la parade de société*" or "*parade mondaine*." It is this particular form of *parade* that Ruimi examines in detail in her work. The genre developed and flourished during the eighteenth century, but subsequently critics have judged it as a despicable theatrical deviation that deserved to be forgotten by literary history (p. 10). The exceptions to this rule are the *parades* by some well-known playwrights, like Beaumarchais, that have been studied in some detail.^[2]

Since the year 2000, a number of studies dealing with the French "unofficial" theaters have opened the way for the reevaluation of genres like the *parade*.^[3] It is in the wake of these works that Ruimi sets her study. The main question her book explores is why the *parade*, a genre that existed for an entire century and was so fruitful as a form of dramatic experimentation, remained unknown or despised for so long (p. 15). To answer this question, Ruimi uses historical, linguistic, and dramatic analysis. Her approach is not chronological because, as she explains, there is no real evolution of the *parade* as a genre (p. 13).

The book is comprised of four parts, the first of which sets out to define *parade* and provide the context for its birth and development. The second part focuses on the writing, staging, and reception of the *parades*, while the third analyzes the anti-classical dimension of the genre. The fourth section inquires whether the *parade* was a subversive form of theater. An appendix provides a chronology of *parades* from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century, a table of *parades* by author, and a collection of critical texts on the genre.

The first part of the book defines *parade* as a polymorphous genre, difficult to define because the word itself has multiple meanings. Period definitions usually lump together fairground *parades* and society shows, making it difficult to distinguish the two forms (p. 26). Ruimi explains that, in the eighteenth century, the word "*parade*" was mainly used to classify plays that defied categorization and that the term carried negative connotations (p. 27). Among the different kinds of *parade*, the most popular was the

“*comédie parade*,” a short piece (one-act usually) written in prose and accompanied by “vaudevilles” (interspersed songs or dance). Its characters borrowed those of the fairground and of the Italian theaters (like Isabelle, Gilles, Léandre and Cassandre, or Harlequin, Colombine, Pierrot, etc.). These plays featured a burlesque style, colloquial and deformed language, and could often contain elements of parody. Ruimi argues that the *parade* was at the intersection of three places: the fairgrounds, the salons, and the boulevards, but what unified it as a genre, was its ability to provoke laughter among “all French people” (p. 36).

To discuss the transition of *parade* from fairground theaters to the salon and the private stage, Ruimi uses the writings of Thomas-Simon Gueullette, an amateur of *parade*, and the *parades* by playwright Charles Collé. The two attributed different origins to the *parade*. According to Gueullette, law students in search of amusement started the fashion as they imitated the fairground actors. Collé claimed the *parade* allowed bored aristocrats to experience the pleasures of the common people (pp. 42-44). Regardless of their reasons, both groups were attracted to the novelty of the genre. In its transition from the fairgrounds to the private circles of high society, the short theatrical form changed: the new *parade de société* often referred to current events and amusing anecdotes known only to the group, thus acquiring a socially unifying effect (pp. 44-45).

Gradually, more variety was introduced into the plots inspired by typical fairground and Italian theater storylines, or “*canevas*” (p. 47). It was not the plot, but the creativity in inventing new situations that Ruimi claims was most interesting in these salon *parades*. The genre became popular enough that there was demand for printed copies, which led the editor Julien Corbie to print a collection of *parades* in 1756. The publication, entitled *Théâtre des Boulevards ou Recueil de Parades*, is comprised of the most popular texts of the time. Ruimi explains that Corbie took advantage of the popularity of *parades* and, in a marketing ploy, associated *parades des boulevards* and *parades de société* in his title, although the two genres were different (pp. 55-60).

As for the popularity of the genre, Ruimi explains that the *parade* revolved around a typically French humor based on word plays, and because of this dependence on the French language, the *parade* was rare outside of France, with the exception of Poland and the “Potocki case,” who revived *parade* after the French revolution (p. 61).

The second part of the book deals with the writing, staging, and reception of *parades* and discusses the authors, actors, and readers of *parade*, attempting to show what was at stake in this genre. Paradoxically, although the *parade* was unavoidable in the eighteenth century, it was generally omitted from the play catalogues for society theater, and people typically avoided mentioning their fascination with the genre. Using a corpus of plays by Gueullette, Collé, Potocki, and Beaumarchais, Ruimi discusses the elements that made *parade* amusing and appealing to the audience. She shows that the writing of *parades* was often collective, as the plays were intended for immediate performance rather than for publication.

Yet, in spite of content being copied from play to play, one can distinguish the style of particular authors (pp. 81-86). In discussing the profile of the typical *parade* author like Collé, Ruimi explains that these playwrights, although from the *Tiers-État* (common people), had a “common cultural background” with their audience, comprised mostly of aristocrats (p. 87). For that reason, the playwrights had a good knowledge of the texts and language familiar to the audience, and they deformed and subverted them to make their spectators laugh. They played with “*messéance*” (the direct opposite of propriety in official theater), they parodied the judicial language, and they made use of scatological and burlesque elements in order to amuse (pp. 87-96). *Parade* authors were attentive to the cultural life of their time and used this minor dramatic genre to acquire the protection and patronage of the elite. Because of that, the *parade* constitutes in Ruimi’s eyes a “hyphen” between the third estate and the nobility (p. 101). Yet, in

spite of this intellectual complicity between authors and the patrons who commissioned the plays (*commanditaires*), the distinction between social groups always remained in place (p. 115).

The section on actors and spectators is among the most interesting in the book. It delineates the functioning of *parade* as society spectacle, and it explains the desire of the high-level aristocrats (*grands seigneurs*) to act in *parades*. According to Ruimi, there was a voluntary “degradation” on the part of the aristocrats (like the Duke of Orléans) or the professional actors (Lekain or Mlle Gaussin) who chose to perform *parade* roles. This taste for ridicule was expressed through various mechanisms: odd costume choices, erroneous language, and the inversion of gender roles (p. 105). One element that united all these different groups (authors, actors, spectators) was the desire to see a new form of comedy unique in its way (p. 115). The *parade* was viewed as a response to the crisis of the official theater (p. 117) as it broke all the rules respected on the official stage (*bienséance, vraisemblance, mimesis*). As a consequence, *parades* indirectly promoted change on the official stage, and some of the *parade* authors (Beaumarchais chief among them) reflected on the renewal of theatrical forms (p. 118). The great success of *parades* is explained by a desire among the spectators to escape their world for a short time and to avoid the official theater that had become too rigid and predictable (p. 120).

As for the distribution of *parades*, Ruimi explains that the fashion spread first and foremost through rumor. As *parades* were often played clandestinely, initially there were no texts to attest of their existence (p. 121-22). But the popularity of the genre led to the demand for published texts among the elites who wanted to stage their own shows. Collections of *parades* circulated first in manuscript form and as copies of manuscripts (p. 122). There is relatively little information about the printed texts (such as the number of copies, who were the buyers, whether the texts were destined for reading or for staging, etc.) and the publication of *parades* is somewhat of a paradox because they were intended for society staging only (pp. 122-23). Often, the authors themselves did not agree to the publication of these plays, which were printed without their consent and sometimes without “*privilege*” under the name of fictitious publishers (pp. 123-24). The case of the collection published by Julien Corbie is the most interesting, as Ruimi explains, because Corbie gathered texts from manuscripts, “corrected” and changed them (to the dismay of their original authors), and published them under the title *Théâtre des Boulevards ou Recueil de Parades*. Corbie’s publication indicates not only the demand for such texts, but also the hesitation of authors like Collé to allow the publication of texts that made public the content of the elite’s private entertainment (pp. 128-31). The publication in turn led to a wide condemnation of *parade*.

In examining the reception of *parades* in the eighteenth century, Ruimi explains that the genre was almost unanimously condemned. Though *parades* enjoyed a great success on the private stage, publicly they were universally despised. Most playwrights rejected their own contributions to the genre (p. 137-38). A couple of rare texts defending *parade* exist (published in *Théâtre des Boulevards*), but they were weak attempts to legitimize the genre, which was a common attitude among those promoting lesser-known literary forms. However, these attempts degraded more than they ennobled the *parade* as a genre (pp. 140-41). Generally, critics argued that *parade* opposed decency and good mores (p. 153). Even *parade* playwrights like Pierre Laujon and Charles Collé criticized the genre for its immoral characteristics and for its lack of aesthetic value, hinting also at the complacent attitude of the spectators who elected to view such base entertainment (pp. 153-54). The defense of *parade* was rare. In the view of Gueullette and Fréron, the genre was a “necessary madness” good only for reigniting the spectators’ desire to see good quality plays. (p. 148). The debate about the genre culminated with the publication of the *Encyclopédie* article on *parade*, which attracted even more controversy (pp. 168-70).

The third part of the book analyzes the anti-classical dimension of *parade* in relation to mainstream French theater of the time. Ruimi shows that through intentionally incorrect language, illogical syntactical constructions, and ridiculous pseudo-popular characters, the *parade* constituted a form of challenge against the clarity that theorists of theater had established in the seventeenth century. Not

only did *parade* deform language and pronunciation, but it also alluded to the language of tragedy only to confuse it and give it the opposite meaning, thus creating a burlesque style. In doing so, it amused an audience familiar with the classical genres and created complicity among the spectators who enjoyed the parody of the official theater (pp. 189-208).

In tandem with the deformation of language, a degradation of characters and costumes made the genre even more amusing (pp. 211-19). The *parade* featured a decline of some of its characters' social status (from nobility to "*roturé*") while others, the servants, became more refined and assertive, often appearing as "the least ridiculous among the characters shown on stage" (p. 229). Ruimi argues that the plays confronted spectators with a time and space that were familiar but not credible, as the geography of Paris was deformed, and characters traveled the world in a matter of hours (pp. 233-52). Some plays showed a marked interest in the exotic, but they maintained a French flavor, thus going against the orientalist topoi that were so fashionable during the eighteenth century.

Chapter nine discusses the rule of "*messéance*," or the intentional use of situations that oppose the classical decorum required of theater. Whether through flaunting of bodily functions (ingestion, digestion, drinking, scatology), emphasis on illnesses or pregnancy, satire of medicine, or omnipresence of sexuality, the *parade* contradicted all rules established during the previous century, thus becoming anti-classical and subversive. As with the rest of the book, this section makes a strong case for the originality and theatrical importance of the *parade* in eighteenth-century theater. Ruimi's arguments reinforce those of other scholars (i.e., David Trott, and Marie-Emmanuelle Plagnol-Diéval) who call for the re-examination of minor genres that were probably influential in the evolution of theatrical forms and theories.^[4]

The final part of the book questions the subversive character of the genre. It discusses the way *parade* upset the normal order of things and examines the elite's predilection for imitating the common people. Ruimi explains that the intent was "more than carnival but less than a revolution" (p. 369) as the disguise of the characters was a risk free, temporary degradation permitted by the playful nature of *parade* (p. 372). Nevertheless, a new type of femininity emerged in these plays where young girls claimed their right to sexuality and disobeyed their fathers, some of them doing so violently. This strengthening of the feminine image went hand in hand with a degradation of virility among the male characters (pp. 384-95) and with an "erosion of authority" (p. 396).

But, Ruimi argues, it is on the dramatic front that the *parade* was truly modern and assertive. Using the analogy of a dramatic laboratory, Ruimi shows that the *parade* prefigured many of the contemporary theatrical forms (p. 413). *Parades* were very modern because the genre was often meta-theatrical. Moreover, due to their staging in private, they promoted a more active interaction between the actors and the audience that was in close proximity and interacted with the actors. In many ways they prefigured the theater of the absurd. Even if this genre did not directly influence the dramaturgy of the official theater during the eighteenth century, *parade* served as a sharp counter-point.

In conclusion, Ruimi explains why *parade* was forgotten and dismissed. One reason was the disappearance of private theaters where such plays were staged. Another was a gradual loss of interest in a genre that was eclipsed by others (like the *proverbe dramatique*, another type of short play that had a morality) as a change in tastes and theatrical preferences took place. Evaluating the distaste of the subsequent centuries for *parade*, Ruimi explains that until the twentieth century (when the *parades* of Beaumarchais were rediscovered and studied) the genre was often viewed as shocking and obscene (p. 453-54). This explains why the *parade* was never considered even as a subcategory of literary history. Yet, as she argues, the *parade* had specific rules and criteria and constituted a separate genre (pp. 455-56). She concludes that much more is to be discovered about *parade*, but that in the meantime this theatrical form can no longer be considered as a trifle, but should rather be viewed as a hidden treasure (p. 461).

Jennifer Ruimi's book does an excellent job of delineating the specificity of *parade*. Based on a nuanced and thorough analysis of a well-defined and extensive corpus of texts, the author shows convincingly that the *parade* was an important genre that must be taken into account when studying the evolution of French theater during the Enlightenment. Her work is a significant contribution to the effort to reimagine and reconstruct the forgotten, but important, theatrical practices of the eighteenth century. Aside from being a pleasant and interesting read, this volume will be a most useful resource for all scholars and students of eighteenth-century French theater.

NOTES

[1] Marie-Emmanuelle Plagnol Diéval, *Le théâtre de société, Un autre théâtre?* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2003).

[2] Jacques Schérer, *La Dramaturgie de Beaumarchais* (Paris: Nizet, 1970).

[3] In particular, the works of David Trott (*Théâtre du XVIII^e siècle: jeux, écritures, regards* (Montpellier: Éditions Espaces, 2000)), Martine de Rougemont (*La vie théâtrale en France au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2001)), and Marie-Emmanuelle Plagnol-Diéval.

[4] See note 3 above.

Maria Teodora Comsa
Stanford University
mcomsa@stanford.edu

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