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Gregory S. Brown, *Literary Sociability and Literary Property in France, 1775-1793: Beaumarchais, the Société des Auteurs Dramatiques and the Comédie Française*. Aldershot and Burlington, Vt: Ashgate Publishing, 2006. x + 186 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$94.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-7546-0386-5.

Review by Marisa Linton, Kingston University.

As Greg Brown acknowledges, this book, together with his earlier study, *A Field of Honor*, represents the fruit of more than ten years of archival study on the playwrights of eighteenth-century France.[1] The two books were conceived and written more or less simultaneously and are intended to complement one another. Although they deal with some of the same material, they follow diverging paths. *A Field of Honor* focused on individual playwrights and their relations with the Comédie Française, the court, the Parisian elite, and the wider audience. The current book, by contrast, examines the collective strategies of a group of dramatists known as the Society of Dramatic Authors to establish themselves as men of letters. This group was founded by Beaumarchais in 1777. It went through a number of permutations, triumphs and vicissitudes. Brown charts its rise, its fall (it lapsed in 1780), its revival during the revolutionary period in a variety of related guises, up to its final demise in 1793, when it was outflanked by a rapidly changing political situation and a new settlement of literary property by the Convention. In both books Brown pursues the admirable goal of situating the playwrights firmly within the context of eighteenth-century society, politics and rhetoric. He resists the temptation to portray them in teleological terms as prefiguring "modern" relationships between author and public. He is meticulous in his recovery of their context, particularly the repertoire of rhetorical strategies, nuances and codes of behaviour upon which aspirant playwrights could draw in seeking to establish their reputations. Thus, he argues that the Society of Dramatic Authors "is best understood not as the first writers' syndicate in French or European history, reclaiming authors' dues in terms of monetary compensation, but very much the opposite--an elite gathering modelled on a salon, intended to *distinguish* status-conscious men of letters from all venal and professional forms of writing" (p. 3).

Brown has uncovered a wealth of new material on the activities of the Society of Dramatic Authors, which enables him to offer an original interpretation of its cultural role. What he has discovered does not posit any dramatic achievements wrought by the Society. Indeed, until 1793 there was no final settlement: legislation was enacted, but not acted upon, or repealed. What he does show, however, is *how* the members of the Society acted and what their collective strategies were. His aim is to examine how they "functioned as both a social network and a political interest group" (p. 163). Their most concrete goal was to establish their entitlement to "literary property" of their plays. But by extension, they were equally concerned to establish a collective social identity for themselves which raised them above the level of jobbing writers. In the 1770s and 1780s an essential component of that identity was civility and the ideal of the *honnête homme* embodied in the manners of the court. Once the Revolution broke out though, this attention to civility was seen as redolent of the ancien régime and told against the playwrights. In his discussion of "literary sociability" Brown owes a great debt to writers on the culture of sociability, particularly Bourdieu and Elias--a debt that he discusses at greater length in *A Field of Honor*.

Because Brown is dealing with the efforts of a group of playwrights, most of the individuals concerned remain shadowy figures. The exception to this is Beaumarchais himself. We see Beaumarchais as an assured and established figure who takes the initiative in setting up the Society of Dramatic Authors and inviting selected playwrights to his house. We see him at court, where he is adept in its rules and rituals.

We see him with his fellow authors, where he presents himself as having only their collective interests as men of letters at heart. And finally we see him reinvent himself for revolutionary politics as a defender of “virtuous innocents” (the playwrights). Throughout, his machinations do full justice to the creator of the character of Figaro and make for the most entertaining part of the book.

Elsewhere, though some readers may find the exhaustive detail which with Brown recounts the blow by blow activities of the three-cornered struggle between the Society of Dramatic Authors, the Comédie Française and the authorities responsible for the theatre (first the court, latterly the revolutionary bodies) a little too excessive at times, it nonetheless imparts a solid grounding to his contentions. Brown’s emphasis on strategic uses of language enables him to show that his playwrights were not confined to the deployment of a particular discourse. He admits to having reservations about Colin Jones’ contention that two distinct discourses of professional identity emerged in the latter half of the century, one “corporate” and the other “civic.”[2] Rather, Brown says “that different playwrights sought, at different times in the 1770s, to embody both ideals.” He adds that some members of the Society of Dramatic Authors (especially Beaumarchais) “were particularly nimble in mobilising both discourses simultaneously” (p. 166). Their opponents, too, employed both these discourses at various times in arguing against the Society’s claims. This reminds us, should we need reminding, that discourses were not limited to one fixed argument, nor was their use confined to particular social groups. Rather, it is better to understand discourses as a repertoire of available languages from amongst which people can choose, and that their choices depend very much on the context.[3] Such a perspective is adopted by Brown, and this gives a real weight to his understanding of how cultural politics worked in this period. Agency and intention remain the focus of this convincing study of cultural history.

Beaumarchais took the step of founding the Society of Dramatic Authors in response to initiatives from the court to reform and regularise relations between the Comédie Française and the playwrights who wrote for it. The courtiers responsible were Amelot de Chaillou (a protégé of Maurepas), and the First Gentlemen, the ducs de Duras and Richelieu. Beaumarchais’ social status was already well established, He had won renown, both for his plays and his participation in *causes célèbres*. He had connections at court, most notably the patronage of Maurepas. As such, he straddled the gap between the court and the social world of the dramatists. In July 1777 Beaumarchais invited a select group of playwrights to his imposing town house in the Marais. Twenty-one members participated in the Society. All were there by Beaumarchais’ personal invitation. In this and subsequent meetings, the business discussion would be followed by dinner and polite conversation. This was significant because, by holding the meeting in a private house rather than a public space, Beaumarchais ensured that the Society of Dramatic Authors appeared distinct from other collective associations such as the royal academies. Rather, it emulated the civility of elite society and the salon (except that no women were present).[4]

The goals of the Society as set out in the petition drafted by its members and sent to Duras called for greater rights for authors who wrote plays that were performed by the Comédie Française. Such rights included rights of literary property over their plays, which traditionally became the property of the actors. The authors also sought reform of the methods whereby remuneration for their plays was calculated. But at the heart of Brown’s approach lies the argument that even more important than these concrete aims was the desire of the dramatists to assert their social position as authors, and the strategies that they adopted to build up their status. Central to the dramatists’ portrayal of themselves as men of letters was the contention that they were devoted to the public interest and that self-interest (the money they stood to make) was of minor importance. Brown pinpoints two different strategies adopted by the members of the group. A majority sought to identify themselves with the image of the man of letters as a member of the courtly elite in the tradition of Racine and Voltaire “whose status was a function of his disinterested service to a cause nobler than his own interests, such as the King, the glory of France and the beauty of literature itself” (p. 28). But there was also a sizeable minority of playwrights “who considered themselves patriots rather than courtiers” (p. 28). The members of this “patriot” group were mostly lower down the social scale than the “courtly” group. They argued that “a

playwright should be autonomous to better devote himself to serving the 'public' and 'nation'" (p. 28).

The Society of Dramatic Authors' petition was vigorously challenged by the actors of the Comédie Française and their lawyers. All parties showed themselves adept in deploying the language of civility, *politesse* and public interest in defending their status and autonomy. The defenders of the Comédie challenged the Society's depiction of its members as selflessly devoted to the public good and unconcerned by money. They accused Beaumarchais in particular of being mercenary and "out for himself," whilst concealing his personal ambition under the guise of being a spokesman on behalf of his less successful colleagues. The key role played by the courtiers whose responsibility it was to oversee the Comédie Française is skilfully delineated by Brown. His work complements that of historians who have long argued for the continuing importance of patronage and the court right up to the Revolution.[5] Brown also shows that royal authorities were acutely aware of the public sphere and its importance. Beaumarchais played a double game: he used both the traditional means of court patronage and the threat to appeal to the public by publicising the Society's aims and the stratagems of its opponents. Thus, at one point he wrote to Duras with the implied threat that if the Society's demands for reforms concerning literary rights and methods of remuneration were not met "he would 'no longer be able to prevent a public discussion' of his version of events" (p. 77). For their part, the courtiers showed themselves alive to the dangers of public debate and disclosure. Thus, the duc de Richelieu took the step of warning Beaumarchais not to circulate such a text, and Amelot followed it up by writing to Beaumarchais that it would "'be convenient if you were to have nothing printed in this affair'" (p. 89). All parties now seemed aware of the possibilities--and risks--of appealing to public opinion.

In 1780 new regulations were posited for the Comédie Française, which included a main provision that gave authors a seventh of the receipts (after various deductions) for performances; once a play had lapsed royalties would not normally be payable on subsequent performances. But Brown concedes that the new regulations made little change to the amount authors received between 1781 and 1789 (p. 106). At all events, the group was allowed to lapse. Chapters four and five deal with its revival by La Harpe during the Revolution.[6] The group underwent a variety of changes and permutations. Some of the old members remained; Beaumarchais and Sedaine both took an active role, as they had in 1777. But several members of the younger generation were also present (including Marie-Joseph Chénier) who had adopted the new revolutionary ideas with enthusiasm. Regulation of the relations between authors and the Comédie Française still remained a chief goal. But now both authors and actors had to present their cases to the various revolutionary authorities rather than to royal administrators. The language too had changed. The old language of civility, *politesse* and the *honnête homme* was defunct. Indeed, it was advisable to avoid such a language, redolent as it was of ancien régime values and culture. Instead, the playwrights (and the actors) adopted the language of *patrie*, nation, citizenship and the public interest. As might be expected of professional wordsmiths, they proved adept at such rhetorical wordplay. They contended that their aim was to serve the nation selflessly (i.e. virtuously) by writing their plays for public performances. As Brown notes: "What changed greatly in this period was the rhetorical force of different languages" employed by participants in these debates (p. 165). Like many of their contemporaries, playwrights made use of the languages of patriotism, nation, citizenship and virtue (in the sense of selfless devotion to the public good) to give weight to their strategic arguments.[7] In the event, a final settlement of the relative rights of the Comédie Française and the playwrights was only made in July 1793 when the Convention passed a general law that confirmed property rights for individual authors up to ten years after their deaths, "and created both a conceptual public domain and a physical *dépot légal* in the Bibliothèque Nationale for all printed works" (p. 154). Only after this, concludes Brown, did the cultural place of dramatic authors in French society become in any sense "modern."

## NOTES

[1] Gregory S. 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). Available at: <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/brg01>.

[2] Colin Jones, *The Great Nation: France from Louis XIV to Napoleon, 1715-1799* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), especially pp. 292-301, 552-67.

[3] My own study of the language of virtue took this approach: Marisa Linton, *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).

[4] On the salon as a reflection of court society and its concerns, see Antoine Lilti, *Le Monde des salons: Sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2005).

[5] Recent studies of the mechanisms of court patronage and its continuing importance throughout the ancien régime include Peter Robert Campbell, *Power and Politics in Old Régime France, 1720-1745* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Leonhard Horowski, "Such a Great Advantage for My Son': Office-holding and Career Mechanisms at the Court of France, 1661 to 1789," *The Court Historian* 8 (December 2003): 125-175; and Thomas E. Kaiser, "Madame de Pompadour and the Theaters of Power," *French Historical Studies* 19 (Fall 1996): 1025-44.

[6] For an extended study of revolutionary theatre and its relationship to politics, see Paul Friedland, *Political Actors: Representative Bodies and Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002).

[7] For recent studies on the languages of patriotism, nation, and citizenship, see David Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); Jay M. Smith, "Social Categories, the Language of Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution: the Debate Over the Noblesse Commerçante," *Journal of Modern History* 72 (June 2000): 339-374; Jay M. Smith, *Nobility Reimagined: the Patriotic Nation in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005); and, like Brown, stressing its ambiguities and rhetorical exploitation, Peter R. Campbell, "The Language of Patriotism in France, 1750-1770", *e-France*, forthcoming.

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