Le Monde Français du Dix-Huitième Siècle

Volume 5, Issue-numéro 1 2020

Book Review

Yann Robert, *Dramatic Justice. Trial by
Theater in the Age of the French Revolution*
(Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P,
2019)

Servanne Woodward, University of Western Ontario
swoodwar@uwo.ca

DOI: 10.5206/mfds-ecfw.v5i1.9441

Yann Robert, *Dramatic Justice. Trial by Theater in the Age of the French Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 338 pp., LCCN 2018018632; ISBN 9780812250756 (hardcopy: alk paper)

Yann Robert identifies unfair and dangerous smearing campaigns as a preoccupation with the ethics of administering justice in public versus secretly, as he pursues a relatively new trend of study between law and literature in *Dramatic Justice*. It falls in line with one of the *Théâtre* articles about John Woodward, a London doctor accused of being a quack, whose controversy Sophie Vasset retraces: it attacks his professional status and his personal reputation successfully through the stage (p. 208). The destructive and pernicious effects of rumors were depicted by Beaumarchais in *Le mariage de Figaro*, and Simon Linguet comes to mind invoking laws against libels and slander by the end of the century. In his insightful volume, Robert evaluates what the legal system owes to the stage and vice versa, at a time when preoccupations with public judgment meets with an attempt to form a democracy to replace a monarchy.

The question of values harmonized with governments would evoke Montesquieu and the type of public encounters: democratic governments would evoke a virtuous spectacle of orators debating to get to some truth or consensus; monarchy would imply luxurious spectacles to display power and entertain the governed body as a compensation for loss of autonomy, and as one of the social pleasures of public self-display and polite cordial exchanges. Marivaux could also be relevant.

Robert begins with changes in dramatic theory as attempted with Diderot, eventually joined by Louis-Sébastien Mercier. Drama would allow theatre to function as re-enactment of facts for the spectators to become witness and judge. Diderot is also a major figure in the transformation of theatre with his commemorative anti-fiction experiment in *Le fils naturel*. Such theatre is serious and its moral purview moves away from bourgeois theatre as pure entertainment punctuated by laughter and applause, and perhaps from a theatre of characters (Molière) or a psychological comedy of moral reform (Marivaux). Diderot observes that the type of curative comedy supported by Molière falls short of its goal. According to Mercier, theatre should be serious, edifying, cause silent indignation and empathy and take effect in immediate social transformation. This imperative for current relevance recovers characteristics of Aristophanes (p. 59), as “moral playwrights” assume “the roles of government watchdog” (p. 67). In the process of reversing the effects of royal censorship verifying that plays could not possibly apply to the order of the day, a new type of theatre fosters personal attacks against contemporaries accused of being noxious quacks, such as philosophers in Palissot’s *Les Philosophes*—Robert gleefully warns (“Be careful what you wish for”, p. 49), before he studies how Mercier backtracks on his positions.

However, the conflation between theatrical “cure” of social reforms and quackery was predictable. Since charlatanism and theater share a common source, two chapters of *Théâtre et charlatans dans l’Europe moderne* treat the unavoidable contagion of skepticism equally distributed along with trust among all these professionals who vie for the same clients. Parody of charlatans, or by charlatans, proves to be a slippery topic. Jennifer Ruimi finds that charlatans assume a civic role on and off the stage.¹ The murky and persistent polyvalence of charlatans

¹ In dirs. Beya Dhraïef, Eric Négrel, Jennifer Ruimi, *Théâtre et charlatans dans l’Europe moderne*, with an afterwords by Jean-Paul Sermain (Paris : Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2018) p. 175.

influences stage performance, and the “thousand faces of imposture” tend to contaminate the activities of professionals such as financial agents, politicians (cf. a well-illustrated chapter on revolutionary caricatures by Claire Trévien, *Théâtre et charlatans*, pp. 339-351), charity volunteers (the operator always claims to be independent and to have travelled far to help humanity in unverifiable places) and to the realm of activities hosted by philosophers, authors and literary critics (Etienne Leterrier, *Théâtre et charlatans*, p. 228, and chapter 8). A more involved division concerning the legitimacy of the one over the other addresses ability and freedom to choose dear to the Jesuits (Lattarico, p. 64), faculties that are potentially curtailed when our senses and our emotions are fascinated by theatrical and illusionist devices. Naturally this thorny question haunts religious theater reviewed by M. A. Katritzky (pp. 99-116). But Diderot also worried that our automatic tearful reaction to melodrama short-circuited our civic reflections and active involvement from the conclusion we could draw at the spectacles that should stir the emotions of active solidarity when we step out of the theater and rejoin society. But *Théâtre et charlatans* falls short of considering the legal stage, and this is where Robert ventures in the second part of his volume.

Robert reverses the roles of the self-representing quack whose speech is authentically referential versus the actor who performs someone a rehearsed text to move the crowds and the judgement toward the desired end for his client. Robert finds that public staged courtroom debate becomes inauthentic rehearsed scripts that must contain pathos, whereas, previously, cases were written and tallied according to a point system that the judge would apply systematically and without emotional bias. Either way, parties worry about wrongful judgments. In terms of developments in the history of theatre, as “audience interventionism grew in the 1770s and 1780s” (p. 138), so are efforts to silence the auditors who monopolize spectacles (p. 139).

Chapter 6 opens with the five plays following the seven months of the condemnation of Jean Calas, to reflect on the “craze for courtroom drama” (p. 192) that staged “trials of trials” and “workshops” to “examine potential performances of justice” (p. 193). Staged reassessments of legal rulings would eventually include plays about the trial of Louis XVI (the “new Calas”) (p. 226), and finally Robespierre’s personal re-enactment of the death of Socrates in his real-life trial (pp. 260-261). Such is the end of the discussion exposing the dizzying exchanges between theatrical performance as a blue-print for reality, and how we give shape to life-defining moment by casting them as fictitious re-enactments, or the appropriation of an aesthetic model that applied to someone else in order to transcend infamy and capital punishment.

Researchers will probably be prompted to revisit Diderot’s drama theories such as his *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, to check how paradoxically the emotional or rational evolutions of legal judgements played out up to the present times, or Montesquieu to evaluate why justice and theatre came to coalesce when monarchy was superseded by republican structure. When read together with *Théâtre et charlatans*, *Dramatic Justice* becomes unsettling. Both works are practically disturbing in their modernity as the distance between fact and fiction collapses, and our natural sense of justice and the law rarely coincide.

Servanne Woodward
The University of Western Ontario