

Ellen R. Welch, *A THEATER OF DIPLOMACY: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND THE PERFORMING ARTS IN EARLY MODERN FRANCE* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), pp. vi + 312; ISBN: 978-0812249002

Roberta Anderson

*A Theater of Diplomacy* is an important and timely book which sets out to restructure how we think about both diplomacy and theatre in early modern France. Welch's volume analyses how the 'theater of diplomacy' evolved in France during the long seventeenth century, from the court of Charles IX to the last years of the reign of Louis XIV. She proceeds to analyse the 'kind of diplomatic work these entertainments perform' (2), from the Bayonne encounter between Catherine de' Medici and the Duke of Alba, organised to negotiate two inter-dynastic marriages between the Valois and Habsburgs (1565) – to the Congresses of Westphalia and of Utrecht (1713) (p. 2).

Acknowledging that diplomatic missions were, and indeed still are, profoundly theatrical – from formal entries and welcoming ceremonies to gift-giving, and the public statements of esteem which concluded missions, Welch investigates two related themes – how diplomats were received at the French court during the long seventeenth century, and how court entertainments contributed to the diplomatic process. Both of these strands make important contributions to our understanding of how the French court represented itself to Europe and the wider world. Drawing on an impressive range of archives, disciplines, methodologies and traditions, Welch has presented her findings compellingly, at ease with both early modern diplomacy and the theatrical texts that staged diplomacy.

Welch notes at the start of her Introduction that 'Metaphors of the performing arts abound in the talk about diplomacy' (p. 1). More than just an abstract metaphor, it reflected the rich culture of spectacular entertainment that was a backdrop to ambassadors' day-to-day lives. For Welch, diplomacy is a dance and, like the dance, it pursues the ideals of 'order and harmony in the world' (p. 1). The diplomat has always been seen as an actor on a stage – recruited, at least at first, almost exclusively from the ranks of the aristocracy whose 'soft power' was formed and enhanced by courtly activities (p. 2). 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 period –1580 to 1655.<sup>1</sup> Like Welch, Rivère de

<sup>1</sup> 'The Poetics of Diplomatic Appeasement in the Early Modern Era', in *Early Modern Diplomacy, Theatre and Soft Power: The Making of Peace*, ed. by Nathalie Rivère de Carles (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016).

Carles and her collaborators recognise basic duplicity at the heart of diplomacy, advancing key concepts such as ‘double vision’ and ‘ambiguation’ that allow the diplomat to pursue simultaneously ‘fiction and reality’, ‘reason and imagination’ or ‘action and reflexive perception’. 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’.<sup>2</sup>

In Welch’s book we see several strands: the ambassador as actor, as highlighted by François de Callières’ oft-quoted observation that ‘an ambassador resembles in some way an actor exposed on the stage to the eyes of the public in order to play great roles’; a certain kind of theatre which comprises, is peopled by, and is even constituted by, diplomatic themes and actors; and grandiose court entertainments – allegorical ballets, masquerade balls, chivalric tournaments, operas, and comedies – which were both ‘diplomatic’ in their purpose to honour and impress visiting diplomats and in their themes.

The chapters that make up this book assess some of the most important examples of diplomatic entertainment which took place during the long seventeenth century in France. The eight chapters combine useful case studies, and surveys of more extended periods. The chronologically ordered chapters go a long way in delivering the book’s ambitious promise to ‘trace major evolutions in the theory and practice of diplomacy and court spectacle’. Consequently, as declared in the last paragraph of the conclusion, Welch offers ‘no grand theory of theater and the performing arts’ effectiveness for international politics’, but, the examination Welch has undertaken is nevertheless successful in its ambition to ‘illuminate the unarticulated assumptions that underlie our own, contemporary practices’ (pp. 9, 212). The review briefly undertaken in the conclusion demonstrates this clearly: the diplomatic entertainments at the 1815 Congress of Utrecht in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars were perceived as empty and irrelevant, as ‘residual and retrograde’, concluding a development that started during the second half of the reign of Louis XIV, in stark contrast to the mid-century abundance of diplomatic entertainments, when the theatre of diplomacy on stage ‘produced new ideas and concepts for theories of political representation’ (pp. 211, 69).

This book is at its most compelling when the author allows herself to speculate, despite her own concerns about her interpretation of the materials at hand, and as her expression of discomfort in Chapter 4 suggests when she notes, ‘Considering the ballet’s diplomatic uses requires a certain amount of speculation’ (p. 114).

Welch develops her ideas when she considers the *Bayonne Entertainments*, during the Franco-Spanish summit of 1565. Ostensibly, the programme of events set out, through a spirit of community, to help the French and Spanish resolve their

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 3–4, 10, 5–10.

differences and find peace. But, Welch notes, while the visual representation of Greek and Roman mythological figures during the festivities were decipherable by all the delegates present and set out to project a shared aristocratic ideal of modern Europe, the pageantry was accompanied by a poetic commentary of 'encomiastic poetry [that] fêted the French king as the most noble, courageous, powerful sovereign' which was provided only in French and was, therefore, largely impenetrable to the Spanish and Italian delegates (p. 26).

Taking France as her case study, Welch has explored the interconnected histories of international relations and the theatrical and performing arts. Her book has argued that theatre served not merely as a decorative accompaniment to negotiations, but rather underpinned the practices of embodied representation, performance, and spectatorship that constituted the culture of diplomacy in this period.

Through its examination of the early modern precursors to today's cultural diplomacy initiatives, her book investigates the various ways in which performance structures international politics still. Her thematic and chronological approach makes it an excellent reference book on the diplomatic theory and performance analysis for both students and researchers.