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### Logan J. Connors, *The Emergence of a theatrical science of man in France, 1660–1740*

Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment, Liverpool : Liverpool University Press, 2020, 296 p.

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Logan J. Connors, *The Emergence of a theatrical science of man in France, 1660–1740*, Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020, 296 p., ISBN : 9781789620382.

More than any other perhaps, one term runs through Logan J. Connors's outstanding new monograph: "relational." At the risk of oversimplifying a nuanced and thought-provoking study, one might say that Connors has written a relational history of one of the most neglected periods in France's rich theatrical past: the decades spanning the final years of Louis XIV's reign to the 1730s. So central is the concept of "relationality" to Connors's study, in fact, that it applies both to its methodology and to its object – that is, both to the historiography of eighteenth-century theater and to the theater itself. Let us begin with the former: Connors writes a new history of early modern drama, rejecting the standard narrative built on a binary opposition between the rule-governed fixity of the neoclassical model and the freewheeling preromantic innovations of mid- and late-century theorists such as Diderot, Beaumarchais, and Louis-Sébastien Mercier. This narrative treats the first half of the eighteenth century as "a stale waiting room" (4), a time of theatrical exhaustion and theoretical stagnation, when in fact, as Connors convincingly demonstrates, it saw "the emergence of a theater of knowledge acquisition, ethical reflection, and diverse sentimental strategies" that set the stage for the most radical ideas in the *Entretiens sur le Fils naturel* and the *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (216). By putting Diderot in *relation* with the period that shaped the early years of his life instead of just in *opposition* to the Grand Siècle, Connors transforms our understanding of the High Enlightenment's most important aesthetic innovations and debates (notably the "tension between knowing-by-feeling and knowing-by-reason" (19)), revealing them to be the culmination of a complicated evolution and not just the result of a sudden break with the tenets of a supposedly monolithic tradition.

Through this relational historiography, Connors provides his readers with a more accurate depiction of early enlightenment drama. Fascinatingly, the theater that he unearths is itself uniquely relational in nature. If in the seventeenth century theatrical praxis and theory tended to focus on rules and models as formulas for producing universal emotions (primarily terror and pity) in an abstract, unified "Spectator," the treatises and plays of the Regency evince a deeper, granular interest (a key term as we will see) in the varied, layered, and interdependent emotional processes that actual spectators undergo during a theatrical event, and in what these processes involve – the intricate relationships between affect and cognition, between emotions felt at a performance

and those experienced in real life, and between the immediate sensitive response of a spectator and the more lasting moral and, above all, social impact of dramatic responses of the sort. As Connors makes clear, Regency authors, much like later Encyclopédistes, did not erect disciplinary divisions between the dramatic arts and the social sciences; on the contrary, they viewed the theater as a crucial medium for experimentation, a laboratory where playwrights and theorists could investigate human nature through the production and dissection of emotions, and where spectators could experience and reflect on new ways of feeling and being in the world. It is this “focus on personal and collective change through the emotions of theatrical performance and dramatic literature” that Connors calls a “theatrical science of man” and that brings together the diverse playwrights and theorists in his study (9).

Rather than proceed with a chapter by chapter summary that would merely offer a less detailed and eloquent reproduction of the chapter outline in the book's introduction (pp. 23-8), I would like to highlight some of the many impressive contributions made by Connors's research to the histories of the theater, of the emotions, and of the Enlightenment. First, he provocatively locates the origin of Enlightenment conceptions of theater and emotions in the antitheatrical discourse of seventeenth-century religious theatrophobes. For instance, the belief that emotions experienced at the theater have a lasting transformative impact on the individual and on society permeated the writings of Pierre Nicole long before it became the foundation for Diderot's program of (positive) social change through the stage. Connors also demonstrates the centrality of lesser known dramatists and theorists, notably the fascinating Antoine Houdar de La Motte. Along with fellow Regency author Jean-Baptiste Dubos, La Motte anticipated many of Diderot's insights, freeing himself from the dichotomy between overwhelming passions and cool reason as well as from the limited emotional diversity of neo-Aristotelian poetics (pity and terror) to explore a wider, deeper range of emotions, including what he calls “sentiments raisonnables.” His new definition of “l'intérêt” – as a mode of relational, durable, active engagement that is at once emotional and intellectual – constitutes a particularly “important theoretical contribution to the history of both the theater and the emotions” (131). These now forgotten aesthetic debates and innovations enhance our understanding of Marivaux in much the same way they do Diderot, revealing both to be historically-grounded thinkers and not the anomalies or atemporal geniuses they are sometimes imagined to be. Likewise, Connors's research shines a new light on the rise of the *comédie larmoyante*, challenging the binary, non-relational thinking that treats the new genre as a symptom either of

a rationalist, moralistic worldview or of a rampant sentimentality. By studying formal elements of the genre, notably unexpected distancing features, Connors concludes that *comédies larmoyantes* bridge the rationality-sentimentality divide by conceiving emotion as a catalyst for introspection, ethical reflection, and social awareness and action.

Of course, even in (or perhaps especially in) such a relational study, the reader is left to wonder at other relationships left largely unexplored. Notably, Connors's new histories of theater and the emotions remain entirely confined within the borders and traditions of France. As he cursorily acknowledges on pages 33 and 125, the influence of European empiricism on High Enlightenment conceptions of the theater and of emotions cannot be overstated. Now that Connors has conclusively demonstrated that Regency authors like Dubos and La Motte should be added alongside Shaftesbury and other English empiricists to the list of Diderot's influencers, it is natural to wonder whether the unique theatrical and emotional regime of the Regency was also shaped by aesthetic and intellectual developments outside France's frontiers. It would be unfair, however, to focus on minor lacunae (especially one that Connors addresses directly in a footnote on page 79) when the study as a whole displays such remarkably deep and wide-ranging research, as well as an encyclopedic knowledge worthy of the period it studies. I would not wish to sound like Voltaire who, not finding everything he had hoped to see in the plays of the early eighteenth century, dismissed them as a sign of impotence: "une espèce bâtarde qui, n'étant ni comique ni tragique, manifesta l'impuissance de faire des tragédies ou des comédies. Cette espèce, cependant, avait un mérite, celui d'*intéresser*; et dès qu'on *intéresse*, on est sûr du succès" (259). To read Connors's trailblazing study is to discover just how wrong Voltaire was about the potency of Regency drama. In fairness to the patriarch of Ferney, he intuits in the same quote, albeit dismissively, the rise of interest as a fundamental aesthetic notion. If his conclusion applies to academic publishing as well as to the stage, Connors's deeply interesting monograph is sure to enjoy the success it deserves.

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