

Cecilia Feilla, *The Sentimental Theater of the French Revolution*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. xiii +258. £65. ISBN 9781409411635.

Cecilia Feilla's book is an important contribution to studies of the French Revolution and reflects a broader trend to consider the most successful cultural productions of the decade alongside the most politically explicit. In this respect, her monograph complements nicely my own *Narrative Responses to the Trauma of the French Revolution* (Legenda, 2012) in that we both start by asking why certain theatrical or literary texts were so popular. Feilla takes as her corpus the sentimental plays that vastly outperformed the more obviously patriotic plays which have thus far attracted scholarly attention. By reintegrating the role of the sentimental in Revolutionary culture, she provides us with a much fuller understanding of the cultural landscape of the period and corrects long-standing assumptions about the interaction of politics and artistic production during the Revolution.

Feilla's starting point is a corpus of over a hundred plays which allows her to draw conclusions on the sentimental mode across political, social and generic divides. The size of her corpus gives considerable weight to her assertion that 'Revolutionary theater was remarkably and undeniably sentimental' (4). Her first chapter explores, through case studies, why sentimentality dominated the Revolutionary stage but this is simply the starting point for a much more ambitious exploration of how sentimental and civic notions of virtue blended on stage and presented 'not just complementary but sometimes competing and contradictory prescriptions for virtuous citizenship and virtuous government' (16). Chapter 2 explores how the role of the tableau changes during the Revolution. Feilla draws on Helena Maria Williams' letters from France and David's paintings to place the use of the theatrical tableau in a broader awareness of visual culture and persuasively assesses how sensibility becomes the key medium for rethinking society not just in the theatre but in art as well.

The focus of the third chapter is on theatrical re-enactments of the Fête de la fédération of July 1790, an occasion which continues to divide scholars as to whether Revolutionary festivals unified or factionalised the Parisian population. The crisis surrounding the King's oath-taking at the Champ de Mars is played out on the Parisian stage. In particular Feilla uses careful textual analysis of Collot d'Herbois' *La Famille patriote* to show how plays reaffirmed the affective dimension of oath-taking during the Revolution.

Chapter 4 is a fascinating exploration of the implications of François de Neufchâtel's *Paméla* during the Terror. Feilla convincingly argues that 'Jacobin politics share a number of assumptions and conventions with sentimental aesthetics (132), not least a valuation of virtue and transparency. She extends her analysis of the play text and its amendments to an assessment of the language of legal briefs, which by the end of the Ancien Régime had largely adopted the language and tropes of sentimental narratives.

Following on from the examination of the role of English virtuous heroines on the French stage, in Chapter 5 Feilla looks at the mediating role played by theatre between classical models and contemporary history with a study of Voltaire's *Brutus*. The chapter looks at the history of filicide plays in the eighteenth century and explores the reasons behind the renewed enthusiasm for Voltaire's play during the Revolution. Feilla also explores performance history and the intertextual links between theatre and art as she analyses how the actor Vanhove recreated on stage the image of Brutus from David's painting *Les Licteurs rapportent à Brutus les corps de ses fils*. Reviews from the performance underscore the extent to which audiences identified with the plot. Examining the continued appeal of *Brutus* during the Revolutionary decade leads Feilla to nuance Lynn Hunt's argument that the family romance is replaced by a fraternal model after the death of the King. She shows instead that the father figure remains a key component of the sentimental stage but that those figures choose the state over their children and thereby emerge as true fathers of their people.

The final chapter takes the actor Talma as the starting point for a broader reflection on the development of acting techniques and how the rise of melodrama marks a ‘shift in the body’s representational mode from pantomime to physiognomy’ (222). By this Feilla means that in melodramas such as those by Pixierécourt from the late 1790s, the emphasis is on an embodiment of the fixed truth of the self, whereas sentimental drama had privileged the representation of a series of states of mind visible through the externalisation of emotions in the face and body. The end of the Revolutionary decade therefore marks a shift in the link between sentimentality and the socio-political.

Overall this is an ambitious, wide-ranging and thought-provoking monograph which is set to become required reading for everyone working on cultural production of the Revolutionary decade and the early nineteenth century.

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