

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



### Welch, Ellen R. A Theater of Diplomacy: International Relations and the Performing Arts in Early Modern France

John H. Astington

Volume 41, Number 2, Spring 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1086001ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i2.29878>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Astington, J. (2018). Review of [Welch, Ellen R. A Theater of Diplomacy: International Relations and the Performing Arts in Early Modern France]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 41(2), 222–224.  
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i2.29878>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2018

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

for this volume represent one-third of Sforza's surviving correspondence. It is not clear, however, what the criteria were for inclusion in the volume. A better sense of the rationale for selection would provide more context. Similarly, a more thorough discussion of the archives containing the letters would provide more background and aid future scholars.

I also wonder if the use of "hostage" in the title doesn't underplay some of Ippolita's political agency. While she was certainly in peril many times during her life at the Neapolitan court (there was the infamous incident in which her husband locked his new wife in her rooms), it is hard to see how categorizing her as a hostage advances a volume that presents such a rich picture of the vividness, astuteness, and force of her personality. While it is important to give a balanced picture, this juxtaposition still seems incongruent. I would also have liked to see more Italian transcriptions of the letters in order to get a full sense of their language.

These are admittedly minor flaws which in no way detract from the importance or deftness of this edition. As one whose scholarly trajectory has been shaped tremendously by *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* Series, I find it always a pleasure to see such a wonderful new addition to this important series.

AMANDA G. MADDEN

Georgia Institute of Technology

**Welch, Ellen R.**

***A Theater of Diplomacy: International Relations and the Performing Arts in Early Modern France.***

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. Pp. 289 + 10 b/w ill. ISBN 978-0-8122-4900-1 (hardcover) US\$75.

The subject of this study is of considerable interest: the participation of foreign representatives in the ritual life of the court of France over the period of a century and a half, from the 1560s until the end of the reign of Louis XIV. The book is organized in eight chapters proceeding chronologically, the second and the fifth taking us outside France to consider the other side of the coin, the experience of French ambassadors in England and Germany. Negotiation between states

depended on a more or less agreed series of exchanges of courtesies, which a well-established modern theoretical tradition has characterized as a kind of theatrical performance; the invitation of ambassadors to court shows and celebrations brought the two kinds of performance together.

The question to be asked, then, is how such communication might adjust understanding or develop international relationships. It was, first of all, a strategy that could encourage or cool only existing alliances, and one political criticism that might be made of Welch's book is that it does not give us a very clear guide to the varying constituency of the diplomatic community in Paris over the period she covers, nor to when or with what other European states France was at war, although the fifth chapter does examine the French presence at the negotiations towards the Treaty of Westphalia. A further question is whether the necessarily conventional nature of court show was very much suited to political persuasion; as a shrewd assessment of royal and aristocratic entertainments puts it in an early seventeenth-century English play, "They are tied to rules / Of flattery." And, one could add, tied to a familiar panoply of tropes, figures, and characters. *Quoi de neuf?* The French entertainment at Münster in 1645 may have been intended to leaven gravity, although it now sounds insensitively light-hearted. Other evidence cited makes it quite plain that certain ambassadors went to such events largely to show themselves, as modern plutocrats might go the opera, to keep up appearances rather than to listen or watch very intently.

As the author makes clear, growing French political and cultural confidence and influence across Europe, perhaps combined with a growing scepticism about the questions I raise above, meant that diplomatic presence at court spectacle became less and less a matter of concern as the seventeenth century drew on: the theatre of the court of Versailles was centred on itself, and serious diplomacy was conducted through other channels. What the general argument of the book could emphasize rather more, I think, is why this point was not reached earlier, and hence chapter by chapter give us a sharper view of what was felt to be at stake politically and culturally at particular historical moments. The writing is generally clear, with some lapses in tone and syntax such as awkward possessive constructions and inappropriate journalese; "royals" seems an unfortunate way to refer to monarchical families of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the pages of a scholarly book, for example.

One surprising weakness of the book is the intermittently poor and inaccurate quality of the versions of French text in English, which can give the impression of having been done by an antiquated translating machine. Readers without any French will be puzzled by awkward phrasing and word order, and will not know when they are being misled. Take the line of a lyric from the *Ballet de la félicité*, performed in 1639; the fourth line as quoted reads "Let's dance, push our voices," a baffling notion in English. The French is "Dançons, poussons nos voix," to be rendered simply as "Let us dance, let us sing." Or, from the start of the 1641 entertainment *Le ballet de la prospérité des armes de la France*, we read of Harmony speaking of her "divers accords," an oddly archaic English formula which turns out to be a simple reversal of the French phrase "mes accords divers." But since this is *Harmonie* reciting or singing these verses, "accord" here carries its musical sense, and the first four lines of her *récit* should be put into English in something like these terms: "I am delightful Harmony / Who with my varied chords / Can spread infinite joy / Throughout the universe." The lack of careful attention to the precise sense and shape of texts, at several points, is distinctly disappointing if not something of a scandal, and undermines one's confidence about the larger arguments based on their reading.

The general impression following a reading of this book, then, is of a missed opportunity to have done something rather better. The material itself has an intrinsic interest, but it requires rather more critical freshness and edge to bring it fully into the light, to interrogate it, and to stimulate further work in related areas. The study certainly is established on a substantial basis of knowledge: a full and up-to-date bibliography includes several recent article-length studies by the author. It is to be regretted that their synthesis within a larger scope has not been more successfully managed.

JOHN H. ASTINGTON  
University of Toronto