Book Review

Jeremy L. Caradonna. *The Enlightenment in Practice: Academic Prize Contests and Intellectual Culture in France, 1670–1794*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012. 352 pp. Hardcover $59.95.

A first prize contest in the essay competition offered by the Academy of Dijon in 1750 launched the literary career of the young Jean Jacques Rousseau. His eloquence, rather than his ideas, Jeremy L. Caradonna argues, made his victory possible, and sealed his reputation as a controversial, but brilliant, man of letters. Hundreds of other writers, from many social backgrounds, including dozens of women, coveted the prizes offered by over two thousand essay prize competitions to be found in the period. *The Enlightenment in Practice* argues that the Parisian and provincial academies, from the 1670s to the Revolution, offer an unprecedented window into the Enlightenment in action, into the contours of its public *persona*. This is not the Enlightenment of the radical *philosophes*, even though Marat, Robespierre, and Brissot can be found among the contestants during the 1780s. The academies were the loci of enlightened rhetoric and eloquence in prose and poetry, in agricultural improvement, in medical practice, on the implications of the discovery of America, even in the mechanical arts.

How does Caradonna's version of the Enlightenment alter our understanding of its contours in France, or does it? His book makes perfectly clear that religious and political orthodoxies were guarded by the academies, and if they strayed, the church, even the monarch, was prepared to call them to task. In 1772, the archbishop of Toulouse and Louis XV himself intervened to stop an academy from setting a contest for an essay honoring Pierre Bayle. Discussions of awarding civil status to Protestants were also stopped (pp. 84–85), and in 1780s Louis XVI censured the Academy of Châlons-sur-Marne for daring to commission competitions about the reform of provincial government or asking for recommendations on how to reform the penal laws "through prompt and exemplary punishments, while also respecting the honor and liberty of citizens" (p. 83). The academic contestants display an enlightened writing community on a very short tether indeed.

This welcomed book documents the depth and breadth of the reading and writing public as it grew in the course of the eighteenth century. While its members were limited as to what they could say by their own hand, they could certainly buy and circulate books at will. It is fair to characterize this middlebrow community as another nail in the coffin of the Enlightenment as the work of thirty or so *philosophes*. On the whole, the academic essays were fairly judged and the value of

learned sociability inculcated by aspiring contestants as well as by the academicians doing the judging. The ideal of enlightened rationality came to be practiced by hundreds of participants, most of whom have long since been forgotten.

Sometimes the author makes historiographical interventions that are bolder than what the evidence will support. Resolutely learned in one national history, he assures his readers that "the French might have blazed the trail, but their European neighbors followed close behind" (p. 92). Clearly he has never examined the chambers of rhetoric to be found in every city of any size in the Low Countries, or the literary-philosophical societies visible in England by 1710. There was little formal censorship of their activities in either place. In the Dutch Republic after 1750 societies promoting "the useful" (known by the shorthand, "het Nut") sponsored prizes for reform-minded essays that augur the reforming turmoil of the 1790s. A minor correction: Isabelle de Charrière was Dutch and not Swiss. Saying that there were more women at work with their pens than other historians have found does not obviate the point about the challenges faced by literary women. Similarly, finding the Marats of the 1780s engaged in prize contests run by establishment academies does not undo the picture of Grub Street offered by Robert Darnton and others. Nor is there much evidence that the academies eventually turned against the state, in effect that by permitting their existence the French monarchy undermined itself (p. 146).

Like the masonic lodges of the 1790s the academies either disappeared or were suppressed. The dynamism of the 1770s and 1780s had been replaced by indifference, or other more pressing matters. To claim this apparent "political conformity that later characterized the Terror is already evident in the supposedly liberal years from 1789 to 1791" (p. 206) simply reintroduces the now tired interpretations of the revolution found in Augustine Cochin and later François Furet. They applied them to the masonic lodges as seedbeds of repression, now the academies are interpreted as inducing a rigid intellectual conformity that augurs the Terror. It is a worthwhile historical endeavor to document the public realm that took on shape and vitality in the course of the eighteenth century throughout northern and Western Europe. Critical examination of the French Revolution should not lead to nostalgia for the old order.

The archives of the French academies have been richly detailed by this ambitious book and it should be applauded for its zeal and learning. Its overly ambitious interpretative reach can be forgiven because its documentation tells us so much about French literary culture. Surely the author is more right than wrong in stating that "the *concours académique* reveals that thousands of people, not just a tiny cadre of philosophers,

actively took part in the intellectual life of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (p. 223). Research in similar sources found in English, Dutch, and German would only enhance these findings.

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