

Festive Spaces and Patriotic Sociabilities in the Letters of Rachel Charlotte Biggs and Helen Maria Williams

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▶ **To cite this version:**

Kimberley Page-Jones, Véronique Léonard-Roques. Festive Spaces and Patriotic Sociabilities in the Letters of Rachel Charlotte Biggs and Helen Maria Williams. Valérie Capdeville et Pierre Labrune. Sociable Spaces in Eighteenth-Century Britain: A Material and Visual Experience, Klincksieck, pp.353-372, 2021, 9782252045367. hal-03653009

HAL Id: hal-03653009
https://hal.univ-brest.fr/hal-03653009

Submitted on 2 May 2022

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ÉTUDES ANGLAISES

revue du monde anglophone

Sociable Spaces in Eighteenth-Century Britain: A Material and Visual Experience



Revue trimestrielle

juillet-septembre
2021
74/3

Klincksieck

juillet-septembre
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Sociable Spaces in Eighteenth-Century Britain: A Material and Visual Experience

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The DIGITENS project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 823862

Illustration de couverture :
Le Rendez-vous pour Marly. Carl Guttenberg, d'après Jean-Michel Moreau, circa 1777. Musée Carnavalet. G. 188.

Kimberley PAGE-JONES
Véronique LÉONARD-ROQUES

Festive Spaces and Patriotic Sociabilities in the Letters of Rachel Charlotte Biggs and Helen Maria Williams

This article focuses on the epistolary narratives of Helen Maria Williams and Rachel Charlotte Biggs, two English women who travelled to France in the midst of the French Revolution and Terror. Reading *Letters Written from France* (1790) and *Letters Containing a Sketch of the Politics of France* (1796), by the republican poet Williams, together with *A Residence in France* (1796) by the loyalist pamphleteer Biggs, it investigates two antithetical takes on the revolutionary ideals embodied by the festive and ceremonial spaces. As Mona Ozouf and Lynn Hunt have argued, the choice of location, the spatial organization of *fêtes* and festivals, and their relation to the natural space were carefully designed to stimulate and showcase feelings of fraternity and unity, so as to shape an inclusive and organic sociability. Influenced by aesthetics and physiology, both women were as much interested in festivities as by the effects of these spectacles and social performances on the minds of participants, spectators and readers. Drawing from materialist and aesthetic discourses, their literary and sociological accounts of these lived moments offer a remarkable analysis of the sociable bonds forged during these revolutionary public spectacles.

Cet article traite des écrits épistolaires de Helen Maria Williams et de Rachel Charlotte Biggs, deux voyageuses anglaises qui se sont rendues en France au cours de la Révolution française et sous la Terreur. L'analyse porte, à travers les représentations de l'espace des fêtes civiques, sur deux approches antithétiques des idéaux révolutionnaires : la première est constituée par les Letters Written from France *(1790) et les* Letters Containing a Sketch of the Politics of France *(1795) de Williams, poétesse républicaine, et la seconde par* A Residence in France *(1796) de Biggs, pamphlétaire loyaliste. Comme Mona Ozouf et Lynn Hunt l'ont montré, lors des festivités révolutionnaires, le choix et l'aménagement des lieux et leur relation à la nature furent soigneusement pensés afin de susciter chez les participants des sentiments de fraternité et d'unité, comme pour donner forme à une nouvelle sociabilité, inclusive et organique. Influencées par certains modèles esthétiques comme par des théories physiologiques, les deux autrices se montrent aussi attentives aux festivités en elles-mêmes qu'aux effets que ces scènes de sociabilité provoquent sur les participants ou sur leurs lecteurs. D'ordre littéraire et sociologique, leurs témoignages sur le cadre matériel et l'esthétique des fêtes civiques constituent une analyse précieuse des liens sociaux noués lors des spectacles conçus sous la Révolution.*

Kimberley PAGE-JONES and Véronique LÉONARD-ROQUES, Festive Spaces and Patriotic Sociabilities in the Letters of Rachel Charlotte Biggs and Helen Maria Williams, *ÉA* 74-3 (2021): 353-372. © Klincksieck.

On reading the French and foreign accounts of the *Fête de la Fédération* that was held on the Champ de Mars on 14 July 1790, the most sceptical traveller who crossed the Channel in the immediate aftermath of the Fall of the Bastille would certainly have found it very hard to resist the tide of enthusiasm that took hold of the participants in this festive event. Landing at Calais on "the eve / Of that great federal day," William Wordsworth recounts, while crossing rural villages and "lurking towns," the intensity of the festive feeling spreading throughout the country "like a fragrance everywhere, when spring / Hath left no corner of the land untouched" (Wordsworth 194). And indeed, what caught the eye and the imagination of the poet was the spontaneous joy felt by the people. Helen Maria Williams, the great English chronicler of the French revolution, would also concede that at that very moment "the people were the sight!" (Williams 64).[1] Deeply convinced by the principles of the French Revolution, she arrived in France on the same day as Wordsworth. She headed for Paris to partake in the festive rejoicings of the *Fête de la Fédération* and stayed in France from July to September 1790. Unlike Wordsworth though, who only occasionally joined a "merry crowd" but revelled rather in the "enchanting show" of nature, Williams was an active political participant in the revolutionary festivals. While back in London, she published *Letters Written in France in the Summer 1790 to a Friend in England*. Williams was not unknown to the British public at the time. From an upper middle-class background, she was an active member of a London coterie of radical Whigs and Unitarian dissenters involved in social and political campaigns, and had her own *salon* in Portman Square, a meeting place for the literary and radical intelligentsia. She had built her reputation as a poet with the publication of anti-slavery poems (*Peru* in 1784, "A Poem on the Bill lately Passed for Regulating the Slave Trade" in 1788) and celebrated the Fall of the Bastille in a poem inserted in her novel *Julia* (1790). Williams finally settled in France in the summer of 1792. Between 1790 and 1796, she published for a British audience two series of letters, each composed of four volumes covering the revolutionary events from 14 July 1790 (*Fête de la Fédération*) to the establishment of the Directory (3 November 1795).

Williams's emotional yet graphic narrative of the Festival was an attempt to reproduce for her British audience the lived moment, but also the imagery of the *fêtes* that encapsulated the sublime reconciliation of the nation. Another English visitor to France in the early 1790s also reported on these festive events in an epistolary travelogue entitled *A Residence in France During the Years 1792, 1793, 1794 and 1795, Described in a Series of Letters from an English Lady: With General and Incidental Remarks on the French Character and Manners*. Published in 1796 and

1. Most quotations related to Williams's letters are taken from *Letters Written in France in the Summer 1790*. The in-text quotes will not mention the date of publication for this volume. When other volumes are quoted, the date will be added.

reedited in 1797, these letters, addressed to a fictive brother, edited by John Gifford (author of *History of France* and editor of the newspapers *True Briton* [1796] and *Anti-Jacobin Review* from 1798) and dedicated to Edmund Burke, have long remained unnoticed. The epigraph—"*Plus je vis l'étranger, plus j'aimai ma patrie* (de Belloy)"—sets the Burkean tone of this counter-revolutionary account of the early days of the Revolution (1790-1792). The English Lady, recently identified as Rachel Charlotte Biggs, also paid rapt attention to the orchestration of the festive moment. Even though the two ladies were far apart on the political spectrum, they nonetheless shared the same interest for the physiological, emotional and social effects of revolutionary festive spaces.

The *fêtes* indeed served as the figuration of a new world, and yet, interestingly, the cracks of the system that was to regulate it were already visible in the controlled running of the revolutionary festive space: "they aimed at spontaneity, yet they were really a combination of precautionary and coercive measures. […] The Revolutionary mania for festivals is the story of an immense disillusionment" (Ozouf 11). The paradox of the revolutionary festivals—a tug-of-war between spontaneous natural feelings and rigid regulation—underpins Biggs's and Williams's epistolary accounts. If their fictive letters can be read, at first sight, as two antithetical ideological representations of the French Revolution in its early days, both ladies would nonetheless share the same detestation of Robespierre's regime. In her first letters, Williams read and interpreted revolutionary festivals and ceremonies as possible frameworks for a symbolic experience of social and moral regeneration whereas Biggs, as a Burkean counter-revolutionary, offered a very different interpretation of these festive spaces—albeit one that was not devoid of a certain fascination for the spectacular means used by revolutionary leaders to enhance national feelings and pride. Their early travel letters, however, have this in common: they are both textual attempts to capture the effects of the ceremonial rituals on the spectators and to translate the enthusiasm of the crowd and spirit of unity. In other words, their narratives can be diversely analyzed as a literary or as a sociological appropriation of the spatial and visual elements that structured the festive event, which they would then reuse in a reimagined form and for different political and ideological motives. The integrative and utopian dimension of the event will first be examined in Williams's description of the *Fête de la Fédération*, which would be performed anew in public spaces but also in private homes. Biggs's and Williams's readings of festive spaces will then be studied in relation to the formation of new sociable practices. As brilliantly analyzed by Mona Ozouf, revolutionaries in the early 1790s were eager to find an "efficacious form of association for beings whom they thought of as having returned to the isolation of nature" (Ozouf 9), and they saw in festivals a formidable political instrument to make visible the formation of radically new sociable ties. The paper will conclude by suggesting a few connections between French revolutionary festivals

and British national jubilees, since Biggs was the main instigator behind the 1809 Royal jubilee.

The 1790 Federal Day in the *Letters* of Helen Maria Williams: integrative festivity and utopian sentiment

In line with the position of Richard Price in *A Discourse of the Love of Our Country* (1789), *Letters Written in France in the Summer 1790* was Williams's first contribution to the "Revolution controversy" (Butler 1984) and was founded on her own experience, as an eye-witness, of the rejoicings and festivities celebrating the advent of a new era in France. The epistolary form was indeed an ideal rhetorical device by means of which she could deliver a spontaneous and affective response to the events of the French Revolution.

Williams's sensible and social experience of the Federation

The *Fête de la Fédération* (14 July 1790), whose description opens the first volume of Williams's *Letters*, has a crucial narrative function in it. Organized in Paris by the Constituent Assembly, the festival was to commemorate the Fall of the Bastille and institutionalize the federations which had multiplied in a sporadic way from November 1789 and during which "patriots" (mainly composed of members of the National Guard) took oaths of unity. Preparation work on the Champ de Mars, during what came to be known as *Journée des Brouettes* (Days of the Wheelbarrows), turned the place into a great hill. The festival rapidly became a symbol of the unity of the Parisians, toiling together regardless of class, gender and age. Williams's narrative reproduces the enthusiasm and sense of unity that prevailed on that day:

> The Champ de Mars was formed into an immense amphitheatre, round which were erected forty rows of seats […] Twenty days labour, animated by the enthusiasm of the people, accomplished what seemed to require the toil of years. Already in the Champ de Mars the distinctions of rank were forgotten; and, inspired by the same spirit, the highest and lowest orders of citizens gloried in taking up the spade. (65)

However, the most sublime spectacle, the apotheosis of the French Revolution, was for Williams the *Fête de la Fédération*. Skilfully using preterition ("I promised to send you a description of the federation: but it is not to be described!") and rhetorical questions ("How am I to paint the impetuous feelings of that immense, that exulting multitude?", 64) to insist on the powerlessness of words to describe such an experience, Williams underscores the totalizing dimension of the festivity: "Half a million people assembled at a spectacle, which furnished every image that can elevate the mind of man; which connected the enthusiasm of moral sentiment with the solemn pomp of religious ceremonies; which

addressed itself at once to the imagination, the understanding, and the heart!" (64–65). Her narrative draws the attention of her reader on the multi-sensory nature—visual, but also auditory and olfactory—of the festive and ceremonial experience: the burning of incense, the theatrical processions of delegates walking through three artificial arches, the celebration of a great mass, fraternal embraces, the staging of the oath taken first by the Marquis de La Fayette, repeated by the King, by the National Assembly and finally by the whole audience. The experience described by Williams is that of a collective joy and energy, achieving an effect of plenitude. Indeed, Williams insists on the variety of the social and occupational groups filling the space of the Champ de Mars and acting as a symbolic representation of a reconciled nation.

But the feeling of organic community and of genuine fraternity seems to emerge as much from the sharing of emotions and the communion of hearts and souls, which culminates in tears: "my heart caught with enthusiasm the general sympathy; my eyes were filled with tears" (69). For a woman of poetic sensibility, imbued with Hume's theories of sympathetic communication (Fairclough 76–79) and Rousseau's ideas of the "natural man," her experience of the French Revolution is an affective one: "it is very difficult […] to avoid sympathizing in general happiness" (Williams 89). The *Fête de la Fédération* offers a perfect spatial and conceptual framework for the liberation of an emotional, communicative and collective energy springing from the heart.

This contagious impulse, whose causes are natural, has positive effects on the individual, turning him into a virtuous creature, elevating his soul and thus allowing for the moral regeneration of the nation. National distinctions and differentiations vanish under the spell of this collective unanimity endowed with universal virtues: "[t]his was not a time in which the distinctions of country were remembered […]. It was the triumph of human kind" (69). As such, the spectators being at one with the "people" (to be taken in a generic and rather abstract sense) form the spectacle to themselves: "The people, sure, the people were the sight!" (64). This idea of the festive event harks back to Rousseau's primitive rejoicing in *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, a festival sparked by a passionate and contagious spontaneity, by the pleasurable feeling of being with other participants and not by spectacular means: "là se firent les premières fêtes, les pieds bondissaient de joie […] le plaisir et le désir, confondus ensemble, se faisaient sentir à la fois" (Rousseau 96).

Williams's painting of a community in ecstasy of joy and full of the feeling of an organic union invokes an imaginary ideal of social harmony at work in the utopian narrative form. Williams's account of the *Fête de la Fédération*, taking place in rainy Paris on 14 July 1790, is the material and symbolic realization of eighteenth-century utopian ideals: the collective work for the preparation of the site, the celebration of the founding event of a new political era (the Fall of the Bastille), the thrill

of joy spreading to all participants, the values of equality and reciprocity as perfect expressions of a new sociability (Ozouf 14–15).

Festive spirit and electric contagion in the national space

As Williams continues her utopian journey throughout the north of France (Paris and Normandy), she witnesses many more public and private festivals, which she interprets as signs of "the enthusiastic spirit of liberty" (93) and of the social regeneration at work in the early days of the Revolution. As such, the narratives of these *fêtes* extend the inaugural and matricial moment of the *Fête de la Fédération*, thus elaborating a series of variations on the same theme.

Rejoicings continued well after 14 July and Paris was turned into a festive space brimming with joy: the illuminations of the Champs-Élysées and of the Louvre, the fireworks shot from the Pont-Neuf and the mesmerizing transformation of the Bastille: "The ruins of that execrable fortress were suddenly transformed, as if with the wand of necromancy, into a scene of beauty and of pleasure. The ground was covered with fresh clods of grass, upon which young trees were placed in rows, and illuminated with a blaze of light" (Williams 72). Williams insists on how the feeling of social harmony creates a new national consciousness experienced as a re-enchantment of the world: "Here the mind of the people took a higher tone of exultation than in the other scenes of festivity. Their mutual congratulations, their reflections on the horror of the past, their cries of 'Vive la Nation' still ring in my ear!" (73). These common impulses, aspirations and energies, which Williams translates using the metaphor of electricity (63), are liberated during these festivals and come to embody the synergy and energy contained in the word "nation" (from the Latin *nasci,* "to be born"), thus offering a radically new framework to think the concept, beyond narrow territorial borders and shaped by the Enlightenment values of "reason, virtue and science" (82): "I too, though but a sojourner in their land, rejoiced in their happiness, joined the universal voice, and repeated with all my heart and soul, 'Vive la Nation !'" (73).

With the revolution, the utopian space—as a "no space" which had nonetheless crystallized the hopes of equality and freedom—found in the concept of "nation" a historical realization (Fuentes 153). The *Marseillaise* had not yet been adopted as the national anthem, but the revolutionary song "Ça ira" had, according to Williams, a similar unifying function bearing witness to the classless affective longing for social cohesion: "It is sung not only at every theatre, and in every street of Paris, but in every town and village of France, by man, woman, and child. 'Ça ira' is every where the signal of pleasure, the beloved sound which animates every bosom with delight, and of which every ear is enamoured" (102). Parisian theatres were also the locus of affective interactions as patriotic plays reproduced the experience of the inaugural moment and the social revolutionary project: "These little pieces […] have a most charming

effect with an accompanyment [*sic*] of applause from some hundreds of the national guards, the real actors in the scenes represented" (102). Williams refers here to the numerous plays which, from the summer of 1790 on, used in their plot some of the revolutionary episodes and events: "Most of the pieces we have seen at the French theatres have been little comedies relative [to the] circumstances of the times, and on that account, preferred, in this moment of enthusiasm, to all the wit of Molière" (102). Such performances acted as patriotic self-representations of the "Happy Nation" (the title of a book by Lemercier de la Rivière published in 1792; see Biard 59), blurring the frontiers between actors and spectators and repeating on stage the civic festivities. In Paris as elsewhere, these plays remained popular throughout the revolution and are also repeatedly mentioned in Biggs's letters: "The stage is now become a kind of political school, where the people are taught hatred to Kings, Nobility, and Clergy […] The doctrine of popular sovereignty is artfully instilled […] The frenzy of the mob is represented as the sublimest effort of patriotism" (Biggs I:77).

Re-enacting the revolutionary fête *in private places*

The first volume of Williams's *Letters* closes with the description of a private *fête* given in a *château* by her French friends, Mons. and Mme du F., whose embedded story constitutes the core of her epistolary travelogue. This *fête* transfers the official public rejoicings commemorating the first anniversary of the fall of the *Ancien Régime* to the private sphere. Celebrating the legal recovery of Mons. du F. (a victim, in Williams's *Letters,* of the excesses and arbitrariness of absolute power), the *fête* reactivates a number of motifs used in the descriptions of public festive events and serves as a miniature reproduction of the new social links uniting the members of the "Happy Nation."

Starting and finishing with fireworks, the *fête* was organized around speeches, the offering of civic wreaths, fraternal embraces, a banquet, songs and dances enhancing the impression of social inclusiveness: "The gentlemen danced with the peasant girls, and the ladies with the peasants. A more joyous scene, or a set of happier countenances my eyes never beheld" (Williams 144). Pastoral motifs (like dancing around secular trees) and the covering of festive objects with greenery are visual elements that symbolize the revolutionary thrust in favour of a return to nature, as inspired by Rousseau's myth of a primordial Arcadia. The evening is then followed by the performance of a play that Williams had seen when in Paris: *La Fédération ou la Famille patriotique*, a play by Jean-Marie Collot d'Herbois[2] written for the Festival of the Federation and

2. Jean-Marie Collot d'Herbois, originally a playwright and actor, grew increasingly radical and ruled with Robespierre and Saint-Just on the Committee of Public Safety. He was one of the main agents of the repression of the federalist revolt in Lyon. In

performed sixteen times at the Théâtre de Monsieur during the summer of 1790 (Biard 55).

The plot of the play, which is not mentioned by Williams, nonetheless reverberates in the textual space of Williams's *Letters* as it echoes the situation of the du F. couple. Indeed, *La Famille patriotique* tells the story of two lovers who are able to overcome class differences as they contemplate the spectacle of national concord. Williams herself was an active participant in the comedy which replayed, at a domestic level, the outdoor official festivities. In the last vignette, the federating song "Ça ira" is taken up by the entire audience—"*Ça ira* hung on every lip, *ça ira* glowed on every countenance" (Williams 143)—before Williams's appearance on stage: "[…] in the last scene, I, being the representative of Liberty, appeared with all usual attributes, and guarding the consecrated banners of the nation, which were placed on an altar on which was inscribed, in transparent letters, 'À la Liberté, 14 juillet 1789'" (143). That a foreigner was entrusted with a highly symbolic role in this patriotic play may also suggest the deep-seated belief in the universal values of revolutionary ideals.

As a mise en abyme, the scene of the festival at the *château* echoes the main rhetorical functions of *Letters Written in France in the Summer 1790*: it is a tribute to Williams's perception of the Revolution as a "Happy" one (Biard 59) and acts as a pro-revolutionary piece of propaganda for an English audience. And yet, since it grants a fundamental role to theatre, the private *fête* sheds light on some of the paradoxes of the civic revolutionary ceremonies; indeed, as with theatrical plays, civic festivals could not eschew artificial and spectacular means (*mise en scène* and theatrical props) to stir up the enthusiasm of participants and to achieve political adherence to the revolutionary project.

Well-aware of the pedagogical effects of visuality as expressed by Citizen Gence—"il faudrait surtout frapper l'âme par les yeux, le plus puissant de nos organes" (qtd in Ozouf 182)—the organizers left nothing to chance: the decorative objects, the architectural elements, the order of processions, the taking of the oath, the music and songs, all details of the festival were carefully chosen and arranged so as to create the awaited effects. Although Williams, like other foreign spectators, would insist on the natural emotions and sentiments of the onlookers, these festivals were nonetheless thoroughly orchestrated, the occupation of space and its spectacularization being of utmost importance for the reconfiguration of a "huge crowd of isolated individuals into an organized community" (Ozouf 9). To ensure moral and political success, these festive rejoicings were thus organized using impressive yet codified ceremonial spectacles and processions, and a meticulous partitioning and occupy-

1795, Williams condemned him vehemently in her *Letters Containing a Sketch of the Politics of France* (Williams 1997, 193–96).

ing of space that would be reproduced visually. As Guillaume Mazeau observes, festivals and their iconographic representations played a key role in the politics of the revolutionaries in order to "regulate collective tensions" following the collapse of the *Ancien Régime*; they belonged to the "new informal political arts" resting on a new "distribution of the sensible" (as understood by Jacques Rancière) and on the "mobilisation of affects" (Mazeau 22). Using a sociological approach, Biggs's letters for instance focused on the behind-the-scenes making of civic festivities so as to highlight their didactic effects, or lack thereof, on the participants.

Civic festivals, prearranged sociability and the fabric of nationalisms

Heterogeneity and dissonances in Williams's choreographed spaces

Celebrated at the height of the Terror, the *Fête de l'Être suprême* (Festival of the Supreme Being, 8 June 1794) appears in the sixth volume of Williams's *Letters* and is described by the author as a "polluted festival instituted by a tyrant [Robespierre]" (Williams 1997, 167), stained by the guillotine at work in the background and the cult of personality. Williams, who had remained loyal to the Girondins after their fall (31 May 1793), condemned the festival vehemently for its falseness and use of artifice. Although an exile in Switzerland at the time, she describes it as if she were a spectator, using an elegiac mode to contrast it with the 1790 Festival and insisting on its mechanical and coercive aspects:

> […] by David's command, the mothers are to embrace their daughters—at that, the fathers are to clasp their sons—here, the old are to bless the young and there, the young are to kneel to the old—upon this boulevard the people are to sing—upon that, they must dance—at noon they must listen in silence, and at sunset they must rend the air with acclamations.
>
> Ah, what was then became [*sic*] of those civic festivals which hailed the first glories of the revolution! What was become of that sublime federation of an assembled nation […] exult[ing] in its new-born freedom? What was become when no emotion were preordained, no feelings measured out, no acclamations decreed, but when […] every heart throbbed with enthusiastic transport, when every eye melted into tears, and the vault of heaven resounded the bursts of unpremeditated applause! [...]
>
> Robespierre on this day, intoxicated with his power, lost sight of his usual prudence and displayed all the littleness of his vanity. [...] During the procession his creatures attempted to raise the cry of "Vive Robespierre!" but it was faintly re-echoed by the spectators. (William 1997, 167–68)[3]

3. Williams uses the same point of view and the same writing methods when she discusses the festivities given for the coronation of Napoléon, a new avatar in her eyes of tyranny and deviation from revolutionary principles: "Le cortège s'avança dans une pompe solennelle, mais il traversa les rues de Paris au milieu d'un silence presque complet. Quelques acclamations achetées par la police furent l'unique réponse aux saluts perpétuels du futur empereur. Le peuple s'aperçut bien que ce jour [2 December 1804] était pour lui le jour d'une défaite" (Williams 1827, 155).

Williams's enthusiasm in the early days of the Revolution was unquestionable, and yet, the narrative devices used in the first volume to chronicle the spectacle and rejoicings jar with the feeling of spontaneous unity she insists so much upon. She cannot, for instance, remain silent regarding the lack of enthusiasm and passivity of the King, which was mentioned in most of the reports (Dupuy 20), but she minimizes its importance, focusing instead on La Fayette who was, for many participants, the true hero of the Festival (Ozouf 77; Dupuy 20).

Williams's description dwells on the complex *mise-en-scène* effects, transforming the festive space into a theatrical one. Chosen for its openness and vastness, its practicalities and its planning potentialities, the Champ de Mars, free from any association with History or the past, was a convenient location for a circular scenography symbolizing the newness of unity, order and time (Ozouf 153). The ceremony is minutely prepared; a vertical monument—a temple covered with inscriptions acting as miniature political programmes—is used as a central focal point for the dramaturgy of the oath-taking ceremony and the convergence of gazes:

> In the middle of the Champ de Mars L'Autel de la Patrie was placed […]. Several inscriptions were written on the altar, but the words visible at the greatest distance were La Nation, la Loi, le Roi. […] Monsieur de la Fayette […] ascended the altar, gave the signal, and himself took the national oath. In an instant every sword was drawn, and every arm lifted up […] the solemn words were re-echoed by six hundred thousand voices; while the Queen raised the Dauphin in her arms, shewing him to the people and the army. (Williams, 68)

The spectacularization of the ceremony was meant to sacralize the foundation of a new sociability. The revolutionary spatial configuration of festive spaces used the same codes as that of the prestigious ancient models (in particular that of the theatre invented in Athens at the end of the 6th century B.C.): the gathering of citizens to rejoice in a dedicated space, the use of an all-encompassing spectacle, the controlled liberation of collective emotions to strengthen the *polis* and educate the citizen. In Athens as in Rome, theatrical performances and civic festivals were social institutions and, in their willingness to institute a new order, revolutionaries tapped into these models for inspiration. In Williams's narrative, the topographical structuring of space introduced a jarring note into the principle of homogenization that the festival claimed to make visible:

> At the upper end of the amphitheatre a pavilion was built for the reception of the King […], and the National Assembly […]. The Deputies placed themselves round the inside of the amphitheatre. Between them and the seats of spectators, the national guard of Paris were ranged and the seats round the amphitheatre were filled with four hundred thousand people. The middle of the amphitheatre was crouded [*sic*] with an immense multitude of soldiers. The National Assembly walked towards the pavilion, where they placed themselves with the King, the Queen and their attendants. (Williams 67–68)

The description of spatial organization and movement is also disrupted by the insertion of a long list of twenty-four items, detailing the different groups which made up the procession that walked from the Tuileries to the Champ de Mars in three separate sections. The presence of this list which may have been used as an attempt to represent the whole picture of the procession operates textually as a heterogeneous fragment:

> A troop of horse, with trumpets.
> A great band of music.
> A detachment of grenadiers.
> The electors chosen at Paris in 1789.
> […]
> Battalion of children, carrying a standard, on which was written *L'Espérance de la Patrie*.
> Deputies from the regular troops.
> Deputies from the navy.
> […]
> Troop of horse with trumpets. (Williams 67–68)

The aesthetics of the list suggests the didactic purpose of the festival and the paradoxes that stem from it: the revolutionary festival that saw itself as a spontaneous and thus unifying event cannot eschew division; Ozouf has indeed insisted on the exclusion of the aristocrats and the lower orders. The thorough, if not obsessional, orchestration of the festival revealed the regulatory, coercive and, all in all, totalizing nature of revolutionary ideology at work during these civic festivals, even during the one that will be remembered as the most consensual and admired festival of the revolutionary era. Williams was well-aware of the scheming and careful planning required to awaken sympathies:

> Such was the admirable order with which this august spectacle was conducted, that no accident interrupted the universal festivity. All carriages were forbidden during that day, and the entrances to the Champ de Mars were so numerous, that half a million of people were collected together without a croud. (Williams 70)

However, the ambiguities and tensions between artifice and nature underlying revolutionary festivals unexplored in Williams's first letters since she interpreted the politics and manoeuvring of revolutionaries as a search for virtue:

> The leaders of the French revolution are men well acquainted with the human heart. They have not trusted merely to the force of reason, but have studied to interest in their cause the most powerful passions of human nature, by the appointment of solemnities perfectly calculated to awaken that general sympathy which is caught from heart to heart, and throbs in every bosom. (Williams 90)

As the moral purpose of the revolution was pure and devoted to "the general good" (78) and "the prosperity of that regenerated country" (150),

the means used to affect participants and evoke collective sympathetic contagion were legitimate. On the contrary, Biggs's letters, which are legible as deploying a counter-revolutionary apparatus, would insist on the deplorable effect of coercive measures on taste and morals.

A loyalist perception of festive spaces and sociabilities

Biggs travelled to France with her husband Benjamin Hunt Biggs in May 1792 and resided there (mainly in Arras and Amiens) until June 1795. Although she would travel back to France in 1814, as an unofficial spy for Nicholas Vansittart, the Tory Chancellor of the Exchequer, her relations with the government at the time of her 1792 continental trip are unclear. A great admirer of Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution*—a book that she religiously carried with her in France and finally decided to burn during the Terror—it seems that Biggs crossed the Channel with no statecraft-related obligations. She may, however, have corresponded with the editors of British official gazettes (like *The True Briton*), as she was amazingly well informed on the unfolding of political events in revolutionary France. Biggs belongs to a category of loyalist women who stepped into politics thanks to the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, cunningly staking out an unofficial role in the political field, as Linda Colley notes: "like many of their male countrymen, some women found ways of combining support for the national interest with a measure of self-promotion. […] Under cover of a patriotism that was often genuine and profound, they carved out for themselves a real if precarious place in the public sphere" (Colley 1992, 168).

A middle-class woman born in the early 1760s in south Wales, raised in Lambeth and educated in the Parisian convent of Pentemont, she carried no literary reputation at the time of her continental travel and has remained a somewhat shadowy figure. She never acknowledged the authorship of *A Residence in France*, nor that of the comedy *What is She?*, performed at the Theatre Royal in April and May 1799 (both writings published by Longman). *A Residence in France* was translated into French in 1872 by historian Hippolyte Taine, who saw in these letters the work of a sensible, well-read and intelligent woman. If Taine does not question the lady's authorship, praising the modesty of a style that he compares to that of Joseph Addison and Samuel Johnson, a reviewer of Taine's translated work insisted on the unfeminine style of the travelogue, which did not bear the usual marks of "feminine terror." Biggs, indeed, hardly fits the canon of feminine travel literature, since her counter-revolutionary prose aimed at foiling the narrative strategies of revolutionary enthusiasm. She justified an anti-sentimental, and even anti-literary style, by the necessity of adhering to truth: "I was actuated by the desire of conveying to my countrymen a just idea of that revolution which they have been incited to imitate" (Biggs I: xxiv). Unlike Williams who came to abhor the French regime yet remained faithful to

republican ideals, Biggs, as a Monarchical, conservative and Protestant loyalist, was ardently convinced of its evilness from the fall of the monarchy: "[…] whoever examines attentively the situation and politics of France, from the subversion of the Monarchy, will be convinced that all the principles of this monstrous government were established during the administration of the Brissotins […]" (Biggs I: xxvi).

If Williams's literary descriptions are grounded in Hume's theory of sympathetic communication, Biggs's interpretation of festive effects may owe more to Samuel Johnson's and John Gwynn's plea for new modes of urban public visuality, published in the essay "Thoughts on the Coronation of his Present Majesty King George the Third" following the coronation of George III in 1761. The narrowness of the streets and the shortness of the route taken by the procession led both men to write a pamphlet suggesting a longer and safer route that would, by increasing the visibility of the procession and proximity of the king with the people, gratify their minds and consolidate their loyalty to the king:

> All pomp is instituted for the sake of the public. A show without spectators can no longer be a show. […] As the wisdom of our ancestors has appointed a very splendid and ceremonious inauguration of our kings, their intention was, that they should receive their crown with such awful rites, as might for ever impress upon them a due sense of the duties which they were to take, when the happiness of nations is put into their hands; and that the people, as many as can possibly be witnesses to any single act, should openly acknowledge their sovereign by universal homage. (Johnson and Gwynn 451)

Johnson and Gwynn insist on the frustration felt by those who "returned without a single glimpse of their Prince's grandeur" and thus on the potential danger of thwarting the loyalty and curiosity of the people during these public events by hindering their visual experience: "the impatience of the people, under such immediate oppression, always produces quarrels, tumults, and mischief" (Johnson and Gwynn 459). Interestingly, Gwynn pursued these reflections on the importance of spectacularizing royal ceremonies and making magnificence public since the public visual consumption of these events produced a "refinement of taste" among all people, although to a varying degree:

> In the same proportion as public magnificence increases, in the same proportion will a love of elegance increase among all ranks and degrees of people, and that refinement of taste, which in a nobleman produces true magnificence and elegance, will in a mechanic produce at least cleanliness and decorum. (Gwynn 1)

Biggs shared none of Williams's revolutionary beliefs, but she undoubtedly took a patriotic interest in the revolutionaries' use of show, pomp and magnificence for the reasons stated by Johnson and Gwynn: their pedagogical power to educate the lower classes and foster a national feeling that would reinforce discipline, order and respect for the authorities:

"The people, who were highly amused, I dare say, conceived the whole ceremony to be a rejoicing, and at every repetition that the country was in danger, joined with great glee in the chorus of ça ira" (Biggs I:29).

Though appearing to cast a cold eye on the 1792 festivals and ceremonies, her letters nonetheless offer very detailed descriptions of the festive spatial organization and its effects on attendants. She was well aware of the symbolic potentiality of festivities in representing a social order, and her narrative constantly revives the motifs of *Ancien Régime* order: "I was always most pleased with this village festivity; it gratified my mind more than select and expensive amusements […] and the little distinction of rank which was preserved, added, I am certain, to the freedom of all" (Biggs I:19). Biggs's interest in revolutionary ceremonies and *fêtes* thus stems from her awareness that they played a fundamental role in the fabric of loyalty and in the adhesion of the public to the new revolutionary social order. She details "the ceremony of a federation" in a letter written a few days before the Tuileries massacre (10 August 1792). Although sceptical of the means used by revolutionaries to make people "cherish" the new constitution and national liberty, she nonetheless describes the general effect as "impressive," and the "spirit of the scene" as "gay, elegant, and imposing" (28). As with Williams's descriptions, her gaze moves from the spectacle to the spectators, scrutinizing the effects of the *mise en scène* of the festive ceremony—the music, processions, natural ornaments, choreography around the altar—on the countenance of the participants. She thoroughly describes the spatial disposition of the temple and the decoration of posts turned into "Doric columns," praising the choice of an open space "for convenience and effect" (25) and insisting, like Williams, on the vegetalization of festive objects:

> On each alternate post were fastened ivy, laurel, &cc. so as to form a thick body which entirely hid the support […]. The whole was connected at top by a bold festoon of foliage, and the capital of each column was surmounted by a vase of white lilies. In the middle of this temple was placed an altar, hung round with lilies, and on it was deposed the book of the constitution. (25)

Yet, when she turns her gaze towards the people, the spectacle becomes comical. While during the ceremony some soldiers are rewarded with a "fraternal embrace," civic wreaths and money for having saved the lives of some of their fellow-citizens, Biggs insists on the discrepancy between the purpose of the organizers using Roman customs and the effects on the people unaware of the symbolic value of these customs: "[…] the people, though they understood the value of the money, did not that of the *civic wreath,* or the *embraces*; they therefore looked vacant enough during this part of the business" (27, original italics).

As Biggs's narrative progresses, the artificiality of "extrinsic decoration" (29) used during festivals and its propaganda effect, substituting genuine affection for enforced obedience, becomes her main topic of reflection: "I cannot pretend to decide whether the leaders of the people

find their followers less warm than they were, and think it necessary to stimulate them by these shows, or whether the shows themselves, by too frequent repetition, have rendered the people indifferent about the objects of them" (23). Terror and astonishment—with none of the Burkean sublime—gradually replace passive obedience among spectators. In Biggs's descriptions of the festivals of the early months of 1793, the strict regulation and ordering of space and movement are supplemented by the perfect orchestration of popular sentiments: "Every movement is previously regulated by a Commissioner appointed for the purpose, […] a plan of the whole is distributed, in which is prescribed with great exactness, that at such and such parts the people are to 'melt into tears', at others they are to be seized with a holy enthusiasm" (42).

The secularization and multiplication of popular festivals, their politicization and strict control, and the use of "gross and material idolatry" (Biggs II:26) were for Biggs the factors that wrecked the potential of popular public ceremonies to educate the lower orders and refine their morals and taste, the efficacy of ceremonies depending, according to her, on their degree of spontaneity. Her detailed descriptions of the festivals celebrated before the fall of the constitutional monarchy undoubtedly contributed to her reflections on the organization of the British jubilee that took place on 25 October 1809.[4]

Rachel Charlotte Biggs's involvement in the first national Royal jubilee

If any one word can characterize the descriptions and narratives of the 1809 jubilee celebrating the first day of King George's fiftieth year of reign, it is that of spontaneity. According to the wife of a naval officer who collected all the newspaper reports of the festivities that took place across England on that day, the jubilee was the "sublime" spectacle of an entire nation celebrating their love for their King and, by extension, for their "fellow creatures." She describes the event as having originated spontaneously "by one common impulse" across the nation: "The idea, once expressed, moved *with a rapidity almost unexampled*; and what was the act of millions, was the spontaneous effusion of love in each individual […]. It was indeed 'the Jubilee of the heart, the Jubilee of the best feelings of which our nature is susceptible; it was the Jubilee of love for our King, the Jubilee of love for our fellow creatures'" (*Account*,

4. If her first-hand experience of revolutionary festivals can partly account for the way she instigated the 1809 jubilee, the propaganda effects of the Napoleonic festivals were also well-known by the time the jubilee was organized and probably well in the mind of the organizers: "[…] it was a characteristic of Napoleonic festivals that they deliberately incorporated elements of the spectacular and fantastic, and understood the propaganda value of fun. In this they stood in stark contrast to the more prosaic, staidly educative festivals that had been staged by the revolutionaries; there was a modern, flamboyant element in them that aimed to set the public pulse racing" (Forrest).

xii, italics in the original). Similarly, *The European Magazine* praised the festive day as the "spontaneous expression" of the sentiments of the people for their King (*European Magazine* 310). As in Williams's narrative of the Festival of the Federation, the joy and enthusiasm in all ranks, the deeds of benevolence, the nation rising with "one accordant voice" was the spectacle.

The Revolutionary and Napoleonic civic festivals, as shown by historians Linda Colley and Stuart Semmel, had sparked "cross-Channel competition" (Colley 1984, 216) in festive display. British authorities were particularly impressed by the numbers attending, the propaganda effects and the fact that these federations had seemed to arise naturally in other provincial cities and villages; and yet, as Colley puts it: "How could they organize public display so as to distinguish it from that spawned by an illegitimate and enemy regime?" (1992, 110). And indeed, reports insisted that the Royal jubilee had none of the "compulsory acclamations extorted from a joyless populace by the stern mandate of authority" (*Account*, xii), a straightforward reference to French festivals.

Biggs was the brilliant mastermind behind the 1809 jubilee, this "loyalist device" that, according to Semmel, "helped invent the British nation" (545). There seems to be little doubt that Biggs's experience of revolutionary popular rejoicings acted as a catalyst in the organization of the jubilee ("R.C. Biggs to Nicholas Vansittart"). She knew that public amusements made subservient to politics vitiated taste and morals, and she had carefully recorded in her letters how the French people had been indoctrinated through civic festivities and theatrical plays. If the jubilee was to be a success, it had to appear as if originating from the people and not from central authorities. In a letter sent to the Earl of Darmouth a few days before the jubilee, she detailed how "she wrote nearly three hundred letters […] to many people of popular habits & influence, recommending a jubilee which would include both festivity & beneficence" to foster a "spirit of loyal enthusiasm" in the wake of the Duke of York scandal ("Mrs. R.C. Biggs to Lord Darmouth").[5] Not only did she write to corporations but she also prompted the material commercialization of the event by contacting Wedgwood for the preparation of a "Breakfast service with ornaments" and suggesting to Matthew Boulton the design of commemorative medals. Biggs had also astutely tailored each letter she wrote "adapting it to the supposed religious principles, political tendencies, manners, commercial interests and local means of the different towns" ("Mrs. R.C. Biggs to Lord Darmouth"), thus staging the event "in a zone between state and

5. For more on this scandal, see Colley 1992, 222: "[…] the king's second son, Frederick Augustus, Duke of York, Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, had also become caught up in sexual scandal. His mistress, a shrewd *demi-mondaine* called Mary Anne Clarke, had used her bedtime influence with the duke to attract bribes from men seeking more than usually rapid military promotion, an arrangement finally revealed to the House of Commons by one of Clarke's former lovers, Colonel Wardle, MP for Salisbury."

civil society" through the use of "press culture that carried proposals from metropolis to province and back again" (Semmel 546).

As newspapers were unable to trace the origin of the festival—who would think "a female of delicate health & retired habits" capable of such an astonishing initiative?—it was mediatized as "the spontaneous effusion of every heart" (*Courier*, 25 October 1809). Radicals and reformists, though, were quick to see in the illuminations, fireworks and free meals of the jubilee nothing less than a "puppet-shew scheme" (*Independent Whig*, 8 October 1809), a "*Ministerial manoeuvre* to amuse the people of England, and to divert their attention from past and passing events" (Cobbett qtd in Semmel 550). William Cobbett was one of the most strident critics of the jubilee, highlighting the paradox of a festival orchestrated to appear as proof of natural and popular royal devotion and yet making use of the same artificial devices as those used by the continental enemy. For Cobbett, the popularity and spontaneity that characterized British jubilees could not be the trademarks of sincere patriotism; if they were, then why should the sincerity of continental jubilees that made a similar use of bonfires, dance, illuminations, food, singing and anthems be questioned? "[W]e come to this dilemma, either to allow, that there may be *a doubt* of the sincerity of our jubilee, or that, the people of *all* those countries (*all the Continent*, indeed) are a set of despicable wretches" (Cobbett 515). In an ironical twist, radical criticism underscored the same inconsistencies as those found in Biggs's descriptions of revolutionary rejoicings: a festive and sensual appeal to loyalty could only create a fragile and ephemeral bond between the people and the regime: "the momentary enthusiasm that is obtained by affecting their senses subsid[ing] with the conclusion of a favourite air, or the end of a gaudy procession" (Biggs I:24).

For loyalists and republicans alike, revolutionary festivals were thus a genuine source of inspiration and a recurrent motif in travel letters, as they fostered a reflection on the new forms of socialization at work during the revolutionary period. For Williams, the French *fête* was instrumental in the collective appropriation of the common values and shared purposes that would spawn a regeneration at a national level and the advent of social happiness. Half a century later, Jules Michelet would share Williams's romantic perception of the revolutionary fraternity exhibited during these *fêtes* as a re-enchantment of the world, a miracle:

> La fraternité a aplani tout obstacle, toutes les fédérations vont se confédérer entre elles, l'union tend à l'unité. Plus de fédérations, elles sont inutiles, il n'en faut qu'une: la France. Elle apparaît transfigurée dans la lumière de juillet. Tout ceci, est-ce un miracle ? […] Oui, le plus grand et le plus simple, c'est le retour à la nature. Le fond de la nature humaine, c'est la sociabilité. (152)

Yet Williams's narrative does not avoid the paradoxes underlying revolutionary ideologies and their social practices; though sublime, spatial

arrangements betrayed the coercive measures used by revolutionaries, well-aware of the potential of spectacles to stir national pride. The festive space symbolized in a way the fantasy of a primordial sociability and of a social contract freely entered into by all members of the community. Even if Biggs focused rather on the cracks of the system, using a sociological yet patriotic analysis of revolutionary festivals, her descriptions reveal a fascination for the spontaneity of confederations and the visual and other spectacular means (illuminations, banquets, acts of benevolence) used by the organizers. Enlightened planning theory, as found in the works of Gwynn, valued well before the French revolution the display of "publick magnificence" and the role it played on taste and national feeling. The 1809 jubilee, as instigated by Biggs, was to a certain extent a reimagined form of revolutionary festive ideology which would transfer sacredness back from secular power to regal power.

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ISBN : 978-2-252-04536-7
ISSN 0014-195X