Patronage is still often hastily associated with elitism and apolitical life, and therefore appears, from a Romantic point of view, as a hindrance to literature. To counter this perception, Peter Shoemaker highlights clearly and engagingly why patronage should be considered a central literary institution in the age of Louis XIII. When authors lent their voices to high nobles and benefited from their support, they were also prompted to find novel ways to assert their individuality. In Shoemaker's view, literature is not produced as an antithesis to constraint, but rather in the very tension between constraint and liberty. In other words, patronage fostered dynamic relations that can be understood as entirely modern: “The social energies created by the patronage system could be also productive and exhilarating, a decisive factor in the fashioning of literary ‘selves’ and even ‘communities’” (p. 56). For Shoemaker, the very notion of literature as it is still widely understood today emerges from the “interplay […] between literary patronage on the one hand, and rhetoric on the other” (p. 19).

The book opens on a historical and theoretical overview of patronage, and then focuses on Balzac's letters. Notable here is a fine interpretation of what hyperbole as a device meant to Balzac when he became an interlocutor of grandees. Chapter Three, the only one to appear slightly disjointed and cursory, surveys painting, ballet, polemical literature, and occasional court pieces. Chapter Four studies “Irreguliers, Libertines, and their Patrons” and draws, very smartly, on the larger cultural concept of the gift to pursue its investigation. By the same token Théophile's “La Maison de Sylvie” is given an original treatment, especially with regards to its theme of mythic violence.

With the next and final two chapters, the line of argument shifts to emphasize how the notion of patronage must not be limited to individual aristocrats, but should also include institutions. This is the crux of Shoemaker's thesis. Starting with Chapter Five on the “Public and Private Lives of Theatre,” one begins to understand how under Richelieu monarchical power sought the role of patron, and in spite of its authoritarian ways still allowed for the construction of an authorial stance. Chapter Six can thus claim that the foundation of the Académie Française “was a significant attempt to redirect the energies of patronage” (p. 194). “The French Academy reflects an initial, tentative stage in the progressive transformation of networks of literary patronage into a more stable and permanent institutional system” (p. 203). Literature, once again, is not born in or outside of
power but in the tension between the two. Viewed from this point, even the famed engraving of the “Wheel of Immortals,” once studied by René Démoris in a groundbreaking article, can appear as an emblem of authorial affirmation.

Concluding arguments are generally the place where a scholar can venture even bolder ideas. However, by explaining how “the culture of literary patronage gradually merged into practices of polite sociability and conversation” (p. 227), and even helped to create a public sphere, Shoemaker might have taken unnecessary risks. From the start, he is right to challenge idealistic and egalitarian notions of human interaction and assert the existence of power relations in conversation. That allows him to claim that the tension that he exposed in his first chapters was also at work when conversationalists in a salon had to relate to hierarchical superiors. For the author, conversation and the constitution of a public sphere through dialogue were born out of a tension and balance between competition and cooperation, inclusion and exclusion, in patterns similar to that of patronage.

For this reader, on the other hand, the art of conversation in public circles was also about the “superior” seeking actively to create something in conversation with “inferiors.” That particular labor does not get recognized in Shoemaker’s book, where there are those who strive to level the conversational field, and the aristocrats who accept that leveling, as if that was a given. But that is not necessarily the case. High nobles were also fashioning themselves in progressive ways when they invited literati to their salons and were polite to them. Retrospectively, then, one might ask with regards to the entire book: what about the patrons themselves? What did they produce in these patronage relations? Shoemaker’s book provokes these many questions, and will be sure to have a staying power for many years ahead.

Jean-Vincent Blanchard


Laurent Thirouin here dares to tackle a phenomenon that lovers of French classical drama tend to consider distasteful. The prolonged, and often vehement, denunciations of the stage on religious grounds, some of them coming from writers as distinguished as Pascal, Nicole and Bossuet, are often dismissed as demonstrations of inadequate literary sensibility or of