

Ursula Kaiser-Biburger, Jean-Philippe Baratier. Das Schwabacher Wunderkind, Regensburg (Friedrich Pustet) 2021, 147 S. (Kleine Bayerische Biographien), ISBN 978-3-7917-3281-7, EUR 14,95; Günter Berger, Jean-Philippe Baratier oder die Vermarktung eines Wunderkindes, Berlin (Duncker & Humblot) 2021, 124 S., 7 Abb., ISBN 978-3-428-18441-5, EUR 14,90.

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When he died in 1740, at the age of nineteen, Jean-Philippe Baratier (1721–1740) was known far and wide as a remarkable young prodigy or wunderkind. A hagiographical account of his life by the well-connected French Huguenot savant, Jean Henry Samuel Formey (1711–1797), appeared the following year and was quickly translated into English, contributing to Jean-Philippe's short-lived period of celebrity. Readers were presented with evidence of Baratier's giftedness, including how at age fourteen he was inducted into the Berlin Academy of Sciences, becoming its youngest (ever) member. They were told about how Baratier taught students several years older than him at the University of Halle and rubbed elbows with kings (including the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm I) and other prominent scholars. Yet not long after his death, and in the wake of the contributions of later generations of young prodigies such as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart – who remains quite famous today – Baratier's life story faded almost entirely from view.

More recently, there has been a surge of rekindled interest in Baratier, who is the subject of the two short biographies – both in German and accessible to a general audience – that are the focus of this review. Not coincidentally both works appeared in 2021, the 300-year anniversary of Jean-Philippe's birth in the town of Schwabach (in northern Bavaria). They each offer highly nuanced portraits of the young child prodigy; however, this is in many ways where the similarities between the two works end. Kaiser-Biburger's book focuses on Jean-Philippe's upbringing, especially the impact of his family's Calvinism (his father was a French Huguenot preacher) on his educational development. She relies heavily on a detailed account of Jean-Philippe's life written by his father, François, in which he describes how he helped his son become proficient in French, Latin, Greek, German and Hebrew by the time he was six years old. Kaiser-Biburger devotes additional sections of her biography to an account of his time as a student at the University of Altdorf (near Nürnberg, closed in 1809), where he matriculated at age ten, his move to the University of Halle (where he was named a *Magister artium* in 1735) and extended stay at the Prussian court. She concludes her account with some discussion of Jean-Philippe's interest in astronomy and navigation, including his correspondence with members of the Royal Society in London



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about his efforts to solve the longitude problem, yet these are not explored in much detail.

Berger's book, on the other hand, is more heavily anchored in unpublished archival materials that offer fresh insights into Baratier's life and social networks, particularly when read alongside the more easily accessible, published works by Formey and François Baratier that Kaiser-Biburger relies upon for her account. More specifically, Berger looks at letters Jean Philippe wrote to key intellectuals active in circles connected to Formey and others affiliated with the Berlin Academy of Sciences, including the French mathematician and theologian Alphonse des Vignoles (1679–1744), and their letters back to him. As a result, Berger's book showcases the wide range of Jean-Philippe's research interests, which indeed included astronomy and applied mathematics, but also theology and history, including the »scientific« study of chronology. For example, in Jean-Philippe's largely forgotten letter to Vignoles from Halle, dated July 1738, the seventeen-year old offered a nuanced and highly critical reading of his older colleague's »Chronologie de l'Histoire Sainte« (Berlin 1738, 2 vols.) in which he also lamented Vignoles's dismissal of Isaac Newton's approach, which was committed to using astronomy to make the study of ancient history more precise, in »Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms« (1728). Berger includes a copy of the entire letter, now housed in the University library of Tartu, Finland (p. 70–73). He also engages Jean-Philippe's correspondence with the Berlin based astronomer Christfried Kirch, located now in the UB Basel.

By drawing attention to Jean-Philippe's networks and tools, including the popularity of accounts of his story in various scholarly journals – a »marketplace for publicity« (p. 78) – Berger is able to draw much needed attention to ways in which Jean-Philippe's celebrity was carefully engineered and marketed to an audience eager to consume evidence of his genius. At the core of these efforts was, of course, his father François, whom Berger describes as a »tireless ›Kontrolleur‹ and censor of his son«, who constantly monitored and recorded Jean-Philippe's movements (p. 97). He does not discuss how François' role in producing his son's genius went hand in hand with what were new ideas about the potential of »project-making«, gallantry and Oeconomie operating in the period, ideas that transformed the culture of German universities and the Republic of Letters more generally. The variety of projects that Jean-Philippe conspicuously engaged in showcased his virtuosity, his industriousness and, importantly, his commitment to producing knowledge that (like him) was both useful and commodifiable. To a future generation of educators, the story signaled the physical dangers of excessive intellectual labor, especially when it was entered into prematurely. Indeed, despite the child-centered, playful and self-directed (i.e. autodidactical) teaching techniques that François claimed to have only used with his son, by the end of the 18th century (as Berger also notes) these were largely viewed as much too focused on reading, books and language acquisition. No wonder Jean-Philippe had died at

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nineteen, the argument went. He had literally worked himself to death.

Although in future years, those interested in wunderkinder as phenomena shifted their attention away from language proficiency and other forms of scholarly labor toward inexplicable artistic production or musical genius, there remained a lingering tendency to portray young people like Baratier unusual or unique – in keeping with a deeply entrenched set of meanings associated with the term prodigy more generally. Both Kaiser-Biburger and Berger accept this more popular understanding of the wunderkind as an unusually gifted young person, despite their portrayals of him as a product of his milieu and the efforts of his father. Neither probes a related idea, one that arguably continues to hold appeal even today, which is that perhaps wunderkinder like Jean-Philippe are not so unusual, that every child is or, at the very least, has the potential to become one.



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