

Review of *Les figures du poète Pierre de Ronsard*, ed. Marie-Dominique Legrand

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Abstract:

This article is a review of *Les figures du poète Pierre de Ronsard* edited by Marie-Dominique Legrand.

Keywords: Book Review | Pierre de Ronsard | French poetry

Article:

Les figures du poète Pierre de Ronsard. Ed. Marie-Dominique Legrand. Litterales, 26. Nanterre: Centre des Sciences de la Littérature, Université Paris X, 2000. 192 pp. n.p. ISBN 09894322.

This book, edited by Marie-Dominique Legrand and supplemented by a foreword from Jean Céard, assembles eleven essays exploring the many “figures” (faces) of Pierre de Ronsard initially presented in April 1999, during the first day of a two-day international colloquium sponsored by the Université de Paris X-Nanterre. Critical commentaries on the Pléiade laureate's multiple personas are, of course, anything but rare. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to assert that virtually every substantial study of his copious writings has come to consider, at one moment or another, the multifaceted nature of the real or fictionalized author that emerges from the words he has left us. Despite that attention, no single published volume has attempted to chart the fullness of this variety. Such is Legrand's admirable ambition here.

Setting the stage for the collection, Jean Céard's preface, “Comme le potier fait son argile,” foregrounds three main truths. The first: no single “portrait” of the Vendomois emerges from his writings—an idea inspired by Claude Faisant's study of Ronsard's impact on French literature and culture over the centuries. The second: like the potter who forever shapes and reshapes his clay, Ronsard is consciously engaged in forming and reforming his multiple images. The third and most important: Ronsard's “figure majeure” is the multifaceted one, the face whose diversity is vividly reflected in the array of articles to follow.

Isabelle Pantin's opening piece, "La construction d'une figure de poète: Quelques jalons des études ronsardiennes," may be said to serve as a coda to Ceard's introduction. While reaffirming that the Vendômois was indeed committed to the construction of his own allegory and, hence, that his "figure" may seem wholly "donnée" in certain regards, Pantin insists that his image has always retained ambiguities that warrant further investigation. This rather obvious assessment prepares the way for a disappointingly shallow overview of the critical literature that presumes to remind us that insights may yet be gleaned from reader-reception-based studies such as Marcel Raymond's classic *L'Influence de Ronsard sur la poésie française* and sociocritical investigations like Daniel Ménager's highly regarded *Ronsard, le Roi, le Poète et les Hommes*.

The second essay, "Ronsard en Poète: Portrait d'auteur, produit du texte" by Marie-Madeleine Fragonard, is at once the longest piece of the collection and the only one to employ illustrations (fourteen black-and-white plates, including a foldout reproduction of the *Pourtraictz de plusieurs hommes illustres* of 1600). Reconsidering the literal implications of the idea that Ronsard actively shaped his own portrait, Fragonard examines the laureate's contribution to the tradition in which authors embellish their works with an engraved picture of themselves. The outcome is an informative overview of the use of such imagery since the Middle Ages that culminates in a (frankly) overstated affirmation of the Vendômois's place as an innovator in the tradition (Maurice Scève's contribution to the practice is all but ignored) and an analysis of the iconography that proves disturbingly cursory (especially in its disregard for the immortality-related connotations of the myrtle crown featured in the poet portraits of the early *Amours*).

The next three essays shed light on the ways in which Ronsard was perceived by his contemporaries and authors of the following century. In "Joachim du Bellay, Scevole de Sainte-Marthe, Guillaume Colletet: Points de vue sur Pierre de Ronsard," Marie-Dominique Legrand (the volume's editor) furnishes a superficial sketch of how the writers listed in the article's title reinforced the Vendômois's image as a "classique" avant la lettre." Complementing Legrand's piece, Catherine Magnien's "Ronsard vu par Pasquier" affords an in-depth analysis of one contemporary's reaction to the Pleiade leader. Magnien's exposition of Etienne Pasquier's equivocal representations of Ronsard adds depth to our understanding of the laureate's ambivalent professional and personal relations with his peers. To complete the trilogy, Louis-Georges Tin's "Aspects de la réception de Ronsard au XVII^e siècle: Ronsard travesti" focuses on the literary caricatures of our poet during the seventeenth century. Inspecting the commentaries of authors as diverse as Desmarests de Saint-Sorlin, Guez de Balzac, and Charles Sorel (among several others), Tin finds that the various images of the preceding century have been reduced to a single unfavorable vision: Ronsard-or more properly, every poète-ronsardisant-has become the epitome of formal and linguistic excess and obscurity.

While digressing from any direct consideration of the poet's 'figures,' the next article reminds us how an understanding of Ronsard's image can affect our calculations of textual attribution. In "La Deffence et Illustration de la langue françoise: Un oeuvre ronsardien," Jean-Charles Monferran engages the long-running debate about the authorship of the Pleiade "manifesto." Of

particular concern: the audacious and heroic tones of the enunciation-qualities more evident in the writings of the brazen Vendomois than the works of the melancholic Angevin. Finding little more to support a revision of the traditional ascription, however, Monferran concludes that the seemingly uncharacteristic style of the Deffencei s in truth consistent with “la disparité de l'oeuvreb belayenne” in general.

The four ensuing pieces inspect specific aspects of Ronsard's many faces. In “Ronsard en fileuse,” Anne-Pascale Pouey-Mounou reconsiders the spinner image. In opposition to the metaphor of “couture,” the craft of the uninspired plodding laborer associated with the writing of historians and Protestant polemicists, this critic finds that the metaphor of “filage,” the art of the fury-driven spinner and weaver, best characterizes the principle of textual fabrication in Ronsardian poetics. In “Ronsard en Protee: Le poete et ses doubles (Orphee, Protee, l'abeille et le jardinier),” Francois Rouget reexamines the circumstances and nature of the Vendomois's identification with Proteus. For Rouget, the height of this association occurs during the 1560s, when turbulent political developments and personal illness prompt a retreat from court and a descent into melancholic self-doubt. The crisis engenders a “saturation des doubles emblématiques du poete” (Proteus, the bee, and the gardener) that substantially erodes the Orphic identification of the earlier years. Michel Jourde's “Ronsard en rossignol: Une figure dans le temps” exposes yet another emblematic double of the bucolic order: that of the poet as nightingale. Focusing on a sampling of love poems, Jourde identifies multiple ways in which the laureate appropriates this age-old figure of poetic production. Most notable is the unusually sarcastic value the bird assumes as a metaphor evoking the “variabilité du je” precipitated by the poet's amorous frustrations. In persuasive counterpoint to the preceding two critics, Daniel Ménager reasserts the Vendômois's identity as a man of and for the city in “Ronsard, poète de la ville.” While recognizing the negative view of urban space registered in the polemical poems of the early 1560s, M6nager detects a reversal of this attitude in *Les Nues* and the *Abbrege* (both of 1565) that resonates with the positive picture of the city as an “haut-lieu de l'immanence” represented at other stages of Ronsard's career.

To close the conference, Jean Vignes reaffirms the vastness of the topic under consideration. In his “Conclusions et perspectives,” the former classmate of Legrand and onetime student of Daniel Menager echoes Ceard's preliminary remarks in confirming that Ronsard's predilection for self-representation yields a “figure du poete” that “portait en ellemême a variete du monde” and, thus, that validates the efforts of Claude Faisant and the scholars featured in the present collection.

Conference proceedings are notorious for assembling articles of varying quality and interest. Legrand's volume is no different in this regard. Nevertheless, on balance the collection is worth a look, particularly for those seeking an overview of the latest research into the character and consequences of Ronsard's elusive persona. On a less generous note, however, reproach is certainly in order for the excessive number of editorial errata throughout the book (most

strikingly on display in the editor's own article!) as well as for a binding that stands to disintegrate in the hands of even the most circumspect of bibliophiles.

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