

Review of *Les théories de la 'dispositio' et le Grand Oeuvre de Ronsard*, by Claudine Jomphe

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Abstract:

This article is a review of *Les Théories de la dispositio et le grand oeuvre de Ronsard* by Claudine Jomphe.

Keywords: Book Review | Pierre de Ronsard | *La Franciade* | Renaissance Poetry

Article:

Les Théories de la dispositio et le grand oeuvre de Ronsard. Claudine Jomphe. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000. 410 pp. €54.90. ISBN 2-7453-0262-0.

Ronsard scholars have long debated the merits and flaws of *La Franciade*, the Pléiade laureate's four-book unfinished epic poem, first published in 1572, that attempts to recount the evolution of the fictional hero Francus from disengaged and sheltered surviving son of the Trojan warrior, Hector, to divinely appointed founder of the French nation and progenitor of the French royal line. In a brief introduction to the present book, Claudine Jomphe announces her intention to contribute to char discussion by joining such distinguished *ronsardisants* as Daniel Ménager and Guy Demerson in examining the problematic *dispositio* of the poem, the irregularities of textual arrangement within and among its multifarious parts. However, where the previous critics have tended to confine their investigations co the "original" play of temporal perspectives in the work, the author of his latest study proposes a systematic examination of all facets of the poem's arrangement. What is more, she aspires to do so in relation to the theories of *dispositio* espoused by a broad array of classical and early modern commentators on rhetoric, including, of course, Ronsard himself.

The first of the book's three chapters presents a five-part overview of the discourse on disposition in Antiquity. Here Jomphe attempts to cease out the often ambiguous and conflicting theories of Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and later rhetoricians like Sulpicius Victor and Martianus Capella.

The problems exposed include inconsistencies in rhetorical terminology, the functional inseparability of the principles of *inventio*, *elocutio*, and *dispositio*, shifting views on the aspects of discourse to be subsumed under the concept of disposition, and disagreements over the roles of nature and artifice in matters of textual arrangement. The discussion gains some clarity in the third part, as Jomphe examines the positions of specific theorists in sequence. In the course of these analyses, the author finds that although some consideration is given to the organization of fictional stories (whether naturally, in chronological sequence, or Homerically, with the most important action reserved for the beginning and end of the work), the most extensive discourse on *dispositio* arises among reflections on ordering in oratorical debate. Jomphe's careful readings of the anonymous *De ratione dicendi*, Quintilian's *De institutione oratoria*, and Cicero's *De Oratore* and *Partitiones* highlight the differing views on the effects of various modes of arrangement on the utility, pleasure, and persuasiveness of forensic arguments. For all her efforts to find coherence in the concept, however, the author is ultimately obliged to concede that classical theorists prefer to relegate the rules of disposition to the intuitive discretion of the orator or poet and that, paradoxically; most of their commentaries are poorly arranged and confusing.

Complementing the first chapter, and similarly divided into five principal parts, chapter 2 focuses on the treatment of *dispositio* by such sixteenth-century theorists as Vida, Peletier, Scaliger, and Ronsard himself, in his three prose commentaries on poetics and the epic: the 1565 *Abbrégé de l'art poétique françois*, the preface to the 1572 edition of *La Franciade*, and the posthumous preface of 1587. By way of an introduction, Jomphe affirms that, in general, Renaissance poetic treatises present very developed and consistent commentaries on textual ordering inspired more by Horace and Macrobius than the Ancients considered in the preceding discussion. Subsequent divisions of the chapter expose the precepts of primary interest to the early modern theorists. First among these principles is the commonly held notion that disposition involves not only the exercise of "art" and labor, but also, like *inventio*, a communion with the poetic furies. In recognition of this metaphysical connection, Renaissance theorists embraced the Horatian idea that an epic should open with an announcement of the over subject that includes a prayer to an appropriate deity and the Muses. Such a prelude was to be followed by a leap into the story at its middle (*in media res*), and from there, through retrospective permutations, the poet was gradually to reveal the sources of the hero's motives and adventures. According to Jomphe, this plan was the product of three main influences: Horace's counsel in the *Ars Poetica*, the arrangement of Virgil's *Aeneid* (the most popular ancient epic of the day), and a deference toward the Renaissance reader's fondness for suspense and surprise in these lengthy poems. On the nutter of managing the resulting tension between epic's topical variations and underlying structural unity, however, Jomphe finds the early modern theorists less unanimous. Whereas Vida and Scaliger advised the poet to compose his work with explicit reminders of its unifying scheme woven regularly among the fluid turns of plot, Peletier esteemed that the turns themselves could engender unity when presented in cyclical alternation. Ronsard, on the other hand, took a stand consistent with the Pléiade's confidence in the access of true poets to divine inspiration and knowledge. In short, he affirmed that bard of the highest caliber could do no less

than author poems with a unified design that would be fully apparent to the properly initiated "lecteur rusé."

Jomphe finally considers the *dispositio* of *La Franciade* itself in chapter 3. Once again she presents her findings in five main parts, the initial four of which correspond in a sequence to each of the epic's four published books. The first segment advances a conclusion that becomes a theme throughout the analysis: Ronsard departs repeatedly from the norms of epic ordering as an affirmation of the creative license enjoyed by all true poets. This originality is apparent as early as Jupiter's "harangue" to the gods that follows the orthodox invocation opening book 1. Rather than start *in medias res* (as advised by Horace, Vida, and Peletier, and promoted in his own pronouncements on heroic poetry), Ronsard begins *anihilo*, with Jupiter's spontaneous revelation of the glorious destiny that will define Francus's actions throughout the poem. Other departures from the conventions of disposition include Ronsard's neglect to develop secondary heroes among the main character's companions, his failure to adopt a consistently omniscient narrator, his deferral and obfuscation of Francus's emergence as a hero, his frequent recourse to ekphrastic interludes, and his multiplication of *inamoramenti* amid the phases of the drama. The last of these problems receives the author's most sustained attention. Prominent in books 2-4, the lyrical discourse representing the experience of Francus's amorous admirers, Clymène and Hyante, occupies nearly a thousand verses and comprises what amounts to a collection of interpolated *canzonieri* that pose a profound threat to the progress of the work's overarching adventure. For Jomphe, the presence of this discourse evinces the poet's inability to make a successful transition from poet of love to epic bard.

Although a reduction of the "emblèmes amoureux" in successive versions of the work suggests that Ronsard gains some control of his lyrical pen over time, Jomphe presents a convincing case, both throughout chapter 3 and in her conclusion, confirming the overall failure of *La Franciade* as an epic. Besides the flaws in disposition already noted, there is the fact that Francus's quest is more personal than heroic. For these reasons, along with the absence of any significant characters to provide the material for further adventures once the passion-maddened Cléonte, arguably the second most important figure in the poem, drowns herself at the end of book 3, the epic cannot help but remain unfinished and unsuccessful.

Without a doubt Jomphe has made a substantial contribution to our understanding of one of the most problematic pieces in all of Ronsard's oeuvre. Her book is especially commendable for its persuasive demonstration that the worst flaws of the work derive from violations of the time-tested rules of epic *dispositio*. One is perhaps a little disappointed, however, at the length of the opening chapter, which approaches irrelevance to the overall study's investigation. The investigation moves to the Renaissance theory in chapter 2, where the overwhelming influence is traced not to Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, but to the likes of Horace and Macrobius. One is also left to wonder why Jomphe limits her consideration of Ronsard's *dispositio*-related writing to the *Abbrégé* and the poem's two prefaces when his comments on "copieuse diversité" in the *Au Lecteur* of the 1550 *Odes* and the 1552 ode *À Michel de l'Hospital*, or on the "libre contrainte" axiom underscored in

the 1563 *Response . . . aux. injures & calomnies*, have an equally strong bearing on the issue. Surprising too is the minimal attention paid to Ronsard's cautions about "grotesquerie" and his remarks about the unequal benefits of ekphrasis in epic—all of which emerge prominently in the three theoretical pieces that did come under scrutiny. An examination of these comments could well have elucidated other dimensions of the tensions otherwise so effectively exposed by the author. Be that as it may, the book remains elegantly written and expertly copyedited by Champion; and if only for the consistent five-part structure of its three main chapters, it may well stand as a model of disposition in *the* genre of literary criticism. Add to this its *index nominum*, its *index rerum*, a substantial bibliography, and three instructive appendixes (a brief book-by-book summary of the *Franiade*; a comparison between book 4 and parallel sections in Apollonius's *Argonautica*; and what appears to be an authorial afterthought aimed at redeeming Ronsard's attack on the fantastic ordering of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*), and surely there is more than enough to satisfy the discriminating *ronsardisant*.