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Michael Wintroub, *A Savage Mirror: Power, Identity, and Knowledge in Early Modern France*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006. xii + 306 pp. Figures, plates, notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8047-4872-1.

Review by Hilary J. Bernstein, University of California, Santa Barbara.

At first glance, Michael Wintroub's new book would seem to be a prime example of the common tendency to make book titles as broad as possible in a difficult market. *A Savage Mirror: Power, Identity, and Knowledge in Early Modern France* is, after all, a reading of the royal entry into Rouen staged for Henri II on 27 September 1550. However, in a style that draws much from micro-history, Wintroub uses his examination of the 1550 entry to make some very broad arguments about developing ideas of elite identity, the imagined role of the king in ushering in a Golden Age, and the attractions and limitations of the "new learning" of the French Renaissance in shaping these visions. Wintroub's is a complicated work, in which arguments are laid down as an artist would apply coats of paint rather than presented sequentially, but two major claims nevertheless dominate the analysis. The first interprets the 1550 royal entry as an expression of those Wintroub calls the new "civic-cultural elites," who sought to promote their own values of linguistic prowess and learning as central to elite status over the traditional nobility's emphasis on martial valor. The second sees the global references of the entry, embodied in an elaborate tableau vivant of a "Brazilian" village and combat between Brazilian tribes, as essential not only to the reading of the entry itself but to our understanding of Renaissance ambivalence over the relative power of language and object, eloquence and experience. To arrive at these interpretations, Wintroub explains that he has followed a methodology combining careful textual analysis, consideration of the entry as a performed event, and analysis of social context: "this book is not concerned simply with the hermeneutics of ritual symbolism, but with the social context(s) of a ritual's production, meaning, and use" (p. 11). There is much of value in this book, but unfortunately, it is on the whole much more successful in the former than in the latter approach. Further, difficulties with contextualization also lead the author astray in the search for meaning.

Intended to equal and even to exceed the royal entries staged by Lyon and Paris in 1548 and 1549, Rouen's elaborate entry of 1550 was designed to demonstrate both Rouen's wealth and magnificence and its proficiency in the classical symbols and concerns that were transforming traditional entries into Roman triumphs. The entry ushered the king from an elaborately staged Brazilian village, through a land battle between two Brazilian tribes, to a sea battle between the French and the Portuguese, to an image of the Elysian fields in which Good Memory commended François I for supporting arts and letters through a book written in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and Henri II was urged to do likewise. Thus, Wintroub explains, it at once brought Henri II on a unidirectional journey from New World barbarism to a paradise based on classical learning *and* led him on a circular peregrination from one Golden Age based in innocence and simplicity to a second in which he, as universal monarch, would restore peace, prosperity, and Christ's reign on earth through the patronage of letters. Although a contemporary witness identified the intent of the entry only as a progress from barbarism to civility and learning (p. 58), Wintroub is on solid ground in emphasizing the circular nature of its meaning as well.

In Wintroub's estimation, such concerns were germane to the new "civic-cultural elite" who were coming to dominate Rouen's civic life and who were specifically responsible for the entry. Many of the entry's organizers and the *conseillers-échevins* who appointed them were members of Rouen's well-known Puy de Palinod, a society dedicated to the veneration of the Immaculate Conception through poetry

competitions requiring mastery of difficult rhetorical rules and a high level of cultural literacy. This “civic-cultural elite” used the occasion of the entry to contest the values of martial prowess and valor that characterized the traditional nobility and to cast Henri II, in the guise of Hercules, as the mediator between the older elite identity and a new one based on linguistic virtuosity and the cultivation of learning. Yet, for all of the attractions of the paradise of learning awaiting Henri II in the last station of the entry, Wintroub also argues that the new “civic-cultural elite’s” approach to both the “new learning” and its own newly-gained success was ambivalent. Extending beyond the relatively elite participants in Rouen’s Puy societies, the cultural attitudes and linguistic skills of the new elite extended to the membership of Rouen’s confraternal festive society, the Abbaye des Conards. In mocking the pretensions of “new men” who had destabilized the social order by buying up offices, the Conards were simultaneously criticizing themselves and thus the very literary culture in which they participated. In the 1550 entry, the anxieties caused by this dual association of learning with a fallen state of disorder and with its resolution in a new heaven on earth were represented in the Brazilians. Their presumed lack of culture suggested both a barbarism that could be cured through ample patronage of letters and a simplicity that looked askance at the pretensions and uncertainties of language.

Wintroub’s formulation of this new “civic-cultural elite” and his interpretation of the entry as presenting arguments about the nature of elite identity are not convincing. To define this new elite, Wintroub first ascertains that a large number of the entry’s organizers were members of Rouen’s Puy de Palinod and other related devotional poetry societies (p. 77). He then sets about to argue that the composition of these Puy societies was more elite than some historians, including Jonathan Dewald, have assumed.^[1] This may indeed have been the case, but Wintroub’s conclusion that approximately 40% of the Puy de Palinod’s membership in 1548 were members of the robe elite is not to be trusted, since his representation of social distinctions within urban society leads him to equate municipal officials with office holders in Rouen’s sovereign courts and to group a *maître des ouvrages* with a president of the Cour des Aides (p. 82). Still, for Wintroub, these social distinctions are beside the point, since robe officials were part of “a much larger social grouping,” ranging from officials to merchants and artisans, and “[t]he boundaries of this new elite were...defined less by economic wherewithal, occupation, and title than by certain common cultural and linguistic dispositions, attitudes, and skills” (p. 7). The same kind of argumentation holds in Wintroub’s treatment of the social standing of the Conards. Although other historians have seen the Conards specifically,^[2] or the participants in France’s sixteenth-century festive societies generally,^[3] as being composed of the kinds of established artisans, lesser merchants, and minor legal officeholders who made up the respectable—but by no means elite—population of France’s cities, Wintroub is concerned with arguing that the group of Conards actually included the kinds of elites who also participated in the Puy societies (pp. 130–31). Should this social identification rest inconclusive, however, Wintroub explains that more than by their socio-economic status, the Conards should be identified “by a shared commitment to, and interest in, the cultural life of their city. In this respect at least the Conards appear to have been part of the same civic-cultural elite” to which the entry’s organizers belonged (p. 132).

Although it is certain that disparate members of urban communities nevertheless shared many cultural attitudes in the mid-sixteenth century, to argue that they should therefore be grouped together as one “civic-cultural elite” is to ignore all of the other social, political, and legal distinctions of a very hierarchical society.^[4] Further, such an identification leads to some questionable interpretations of the 1550 royal entry. Wintroub asserts that in his movement from a Brazilian village to the Elysian fields, Henri II was simultaneously being instructed in competing definitions of nobility: the martial ethic, represented by the fierce exploits and bravery of the “savages” in their battle, and the learned ethic, to which Henri II was enjoined to lend support. The king himself was further conceived as the ultimate mediator between these two ideals, since in an intervening tableau vivant, he is presented as Hercules defeating the hydra. While such a symbol would seem to present Henri in a distinctly military fashion, Wintroub argues that Hercules was at this time a multivalent figure that at once recalled the martial valor of his Lybian incarnation and the eloquence of the Gallic Hercules.^[5] Although there is little to

suggest that the Brazilians really should be viewed as embodying a noble ethic (they are depicted as engaged in trade, after all), there is less to indicate that the organizers of the entry were concerned with making a social argument. Such an assumption implicitly relies on the extensive literature analyzing the development of a *noblesse de robe* and the unique culture of the *bourgeois gentilshommes*.^[6] Yet, Wintroub's "civic-cultural elite" was only very partially composed of *gens de robe*, and it is unclear why the wealthy merchants and clerics who organized the entry would be interested in questioning the traditional qualities of the nobility. What they most certainly were interested in, however, was whether France was to be at war or peace, and these concerns seem to be foremost in the tableau vivant in which Hercules appears. It is always hazardous to offer a reading of texts that one has not read, but the information that Wintroub provides suggests a more straight-forward interpretation of the entry station. In the tableau vivant, Orpheus sits flanked on one side by Hercules, battling the hydra, and on the other by the Muses. An accompanying poem identifies the king as a Hercules on earth, he who defeats Mars and "honorably establishes peace in place of war" (p. 51). Further, on the statue of Minerva given to the king at the entry, he could read that the prince would support the Muses in the surety and repose they needed and that they in turn would reciprocate by celebrating his heroic deeds (p. 113). Is it not therefore more likely that the entry's organizers were instructing Henri II in the duties of kingship? He could continue to defend the realm through military exploits, but he should not forget that the goal of war was to establish peace, in which learning and trade could flourish and ultimately redound to his own glory.

If the arguments about elite identity in the entry are problematic, those about the "civic-cultural elite's" ambivalence about its own position and claims for learning are also questionable. To arrive at this interpretation, Wintroub makes use of the Conards who, on Henri II's request, performed their own "triumph" and a farce several days after the entry. The Conards, Wintroub argues, had a history not only of mocking society at large and censuring the nobility and the clergy for ignoring their obligations to the poor, but also of specifically criticizing the "new men" of urban society, who illicitly advanced their status and destabilized society by using their wealth to purchase offices. Yet, since members of the Conards themselves belonged to the new civic elites who were profiting from such actions, their mockery was in fact an auto-critique that questioned their own claims for the value of learning. Central to this argument is thus an identification of the Conards, the "new men," and the "civic-cultural elite," for only in this way can the entry's organizers be shown to ascribe to such self-doubt. Yet, as previously shown, these associations are highly debatable. Further, the notion that certain urban groups resented the advancements and abandonment of civic responsibility of their betters is based on just the kinds of social distinctions that Wintroub rejects in his characterization of the Conards.^[7]

In addition to these socio-cultural arguments, *A Savage Mirror* is concerned with demonstrating that the global aspects of the entry, embodied in the Brazilian village, were essential to its meaning and thus played a crucial role in defining the cultural position that the organizers sought to convey. One side of a ritual equation that could only be balanced by the awesome, god-like power of the king, the Brazilians were both barbarous and virtuous, markers of a liminality that reinforced the elements of self-critique in the entry, endowed with a materiality that pointed to, but also stabilized, the ultimate unreliability of language and social dispositions that the "new men" posited. To explain the ways that the Brazilian tableau vivant and battle accomplished these ends, Wintroub turns to two important aspects of Renaissance culture: the influence of the classical past and the passion for collecting and ordering the universe. For Wintroub, the classical elements imported into Renaissance entries were not simply borrowings or imitations of antique motifs, but symbolic markers that underlined the fundamental similarities, or "family resemblance," between Roman triumphs and sixteenth-century ceremonial occasions, such as royal entries and funeral ceremonies. Due to a historical progression by which the Advent of Christ was modeled on the Roman triumph, and later political rituals drew heavily from Christian ritual occasions, classical motifs in Renaissance entries fit within a pre-established liturgical framework and thus performed the same functions as in the Roman ceremonies. "Indeed," Wintroub explains, "even explicitly revived motifs of triumph, such as the chariot, were animated by the web of

significations structuring both the Advent ceremony and the imperial triumph” (p. 149). Thus, because the Roman triumph functioned to turn the triumphator into a god, Renaissance entries performed the same work in the person of the king. Further, because the presence of defeated barbarians symbolized the Roman triumphator’s glory and stood for his apotheosis, the New World barbarians in the 1550 entry were similarly essential to the glorification, even deification, of the king. At the same time, however, the elaborate staging of the Brazilian village made of the 1550 entry a living cabinet of curiosities. As objects of wonder and careful collection and display, the Brazilians and their world thus embodied an empirical approach to knowledge that stood apart from the glorification of language and eloquence in other entry stations. Again, it was the king, in his journey through the entry and incarnation as the last world emperor, who could mediate between the two representations and usher in the Golden Age on earth. The global elements of the entry were thus fundamental to the work it sought to perform.

To compare the Brazilians and their environment to objects in a cabinet of curiosities is an interesting insight and to consider the elements of the 1550 entry that drew on Roman triumphs is surely important, but the interpretive conclusions that Wintroub draws from these elements are difficult to accept. His assertion that because a general line of historical influence linked Roman triumphs, Christian processions, and royal ceremonies, Roman motifs could be seamlessly reintroduced into sixteenth-century occasions and continue—if only unconsciously—to evoke the same meanings seems misguided. The clearly established Christian liturgical context for political ritual is more than adequate to account for the millenarian overtones of the entry, and to say that Roman symbols could be reinserted into an existing ritual structure without any dissonance or reinterpretation is to deny the self-consciousness with which Renaissance practitioners imitated, employed, and transformed the classical elements they adopted. Further, Wintroub’s specific application of the elements of Roman triumphs to the Rouennais entry is questionable. Although he identifies the Brazilians as equivalent to the barbarians in Roman triumphal entries, it is hard to see them performing that function. Barbarians were useful in Roman triumphal ceremonies because they were conquered enemies; the Brazilians, however, are represented as including a tribe allied to the French, and their inclusion in the entry, as Wintroub very successfully shows, was calculated to lobby Henri II to reinstate permission for the Rouennais to engage in the Brazilian trade. Moreover, although Wintroub does not mention it, the entry ceremony did include “captives,” who stood for the recently defeated English troops in the siege of Boulogne.[8] If anyone were to stand in for defeated barbarians in the 1550 entry, therefore, would it not be the English rather than the Brazilians? Wintroub, however, is certainly aware that the classical elements in Renaissance entries were the subject of careful research, grafted onto the medieval entry tradition (p. 185). Yet, in admitting the mental distance between Renaissance scholars and their classical models, the author also places the experiential aspects of his argument in doubt. If the antique symbols of the entry were the products of careful research into the classical past, which Wintroub identifies with antiquarianism and thus with experiential knowledge, then it is not clear why he assumes that the “new learning” extolled in the entry was a learning based solely on linguistic virtuosity and not also on this more “material” aspect of erudition. Indeed, eloquence and erudition were complementary aspects of French learning throughout the period, and it is by no means obvious that the latter was seen as a solution to the problems of the former.[9]

In his description of the ways in which Renaissance collectors used natural objects to evoke a series of associations, Wintroub points to “the collector’s ability to creatively read and analyze the emblematic, associative, and sympathetic histories of...objects across a field of often arcane textual, material, and pictorial associations” (p. 173). This, I would suggest, is Wintroub’s special ability as well. Immersed in the texts and images of the mid-sixteenth century, he is able to draw interesting and learned parallels that sometimes turn up valuable relationships. *A Savage Mirror* is particularly good at pointing out Rouen’s longstanding interest in Renaissance practices, especially the Roman triumph, imported from key inhabitants’ experiences in the Italian campaigns, and it is very convincing in showing how the devotional concerns of palinodic verse informed the particular symbolic program of the entry. Yet

Wintroub equally points to the fact that objects, once they became de-contextualized from their original uses, “could be rewritten and reinscribed with new meanings and purposes” (p. 173). This is the danger of considering any cultural production without careful attention to its many contexts and the possibly competing uses that different participants envisioned for it. I certainly am not suggesting that *A Savage Mirror* ignores the context of the 1550 entry; indeed, the chapter in which Wintroub demonstrates the history of Rouennais trade with Brazil, the inter-connections of French trade policy in the Atlantic with the concerns of the Imperial Wars, and the entry’s expression of Rouen’s specific mercantile concerns is one of the best in the book. Yet it is surely a drawback that the author waits for the concluding “coda” to acknowledge that royal entries presupposed a limited, juridical definition of monarchy, and that rather than pursuing the particular social, political, and personal concerns of the entry’s different organizers, participants, and spectators, he chooses rather to combine them into an undifferentiated “civic-cultural elite.” [10] Thus, while Wintroub’s is certainly a learned, detailed, and carefully constructed work with ambitious goals, it ultimately falls short of providing a convincing account of the 1550 royal entry into Rouen and thus of the nexus of cultural meanings and social concerns it is said to embody.

NOTES

[1] Jonathan Dewald, *The Formation of a Provincial Nobility: The Magistrates of the Parlement of Rouen, 1499-1610* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 56-7.

[2] For example, see Dylan Reid, “Carnival in Rouen: A History of the Abbaye des Conards,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 32.4 (2001): 1027-55, and “The Triumph of the Abbey of the Conards: Spectacle and Sophistication in a Rouen Carnival,” in Joëlle Rollo-Koster, ed., *Medieval and Early Modern Ritual: Formalized Behavior in Europe, China and Japan* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 147-73. Reid carefully distinguishes the Conards from the elites—wealthy merchants and robe officials—who governed Rouen and participated in the Puy societies: “And yet, they were clearly not elite in any sense. They did not have university educations; they did not wield any direct power; with the exception of Noël Cotton, they did not belong to the group of wealthy merchant families which governed Rouen, let alone the families who were moving into high royal offices, receiving rich ecclesiastical benefices, and acquiring rural estates” (“Carnival in Rouen,” 1053).

[3] Sara Beam, *Laughing Matters: Farce and the Making of Absolutism in France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 21. Beam identifies the members of the festive societies as belonging to the “couche moyenne” of artisans, lesser merchants, and lesser officials, who could have some social standing in the city but were very rarely elites with real political control. Indeed, her overall argument presupposes that *farceurs* and officials belonged to two separate groups, since her narrative is one of elite crackdown and then banning of public farce. I thank Sara Beam for allowing me to read portions of her book in proofs.

[4] Beam argues that in the mid-sixteenth century, urban elites still appreciated and supported the farces of the festive societies. *Laughing Matters*, 44-76. For an argument that governing elites and common people shared a political and ceremonial language in sixteenth-century France, see my *Between Crown and Community: Politics and Civic Culture in Sixteenth-Century Poitiers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), esp. 43-63, 164-85.

[5] This argument should already be familiar to readers: Michael Wintroub, “Civilizing the Savage and Making a King: The Royal Entry Festival of Henri II (Rouen, 1550),” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 39.2 (1998): 465-94.

[6] George Huppert, *Les Bourgeois Gentilshommes: An Essay on the Definition of Elites in Renaissance France* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977); Ellery Schalk, *From Valor to Pedigree: Ideas of Nobility in France in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Arlette Jouanna, *L'idée de race en France au XVIe siècle et au début du XVIIe*, 2 v. (Montpellier: Université Paul Valéry, 1981); Davis Bitton, *The French Nobility in Crisis, 1500-1640* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969).

[7] See especially, Bernard Chevalier, *Les bonnes villes de France du XIVe au XVIe siècle* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1982), 129-49.

[8] Philip Benedict, *Rouen during the Wars of Religion* (Cambridge, U.K: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 2.

[9] See especially Marc Fumaroli, *L'âge de l'éloquence. Rhétorique et 'res literaria' de la Renaissance au seuil de l'époque classique* (Geneva: Droz, 1980), and Orest Ranum, *Artisans of Glory: Writers and Historical Thought in Seventeenth-Century France* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

[10] Lawrence M. Bryant long ago made clear how royal entries could combine very different interests and traditions in the same ceremony; see *The King and the City in the Parisian Royal Entry Ceremony: Politics, Ritual, and Art in the Renaissance* (Geneva: Droz, 1986). For a good recent example of analysis of an entry that takes into account political contexts, competing interests, and the relation of the entry ceremony to farce, see Michael P. Breen, "Addressing *La Ville des Dieux*: Entry Ceremonies and Urban Audiences in Seventeenth-Century Dijon," *Journal of Social History* 38.2 (2004): 341-64.

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See also Michael Wintroub's response to this review.

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