

H-France Review Vol. 11 (April 2011), No. 92

Antónia Szabari, *Less Rightly Said: Scandals and Readers in Sixteenth-Century France*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010. 304 pp. 35 illustrations. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 0804762929.

Review by Jeff Persels, University of South Carolina.

It is always both intellectually stimulating, and even psychologically satisfying, to see a critical fraction of the vast and vastly understudied underbelly of early modern French publishing get some of the attention it deserves. More studies of the “holy trinity”—Rabelais, Ronsard, Montaigne—are always welcome, but as anyone who has spent even an afternoon in any Parisian or regional variant of a French library’s *fonds ancien* can attest, there are reams of long-unturned, and even as yet uncut pages. Admittedly, many of them are filled with half-baked ideas expressed in fair-to-middling prose or verse or worse, as is often enough the case of those treated in the study under review. But that they made it into print at all and (not at all unusually) in multiple editions, and survived into the archives, should perhaps command more of our attention.

This situation is particularly true of the polemical ephemera of the religious controversies that kept French-language presses in motion throughout much of the sixteenth century, a notable and representative sampling of which is the object of Antónia Szabari’s new study. With a nod to Luc Racaut’s earlier survey of this literature, *Hatred in Print: Catholic Propaganda and Protestant Identity during the French Wars of Religion*, she classifies it as a “literature of vituperation.”[1] This satirical corpus, she contends, is to be defined by its function rather than its form, and she pursues that function skillfully through the century, arguing that they ultimately result in “the rise of a political genre” (p. 6) and generate “enduring themes and models of political and religious discourse compelling to later generations caught up in their own struggles for identity and power” (p. 219). It is this rise or this generation which gives *Less Rightly Said* its central thesis.

Szabari’s accomplishment is as useful as it is graceful, and that is saying something, given the generally graceless quality of the primary material. She examines closely yet economically the rhetoric forged in the heat of polemical exchange which, as she artfully demonstrates, increasingly blurred the spiritual and the political as the confessional controversy festered into open conflict. The book is trimly organized into seven more or less chronological chapters, running from Bernard of Luxemburg’s 1522 *Catalogus haereticorum* to Artus Thomas’s *L’Isle des Hermaphrodites*, published in 1605, and corresponding roughly to what we might call semantic fields of vituperative exchange, though they offer much more than that. She generously and justly strives to give equal time to Catholic and Calvinist polemicists and in so doing—true to her initial distinction prioritizing function over form—provides a good idea of the scope and variety of the generic forms co-opted (or even created) by the equally broad selection of known and anonymous authors. She engages as learnedly and profitably with such canonical works as Rabelais’s *Gargantua* (1534) and *Quart Livre* (1548-52) and Ronsard’s *Discours* (1562) as with such markedly more obscure *libelles* as Jérôme de Hangest’s *Contre les tenebrions lumière evangelicque* (c.1535) and Artus Désiré’s *Passevent parisien* (1556), and including the extraordinary *Mappe-monde nouvelle papistique* (1566-7) an allegorical map of the infernal world of Catholicism, attributed to engraver Pierre Eskrich and measuring over 4ft x 6ft. Her reading of *Gargantua*’s pissing on the Parisians (*Gargantua* XIII, 1534) in the context of contemporary political, clerical and academic struggles, for example, has changed my understanding of the work as a whole and is, in and of itself, worth the price of the book.

There are a few cavils to be raised in passing. Szabari is not always as sharp a reader of images as she is of texts. Artus Désiré's 1564 "tree of heretics," for example, discussed in chapter one, is obviously meant to recall not the tree of knowledge but rather the Tree of Jesse, that is, an inversion or perversion of the popular graphic representation of the Messiah's family tree (Isaiah 11.1), here appropriately offering the genealogy of the Anti-Christ, springing not from King David's father Jesse but rather from the phallic "root" of the devil. There are a few other arguably hasty readings of images and even early modern readers' "doodles." She claims categorically, for instance, that the red coloring of the figure of Calumnia in a woodcut in a 1519 edition of Erasmus' *Annotationes* was meant "to highlight her importance in the dramatic scene that unfolds in the image" (p. 86). Maybe, but then again maybe not. There are also, oddly, sporadic gratuitous and anachronistic attempts to connect these works of specific polemical moment to an imagined modern readers' experience via references to such unconnected and widely divergent authors as Hugo or Proust or Beckett.

Szabari's argument would likely have benefitted, as well, from an effort to provide a better sense of the historical ebb and flow of French-language religious polemic, something along the lines of Claude Postel's *Traité des invectives au temps de la Réforme*, cited in the bibliography but not otherwise given its due.^[2] Ditto for Denis Crouzet's extensive work, all the more so as Szabari devotes an otherwise insightful half-chapter to the aforementioned Artus Désiré, to whom Crouzet, more than any historian, has asked us to pay heed. The works she subjects to often illuminating treatment are, I know from my own consultations of the primary texts, indeed representative, but it would have been helpful to provide a clearer sense of why she chose the works she did, where they fit into what she considers to be the greater scheme of vituperative works down the century, and how they responded to shifting confessional and political fortunes.

One could raise an eyebrow, too, about what often reads like an assumption of a seemingly ineluctable race to absolutism, a contentious perspective shared by another recent related study of political rhetoric in out-of-the-way genres, Sarah Beam's *Laughing Matters: Farce and the Making of Absolutism in France* (Cornell University Press, 2007). And here as there, knowledge of what is to come does now and again arguably force interpretation of what precedes just as an emphasis on the political occasionally neglects other aims and influences. "Literature of vituperation" it may be, but the genuine religious fervor that motivated much, if certainly not all, of the invective, however real or merely rhetorical its violence, does sometimes seem to get short shrift. These are, however, assuredly more discussion questions than quibbles. They should definitely not detract from the overall utility, erudition and artful instruction of this study. If not quite "the best available introduction to this material" as the jacket copy proclaims—Postel's *Traité* would be a better fit for that—it is arguably as good and as necessary a companion piece to understanding a hitherto underappreciated polemical corpus.

NOTES

[1] Luc Racaut, *Hatred in Print: Catholic Propaganda and Protestant Identity during the French Wars of Religion* (Farnham, UK: the Ashgate Publishing Group, 2002).

[2] Claude Postel, *Traité des invectives au temps de la Réforme* (Paris: la Société d'Édition Les Belles Lettres, 2004).

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ISSN 1553-9172