
H-France Review Vol. 12 (September 2012), No. 125

Marcus Keller, *Figurations of France: Literary Nation-Building in Times of Crisis (1550-1650)*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011. x + 211 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. \$80.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 978-1-61149-048-0.

Review by Paul Cohen, University of Toronto.

Renaissance poet Joachim Du Bellay's polemical call to elevate the French language, entitled *The Defense and Illustration of the French Language* and first published in 1549, has offered successive generations of historians and literary scholars a seemingly natural starting-point for reflections on the origins of French national, linguistic and literary identity.[1] Such scholarship has typically held up the *Defense* as a decisive text for a range of reasons: archetypal manifesto for literary nationalism, blueprint for state-sponsored language planning, or ideological expression of the absolutist state. The body of criticism that has built up around Du Bellay's Renaissance manifesto thus constitutes an important chapter in the vast historiography on the invention of French national identity.[2]

Though Marcus Keller likewise chooses to begin his exploration of literary nation-building with Du Bellay's treatise, his objective is happily original. Rather than situate Du Bellay and the Renaissance literary moment in a longer genealogy of French national identity, as so much of the scholarly literature has sought to do, Keller instead proposes to explore the contours and constitutive figurative elements of early modern representations of nationhood. His analysis seeks to lay bare the internal logics embedded within the categories which early modern French men of letters themselves mobilized in their efforts to define and make sense of the French political and cultural communities. The book offers a series of close readings of canonical texts by Du Bellay, Pierre Ronsard, Michel de Montaigne, Théodore Agrippa d'Aubigné, and Pierre Corneille in order to interrogate the constellation of meanings surrounding "nation" and "national" in the context of early modern French literary production.

Keller credits three methodological models for his project. First, he draws inspiration from Timothy Hampton's *Literature and Nation in the Sixteenth Century*, an examination of the ways in which literary form and national identity mutually constituted each other in the early modern period.[3] Second, Keller endorses the Althusserian philosopher Etienne Balibar's historical critique of the nation, notably preferring Balibar's concept of "imaginary communities" to Benedict Anderson's "imagined community", better suited in his view to acknowledging national identity's dynamic character.[4] Third, taking his cue from Homi Bhabha, Keller emphasizes the slippages, disjunctions and incoherences inherent in early modern expressions of nationhood.[5] Keller focuses his analysis not on the ways in which men of letters *narrated* the French nation, but rather on dissecting how they *figured* France in tropes, metaphors, images, and analyzing their internal logics. As Keller puts it, "Nation form, fictive ethnicity, and key concepts of postcolonial theory, then, allow for a new and different understanding of France,....Charting the ideological grounds on which the modern nation-state takes shape, this study provides a critique of both the idea of nation and current theoretical approaches to nationhood" (p. 6).

Such an approach carries decided advantages. As a literary study, Keller's book demonstrates the power of France as a subject for literary creation for early modern men of letters. As intellectual history, it complicates our understanding of a set of crucial categories like 'nation.' As cultural history, it points in

suggestive ways to the impact of historical upheavals like the Wars of Religion and the Fronde on literary expression. As a contribution to our understanding of the history of French national identity, it avoids the dangers of teleology that has so marked work on early modern national sentiment in general.

The book offers five case studies, each applying this methodological framework to a different set of canonical literary texts. The first chapter presents an analysis of Du Bellay's *Defense*.

Keller explores the metaphors and rhetorical figures with which Du Bellay argues that the national community is defined by its vernacular tongue. Du Bellay describes language with a series of images that are both complementary and contradictory: as a product of culture and artifice; as akin to a plant to be cultivated, linked to the soil of the territory where it is practiced; as a mode of literary expression to be improved by imitation of foreign models. Keller argues that a series of tensions run through Du Bellay's writing, between language as invested with a cultural specificity whose very essence represents an expression of community identity and language as a cultural practice which members of the community have a duty to improve, between language as essence and language as improvable and imitable. According to Keller, these tensions call into question the very stability of the nation-category.

Chapter two analyzes the ways in which Du Bellay's friend and rival Ronsard, and the Huguenot soldier and poet Agrippa d'Aubigné, both mobilized images of the family to imagine the French community. The fact that Ronsard's *Discours* represents a work of Catholic apology, and Aubigné's *Tragiques* a Protestant complaint, makes the comparison particularly interesting. Despite their confessional differences, both describe France as a family in order to explore the consequences of religious division. For both poets, the figure of the family serves as a means to bind together a socially differentiated royal community. In Ronsard's work, France is mother to both her loyal Catholic children and her wayward Protestant offspring. Aubigné, in contrast, invokes Biblical models in comparing Protestants to Jacob and Catholics to Esau. For both, the family figure offers a means of positing the resilience of the national community, despite the trauma of religious division and civil war.

In chapter three, Keller analyzes the ways in which Montaigne conceives in his *Essais* of nations as communities bound together by collective practices and customs. Though customs define nations and constitute their identity, Montaigne refuses to see in them either an essential expression of cultural identity or a subject of pride, arguing instead that they trap people within their cultural subjectivities, blinding them to the inherent equivalence of various customs. True knowledge can only come precisely when one overcomes the blinders of custom.

Keller turns in chapter four to François Malherbe's *Odes*, six poems written to celebrate the monarchy on the occasion of particular events. For Malherbe, it is not so much language or custom, but unwavering loyalty to the royal dynasty, that represents the acid test of Frenchness. Rebellion, whether urban uprisings or Huguenot resistance to a Catholic king, disqualifies its authors from Frenchness. Malherbe draws on mythological figures in order to describe the monarchy and its subjects' duty to submit to its authority, which point, on the one hand, to the king's relationship to God as defined by divine right and, on the other, to the king as himself a servant of the French nation.

In the final chapter, Keller compares playwright Pierre Corneille's *Le Cid* (first performed 1637) and *Horace* (1640). He argues that both plays probe the limits and contradictions inherent in heroic loyalty to the political community at the dawn of the absolutist era. In *Le Cid*, Rodrigue's fidelity to Castile in the struggle against the Moorish menace comes into conflict with his love for Chimène. In the latter play, Rome first acclaims Horace as a hero after his victory over its enemy, the city of Alba. Rome then expels Horace from the community because he sheds Roman blood in killing his sister Camille, married to a leading citizen of Alba. The plays thus offer a laboratory for thinking about the tensions opened up by the early modern state's demands for loyalty on the one hand, and more traditional forms of loyalty to family, aristocratic class, and honor on the other.

Keller's book, then, interprets early modern literary figurations of French nationhood as complex, varied, open-ended, and polyvalent, as much critical reflections on and even critiques of the nation-form, as expressions of ideology. As such, it offers a set of thoughtful close textual readings which will provide scholars of early modern national identity substantial food for thought.

Historians may feel somewhat frustrated by Keller's explicit refusal to consider change over time, or to analyze the interplay between broader historical transformations and his authors' literary explorations of nationhood, beyond cursory invocations of centralization and absolutism (see for example pp. 7, 129-131, and 163). His frequent use of the passive voice in analytical passages is, *pace* Strunk and White, entirely consistent with the methodological choice not to engage in analysis of change over time or of historical causality. While Keller's desire to avoid fictive teleologies is salutary, as is his desire to break down the disciplinary periodizations which divide the sixteenth from the seventeenth centuries in literary studies (p. 168), the question of historical change is nonetheless an important one. Corneille's France, after all, was a very different place from Du Bellay's France. How evolving conceptions and practices of aristocratic identity and honor, of humanism and letters, of religious change and conflict, of state formation and political ideas, of legal and social thought, helped to shape, and were in turn shaped by, literary production of the sort considered here, are crucial questions to which it should be hoped Keller's book will inspire future scholars to turn.[6]

Less consistent with Keller's methodological choices--and, to this reviewer, less convincing as an argument--is his insistence that the early modern and modern national forms are to a large extent comparable and riven by similar internal tensions (introduction and especially pp. 168-169). I would suggest that many of the most important elements of French nationhood present in Keller's corpus and which he analyzes with such brio--family and blood, Greco-Roman mythology, ecclesiastical unity, and custom--were invested with particular and historically specific importance in the early modern period. It is precisely elements like these which make it necessary to distinguish between early modern and modern conceptions of nationhood.

Likewise, Keller's subtitle and repeated invocation of "literary nation-building" echo many generations of scholarship on the continuous, long-term histories of nation-states, and appears to run counter to his methodological project. Does Keller in fact see canonical authors like Montaigne or d'Aubigné as historical actors decisively intervening in the construction of the nation? Or must this term be taken as figurative, a description of a largely literary exercise in which men of letters experiment with different ways of imagining their cultural and political communities? Or should we read "nation-building" as the on-going process of the members of any community as they constantly re-imagine and reinvent their collective identities? Given the dense historiographical debate in which Keller's work intervenes, greater clarity on this point would have been welcome.

Notwithstanding these reservations, Keller's book constitutes a stimulating reflection on the multiplicity of ways in which early modern French men of letters imagined and described their national community. It reminds us that we still have a great deal to learn about how early modern societies imagined nationhood, and that Renaissance and *Grand siècle* writers could be every bit as self-reflective and critical of the nation-form as modern cultural critics.

NOTES

[1] For a recent critical edition, see Du Bellay, *La Deffence, et illustration de la langue françoise (1549)*, ed., Jean-Charles Monferran (Geneva: Droz, 2001); for an English translation suitable for undergraduate teaching, see Laura Willet, trans., *Poetry and Language in 16th-Century France: Du Bellay, Ronsard, Sebillet* (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2003). The enormous scholarly literature on

the *Deffence* and national identity includes David J. Hartley, "Patriotism in the *Deffence et Illustration de la Langue Francoyse*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 83(1982): 83-95; Jean Dubu, "De l'Ordonnance de Villers-Cotterêts à la *Deffence et illustration de la langue françoise*: Affirmation politique et revendication littéraire," in Marie-Thérèse Jones-Davies, ed., *Langues et nations au temps de la Renaissance* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1991), pp. 137-150; Marc Fumaroli, "Le Génie de la langue française," in *Les Lieux de mémoire* III, *Les France 3, De l'archive à l'emblème* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), pp. 911-973, esp. 926-931; and Richard L. Regosin, "Language and Nation in 16th-Century France: The *Arts poétiques*," in Freeman G. Henry, ed., *Beginnings in French Literature* (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 29-40.

[2] For an overview of this historiography, see David Bell, "Recent Works on Early Modern French National Identity," *Journal of Modern History* 68(March 1996): 84-113. Important examples include: Alphonse Aulard, *Le Patriotisme français de la Renaissance à la Révolution* (Paris: Étienne Chiron, 1921); Dorothy Kirkland, "The Growth of National Sentiment in France Before the Fifteenth Century," *History* 23/89(June 1938): 12-24; Marie-Madeleine Martin, *Histoire de l'unité française. L'idée de patrie en France des origines à nos jours*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982), [English translation: *The Making of France: The Origins and Development of the Idea of National Unity*, trans. Barbara North and Robert North (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1951)]; Bernard Guénée, "État et nation en France au Moyen Âge," *Revue Historique* 237(1967): 17-30; Jean Lestocquoy, *Histoire du patriotisme français des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1968); Myriam Yardeni, *La Conscience nationale en France pendant les guerres de religion (1559-1598)* (Louvain-Paris: B. Nauwelaerts, 1971); Jean-Yves Guiomar, *L'Idéologie nationale. Nation, représentation, propriété* (Vienne: Champ Libre, 1974); William F. Church, "France," in Orest Ranum, ed., *National Consciousness, History and Political Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), pp. 43-66; Alphonse Dupront, "Du sentiment national," in Michel François, ed., *La France et les français* (Paris: Gallimard-Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1981), pp. 1423-1474; Colette Beaune, *Naissance de la nation France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985) [English translation: *The Birth of an Ideology: Myths and Symbols of Nation in Late-Medieval France*, trans. Susan Ross Huston (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991)]; Michael Wolfe, ed., *Changing Identities in Early Modern France* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997); Alain Guéry, "L'État monarchique et la construction de la nation française," *Revue de la Bibliothèque Nationale* 32(Summer 1989): 6-17; Guiomar, *La Nation entre l'histoire et la raison* (Paris: Découverte, 1990); Jean-Marie Moeglin, "Nation et nationalisme du Moyen Age à l'époque moderne (France-Allemagne)," *Revue Historique* 301/3(July-September 1999): 537-553; David Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); and Alain Tallon, *Conscience nationale et sentiment religieux en France au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002).

[3] Hampton, *Literature and Nation in the Sixteenth Century: Inventing Renaissance France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000). See also my review essay, "Poets into Frenchmen: Timothy Hampton on Literature and National Sentiment in Renaissance France," *Shakespeare Studies* 33(2005): 173-202.

[4] See Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Classe* (Paris: La Découverte, 1997).

[5] See Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

[6] Examples of literary studies which investigate the interplay between political life and literary form in the early modern period include, famously, Lucien Goldmann, *Le Dieu caché. Étude sur la vision tragique dans les Pensées de Pascal et dans le théâtre de Racine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955); and more recently, Hélène Merlin-Kajman, *Public et littérature en France au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1994); Christian Jouhaud, *Les Pouvoirs de la littérature. Histoire d'un paradoxe* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000); Merlin-Kajman, *L'Excentricité académique* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2001); Merlin-Kajman, *L'Absolutisme dans les lettres et la théorie des deux corps. Passions et politique* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2001); and Hampton, *Literature and Nation*.

Paul Cohen
University of Toronto
p.cohen@utoronto.ca

Copyright © 2012 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172