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Blandine Perona, *Prosopopée et persona à la Renaissance*. Paris: Classiques Garnier ("Bibliothèque de la Renaissance" 12), 2013, 418 pp. 39€ (cl). ISBN 978-2-8124-1755-9.

Review by Alison Calhoun, Indiana University.

From the very first pages, Perona's book orients a rhetorical device, *prosopopeia*, which Perona defines as a "discours fictif attribué à un absent, un mort, un objet inanimé ou une abstraction" (p. 8, n. 3), toward a much broader reflection on how Renaissance authors stage the false transparency of language in their writing. While *prosopopeia* might have conventionally been used in rhetoric to present an argument or authorial *caveat*, Perona's Erasmian authors from the French Renaissance use the device to put such authority into question. They all presuppose "une interrogation sur la capacité du langage de formuler directement ce qu'il veut dire" (p. 11). Deriving from Quintilian's Latin translation *fictio personae* (shared, as we learn, by Rabelais, whose French translation is either "fiction de personne" or "Desguisement"), *prosopopeia* is not only fictional discourse, but also meant to generate a character or person. However, what interests Perona is how Erasmus and several of his French followers use this fiction and disguise paradoxically to form the ultimate ("authentic") relationship between author and reader. From Erasmus to Béroalde de Verville, this encounter relies on the reader's lively intervention. Since Perona's thesis states that part of the goal of the Erasmian *prosopopeia* is to complicate the issue of who is really speaking, her book treads on the thorny issue of authorial intention and subjectivity. But Perona judiciously reminds us that works that concern themselves with authorial intention and voice do not necessarily lead to one clear message. Instead, these authors and their work unveil a sustained reflection on the power of language and the possibilities of interpretation.

As we learn from the first chapter, Perona's reading of Erasmian *prosopopeia* builds on the work of scholars like Carine Ferradou and Marc Fumaroli by exploring Erasmus both as a follower of the Church Fathers and the thinkers of the Second Sophistic, especially Lucian and Libanius.[1] This dual sacred/secular influence allows Perona to explore Erasmian hermeneutics alongside encomium, declamation, dialogue, emphasis, and irony, which she argues generate both a theory of language and a form of reflexivity. Perona takes us through Erasmus's theological and rhetorical works to demonstrate how an essentially theologically driven desire to gain the presence of Christ also drove the author's secular usage of *prosopopeia* as a means for inventing and transforming his readers. Perona pairs together Erasmus and Rabelais based on their shared solicitation of the reader to "accept" ("consentir," from the Prologue to Rabelais' *Tiers Livre*) *prosopopeia* as a mask that reveals: "le mensonge qui peut faire advenir la vérité" (p. 131).

This "acceptance" of *prosopopeia*, as we learn, forges a kind of pact (p. 102) or contract with the reader. Rabelais, an uncontested heir of Erasmus, uses *prosopopeia* to underline the silenic nature of language. In the *Tiers Livre*, he creates the same complicity with the reader Erasmus sought by authoring a work whose arbitrariness and insufficient signs are paradoxically the point: "plus la démarche est détournée, plus le signe fait signe" (p. 119). While Perona's book would have made a perfectly adept essay stopping at her analysis of Erasmus and Rabelais, the three subsequent chapters of her book answer the burgeoning

question of what kind of influence this paradoxical writing ends up having on later French Renaissance authors.

The chapter on Louise Labé re-reads the *Débat de la Folie et d'Amour* as a new version of the Lucianesque dialogue, what Perona refers to as “Sophistications” of the *prosopopeia*. Perona’s sophistic analysis of the *Débat* allows her to assert the complexity of voices and language games in Labé’s work where “il ne suffit pas d’entendre ce qui est dit, il faut redéfinir la place de ce dire dans le jeu des discours pour cerner sa légitimité et sa portée” (p. 133). The chapter on Montaigne, which concentrates on the essayist’s “De la gloire,” “De la praesumption,” and “Que philosopher c’est apprendre à mourir,” claims that *prosopopeia*, described here as the “médiatisation de l’énonciation” (p. 203), contributed to Montaigne’s skeptical thought by helping him play with the distance between utterer and utterance. Distance, as Perona argues, which might produce “disidentification” rather than recognition and identification, nevertheless promotes the same pact with the reader that resulted from Rabelais’s *prosopopeia* as “disguise.” Montaigne’s traditional use of *prosopopeia* (as Nature in the essay “Que philosopher c’est apprendre à mourir”), but also through the broader lens of paraphrased citations from third parties, create enough distance to elicit the freedom to interpret, to learn about oneself, or to get to know Montaigne. Thinking about Montaigne from this angle, while perhaps not the key to the entirety of the *Essais*, is extremely fruitful because we gain a sense of his constant use of the third party as a form of sincerity. If I understand correctly, sincerity will be the topic of Perona’s next book-length study, and she appears to have begun an important foundation for that exploration in many of the analyses of this first book.

In the final chapter, Perona tackles the “verbal labyrinth” (p. 372) of *Le Moyen de parvenir* by Béroalde de Verville, certainly an author most students and scholars of the French Renaissance would want to see in her study. She makes a clear case for framing her book with Rabelais and Verville: “Béroalde fait un pas de plus que Rabelais ... le consentement de la prosopopée est moins sollicité qu’imposé” (p. 301). Perona shows how the relentless language games in the *Moyen* manage to put enunciation and authority into question to the point where words (“la parole”) are the origin of narrator, author, and interlocutor, which only exist within an “espace de l’illusion verbale” (p. 305). Rather than distance the presence of the author, however, this challenge to the reader only increases his or her role in and desire to reconstruct authorial intentions.

Perhaps the only perspective missing from this study, and one that points more to the importance of the subject matter than any weakness in this present volume, is historical information about sixteenth-century French readership and reception. As we gain knowledge about how this rhetorical device functioned in the literary examples Perona explores, we begin to wonder to what extent contemporary readers were susceptible to such radical notions about language’s opacity. To what extent were these masks necessary to disguise the thoughts of the authors who penned them?

Prosopopée et persona à la Renaissance is not just about rhetoric, but more importantly a new perspective on how to think about fiction and meaning in early modern, especially French, literature. Like the *prosopopeia* she describes, Perona’s book is at once erudite with the technical accuracy of a work on rhetoric, and steeped in the sense of joy and pleasure that were an important part of the acquisition of knowledge in the Renaissance. As she writes when describing the works of Erasmus: “Le plaisir n’est pas quelque chose qui s’ajoute pour faire passer l’amertume d’un enseignement. Il est mode de connaissance. La joie d’accéder au sens, rend aussi ce dernier plus pénétrant” (p. 75). Perona unwaveringly succeeds in each case study to uncover the playful, interactive nature of paradoxical writing by daring to analyze the complex relationship between author and reader.

NOTES

[1] Carine Ferradou, “La réflexion sur le pouvoir du langage dans plusieurs colloques d’Érasme, le “Lucien batave,” *Bulletin de l’association d’étude sur l’humanisme, la réforme et la renaissance* 58.1 (2004): 59-88. Marc Fumaroli, *L’Age de l’éloquence* (Geneva: Droz, 2002).

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