
H-France Review Vol. 17 (October 2017), No. 203

Andréane Audy-Trottier, Kim Gladu, Vincent Godin-Filion, Nelson Guilbert et Émilie Joly, eds., *Entre vice et vertus: discours moral, invention littéraire et pensée esthétique (XVe-XVIIIe siècle)*. Paris: Hermann, 2016. 206 pp. Bibliography. €25.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-7056-9239-1.

Review by Ann T. Delehanty, Reed College.

This work is the product of the eleventh colloquium of “young researchers” in the Cercle interuniversitaire d’étude sur la République des Lettres (CIERL), which took place in 2011 at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières. It is a very slim volume, at just about 200 pages, which still manages to contain a surprising number of short essays (fourteen, to be exact). The very brief length of each essay ultimately becomes a blessing and a curse for the volume. While this reader doesn’t normally read edited volumes such as these cover to cover, it was pleasantly surprising to read this one in this fashion. Each essay contains several ideas that will draw in the reader and invite further contemplation of its subject. These “young researchers” do excellent work of piquing interest. Almost without exception, however, the essays ultimately also frustrate the reader with their brevity and insufficient space to develop their ideas. Moreover, while this is a potential trap of the amorphous genre of *actes* as well as the nature of conference panels themselves, the decision to divide the fourteen essays in the book into five different sections also serves to make the reading even choppy. The connections between the essays within a section are at times tenuous or unclear. Since there were multiple moments both of potential synergy and conflict between the ideas presented across the essays, more editing might have drawn those connections out better. If one ignores these structural limitations, however, and reads with an eye to serendipitous discoveries and intriguing formulations of important questions, the book does not disappoint. The volume becomes a promise of very interesting work to come (or, in some cases, since the volume took five years to come out, work that has likely already appeared) rather than a full expression of these new ideas.

In the first section of the book, “De l’horreur édifiante à la faillite de la vertu,” the essays all explore the contours of various borders or limits of virtue, such as those between the exterior and interior, the transcendental and mundane, and the general and particular. Each essay makes a case for the implications for virtue or morality with those changing contours.

Two of the essays demonstrate how slippage between semantic categories results in crucial ambiguities about virtue. Thibault Catel’s essay on the monstrous in *histoires tragiques* from 1559 to 1664 makes an intriguing case that some authors of the *histoires tragiques* (Catel analyzes François de Rosset specifically) liken the monstrous to the miraculous in their plays. Catel teases out the implications of something morally virtuous (the miraculous) being analogous to something singular, frightening, and potentially dangerous (the monstrous). By blurring the lines between the monstrous and the prodigious, Catel argues, Rosset and others move the monstrous from the morally depraved into a realm of the mysterious. This then moves the mysterious to being something that is wholly singular and ineffable rather than morally exemplary. In the next essay in the collection, Jean-Alexandre Perras takes up the etymology of the word *génie* in order to show how there is a delicate line between *génie* as natural (in the sense of being more mechanically instilled in bodies) and *génie* as God-given inspiration. Perras suggests that Huarte’s theory

of genius in the humors, for example, eliminates any notion of virtue since it locates genius exclusively within the body. This notion of genius would obviously be in tension with those models that seek a less mechanistic and inspired-in-the-moment notion of intelligence. Perras briefly cites Garasse's critique of Théophile de Viau's *libertinage* as evidence of the equivocal use of *génie* at the time. Taken together, these essays do a good job of showing how the meaning and location of virtue was in open dispute during the period.

André Laidli's essay on virtue in La Rochefoucauld stands out in the volume with a sustained treatment of its questions and engagement with a broad range of scholarship. Laidli nicely places the "method" of the *maximes* in dialogue with Cartesian method. The essay focuses on how the moralists needed to leave more room for ambiguity than Descartes did due to the nature of their subject. Laidli offers a fascinating theory that La Rochefoucauld places the *maximes* between a generality and a particularity in order to best capture the imprecision of his subject. This promises intriguing work to come within the philosophy of literature and a dynamic way of exploring the *moralistes* as philosophers.

The last essay in this section, by Julien Perrier-Chartrand, makes a giant (yet provocative) claim in a very short space: Perrier-Chartrand locates a move toward a new kind of hero in theater, *un héros intérieur*, within the very late seventeenth-century drama of Antoine de la Fosse, *Manlius Capitolinus*. Perrier-Chartrand contends that this shift to the interiorized hero gives rise to the fading out of tragedy in the seventeenth century. These are fascinating and important assertions but a more sustained discussion, with more textual evidence across several plays, is needed to bear them out.

The second section of the volume, "La Morale mise en scène: entre la naïveté de la fable et la licence picturale," contains three essays that touch on the question of moral standards in theater, fables, and salons. Vincent Dupuis's essay, "Querelle du théâtre et Querelle des femmes," makes a very convincing argument that the language used within the *querelle du théâtre* to speak about attending theatrical spectacles parallels the language associated with women as evil creatures of their passions. By looking at the two *querelles* in tandem, Dupuis claims that we are able to understand better the critics' and playwrights' desire to develop theatrical intrigue that draws in the spectators without stepping too far towards licentiousness (or *licence*) that might lead them astray. Despite the significant historical gap between their subject matters, this essay fits quite nicely with Isabelle Pichet's instructive essay on the *comité de selection au Salon* whose primary role was to assess the potential licentiousness of works (Pichet especially highlights the problem of the nude) proposed for mid- to late-eighteenth-century salons. In both essays, the authors capture the dilemma facing those in charge of assessing "decency"—which was clearly a moving target. Pichet offers a very helpful distinction between the content of the works being assessed and their critics' attention "aux effets et à l'incitation au vice" that the works might cause (p. 114). The artwork or spectacle poses a moral risk that most definitely exceeds the limits of its display. In the remaining essay in this section, Marie-Ange Croft offers an interesting reading of the fables of Edme Boursault, a little known playwright and fabulist writing in the last quarter of the seventeenth century. Croft argues that Boursault's use of fables in his comedies adds gravitas to the comedic genre and helps to rehabilitate comedy as a potential source for moral lessons.

The third section of the book "Le vice nécessaire à l'utilité publique" offers two essays that examine how eighteenth-century thinkers move beyond the *moraliste* concerns of the late seventeenth century. Karina Roy's analysis of Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees* discusses how Mandeville's insights about the utility of vice for a wealth-based society influence the thinking of Hume, Helvétius, and Adam Smith. Roy argues that the basic understanding of the human being's social role transforms in this period away from the honor-based model of the seventeenth century and toward a model driven by self-interest: "L'homme sera vu comme une machine dont le moteur est le désir, et le projet d'une société libérale produira des individus rationnels qui répondent à des intérêts individuels" (p. 132). In striking contrast, Émilie Joly's essay analyzing the work of Geneviève Thiroux d'Arconville suggests that Thiroux d'Arconville seeks to harness the science of observation in order to overcome the failings of *l'amour-propre*. After reading the

two essays, one feels that one is witnessing a significant epistemic divide between the philosophy of economics and the philosophy of science that is left unexplored because the essays do not refer to one another. While this is perhaps beyond the scope of a revision of conference papers, this reader would have been very interested in seeing how these authors navigate the breach that their papers seem to open up.

The fourth section, “Évolutions et révolutions de la parole chrétienne au XVIIIe siècle,” continues to explore how eighteenth-century thinkers increasingly focus on the world of interiority as the locus of both moral and religious questions. Alexandre Landry’s essay analyzes the work of Antoine de Caraccioli and Antoine-Adrien Lamourette as evidence for how certain thinkers, loosely inspired by figures such as Teresa of Ávila, employ an idea of “les délices de la religion” in order to allow for the incorporation of a kind of sensual pleasure within religious experience and account for the passions in a way that affirms their role within religious experience. Vincent Godin-Filion uses a comparison between Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Chateaubriand’s commentary on Milton’s work to demonstrate how Chateaubriand’s interpretation of the text moves from bad choices (for Milton) to a bad nature (for Chateaubriand) and from an interior model of individual liberty to an external model of liberty that depends on maintaining aristocratic hierarchies. Godin-Filion suggests that Chateaubriand’s reinterpretations (or perhaps misinterpretations) reveal a great deal about his anxieties about revolution.

The final section of the collection, “Les lumières libertines et la morale,” contains three essays that discuss the work of Sade, Denon, and Casanova, respectively. Kathleen Hayes’s essay provides a very helpful compendium of references to Diogenes and cynicism in Sade’s work so as to place Sade in the intellectual tradition of the cynic and explain the “mécanisme des plaisirs qu’il s’attache à décrire en détail aux lecteurs” (p. 177). Luba Markovskaia analyzes the pre- and post-Revolution versions of Denon’s “Point de lendemain” in order to show shifts in his perspectives on morality that Markovskaia attributes to the influence of the Revolution. And Nelson Guilbert’s work on Casanova examines Laforgue’s rewriting of Casanova as well as three contemporary scholars’ interpretations of that rewriting. All three essays offer helpful, preliminary new insights for scholars of eighteenth-century *libertinage*.

In short, those who study any of the writers analyzed in this volume will find interesting food for thought in the individual essay that examines that writer. A cover-to-cover reading will not yield an overarching argument but will certainly yield some insights or avenues for additional exploration nevertheless. The book would have been improved by more dialogue between the essays that share a section. Even without such cross-pollination, however, the book still contains numerous ideas that are very worthy of note and further development.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Thibault Catel, “Exemplarité et écriture du monstrueux dans les histoires tragiques (1559-1644): le vice, entre édification morale et horreur prodigieuse”

Jean-Alexandre Perras, “‘Girouettes à tous vents’: le génie de la morale aux XVIIe siècle”

André Laidli, “La vertu peut-elle ne pas être un ‘vice déguisé’? La question du ‘hors-texte’ et du non-dit dans les *Maximes* de La Rochefoucauld”

Julien Perrier-Chartrand, “La faillite de la vertu aristocratique dans *Manlius Capitolinus* d’Antoine de La Fosse”

Vincent Dupuis, “Querelle du théâtre et Querelle des femmes: convergences et lieux communs”

Marie-Ange Croft, “Le Pigeon qui voulait devenir Corneille ou la fable d’Edme Boursault (1638-1701)”

Isabelle Pichet, “Le comité de sélection au Salon: juge de la moralité”

Katrina Roy, “Les vertus du vice: une économie de l’homme”

Émilie Joly, “Des vices de l’amour-propre aux vertus de l’utilité chez Geneviève Thiroux d’Arconville (1720-1805)”

Alexandre Landry, “L’apologétique sensible au temps des Lumières, entre les inquiétudes de l’âme et les ‘délices de la religion”

Vincent Godin-Filion, “Satan et le péché originel: penser la liberté chrétienne dans le long XVIIIe siècle”

Kathleen Hayes, “L’indécence cynique chez Sade: une étude des occurrences sadiennes du cynisme”

Luba Markovskaia, “‘Point de morale, je vous en conjure!’: le problème de la morale dans les réécritures de *Point de lendemain* de Vivant Denon”

Nelson Guilbert, “L’homme sans morale: regards croisés sur Giacomo Casanova”

Ann T. Delehanty
Reed College
delehana@reed.edu

Copyright © 2017 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 republication 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