

H-France Review Vol. 17 (April 2017), No. 67

Anne-Sophie Fournier-Plamondon and Andrée-Anne Plourde, eds., *Argent, commerce et échange sous l'Ancien Régime: XIIe colloque "Jeunes chercheurs" du Cercle interuniversitaire d'étude sur la République des Lettres (CIERL)*. Paris: Hermann, 2016. 184 pp. Notes and bibliography. 24.00€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-7056-9238-4.

Review by Julia V. Douthwaite, University of Notre Dame.

For scholars of French history and culture, the economic affairs of the ancien régime hold endless fascination. This slim volume provides a glimpse of how some young scholars are tackling the subject today. According to the preface by Anne-Sophie Fournier-Plamondon and Andrée-Anne Plourde, historiography used to focus on describing the social and economic conditions of narrow demographic units—a town, a region, or a nation—whereas the best writing in French history is now characterized by a shift away from this laser-like precision. Recent methods allow readers to learn about French economic history from broader perspectives, the editors announce, and they list three ways that this openness has benefited the field: by explaining how the French operated in business networks that ranged across boundaries in “international and transnational” networks; by studying period treatises on economic theory (by Physiocrats and *encyclopédistes*, for example); and by publishing biographical studies of the people who worked in the culture business, such as art collectors and book publishers, as well as those whose work gave their authors access to royal pensions (pp. 1-2). They observe that the historical study of business practices, money, and financial transactions also encompasses analysis of the artwork and literature that portray merchants, misers, and bailiffs (*huissiers*), such as Molière’s comedy-ballet, *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (1670), Prévost’s novel, *L’histoire du chevalier Des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* (1731), and Greuze’s painting, *La Dame de charité* (1773). Taking as a model art historian Philippe Hamon’s study, *L’or des peintres: l’image de l’argent du XVe au XVIIe siècle* (2003), the editors argue that attitudes toward commercial exchanges and money broadly writ can be seen everywhere in the mores and belief systems of modern European society.[1]

During two days in May 2012, the two editor-organizers hosted the twelfth colloquium in the series for young researchers held by the CIERL (Centre interuniversitaire d’étude sur la République des Lettres), a research arm of the Université Laval in Québec. This volume presents the revised papers to scholarly readers.

The volume is organized into four sections. The first, “*Beati pauperes*,” studies charity as it was practiced by institutions, notably two special organizations: those that housed and provided assistance to destitute Veronese women, known as monastery-conservatoires among other designations; and the humble institution known today as the pawn shop. In a delightful foray into the history of usury and altruism, one learns that pawn shops were first invented in fifteenth-century Italy, where they were known by the more poetic name that still marks the European cityscape, the *Mont-de-piété*.

The second section, “*Réel ou figuré*,” includes a chapter on the sugar business in the eighteenth century, with emphasis on the so-called “*mal français*” or backwardness of French techniques and trade. The

author argues that the French really were inferior businessmen, and brings some humor to the topic, as when she drolly comments on a long complaint of helplessness made by a refinery owner, “C’est oublier un peu vite leur part de responsabilité dans cet échec” (p. 59). Next is an essay that argues for an “economy of vengeance” running through the duels that wreak havoc in Pierre Corneille’s tragic drama, *Le Cid* (1637).^[2] Analyzing the “honor business” or *commerce de l’honneur* in period manuals of conduct and moralizing, the author raises points that echo interestingly with the essay by Marie-Cécile Schang. The latter illuminates similarly dangerous scenes of machismo in a play published about 130 years later by Sedaine, whose characters talk it out instead of killing each other.

The third section, “Autour de Charles Sorel,” presents two chapters on Sorel (1597-1674), the author best known for his satiric, picaresque novel, *La Vraie histoire comique de Francion* (1622). One chapter analyzes economic language and theories in his *Science Universelle* (1634-1644) while the other compares successive editions of books by Sorel, paying close attention to the “espace périgraphique” (p. 124).^[3]

The fourth section, “Ecrit, joué et chanté,” includes three literary studies: one on Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* (1600), Ben Jonson’s *Volpone or the Fox* (1606), and Molière’s *L’Avare* (1668); one on two plays by Sedaine; and a third on Prévost’s novels with an eye for what they can tell us about the concept of *libéralité* or generosity.

If one were to evaluate the contents of this volume by comparing the sum-total of its parts listed above to the highlights of current trends in French historiography cited in the preface, one would have to conclude that its coverage is spotty. Some of the “hottest” topics put on the table, about “international and transnational” trade networks, for example, are examined in only one contribution (the excellent essay by Maud Villeret). However, Villeret’s piece fully realizes what Nancy L. Green called the ideal transnational approach, in that it “is not merely an extension of geographic scope. It implies interrogating the relationships between regions (especially, but not only, as nations), and above all it means questioning the impact of circulation, mobility, ideas and interactions on all parties/things involved”^[4]. The volume also includes an essay on economic theory, as seen in Charles Sorel’s *Science Universelle* (1634-1668), and two essays that delve into the biography of a writer (Sorel).

To the American reader, more attuned to the rough-and-tumble politicizing of cultural studies, and a book market that demands that authors pay attention to a topic’s relevance to today’s readers, this volume’s style and methods may seem surprisingly traditional. The sources cited are split evenly between archival research and scholarship, with only a few mentions of more polemic or timely titles. The style is couched in the “objective” first-person plural or the passive voice, apart from a few instances of bold “je” clauses, and close readings of literary texts are abundant. One hastens to add, however, that the essays are not without merit and some are quite spectacular. Even the most timid are based on solid, “scientific methodology” as it is known in France. They provide mines of amazing primary material, conscientiously documented, and extensive bibliographies of French-language secondary literature that may be unknown in the United States.

In chapter one, Massimo Scandola describes the routine lives of single women who sought refuge in the institutions known as the *monastères-conservatoires* of Verona. One of his most surprising discoveries is the extent to which some of these women worked as seamstresses making clothing, and the fact that sewing could be a means to economic ascension and the relative freedom of marriage or at least release from the convent. The next essay, by Guillaume Pastureau, is thorough and engaging, and the only one that dares make an explicit connection to the modern-day world of finance. He opens with the 210th anniversary of the Crédit municipal of Bordeaux. Although the CM is currently known as a commercial bank, it began as a Mont-de-piété (MDP) in 1801. It is interesting to ponder the origins of this institution (1462, in Perugia, Italy) and to see how it developed in sync with societies that were undergoing the transformation from a local barter economy to a broader involvement in economic affairs, thanks to the circulation of money. Pastureau rewards the reader with useful insights into Jewish

thinking, which accepted usury as a form of solidarity among its members whom they considered “potential paupers” (p. 29). Also helpful is his reminder that the European economy that we know today, in which trade and banking are conducted more or less freely across national, ethnic, and linguistic boundaries, was already in place by 1500 in two zones: northern Italy and Flanders and northern Europe. He also astonished this reader with evidence of interest rates rising as high as 120%, among pawnbrokers in Bordeaux (n13, p. 34), putting some real-life meaning behind the warning, *caveat emptor*.

Villeret’s essay debunks several mainstays of French history regarding the policies of Louis XIV’s *contrôleur général des finances*, Colbert (1661-1683). While critics of mercantilism have condemned Colbert for sowing the seeds of “le mal français” (that is, France’s lack of industrial dynamism), Villeret provides ample evidence for sharing the blame. Given the sudden rise of protectionism world-wide and the uncertain relations dictating British, American, and French economic policies in the near future, this essay made for riveting reading. Villeret sounds an alarming note, demonstrating how powerful a blow to trade a country’s government can be, especially when combined with state-sanctioned persecution of religious minorities (that is, the 1685 Revocation of the Edit de Nantes). Yet her analysis ultimately points the finger squarely at the French businessmen themselves. On one page, she describes them with no fewer than four terms designating weakness (“timoré,” “résigné,” “infériorité,” “impossible”), and quotes a Nantais merchant who whines about his compatriots being “deceived every day” by cunning English and Dutch rivals (p. 59). The essay by Julien Perrier-Chartrand analyzes the semantics of family honor and vengeance by studying duel scenes in *Le Cid*, showing how literature can be used to mirror trends in social history (p. 79).

Marie-Florence Sguaitamatti’s essay on Sorel’s *Science Universelle* comes in at twenty pages, making it the longest in the volume. Ably documented with many citations from Sorel’s writing on jurisprudence and morality, it reveals that economic themes were interwoven with issues that we would consider whimsical if not downright far-fetched, such as alchemy. Matthieu Fortin provides close readings of key passages in several books by Sorel, arguing that the author is representative of the legions who suffered under the fluctuating laws of Louis XIII’s reign (1610-1643). He calls Sorel’s situation, rather poetically, “un espace entre-deux,” which trapped the writer in “un mouvement d’incongruité erratique” (p. 111). His conclusion argues that literary texts reflect socio-historical trends, as “symptomatiques des exigences légales et administratives du régime du privilège” (p. 124).

A comparative approach combining insights from Elizabethan England and France under Louis XIV characterizes the chapter by Tatiana Burtin on three plays by Shakespeare, Jonson, and Molière that satirize greedy money-lenders. She is visibly inspired by Max Weber’s definition of capitalism as the logic behind the rational accumulation of goods in view of their future sale for profit (p. 131). Tools of literary analysis allow her to make the claim that relations based on money changed over time. While the English were already aligning their views with the Protestant work ethic, the French case was marked by a “schizophrenic tendency,” writes Burtin, driven by the as-yet-unresolved struggle between the aristocratic “disinterest” in financial matters and the bourgeois preoccupation with working to make money (pp. 144-146). This essay makes common cause with Villeret’s regarding economic backwardness or “retard économique” (p. 140). One wonders what these two young scholars, both employed by French universities, would make of the recent comment by their colleague, the historian Eric Vuillard. In a barb on what he called “the consanguinity between finance and State power,” Vuillard insinuated that there are striking similarities between the work of ENA-trained Emmanuel Macron, who served the Socialist government from 2014 until last fall and is currently a candidate for president of France, and the Genevan banker Jacques Necker, who served under Louis XVI. Both cater to the private interests of a closed circle of power brokers. [5]

The chapter by Marie-Cécile Schang takes readers to the theater during the crucial years of the mid-eighteenth century, when the *philosophes* Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot were in their heyday, scandalizing and fascinating audiences in Parisian salons and the imperial courts of Russia and Prussia,

and, to a lesser but still important extent, inspiring the denizens of coffeehouses in London and Edinburgh. Schang argues that the interest in comparing two works by Sedaine lies in their apparently contradictory portrayal of money matters (p. 149). As in the essay on *Le Cid*, the history of duels lies behind the plot of *Le Philosophe sans le savoir*. However, the threat never materializes because, unlike Corneille's characters, Sedaine's are able to talk their way out of conflicts. Ample plot summaries and close readings allow Schang to conclude that the choice of genre exercised control on plot: while the characters in the drama, *Le Philosophe sans le savoir*, resolve their worries through talking, the characters in Sedaine's comic opera, *Le Magnifique*, resort to combat to achieve the same end.

Audrey Faulot's chapter, on Prévost's novels *Manon Lescaut*, *Le Doyen de Killerine* (1735-40), and *L'Histoire d'une Grecque moderne* (1740), provides an unfortunately too-brief overview of French-language titles on the concept of the gift and relies on the mystifying language of High Structuralism to make her arguments.[6] In an opening gambit, she declares, "Nous envisagerons les enjeux de pouvoir non seulement dans une perspective actantielle, mais comme partie prenante d'une réflexion plus large sur la domination comme mode de relation entre des individus" (p. 167). This bloodless language leads her to some murky conclusions, as on page 170 where the critic throws up her hands over the status of Théopé the "modern Greek," whether she is a gift or the object of a contract, making the analysis less sensitive to other potential subjects of interest. Surely it could or would be worthwhile pondering the minority status of the many characters who are persecuted and possibly enslaved for their ethnic and/or religious identities (think of the Irish Catholics of *Le Doyen* and the Oriental Zara/Théopé of *L'Histoire*).[7] Faulot claims that Prévost's work is "ideologically saturated" with money matters that still have the power to perplex us today, notably gift-giving and contract-signing, and it is all the more a pity that her analysis relies so heavily on dense lit-crit jargon (pp. 180-181).

In sum, the volume contains essays rich in provocative examples of money wreaking havoc on people's lives and morals. Given their pertinence to today's political scene, some of these essays could be parlayed into more topical pieces for broader audiences, and/or tightened up for greater argumentative power. The subjects discussed include moments of political and cultural crisis that were caused by fluctuating economic policy, a simmering problem we have known for the past twenty years and that may come to a boiling point shortly, with the rise of populist, protectionist governments in the UK, the US, and possibly in France in 2017. I hope that these young scholars will take courage in the knowledge that their mastery of primary materials is safely assured. Perhaps their next works may take on a more engaged tone or dare to speak to non-specialist audiences. They certainly have enough material to inspire readers with useful insights from past moments of socio-economic crisis. Such perspective may offer solace and entertainment, if not strategy, as we brace ourselves for the disruptions in national and international markets that lie ahead.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Anne-Sophie Fournier-Plamondon and Andrée-Anne Plourde, "Préface"

Massimo Scandola, "'Convertite,' 'Dimesse' et 'Citelle': les femmes pauvres et les conservatoires féminins dans la République de Venise. Le cas du diocèse de Vérone (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècle)"

Guillaume Pastureau, "L'argent secours sous l'Ancien Régime: Le cas du Mont-de-piété"

Maud Villeret, "Freins et encouragements: le rôle ambigu de l'état dans le commerce du sucre aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles"

Julien Perrier-Chartrand, "Le commerce de l'honneur dans *Le Cid* de Pierre Corneille"

Marie-Florence Sguaitamatti, "Réflexions sur l'économie dans la *Science universelle* de Charles Sorel"

Matthieu Fortin, "Des romans 'entre-deux': Régime du privilège et réécriture chez Charles Sorel"

Tatiana Burtin, "Figures de l'avarice et de l'usure dans les grandes comédies: Le rapport à l'argent, à la richesse et à l'échange en Angleterre et en France aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles"

Marie-Cécile Schang, "Ici l'habit fait valoir l'homme, là l'homme fait valoir l'habit: enjeux idéologiques et dramaturgiques du rapport à l'argent dans *Le philosophe sans le savoir* et *Le Magnifique* de Sedaine"

Audrey Faulot, "Libéralité, dette et reconnaissance dans les romans de Prévost: De la 'généreuse sensibilité' aux 'obligations extraordinaires'"

NOTES

[1] Modern should here be understood as designating the period from 1450 to 1789, what American scholars would consider "early modern."

[2] Note 80 sends us to the title page of the first edition, where it was called it a "tragi-comédie." *Le Cid* would not be labeled a "tragédie" until the second edition of 1661 (p. 74). For today's readers, it seems inconceivable that this heart-breaker could be considered "comic." The discrepancy seems worthy of further study by a historian of emotions.

[3] For the uninitiated, that is what used to be called the "paratext." It means the pages of the book where editorial and publishing information appear, the royal censor's approval is officially stamped, and where the author or editor sometimes publish appeals to the reader, the critic, or a powerful patron or patroness, or claim to be the recipients of a found manuscript. In the 1980s and 1990s, many dissertations were written by Ph.D. students inspired by the structuralist Gérard Genette, in his *Figures I* (1976), *Figures II*, and *Figures III* (originally written in 1959-1972). The author of this chapter does not cite Genette, but he is clearly following in his footsteps. See Leyla Ezdinili, "George Sand's Literary Transvestism: Pre-texts and Contexts," diss. Ph.D. (Princeton University, 1988).

[4] Nancy L. Green, "French History and the Transnational Turn," *French Historical Studies* 37, 4 (2014): 553.

[5] Julie Clarini, "Entretien croisé" with Arlette Farge and Eric Vuillard, *Le Monde*, Sept. 9, 2016, 7.

[6] Alongside Marcel Mauss's classic essay of 1923-24, Faulot lists Jean Starobinski, *Largesse* (2007), Geneviève Lafrance, *Qui perd gagne* (2008), and Catherine Duprat, *Le Temps des philanthropes* (1993).

[7] Douthwaite, *Exotic Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 26. As a Circassian, Zara was likely born to Sunni Muslim parents. <http://www.encyclopedia.com/places/commonwealth-independent-states-and-baltic-nations/cis-and-baltic-political-geography-110>.

Julia V. Douthwaite
University of Notre Dame
jdouthwa@nd.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 redistribution/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