
H-France Review Vol. 21 (October 2021), No. 201

Ellen McClure, *The Logic of Idolatry in Seventeenth-Century French Literature*. Cambridge, U.K.: Boydell & Brewer, 2020. Notes on translations, acknowledgements, and bibliography. 253 pp. \$95.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781843845508; \$24.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781787446892.

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The major premise of Ellen McClure's analysis of idolatry centers on the persistent memory concerning the polemics over religious images between Protestants and Catholics at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth centuries in France. The concept of idolatry, or "logic" as McClure designates it, is held to permeate the cultural imagination of the period in question such that it constitutes a sort of "dark matter" (p. 5), everywhere present, and no more so than in "nearly every major writer and thinker" (p. 3). So, it is held, the authors chosen for study, Honoré d'Urfé, Descartes, La Fontaine, Molière, Racine, and Madame de Sévigné, were "deeply conversant with the logic of idolatry," a claim McClure herself identifies as "surprising or provocative" (p. 6). The reason for this derives from the fact that such a perspective has escaped the attention of previous scholars. Indeed, McClure aims—without further specification—to "refute the narrative that characterizes seventeenth-century France as somehow immune to, or safely beyond, the polemics that tore the country apart a century earlier" (p. 26). In this perspective, McClure seeks an engagement with "alternative models of human agency and artistic creation" (p. 6). She anchors the support for her exploration of idolatry in a perspective on the relation of the human to the divine, where movement toward the divine is interrupted by the greater attraction of the former, especially in the elevation of human creation. In this way, in her own terms, the extension of the notion of idolatry moves from a narrow understanding of it to notions of an authorship that rivals that of the Creator. This helps to situate the study of the problem beyond purely religious history.

McClure argues that, despite Descartes's silence on the confessional divisions of recent memory, "the polemics surrounding the issue of idolatry provide a powerful, yet neglected, subtext to [his] insistence upon the immateriality of the human soul" (p. 75), notably in the *Méditations* and his replies to the objections subsequently made to them by a variety of individuals, including Thomas Hobbes and Gassendi. Although McClure's account of the objections she considers is highly informative, it is incomplete since she does not include Antoine Arnauld's strictures on the mind-body relation, so crucial to her own argument on the *Méditations*. La Fontaine's position on the writing of fables is "deeply connected to the logic of idolatry," this logic being defined in contrast to a system "wherein the materiality of the object must always be placed in service to, and eventually efface itself before, a higher truth" (p. 118). In its own way, Molière's theater shows itself to be "intricately engaged with the problematics of idolatry" (p. 189), with Racine

invoking idolatry in *Phèdre* as addressing “the neat division between pagan and Christian” (p. 196). D’Urfé offers an “imaginative, inventive exploration...of issues raised by Catholic and Protestant polemicists” (p. 73); and Madame de Sévigné is conscious of her obsessive love for her daughter as a distraction from love of the Christian God. Finally, the visit of the Siamese ambassadors to the court in 1686 and its reception in literature are considered as continuing to reveal the emotional pull surrounding idolatry.

Most prominently, McClure’s introduction focuses in detail and with acuteness of purpose on religious images. We follow the historical critique of images and their legitimation from various Fathers of the Church to Augustine’s assertion, helpful to McClure’s own extension of idolatry, that a suspicion of images may encompass any incorrect interpretation of signs and may therefore include language. Calvin’s attack on Catholic idols is accompanied by a welcome reminder of the defense of religious images in Louis Richeome’s *Tableaux sacrez des figures mystiques du tres-auguste sacrifice et sacrement de l’Eucharistie* (1601), which itself expands on the Protestants’ limited traditional associations they applied to images. This then opens up the discussion, applied by McClure to her chosen authors, of the status of human authorship in the context of divine dominion where, in her telling expression, authorship comes “under suspicion” (p. 13). It might have been pertinent at some stage, however, to have mentioned the historical error of Calvin, who claimed that the first Christians eschewed all pictorial or sculptural representation of their religion. Moreover, historians like David Freedberg have argued that rival Biblical texts to the implications of the Decalogue like Daniel, 9:21 and Psalms, 98:8 counter the allegedly illicit use of images in Christian culture.

The chapter on Descartes begins with the assumption that he seeks to establish whether God can be accessed “without recourse either to images or to revelation” (p. 75). McClure views her enterprise here as restoring the theological dimension to Descartes’s philosophy in contradistinction to “[c]enturies of scholarship” that have engaged primarily with his assault on the Aristotelian version of how to understand the physical universe (p. 84). In a sustained analysis of the *Méditations*, McClure focuses her attention on Descartes’s mission to free the mind from images and “to fend off the seductive and misleading power of the image on the soul” (p. 84). Consequently, the celebrated thought experiment concerning the piece of wax is invoked as calling into question “the usefulness and value of mimetic representation” (p. 82), quite an interpretative leap. There follows an interesting and complex disquisition on problems surrounding Descartes as author in the face of God the Creator.

Some caveats emerge here. Descartes’s use of the title *Méditations* within Christian tradition as “deliberately provocative, and even scandalous” (p. 83) seems to have escaped the notice of his contemporaries. There is no reason to believe that the piece of wax has anything to do with mimesis as such, and centuries of scholarship may be correct in focussing on it as establishing the need for strictly inductive scientific principles rather than conclusions made from observation. Moreover, assessing Descartes’s assistance in the conversion of unbelievers in the Sorbonne letter requires care. His proof of God is helpful, but no more than helpful, since no self-respecting Catholic could argue that certainty about God could dispense with the mystery of revelation. Descartes does not himself claim this (see the quotation on pp. 74–75, n. 4). Equally, McClure’s conclusion that “Descartes remained convinced that he had managed to solve the problems raised by the debates over idolatry” (p. 112) fails to convince even with the quotation she provides, as with the rather startling statement that in the relation of the material to the immaterial “the label ‘Christian’ papered over important ideological rifts on...this subject” (p. 76).

Nor can there be any “vehement commitment” on Descartes’s part to the modern concept of “creationism” (p. 88), which argues against the wholly different context of evolution.

In respect of d’Urfé’s *L’Astrée*, McClure challenges the accepted position of the novel that it constitutes a “Neoplatonic celebration of the transformative power of love” (p. 23), arguing rather that it foregrounds a considerable degree of representational instability and that it portrays the fractured nature of the world. Itself infused with the lexicon of idolatry through adoration inspired by human love, *L’Astrée* is ideal territory for investigating the confusion of creator and creature. Indeed, McClure presents us with a successful and densely argued discussion of problems related to “any kind of smooth transition from earth to heaven and back again” (p. 39). She advances as another contributory aspect of d’Urfé’s position on idolatry that the latter may just as easily be promoted by language as by image whereby “[the] intent, not the medium, constitutes the sin” (p. 37), thus pointedly echoing the words of Calvin quoted in the introduction. It nonetheless comes as a surprise to find McClure concluding that “d’Urfé dares to ask whether idolatry is such a terrible sin after all” (p. 73), and this from a friend of Saint François de Sales.

The chapter on La Fontaine provides one of the biggest challenges of this study, namely that the *Fables* constitute, almost in their entirety, an implicit and explicit engagement with idolatry, although McClure is right to perceive that, more generally, they work “to unsettle our notion of human agency” (p. 129). In a bravely sustained analysis surrounding issues of authorship in line with her main argument, she presents a picture of the poet as something of an iconoclast in his own right in his stand against a model of poetic composition emphasizing the relation of human creation to the divine, a stand “grounded in his conviction that it feeds humanity’s appetite for a certain kind of divinity” (p. 135). McClure’s contention that he consistently problematizes the notion of authorship contains many pertinent points. We are, however, surprised by the idea that his central position is that “the poems’ wisdom is only accessible to those who loosen their grip on the biblical creation story” (p. 114). In this perspective, La Fontaine “highlights the uneasy juxtaposition of pagan and Christian” (p. 115). The acceptability or otherwise of McClure’s interpretation rests on the degree of conscious theological intention we are willing to ascribe to La Fontaine in his “deft” exploitation of the theme of idolatry (p. 121).

With the exception of a sensitive discussion of Antoine Godeau’s *Sonnet sur la comédie*, in which he deals somewhat ambiguously with the status of theater and the moral lessons it may convey, the level of interpretative inflation evident in previous discussions continues with McClure’s consideration of Molière and, in particular, her analysis of *Sganarelle ou le Cocu imaginaire*, where Sganarelle’s wife falls in love with a portrait of Lélie and, in so doing, behaves precisely in a way that Protestants accuse Catholics of. Molière thus aligns himself with critics of idolatry and pursues the theatrical argument along the lines of “how belief is constructed and maintained” (p. 194), although the comic aspect lies in the “parodic literalization” of idolatrous performance (p. 190). The play then becomes associated with the treatment of God and religion where Sganarelle comes to constitute a “reference to the Christian God” (p. 195). Racine’s *Phèdre* also becomes associated with the artistic consciousness in seventeenth-century French religious terms of idolatry through the crucial role of Hippolyte, whose own destruction assumes “intimations of iconoclasm” (p. 204). Unfortunately, McClure makes much of the capitalization of “Fils” whereby a Christian audience would have “immediately, if unconsciously” noted the foreshadowing of “the salvific power of the love of Christ” (p. 199). Such capitalization is, however, a typographical convention in seventeenth-century printing and not, of course, noticeable in performance. The study devoted to Madame de Sévigné’s relationship with her daughter is loaded towards idolatry,

and contains a number of perceptive passages, particularly in the excellent consideration of Providence. These are somewhat undermined by unbridled analytical excursions, as when the pen, papers, and postal service come to represent “a curious extension and application of the discourse of idolatry” (p. 153) and when her writing desk assumes sinister proportions as the temple of Janus. Moreover, the narrow focus on idolatry gives the impression of Madame de Sévigné’s religious life as an almost permanent dark night of the soul. It really was more joyful than that.

A number of McClure’s claims require review. The first is that there has been no “religious turn” in French studies “wherein religious categories are brought to bear on ostensibly non-religious literary or historical texts” (p. 6). Philippe Sellier’s three-volume *Port-Royal et la littérature*; Marc Fumaroli’s writings on Corneille; and any number of studies of La Rochefoucauld among others could have been invoked in this context.[1] Secondly, the ubiquity of an engagement with idolatry by “nearly every French writer and thinker” remains unsubstantiated except for the subjects of her study, unless idolatry is so generally defined as to be effectively dissolved as a specific focus. Indeed, at least some of the aspects of idolatry McClure evokes can be encompassed in the preoccupation of preachers and religious moralists with the more general issue of the attraction of “the world.” Overall, apart from the literalists in epic poetry and painting who objected to the appearance of the gods in religious subjects, the seventeenth century in France could be held to display a distinctly relaxed approach to the pagan world. No artist who depicted its gods failed to receive invitations to work for the church. Richelieu commissioned three bacchanales from Poussin.

There is considerable traction in the discussion of the status of authorship in McClure’s book, and she often applies detailed and dynamic analyses to the relation of the human to the divine. The difficulty lies in what is claimed beyond the analyses of the chosen subjects and ways in which they lead to considerable leaps of interpretation from the literary to the political. La Fontaine is viewed as not only undercutting Cartesian philosophy—the poet was undoubtedly hostile to Descartes’s notion of animal machines—but also as undercutting “the assumptions underpinning the social and political order of absolutist France” (p. 142). Equally, he is, out of an “acute sensitivity,” highlighting no less than “the complexity of negotiating materiality, representation, and belief in seventeenth-century France” (p. 121). Racine’s *Phèdre* undermines “arguably” “the economy of seventeenth-century French society at large” (p. 203). Did their readers pick up these pointers to subversion? The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes “offered France the tantalizing prospect of solving the sticky problem of idolatry once and for all” (p. 219).

The main problem with the historical aspects of McClure’s book lies in viewing idolatry as a permanent existential threat that “contributed to a deep anxiety that permeated the century” along with the “fragile alliance” between church and state as alleged in the last chapter of the book relating the visit of Siamese ambassadors to the court in 1686 (pp. 220-221). Here, too, we read the excessive claim that “religion in France continued to be read through the lens of idolatry” (p. 215). McClure’s narrowing of the religious perspective starts and ends in the depiction of a sort of Catholic pathology inculcated by the memory of Catholic/Protestant polemics permanently embedded in the subconscious of the faithful. For example, readers of the first of three of La Fontaine’s idolatry fables would find it impossible not to think of “the episodes of violent iconoclasm that had marked Europe for over a century” (p. 117). Indeed, the century grows “increasingly uncertain of the proper relation between the terrestrial and the transcendent,” another statement without supporting evidence (p. 124). Generally, society at this

time is held also to be dominated by “mastery and fear” (p. 139, n. 32). No fuller understanding of Catholic Reformation France could possibly lead to these conclusions. Certainly, Ellen McClure has not sought to produce a work of history. On the other hand, she situates her whole study firmly in a particular historical perspective as the subtext to her chosen authors. It is unfortunate that many of her claims and assumptions beyond (but also including) the texts undercut the various successes of her presentation.

NOTE

[1] See Philippe Sellier, *Port-Royal et la littérature*, 3 vols. (Paris: Champion, 1999-2019); Marc Fumaroli, *Héros et orateurs: rhétorique et dramaturgie cornélienne* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1996); Jean Lafond, *La Rochefoucauld: augustanisme et littérature* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1986); and Michael Moriarty, *Disguised Vices: Theories of Virtue in Early Modern Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

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ISSN 1553-9172