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Vincent Robert-Nicoud, *The World Upside Down in 16th Century French Literature and Visual Culture*. Faux-Titre, 426. Leiden/Boston: Brill/Rodopi, 2018. xiv + 284 pp. Bibliography and index. €121.00 (hb.). ISBN 978-90-04-38183-4; €121.00 (eb.). ISBN 978-90-04-38182-7.

Review by Tom Conley, Harvard University.

Initially a doctoral thesis written and defended at Oxford University, this monograph studies how a common topos, *le monde à l'envers*, takes shape and evolves from the age of Humanism in the 1530s and 1540s up to and through the Wars of Religion (1562-1598). Contending that print-culture refashions its earlier expression in late-medieval literature, theater and spectacle, Robert-Nicoud notes, first, that the topos lends itself to common rhetorical figures, including “*hysteron-proteron adynaton/impossibilia*, oxymoron, paradox and antithesis” (p. 6). It is especially effective, he adds, in genres exploiting parody and satire, in which the burlesque and grotesque take command. Built upon binary opposition, paradox, and antithesis, the topos, second, spins off the time-held (and now bankrupt) ideology of a world in *concordia discors*, a dynamic harmony of contraries. When circumstance throws it “out of joint,” inversion is marshalled as a corrective measure to restore order and continuity. Manifest in medieval carnivals and feasts of fools, changing the perspective from which a given culture orders its social hierarchies, disorder serves the cause of order. In classical literature, resonant in Lucan’s *Civil War* (in manuscript in 1469, later printed in Lyon in 1519 and 1523), in the account of the Battle of Pharsalus, the topos is conveyed through storm, tempest and disorder. Synchronously, in the *Gigantomachia*, a myth presaging the end of the world that Ovid relates in the *Metamorphoses*, in their attempt to topple the heavens monstrous beasts turn the world upside down.

Chapter one, “Adages, Paradoxes and Emblems,” studies how the topos has moralizing resonance in literature and art of the first half of the sixteenth century. In his *Adagia* (first published in 1520) Erasmus compiles and makes available a compendium of maxims, many of inversion and absurdity, such as *plaustrum bovem trahit* [to put the plow before the oxen], that Rabelais exploits for comically corrective ends in the famous description (in 1535) of Gargantua’s childhood and adolescence. Acquiring a darker cast in the author’s later books, they find visual analogy in Bruegel’s “Netherlandish Proverbs” (1559) and his “Land of Cockaigne” (1567), two paintings of strong socio-political innuendo. The Dutch humanist’s *Encomium Moriae* (1509), a spectacular staging of the topos, asks its readers to consider the world from the standpoint of Pauline wisdom of folly. Beginning with Alciato’s *Emblematum liber* (1531), the sudden and soon enduring popularity of emblem-books owes much to how the topos, depicted in text and image for innocuously moral ends, befits the entrepreneurial design of print-culture in the 1540s and 1550s. The homiletic cast of Corrozet, La Perrière, Sambucus, Aneau, and others of the same moment

gives way to politically motivated emblems in Montenay's *Emblemes ou devises chrestiennes* (composed in 1561 and published during a flush of Protestant optimism in 1567). Likewise, carnivalesque and scatological emblems that in the same breath champion *le bas corporel* and misogyny ["women...cheat and act against the natural order of things" (p. 68)] are retrofitted to address political upheaval in the Wars of Religion, notably when *discord* becomes a political animal in both Montenay's *Emblemata* (1580) and Théodore de Bèze's *Vrais Pourtraits* (1581).

Chapter two, "Rabelais's World Upside Down," follows a similar trajectory. The joyously carnivalesque character of the early Rabelais (that in *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, Céline, one of Rabelais's most fervent readers, has Bardamu call *le communisme joyeux du caca* when he visits the public toilets below Wall Street), is set forward, first, in the *Tiers Livre*, to criticize (Panurge's) *philautie* and, second, in *Le Quart Livre* (1551), to promote anti-papal satire. In chapter three, "Religious Satire and Overturned Cooking Pots," the figure of the tipping *marmite* enables polemical satire as of the 1560s. The ghost of the late Rabelais returns in the posthumous *Isle sonnante* (1562), a work accompanied by Baptiste Pellerin's concurrent ink-drawings that bear analogy with the riotous caricatures in *Les Songes drolatiques de Pantagruel* (1565). Following the lead of Philip Benedict, Robert-Nicoud notes how Catholic polemicists use the trope, on the one hand, to overturn the aims of "Huguenots, Politiques, Atheistes, Espernonistes, [and] Libertins" [in Pierre de L'Estoille's *Belles Figures et Drolleries de la Ligue* (1589-1606)] but also, in view of Protestant ambitions to populate the New World, to link the figure with cannibals and cannibalism.

Much of chapter four, "Social and Cosmic Disorders," studies rhetoric that ties the *monde à l'envers* to visions of the world at the end of time. In his *Discours*, the polemical genre he fashioned in 1562, at the onset of the first of four Wars of Religion, pleading for the Royalist cause, Ronsard depicts the world upside-down in the hope that the effect of his copious verse will restore peace and order. Agrippa d'Aubigné, militant Protestant counterpart of a younger generation, draws on Ronsard's *Discours* to craft his *Tragiques* (written in the 1570s and 1580s, later published in Geneva in 1616). Asserting that "the Church and the Pope have turned the world upside down," D'Aubigné calls for a second inversion, in the words of Jean Céard, a "mouvement en retour par lequel sera rétabli ce qui était détruit, et redressé ce qui était renversé, ce nouveau renversement qui remettra le monde à l'endroit" (p. 211). Reminiscent of Lucan's *Civil War*, inflections of Millenarianism and Apocalypse mark the epic poem and, no less, Guillaume Du Bartas's *La Sepmaine, ou, Creation du monde* (1578). In the one and the other "cosmic upheaval is perceived as a sign of imminent catastrophe" (228). Comets presage the world coming to its end, and so also the return of monsters--gigantes--signals the advent of the Antichrist. Protestant militants, among whom D'Aubigné is past master in the final pages of *Les Tragiques*, recast what Ronsard called the "free constraint" in his polemical writing to depict in solemn tones the vision of a second coming. In a projective conclusion Robert-Nicoud directs readers to the facetious matter of Estienne Tabourot's *Bigarrures* (1583) and hilarious *Apothegmes du sieur Gaulard* (1586, a work comparable to d'Aubigné's depiction of the bumbling Baron Foeneste); to Béroalde de Verville's *Le Moyen de parvenir* (1616), a chaotic convivium of bad taste and elegant erudition; and, to this reader's happy surprise, to Cyrano de Bergerac's *Histoire comique des États et empires de la Lune et du Soleil* (1667), a work crucial to the vision of the world upside down in the *Grand Siècle* that never finds its way into the bibliography.

Extending from antiquity to the entirety of the sixteenth century, the scope and coverage of the topos of the world upside down bears witness to how its force of presence accrues and evolves

from moral satire to a socio-political counterpart. The smile of Erasmian humanism morphs into grimace; from the standpoint of Menippean satire, Horace gives way to Juvenal. Mockery mixes with charivari. For Anglophone readers the book follows the path that Natalie Z. Davis had frayed in a study of a female riding atop Aristotle, putting the whip to man she straddles: with the difference, however, that for Davis the topos inspires her later and greater works of historical and political motivation sustaining a feminist cause.[1] Dealing less with style than meaning, Robert-Nicoud also fills out and expands upon Antónia Szabari's *Less Rightly Said: Scandals and Readers in Sixteenth Century France*, in which, along a similar parabola, from one end of the century to the other, humanistic satire is seen increasingly embittered and politically driven.[2] In the same vein, French readers will enjoy how the book develops the topos along the trajectory that Jean Céard had charted in *La Nature et les prodiges: L'insolite au XVIe siècle*. [3]

If, for constructive purposes, a *bémol* is permissible in a book-review for *H-France*, on occasion chronology moves backward and forward, effectively obscuring a pattern of development for which the book makes its case. Plodding along, the dissertative prose is of a tenor contrary to the wit and sparkle of what it studies. Phatic signs and needless use of the first-person singular (“I am going to show,” “I will show,” “I have shown,” etc.) and deadwood (countless instances of “example,” “for example,” etc.) abound. It may be that English is not Robert-Nicoud's idiom of choice or that advisors and editors at Brill/Rodopi failed to blue-pencil the manuscript. Be that as it may, the book offers a compelling and pertinent overview of a vision of inversion that is welcome here and now, at a time when irony and satire are an endangered species.

NOTES

[1] Natalie Zemon Davis, “Women on Top,” in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), pp. 124-151.

[2] Antónia Szabari, *Less Rightly Said: Scandals and Readers in Sixteenth Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

[3] Jean Céard, *La Nature et les prodiges: L'insolite au XVIe siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 1996).

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