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Guillaume Peureux, *De main en main: Poètes, poèmes et lecteurs au XVIIe siècle*. Paris: Hermann, 2021. 400 pp. €40.00. (pb). ISBN 979-1-0370-0555-7.

Review by Nicholas Hammond, University of Cambridge.

The starting point for this extraordinarily rich and diverse study stems from what Guillaume Peureux calls the decline of *lectio* (the practice of glossing texts by teachers for their pupils during the Renaissance) and the rise in the seventeenth century of *lectura* (personal readings of literary documents, accompanied by notes that allowed interpretations and recreations that were independent of pedagogical glossing). Situating himself firmly in the lineage of Roger Chartier's work on the history of the reading and reception of texts, Peureux's prime focus is upon the appropriation and circulation of poetry in France at the time.

The book begins with three general chapters devoted to different practices of reading and writing that, according to Peureux, "mettaient les poèmes à la merci de leurs usagers" (p. 17). Chapter one deals with the personal commentaries, annotations, and ways of rewriting that readers applied to the poetry that they were perusing and covers such topics as the extraction of lines or verses, the compilation or anthologizing of selected poems and extracts, and even the correction of poetry at both a basic level of typography and spelling and from a wider conception of language and even subject-matter. The second section of the chapter, devoted to François de Malherbe, who is traditionally the poet most closely associated with the supposed rigor of neo-Classicism, contains a fascinating reappraisal of the ways in which he allowed his poems to be distributed. As Peureux explains, Malherbe "ne réunit jamais ses œuvres sous son seul nom mais les fit abondamment circuler, au risque assumé d'une variabilité qui semble peu conciliable avec sa réputation d'obsessionnel du vers" (p. 42). This leads to a third section where poetry of the time was considered by readers of the period to be unfinished material that was ripe for rewriting and includes discussion of the rewriting of the poems of François Villon by Clément Marot and Marie de Gournay's reworking of Pierre de Ronsard's poetry. A final section considers the reading aloud and performance of poems as being akin to a form of rewriting (and I will return to this aspect later in this review).

Chapter two concentrates upon the writing and reading of poetry as a collaborative process and involves an array of disparate examples: an unnamed poet's working manuscript, where he called upon the help of other respected poets and commentators; François de Maynard's use of chosen expert readers in the preparation of an edition of his poetry between 1635 and 1646; and the radical modification by Jean Chapelain of his much-derided epic poem *La Pucelle* at the behest of his employer, the Duc de Longueville. In chapter three, Peureux evaluates more formal,

authoritative sustained commentaries and includes analysis of poetic commentary on the cusp of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, before moving to two different kinds of commentator: Pierre Costar and François Graverol.

These opening chapters serve to register different kinds of reading practice that help make sense of the case studies that follow in the ensuing chapters. Chapters four and five illustrate, in Peureux's words, "deux cas d'appropriations radicales" (p. 17): those exacted upon successive editions of Philippe Desportes's lyrical poetry by a variety of readers, most notably Malherbe, and those made upon Ronsard's works by his great admirer Jean de Piochet, who was preparing his own edition of Ronsard's poetry. The final two chapters concern two very different kinds of writers whose appropriation of poetic texts amounts to a form of creative writing process in itself: Valentin Conrart, founding member of the Académie française and a Protestant, who was attempting to put the Huguenot Book of Psalms into the public domain, and the marquise de Sévigné, whose use of poetic quotation turns her correspondence, according to Peureux, into "une activité d'écriture poétique concertée, selon laquelle écriture et réécriture se distinguent difficilement et font de l'épistolière une poétesse" (p. 269).

Peureux's central thesis, that the instability of all these poetic texts contradicts the imaginary concept of a classicism in which poetry is supposed to maintain a formal and linguistic fixity, is utterly persuasive, and manages to make a much wider argument about the artifice of applying labels to the writings that emanate from this or any period. He weaves an eclectic array of documentary evidence into each chapter, paying the obscure material as detailed attention as he does better-known texts. As punctiliously presented as the examples he gives are, he writes with a refreshing lightness of touch and sense of humor. My particular favorite was the title of one sub-section "Enfin Malherbe commenta?" (deliciously echoing Nicolas Boileau's famous assertion "Enfin Malherbe vint").

Perhaps the only major shortcoming of the book lies in the manuscript- and text-based straitjacket that Peureux's title, *De main en main*, applies to his subject matter for, in many of the chapters, orality plays a compellingly important role in both the transmission and interpretation of poetry and song, moving beyond the *lecteur/scripteur* dialectic that tends to dominate the analysis. Although Peureux acknowledges at various junctures that certain poems were set to tunes or were written in order to be sung or recited aloud, all too often these insights are mentioned parenthetically. The opening examples in the book's first chapter of the famously contrasting commentaries upon both Oronte's sonnet in Molière's *Le Misanthrope* and Trissotin's versifying in *Les Femmes savants* are a case in point. While mentioning that these scenes display all the traits of "une société commenteuse" (p. 19), Peureux chooses them primarily as examples of readers' commentaries intruding upon the poem. However, the fact that the lines of verse are delivered onstage and are heard rather than read by the audience demonstrates also the slippage between the written and spoken/sung word in the seventeenth century. Interestingly, in the case of *Le Misanthrope*, the "poem" that the central character Alceste posits as an example of good natural writing, in contrast to what he deems to be the affectedness of Oronte's sonnet, is an old-fashioned song that he then proceeds to sing aloud.

The closing chapters on Conrart and Sévigné represent research at its meticulous best, with detailed study of different versions of particular psalms in chapter six and a wealth of statistical analysis in chapter seven. However, more could have been made of orality and the connections that link the two case studies. The performance and singing of psalms, for example, surely lie at

the heart of Conrart's rewriting of them. Greater emphasis might also have been placed upon Conrart's own vast manuscript collection and transcription of poetry and songs from the time, now available in the Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal in Paris. Moreover, we owe the existence of much of the extant work of one poet, Denis Sanguin de Saint-Pavin, to Conrart. Saint-Pavin, not mentioned by Peureux, was a close friend of Sévigné, and her quotation of two lines ("Multipliez les vendredis,/ Je vous quitte de tout le reste") from one of Saint-Pavin's poems that remained unpublished until the nineteenth century makes it possible that either she had access to a manuscript copy of the poem or had memorized it from a performance by her friend. Such an example would certainly have made a valid contribution to Peureux's speculation about whether Sévigné memorized poems, copied out extracts, possessed manuscript copies, or relied on anthologies of poetry. More crucially, Sévigné's use of written poetry dominates the chapter, with only very brief mention made of one or two songs, which does not take into account the vast role played by song in her correspondence. Not only was she a very able performer of songs, described by her cousin Bussy-Rabutin as having a pleasant singing voice, but she also quotes many of the latest songs circulating on the Pont Neuf and on the streets, often delighting in their subversive potential. Although the poetry of her uncle Christophe de Coulanges makes an appearance in the chapter, no reference is made to the many songs that her cousin Philippe-Emmanuel de Coulanges wrote and that she enjoyed performing. Peureux's final argument, about the creativity of Sévigné's appropriation of poetry, would only have been bolstered by an examination of Sévigné's use of song. As she explains in a letter to her friend Gilles Ménage, dated 12 September 1656, who had sent her a *canzonetta*, "Je tâche de l'ajuster sur quelqu'un de tous les airs que j'ai jamais sus; et n'y trouvant bien mes mesures, je pense que j'entreprendrai d'y en faire un tout neuf, tant j'ai d'envie de la chanter".[1]

These caveats aside, *De main en main: Poètes, poèmes et lecteurs au XVIIe siècle* constitutes a magnificent contribution to the study and reception of poetry in the seventeenth century. Guillaume Peureux's book is sure to remain an essential reference tool for all students and researchers of poetic texts for many years to come.

NOTE

[1] Madame de Sévigné, *Correspondence*, edited by Roger Duchêne, 3 vols. (Paris: Pléiade, 1972-1978), vol. 1, p. 39.

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