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Marine Roussillon, *Don Quichotte à Versailles: L'imaginaire médiéval du Grand Siècle*. Ceyzérieu: Champ Vallon, 2022. 211 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. €23.00 (pb). ISBN 979-10-267-1060-8.

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From the first sentence, the introduction to *Don Quichotte à Versailles* immerses the reader in the lavish setting of 1664 Versailles where, the author asserts, evidence of the Middle Ages is everywhere. And yet, as we search for it through our twenty-first-century lens, we cannot see it clearly: not in the dictionaries of the period and not in the nineteenth-century romantic version of the seventeenth century that we have inherited. According to Roussillon, in order to promote “classicism,” the medieval had to be marginalized. The seventeenth-century medieval imaginary is routinely associated with the nobility, and with a certain nostalgia for *courtoisie* and the heroic greatness that stands against absolutism. But by shedding this inherited framework and developing an interpretation of the period “en termes de galanterie et de modernité” (p. 11), we discover a national literature that incorporates and even exploits its medieval past.

Roussillon’s inviting introduction is followed by a prologue entitled “Don Quichotte, Chimène et le roi: plaisirs dangereux et plaisirs utiles.” This short chapter introduces Don Quichotte and the French characters who resemble him as an emblematic figure of the medieval imaginary at the start of the seventeenth century. Somewhat unexpectedly, given the title of the book, Don Quichotte is not, in fact, the main subject of Roussillon’s book, but rather serves as background explanation for evolving contemporary attitudes toward arts, letters, and the reading public more generally. According to Roussillon, the madness that led to Don Quichotte’s very existence highlights the perceived dangers inherent in the pleasure of reading, because pleasure leads to allegiance. Ultimately, pleasure is legitimate if it is believable, but pleasure that upends conventional rules must be condemned.

Roussillon’s chapters are expertly crafted. The three parts of the book, the chapter titles, and the section headers offer a useful orientation within the text, without interrupting the flow of the prose. The clearly delineated introduction and conclusion to each chapter serve as guideposts for readers to follow Roussillon’s insightful analysis, and the transitions between chapters create a narrative experience that shepherds the reader through the evolution of the medieval imaginary across the seventeenth century. Underlying this analytical roadmap is a breathtaking richness of textual evidence that allows the reader to discover firsthand the role of the medieval imaginary throughout the seventeenth century. The extensive bibliography includes letters, plays, historical treatises, epic poems, fairy tales, operas, and engravings demonstrating the

pervasiveness of the medieval imaginary across the period, and its usefulness as a vehicle of both literary creation and political power.

Part one deals with the creation of a new literary public for primarily commercial reasons, examined first through the publication practices of Augustin Courbé. According to Roussillon, the medieval imaginary offered the perfect space in which to achieve the convergence between the writing of a national past that would attract the intellectual and the chivalrous aesthetics and morals that would attract the *public mondain*, especially women and younger readers. As the example of Corneille's failed *Pertharite* shows, the medieval imaginary also served as a vehicle for glorifying the monarchy and defining legitimate power. Similarly, the example of the epic poem demonstrates the efforts made by the publishing community to solicit the interest of those in power in the hopes that they might publicly endorse the text and even support its author financially.

Chapter two, "Modernité galante et identité nobiliaire," considers literature's role in creating a new class of elite members of the court from 1640 to 1650, beginning with the exchanges between Vincent Voiture and the Comte de Saint-Aignan. These letters used the *chevaleresque* tradition to praise the Cardinal de Richelieu and demonstrated the political value of gallantry, particularly for authors who were on the rise within the court. The second part of the chapter examines the reading of *Lancelot*. In 1647, Jean Chapelain suggested that Lancelot's character allowed readers to see what was lacking in the current gallantry and to demonstrate the importance of serving the king.[1] For Marc Vulson de la Colombière in *Le Vrai Théâtre d'honneur et de chevalerie ou Le Miroir héroïque de la noblesse*, published in 1648 and undoubtedly circulated prior to its publication, the figure of the *chevalier* did not incarnate a new elite that was on the rise, but rather a decadent form of the historical elitist class. Vulson depicted the king as a new Don Quichotte, driven by the pleasure of knightly tales to relive them through the *course de bague* organized on 4 March 1648. Destined for the king's amusement, this occasion also allowed Saint-Aignan to rise within the court, and allowed Vulson to publish the political efficacy of his own writing. Roussillon concludes the chapter by writing against the notion of nostalgia that has pervaded some criticism of the medieval imaginary in the seventeenth century. Rather, the growth of a new reading public necessitated the invention of a new way to protect them from the supposedly dangerous pleasures of literature.

Part two of the book, "Un pouvoir agréable: *Les Plaisirs de l'île enchantée*," moves us chronologically and contextually from the writings of the 1640s to the performances at the court of Louis XIV and examines the creation of power based on pleasure and distraction. In the context of large-scale festivals, ballets, and operas performed at Versailles, Louis XIV is compared to Charlemagne, a national figure of conquest and protector of the arts and letters which, in turn, serve a political purpose. In the absence of a direct line from Charlemagne to Louis XIV, literary creations established Charlemagne as the "predecessor" of Louis XIV and further described his valor and his worthiness as justification for the power he held. The rest of chapter three defines the source of this valor and worthiness as either love and pleasure—or Christian heroic values.

Chapter four, "Des chevaliers à Versailles," considers the contemporary and historical importance of the official reports published about *Les Plaisirs de l'île enchantée*. Roussillon's analysis begins with the historical and symbolic significance of the *carrousel*. By directly imitating elements of the *carrousel* presented by Louis XIII in 1612, "le pouvoir royal affirme une continuité à la fois

dynastique et politique” (p. 85). But the knights in this celebration were presented as gallant lovers rather than fierce warriors, thereby shifting the representation of power. The appearance on scene of the sorceress Alcine and her comparison to Louis XIV depicted the king’s power as pleasing and agreeable, while also condemning seduction in the name of virtue and further defining the proper use of pleasure in politics as altruistic and in service of the common good as defined solely by the king. The celebrations at court were, in fact, a way to establish control and exert power over the nobility.

The final chapter of part two, “Au-delà de la cour,” delves further into the representations of the medieval imaginary that we have inherited through official published accounts. Unlike the official booklets released by the court, outside manuscripts, such as the Bizincourt publication that is frequently cited by Roussillon,[2] emphasized the warrior-like characteristics of the knights on display in the *Plaisirs de l’île enchantée*, as opposed to the gallant interpretation associated more closely with Don Quichotte. For Roussillon, positioning the *course de bague* at the center of the celebrations underscores their role as a useful preparation for war during times of peace. The Bizincourt introduction of the participating knights focused on their lineage, as depicted by their coat of arms. The official booklet, on the other hand, drew the reader’s attention to the personal attributes of each knight, thereby linking their power within the court to their merit and their service to the king. The final section of chapter five analyses how the depiction of Saint-Aignan evolved in the second half of the century to compare him with Don Quichotte, and to depict him as a mediator between the king and his mistresses: “La galanterie est désignée comme le masque de la débauche” (p. 109). *Les Plaisirs de l’île enchantée* demonstrated an aesthetic use of the medieval imaginary to promote the pleasure of belonging and generate a community with shared values. In this model, pleasure is a vehicle of power based on individual merit as determined by the king himself. Outside the court, resistance to this model promoted the virtues of the Christian warrior and repositioned the king’s model of power as serving his own personal desires, a form of tyranny.

In part three, “Plaire à qui et comment? Anciens et Modernes,” Roussillon proposes to displace the chronology of the “Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes” in order to examine its continuity with the modern, *galant* project of the first half of the seventeenth century. She explores how *Clovis*,[3] alongside the other heroic poems published by Courbé in the 1950s, attempted to find a synthesis between the *savant* and the *mondain* by defining a national literature capable of generating adherence to the values of the monarchy. When the poem was republished by Carmoisy in 1673,[4] the poem’s emphasis on Richelieu shifted to Louis XIV, and *le merveilleux chevaleresque* was largely replaced by divine intervention and prophecy, promoting Christian modernity and demanding a national literature that would serve the king and represent his power. This debate established a clear division: on the one hand, the medieval Christian past for an erudite public and controlled by the authorities; on the other hand, literature for pleasure devoid of any religious value. As advanced by Michel de Marolles,[5] the true problem with *Clovis* was its attempt to synthesize an erudite genre and a popular, chivalrous aesthetic, thus violating the hierarchy of genres and the opposition between truth and pleasure. In other words, these two reading publics had to be kept separate, as they held two distinct political purposes.

The end of the seventeenth century also saw the return to Versailles of the *carrousels*. The common themes in both the operas and *carrousels* of the 1680s demonstrated a sort of competition between Lully and the Royal Academy of Music on one hand and Saint-Aignan and the *Menus-Plaisirs* on the other hand. Chapter seven, “Des chevaliers d’opéra,” begins with an analysis of the

querelle surrounding *Alceste*, with Charles Perrault defending the new genre, and Racine and Boileau condemning it as modern and gallant. Unlike the heroic poem, the opera used chivalry as a vehicle to surprise and please the spectator with a modern, atemporal, exotic aesthetic that was not designed to represent a specific national past. With France embroiled in a long period of war, the aesthetic of the marvelous was used to demonstrate the absolute power of the king: as the opera moved to depoliticize, it in fact insisted that this power was great enough to escape representation. Roussillon juxtaposes the control over authors writing within the court of Louis XIV with the freedoms enjoyed by those writing in a republic. In 1684, the *Mercure galant* published a series of ballads exchanged between Antoinette Deshoulières and the Duke (formerly Comte) of Saint-Aignan, opening a debate on the continuity between the court of the 1660s and that of the 1680s, and the value power grants to pleasure. Two anonymous ballads in the *Mercure galant* condemned gallantry and pleasure, and positioned God's love as the only real love. Other texts emphasized the licentious dimension of gallantry and its *équivocité*: "le double visage de l'amour" (p. 155). This image of licentious gallantry is charged with political stakes as it is opposed to the idealized image of the *cour galante* and used to discredit the piety of Louis XIV. Roussillon challenges the notion that a renewed interest in the medieval imaginary in the second half of the seventeenth century reflects a political reorientation toward history and wartime values. She suggests instead that the medieval imaginary was, first and foremost, an object of pleasure and "un signe de la « douceur » du règne de Louis XIV" (author's emphasis, p. 161). Yet, in the debate around pleasure and its political usefulness to the monarchy, pleasure was criticized, ridiculed and compared to tyranny, even as it found itself depoliticized.

In the final chapter of the book, "Les troubadours et les fées: une écriture féminine du passé médiéval," Roussillon examines the medieval imaginary in the fairy tale, a "petit genre" supposedly destined for women and children, and thus fertile ground for reconfiguring the relationship between pleasure and power (p. 163). The fairy tales published in the 1690s appeared within the context of the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns, especially between Boileau and Perrault, whose *Trois contes*, published in 1694, defended the "bon goût" of the reading public within the court, and the moral value of the fairy tale: the medieval origins of the genre were offered as a guarantee of the national character and "naïveté" of the genre (p. 165). In response, Boileau's Satire X ridiculed learned women and "les précieuses" (p. 167), and disqualified the knowledge, reading, and writing of women. In the *Œuvres mêlées*, Perrault's niece, Marie-Jeanne l'Héritier, promoted feminine writing by distancing it from the marvelous aesthetic, which was itself distanced from the monarchy.[6] Thus, Roussillon argues, the marvelous of the fairy tales honors the power and wisdom of feminine writing by depoliticizing *le merveilleux chevaleresque*, separating it from its Christian and monarchical stakes, and positioning the tales as a modern incarnation of the troubadour tradition. Fairy tales become an erudite form of subversion belonging to the national literature of the time. Female figures previously associated with the risks of passion are replaced by the duchesse du Maine, the duchesse de Nemours and L'Héritier herself, praised for their wisdom and knowledge. The gallant ideology of "pouvoir agréable" (p. 183) is reconfigured to glorify female figures of authorial and political power, and to position them as protectors of arts and letters. The incorporation of the medieval imaginary in the debate around who was entitled to produce and to consume literature, brought to light a "*dépolitisation des plaisirs*" (author's emphasis, p. 186) throughout the reign of Louis XIV, that ultimately served power all the more effectively by masking itself and claiming to be apolitical.

In her conclusion, Roussillon summarizes the evolution of the medieval imaginary in the seventeenth century and the king's desire to project pleasing, agreeable power. Driven by the economic and symbolic necessity to expand, a new reading public was created, popularizing the medieval past, until its proliferation ceased at the end of the century due to multiple competing interests: a serious writing of the past versus a pleasing, depoliticized writing and the strength of faith versus a limited sense of belonging. But even this apparent division between politics and pleasure, Roussillon argues, masks the underlying political stakes of pleasure. Roussillon concludes her book by suggesting a rehabilitation of the act of interpretation, arguing that accepting an inherited interpretation of the seventeenth century that separates pleasure from power and politics from literature has limited both our understanding of the period and our approach towards interpretation itself.

Roussillon's book offers extensive literary, historical and visual evidence of the medieval imaginary's role as a vehicle of literary and political power in the seventeenth century. She builds upon work already begun by Alain Viala, Delphine Denis, and Jörn Steigerwald, among others, to successfully argue against the marginalization of the medieval imaginary in the seventeenth century. Roussillon writes against arguments of nostalgic Classicism put forth by Paul Bénichou and Norbert Elias, demonstrating a far more complex relationship between the king, his nobles, and the chivalrous tradition. While there are several anglophone critics that may have been good additions to the bibliography (Katherine Ibbett, Faith Beasley, John D. Lyons, and Lewis C. Seiffert, to name a few), Roussillon's analysis of the varied primary sources is thorough and expansive. To read Roussillon's book is to revisit many of our own preconceived notions about the role that the medieval imaginary played in the creation of a French national literature in the seventeenth century. Of particular use for students of the period, this book forces its readers to rethink the divisions between genres and the role the medieval played in Classicism. By highlighting published debates about the role of pleasure and the medieval imaginary's practical importance in creating a new market of younger readers, demonstrating the king's exploitation of the chivalrous tradition to define a new class of nobility based on service instead of bloodlines, and exploring the definition of legitimate literary genres, *Don Quichotte à Versailles* convincingly reimagines the relationship between power, history, and literature in the seventeenth century.

NOTES

[1] This text was first printed in the nineteenth century. Jean Chapelain, *De la lettre des vieux romans*, {...} publié pour la première fois avec des notes par Alphonse Feillet (Paris: A. Aubry, 1870).

[2] Nicolas de Bizincourt, *Les Plaisirs de l'Isle enchantée, ordonnez par Louis XIV, roy de France de Navarre, à Versailles, le 6 may 1664*, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. fr. 7834.

[3] Jean Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin, *Clovis ou la France chrétienne* (Paris: A. Courbé, 1657).

[4] Jean Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin, *Clovis ou la France chrétienne. Poème, revue exactement, et augmenté d'inventions, et des actions merveilleses du Roi. Dédié à sa Majesté pour la seconde fois. Par J. Desmarets Controlleur general de l'Extraordinaire des guerres. Troisième édition* (Paris: Claude Cramoisy, 1673).

[5] Michel de Marolles, *Considérations sur le Poème épique de Clovis composé par Monsieur des Marets, Toutes les Œuvres de Virgile traduites en vers François* (Paris: J. Langlois, 1673).

[6] Marie-Jeanne L'héritier de Villandon, *Œuvres meslées* (Paris: J. Guignard, 1696).

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