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**Marc Fumaroli**, *The Poet and the King: Jean de La Fontaine and His Century*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002. Trans. Jane Marie Todd. vii + 536 pp. Notes and index. \$49.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-268-03877-5.

Review by Robert A. Schneider, Catholic University of America.

Marc Fumaroli, professor of Rhetoric and Society in Europe at the Collège de France, is best known for his magisterial study, *L'âge de l'éloquence*, first published in 1980. A book with few equals in terms of erudition, intellectual vision, chronological sweep, and sheer analytical power, it is, in the opinion of this reviewer, one of the truly great and enduring achievements of modern scholarship. Like some other French academics of his stature, Fumaroli is also a public intellectual whose energetic comments on contemporary cultural matters, especially regarding the role of the state in the cultural realm, bring a decidedly critical and conservative voice to the debate.<sup>[1]</sup> *The Poet and the King*, while primarily a scholarly work, can be seen as an attempt to blend these two roles; in contrast to his first book, it wears its erudition lightly, aims at a broader readership than academic specialists, and, perhaps most notably and problematically, uses La Fontaine as a foil for his vision of French culture, both past and present.

It must be said that for a study of La Fontaine, *The Poet and the King* often loses sight of its poet for long stretches and keeps the king, Louis XIV, in view even less. Indeed, it can be argued that one of its virtues is to restore La Fontaine to his century, which Fumaroli does by placing him in a long line of literary and political figures who represent, in his view, a kind of counter-culture to the dominant tradition. As Fumaroli suggests, this is particularly necessary for La Fontaine who, precisely because his fables have proven so enduring and universal in their appeal—they are surely one of France's most successful contributions to world literature—is in danger of becoming something of a cliché. There is no more quotable poet than La Fontaine. Like Pascal, another seventeenth-century aphoristic writer of quotable lines, he is readily and often banally cited by those entirely ignorant of his times and the literary tradition that produced him. For Pascal, however, it does not take much at least to appreciate the influence of Jansenism on his outlook and writing, despite this religious movement's notorious opacity and his own singularity. La Fontaine is another matter. The very accessibility of the *Fables*, their timelessness, their apparent appeal to common sense, and their poetic anatomizing of human nature have conspired to wrench them from history, depriving readers of an appreciation of the true intentions and travails of their author. This Fumaroli provides splendidly and in the process offers an alternative history of the seventeenth century and the succeeding centuries as well.

In essence, Fumaroli wants us to appreciate that La Fontaine's skewering of human foibles—vanity, pedantry, avarice, pretentiousness, oafishness, preciosity, hypocrisy, and the like—was more than a timeless critique; it was expression of an enduring, though beleaguered, French cultural tradition stretching back to medieval chivalry, passing through Rabelais and Montaigne, and extending at least to Chateaubriand, Tocqueville, and Saint-Beuve. In the seventeenth century, the champions of this tradition were the *gens de lettres* associated with the salons, private academies, and "cabinets" that then proliferated in the world of the cultivated Parisian aristocracy—so called *mondain* writers such as

Honoré D'Urfé, author of the enormously popular *L'Astrée*; Vincent Voiture, the house-poet of the Hotel de Rambouillet; Paul Pellisson, secretary and friend of the minister and Maecenas, Fouquet; Guez de Balzac in the latter part of his career when he turned embittered critic of Richelieu and his legacy; Tristan L'Hermite, poet *maudit* and boon companion of Gaston d'Orléans; and, of course, La Fontaine. It is a tradition he reconstructs in terms of a grab-bag of qualities: wit, "true" nobility, frankness, freedom, "sweetness" of expression, an appreciation for the virtues of private life and the value of friendship, and peace, but which can perhaps be best appreciated in terms of what it opposed. The royal court, reason of state, Cartesian rationalism, pedantry, and an overvaluing of public life: these are some of the values and markers of the dominant tradition in French political and cultural history whose triumph he relentlessly laments. The opposition between the tradition he celebrates and the one he bemoans can be seen in terms of a series of passages and turning points, extending even to the transition from the Valois to the Bourbon dynasties, where the former combined all that was best in the Renaissance while the later represented its betrayal. A later turning point took place in the latter part of the seventeenth century when Bossuet, "who professed the orthodox theology of absolutism," prevailed over Fénelon, "whose entire education program for the duc de Bourgogne and whose spiritual doctrine had the aim of reversing the orientation the kingdom had taken since Richelieu." (p.430). There were others, including Richelieu's creation of the Académie française, which hegemonically eclipsed the vibrant, city-based culture of little academies and literary conventicles that served as nurseries for *mondain* literature—a culture evoked in Tallemant de Réaux's *Historiettes* as "a world where people dared to be themselves" (p.130). (Incidentally, Fumaroli's criticism of the Académie française is somewhat ironic, given both his status as an "immortal" and his laudatory allusions elsewhere to the academy during some of the most compromising phases of its history.[2])

But the turning point that serves as the book's centerpiece, and in which La Fontaine figures prominently, is the spectacular rise and fall of Nicolas Fouquet. If there is a true, though tragic, hero in *The Poet and the King*, it is not La Fontaine but the doomed Superintendent of Finances, presented here as the protagonist in one of French history's most decisive, might-have-been episodes. For Fumaroli, Fouquet is all that the linked trio of despised ministers, Richelieu-Mazarin-Colbert, were not: truly cultivated, where they merely exploited culture; an "artist" (p.160), where they were ruthless statesmen; a man at home in the city, willing to "win the trust of the public at large" (p.212), where they were courtiers devoted to secrecy. His retrospective hopes for Fouquet seem to know no bounds. "For the first time since the Valois kings," he writes, "a statesman dear to the hearts of men of letters was about to restore the proper direction of the monarchy..." (p.167). "Fouquet...allowed the French to look forward to a regime of reconciliation, synthesis, and compromise between the restored state authority and the political forces that had tenaciously combated its absolutist excesses since 1625... In addition, there would be diplomacy and peace abroad," he continues (p.211). Fouquet's downfall was nothing less than the "victory of the kingdom of the modern state" (p.230). Though damaged by association, and long shunned by the official court, La Fontaine survived as the literary bearer of Fouquet's spirit and the cultural-political tradition he embodied. The *Fables* were "the most reflective and serene response to the catastrophe of 1661" (p.359).

Fumaroli's La Fontaine is thus a profoundly political poet, whose voice serves to remind readers of another, half-forgotten and momentarily defeated political order, that of "Old France as a whole, with the wealth of its extreme diversity, with its fondness for freedom, grave or lighthearted, philosophical or religious [that] stood opposed to that monumental abstraction of state..." (p. 339). The *Fables* are at once the text of a royal advisor *manqué*, "aimed... at the king himself. It interpreted the general disillusionment and sought to warn the king of his blindness" (p. 359); and a *ralliement* for disaffected courtiers, creating "another community—entirely private, entirely amicable—the true kingdom, linked by language of an entirely different order than the corrupted language of the absolutist court" (p. 379). The *Fables* are also the alternative to Descartes' "fable of the world," opposing its severe and intellectually intolerant metaphysics which, in Fumaroli's view, jettisoned "imagination, feeling, taste, tact, the evidence of the senses and the body itself." Instead, La Fontaine offered a world in which speaking

animals—"one of the most powerful safeguards against human vanity invented by ancient wisdom" (396)—argue against the inflated and misguided claims of philosophical abstraction and the imperious ego alike. Just as Fouquet represented a last hope in the face of Louis' absolutism, so La Fontaine's verses insisted on the superiority of wit over reason, keeping alive a sensibility that the modern cogito failed to appreciate.

One comes away from a reading of *The King and the Poet* with a new appreciation of the meaning and value of La Fontaine's poetry and of its place in the cultural history of his times. But doubts emerge as well, especially regarding the various associations and linkages Fumaroli asserts as necessary to understand the poet's significance. A large question hangs over his interpretation of Fouquet as the doomed alternative to the emerging absolutism of Louis XIV. Though Fouquet's patronage of writers and artists was undoubtedly generous and knowledgeable—and certainly contrasted with his arch-enemy Colbert's approach—to argue by extension that his uniqueness as a man of culture proves his singularity as a statesman simply does not work.[3] There is virtually no evidence provided that Fouquet stood for an alternate political path than that pursued by Louis XIV. Moreover, when one looks at the historical, as opposed to imaginary, Fouquet, a more conventional statesman emerges. Fumaroli's Fouquet finds no echo in Daniel Dessert's 1987 biography.[4] There, in fact, one discovers that Fouquet and his father were avid disciples of Richelieu—the very embodiment of dictatorial absolutism for Fumaroli—and continued to revere the cardinal-minister as a model well after his death. Fouquet remained loyal to Mazarin and the crown even during the Fronde, when other erstwhile royal *serviteurs*, most notably Séguier, joined the opposition camp (something Fouquet flung in Séguier's face during his trial). To be sure, the Fouquet clan had ties to the *dévots*, and Nicolas in particular was close to, if not a member of, the Compagnie du Saint Sacrement. While this association suggests that Fouquet was a complex man, combining sincere piety and a commitment to religiously-inspired good works with financial astuteness and an intense acquisitive drive, it does not add up to the near messianic minister Fumaroli describes.

Doubts arise as well with regards to the integrity of the counter-cultural tradition La Fontaine supposedly represents. Here it must be acknowledged that the seventeenth century was more complex and diverse than the master narrative of absolutism's inexorable rise typically allows. And if we have grown more appreciative of the depths of opposition, criticism, and alienation that an otherwise conformist elite harbored, we have largely Marc Fumaroli to thank.[5] But in *The Poet and the King* these rather inchoate sentiments, though certainly persistent and real, are transformed into a robust, integrated tradition that reminds one of the Whig interpretation of history. What was in fact a *sensibility* cultivated across the centuries by a range of figures whose political leanings were often vague or varied becomes in his hands a consistent political tradition of the "real" France. Thus, Turgot is an eighteenth-century Fouquet, who is a latter-day Sully. Thus: "In 1793 the apotheosis of reason of state was victorious in the battle for grandeur. In 1801 Chateaubriand's *Atala*, *René*, and *Le génie du christianisme* made hope change its allegiance. But the war began with Richelieu's ministry, and La Fontaine gave the side of the resistance one of its better assets: the power of *Fables*" (pp.339-340). And thus a poet like Vincent Voiture, who dedicated his considerable wit and erudition to the exclusive aim of entertaining his aristocratic patrons and whose sole printed intervention consisted of an open letter in support of Richelieu's war policies, is elevated to a bearer of a liberating spirit that remains politically potent and relevant to this day.

Indeed, it is apparent that Fumaroli wishes somehow to revive this spirit by reminding his readers of its robust presence throughout French history. His allusions to contemporary matters are scattered throughout the book, and his revulsion for *dirigiste* state culture and the modern emulators of the Sun King's obsession with grandeur, from Malraux to Mitterand, is unmistakable. Interestingly, he is careful to cast a pox on both Right and Left and charges republicans, liberals, and socialists alike, in their persistent reverence for the Versailles of Louis the Great, with managing a "posthumous revenge for Charles Maurras" (p.235) and the reactionary nationalism of the Action Française. He also asserts "that

both the right and left in France are now currying the favor of an official feminism that imagines no social and political progress for women other than an entirely virile and essentially Machiavellian self-interested ambition" (p.181). These asides and charges are, of course, caricatures of contemporary political culture, as I'm sure he realizes. No matter: Fumaroli is something of *frondeur*, something of an intellectual libertine, and something too of a romantic, combining a refined literary sensibility with Tocqueville's political critique. Astonishingly, however, in a book that strives to make us see the political relevance of literature, there is absolutely no appreciation of the realities of early modern statecraft. For all his refinement, erudition, and charm, in the end the reader is left with the impression of a very familiar type: one whose rejection of modernity is wholesale, whose nostalgia for a by-gone, hopelessly idealized aristocratic world is boundless, and whose sense of political realism is nil.

## NOTES

[1] For a collection of his articles, see Fumaroli, *L'État culturel: une religion moderne* (Éditions de Fallois: Paris, 1991).

[2] Christian Jouhaud has commented on Fumaroli's praise for the academy during the late 1930s, when well-known far rightists and future collaborators, including Charles Maurras and Marshall Pétain, were elected into its ranks. Christian Jouhaud, *Les pouvoirs de la littérature: Histoire d'un paradoxe* (Gallimard: Paris, 2000), p. 379.

[3] For a concise view of Fouquet relationship with men of letters, see Wolfgang Leiner, "Nicolas Fouquet au jeu des miroirs," in *Études sur la littérature française du XVIIe siècle*, Volker Schröder and Rainer Zaiser, eds. (Biblio 17: Paris, Seattle, Tübingen, 1996): 251-273.

[4] Daniel Dessert, *Fouquet* (Fayard: Paris, 1987).

[5] See especially his "La République française des lettres et ses réactions à la montée de l'absolutisme," in *Lettres aux frères Dupuy et à leur entourage*, Giuliano Ferretti, ed. (Leo S. Olschki: Florence, 1997).

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