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Roger Chartier, *Inscription and Erasure: Literature and Written Culture from the Eleventh to the Eighteenth Century*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. Notes and index. 203 pp. \$55.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0812239959; \$22.50 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0812220469.

Review by Timothy Hampton, University of California, Berkeley.

This elegant and learned study constitutes a significant addition to Roger Chartier's well-known work on the history of the book in western culture. However, whereas his earlier studies have often focused on the history of ephemeral or lesser-known forms of writing (chapbooks, slang, etc.), this book offers a take on the "high cultural" form that we call "literature." It presents itself as an intervention into the discipline of literary studies, and as a reflection on a series of mostly canonical texts. Thus it offers both an historical narrative about the relationship of literature and book history, and, loosely speaking, an attempt to work out of method of reading.

The book consists of a series of essays on a number of authors, ranging from an obscure eleventh-century poet named Baudri de Bourgueil, through Cervantes (a major instance, of whom more will be said in a moment), to Jonson, Cyrano, Goldoni, and Diderot. Thus the book touches on lyric poetry, theatrical writing, and the novel. Chartier shows that literary works consistently thematize the material act of inscription, of making texts. He demonstrates that Jonson, for example, is deeply concerned with the new circulation of scandal and "news" made possible by burgeoning print culture, that Diderot struggles with the problem of how much his works were literary "property," that Goldoni's plays dramatize the image of the text as a piece of weaving, and so on. Throughout, the book is characterized by clarity of argument and a remarkable range of references from most of the European languages. The translation is, as one might expect from the expert Arthur Goldhammer, first rate.

This work is highly recommended as a piece of cultural history. More elusive is its contribution to literary criticism. Thus in what follows, I want both to explore the resources for literary studies opened up by Chartier's approach and to offer a counter-reading that might point to some of the limitations of his method.

*Inscription and Erasure* is motivated by two central ideas. The first is that literary texts in early modern Europe are not fixed entities, as one might be led to believe from reading, say, the Penguin Classics, but systems of meaning that are constantly changing, undergoing revision, reconfiguration, and transformation. Much literary criticism, Chartier avers, has denied this fact, and devoted itself instead to a search for a kind of "Platonic Ideal" of a given work that might stand in the mind, distinct from the specific form (as manuscript, pamphlet, paperback, CD-ROM, etc.) in which it is circulated. This is an idea that Chartier has advanced before, and it has become somewhat of a cliché precisely because of the influence of his own work. Chartier's claim, however, is that such instability is inherently linked to the problems raised by new forms of material production—the rise of book culture. Yet some of the most famous instances of textual revision and "multiple versions" of literary works had little if anything to do with printing. Thus, for example, Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* was rewritten and expanded for a second version in response to events, and Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* was completely redone as another poem, the *Gerusalemme conquistata*, in response to personal attacks by Tasso's enemies and the pressure of Counter-Reformation orthodoxy. I mention these counter-examples (the two greatest Italian epics of

the Renaissance) not to play “gotcha” –which one could never win anyway, in this instance—but to suggest that the selective nature of Chartier’s analyses undercuts the close relationship he poses between material production and textual motility. We need a revisionary history of revision that would focus on both intellectual history and material history. Chartier’s approach would constitute one useful entrée into such a larger project.

Chartier’s other main idea, and the marrow of the book, is that literary texts are aware of their instability, and that, moreover, they make the material means of their own production into thematic material. He posits that textual production is inscribed into literature as a motivating force in plot, imagery, and argument. This seems obvious enough. The test of such an emphasis would then be to see how it works in the network of signs that is the literary work—to trace how it displaces emphasis from traditional readings and casts new light in areas of the book not well understood until now. In this regard, I want to turn to the main exhibit of the book, Chartier’s reading of *Don Quixote*, to which he devotes two chapters as well as part of the book’s methodological introduction.

Chartier’s major contribution to our understanding of Cervantes’s novel is his account of an episode in Part I, where Don Quixote and Sancho, on the run from the Holy Brotherhood, enter the Sierra Morena and find a carpet bag by the road. Inside the carpet bag they discover a *librillo* or “little book” containing some sonnets and a letter. The book turns out to belong to Cardenio, the first of the many broken-hearted lovers whom Don Quixote will meet in the novel’s first half. With enviable erudition and subtlety Chartier excavates the historical context of the *librillo*, positing that it was probably a book of tablets covered in wax, upon which one could write and then erase one’s writing. He goes on to link the materiality of this object to the subsequent uses to which it is put, as Don Quixote writes on it both a love letter to his lady Dulcinea del Toboso and instructions to his niece to give Sancho some asses. Chartier correctly notes the irony of the fact that a bit of high-flown courtly rhetoric and a piece of legal writing occupy two sides of the same piece of waxed paper, and he explores the implications of this paradox for the position of the novel as both an ironic send up of courtliness and a book about an emerging world of money and contracts.

Chartier brings this scene of writing and erasure into contrast with one of the book’s most famous episodes, in Part II, where Don Quixote visits a print shop. He sets forth the contrasts between a world of waxen *librillos* and a new world of mass produced books, in which the circulation of a spurious continuation to Quixote’s adventures in Part I becomes a theme of Part II.

However, the appearance of the *librillo* in Part I is followed by another scene of writing, which has little if anything to do with the rise of print culture. Don Quixote, left to meditate on his lady love Dulcinea del Toboso, passes his time writing love poetry in the sand and on the bark of trees. The narrator tells us that of this poetry (*muchos versos*) only three *coplas* survived. (A *copla* is a traditional song form). The *coplas* offer conventional Petrarchan love poetry in ten-line stanzas of eight-syllable lines. Each stanza ends with the name “Dulcinea,” to which is then appended a half-line naming the lady’s place of origin: “del Toboso.” It is this tag added to each stanza, says the narrator, which later caused laughter among those who read the poems, as if Don Quixote thought the verses were incomprehensible without the last two words, “as he himself later confessed.”

Chartier alludes to this scene of writing on bark, which he links to Pedro Mexía’s *Silva de varia lección*, a guide to writing practices in circulation during the period. Yet more important, it seems to me, is that the scene offers a rewriting of one of the most famous scenes of *reading* in Renaissance literature: the central episode in Ariosto’s chivalric romance, *Orlando Furioso*, the most popular epic of the sixteenth century. In Ariosto’s scene the great hero Orlando reads poems inscribed on trees telling of the dalliance of his beloved Angelica with the foot-soldier Medoro. It is one of the most powerful pieces of inscription in all of European literature, since it drives a hero noted for his good sense mad. (Indeed, two centuries later Casanova would tell in his *Mémoires* how he recited the famous passage to Voltaire over lunch,

moving them both to tears). Cervantes parodies Ariosto by debasing the heroic Orlando into the mad Don Quixote.

But the scene also makes an important statement about the relationship between subjects and inscriptions—a theme of Chartier’s book. Don Quixote is an author trying to express the absolute uniqueness of his love for Dulcinea in a world in which Petrarchan love (and love poetry) has become a cliché. How can he escape becoming a tired copy of all of the lover/poets who have preceded him? He does this by rooting Dulcinea in a *place*, by linking her to a specific location. Yet in the process he destroys the form of his poems; he literally ruins their aesthetic integrity with a tag, in the form of a half-line naming Dulcinea’s origin, added to each stanza. By telling us where Dulcinea comes from—aby adding “Del Toboso,” to each stanza—Don Quixote distinguishes Dulcinea from all other ladies. But this supplement is also precisely what ruins his poems and provokes laughter in later readers.

Don Quixote’s strategy seems like a wise one, since Dulcinea’s name in fact means nothing more than “Sweetie.” Thus she very much needs to be distinguished from other ladies. Yet even this act of inscription as a gesture of defining a subject is fraught with irony. For in Dulcinea’s place of origin, “El Toboso” (which denotes a “real” place in Spain) we may also hear some variation on the Greek word “Topos,” with the “b” and “p” sounding alike in Spanish (and frequently interchanged in the unstable *mise en page* of early books). I cannot prove this interlingual pun, of course (any more than Chartier can prove that Cervantes is using Mexía’s guide to writing), but it would suggest that even as Don Quixote tries to link his Dulcinea to a specific place as a way of defining her unique role in the history of romantic love, he ends up suggesting that she may just be “Sweetie from Someplace.” Now that would be an act of erasure worth noticing, for it underscores the ways in which the novel is about the struggle for authenticity in a world where everything is already a cliché or a citation of something else.

My point here is that Chartier’s insistence on the tension between Cardenio’s wax-paged *librillo* and the new medium of the printing press (and Quixote’s *grán historia*) may already be undermined by Cervantes’s own play with literary sources. The scene needs to be read with an ear to the semantic (no less than the material) instability of words and forms, each with its own history. Moreover—and this is the main point—we cannot understand the significance of scenes of inscription without attention to scenes of *reading*. In this case, that involves the complex dynamics of reading for citation, echo, the process of *imitatio*. Indeed, the deep historicity and textual density of reading is one of the characteristics of literary culture in the early modern period, from the first humanists to Racine. And we may posit that in the space where acts of inscription are infused by such acts of authorial reading we can locate “literature” (whether one calls it by the modern term, or some more venerable label such as *poesia*). Literary works do indeed point to their own production, as Chartier argues. But they also point to the matter of other literary works and use that matter as the fodder for their own strategies of representation. *Inscription and Erasure* makes an important contribution to our understanding of the material culture of the period. It offers a compelling narrative that helps define the terms for some larger history of inscription that would link it to the dynamics of genre, imitation, and form.

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