

Nouveaux regards sur les “Apollons de collèges” : Figures du professeur humaniste en France dans la première moitié du XVIe siècle. Mathieu Ferrand and Nathaël Istasse, eds.

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Many early sixteenth-century French scholars were attached as teachers, and sometimes regents, to one (and often several) of France’s *collèges*. These colleges focused on instruction in the liberal arts, primarily the teaching of Latin. Originally set up by religious orders, they were associated, until far into the twentieth century, with rigid Scholastic teaching. The adoption of Italian-style Renaissance humanism took place outside of these conservative schools of small-time masters and regents — or so historiography has long assumed. A particularly influential condemnation of these *professeurs* came from the pen of Lucien Febvre in 1942. In an attempt to expose as slanderous the sixteenth-century accusations of atheism and irreligion leveled at Rabelais presumably from within these colleges, Febvre brought to light, for the first time, the biotope of these colleges, peopled by second- and third-rate Neo-Latin poets, and frustrated and narrow-minded teachers of Latin, but self-proclaimed standard-bearers of learning and culture. He wrote them off with the disastrously ironic label of “Apollons of the colleges.”

This volume explores many of these forgotten or half-forgotten linguists and philologists, and rehabilitates them as the infantry of French humanism. Writing occasional Latin poetry was for them not only a network strategy of gaining patronage or obtaining a teaching position. These articles show that they were genuinely inspired by Politian and Erasmus. The apologetic character of the volume is consistent throughout: Febvre is referenced by all contributors with reverent dismissal, and the proof

lies in the biographies and bibliographies of single professors. The volume is exemplarily edited: the many Latin quotations (a feast for Neo-Latinists) are immaculate; almost all of the contributions are equipped with fresh bibliographies of early modern sources that would otherwise remain difficult to navigate due to their disparity, rareness, and intricate publishing histories; and a helpful triple index of names, works, and colleges testifies to the editors' ambitions to make this volume a coherent collection of essays.

And yet the editors have not entirely convinced this reader that they succeeded in rehabilitating the Apollos. The volume presents the current state of knowledge about individuals and their works, and occasionally about their networks, clearly and usefully. Yet, although the articles describe much, they problematize little. They vindicate the professors against a condemnation from a historian who should by now be the object, not the subject, of cultural history. There are geographical and methodological drawbacks in the focus on Febvre. First of all, the fallout of his condemnation seems to me to have been primarily limited to France and francophone literature. Comparisons with sixteenth-century humanist professors outside of France would have helped to grasp the uniqueness, if any, of the French college professors. Apart from a few comparative approaches on the level of individuals, we learn little of institutional, regional, and international contexts. In the few cases that a comparative approach has been adopted, as for example in Jean-Eudes Giroit's analysis of the controversy of an old-style and a new-fashion teacher, the analysis immediately grows more penetrating. Methodologically, most contributors adopt literary criteria and eschew interdisciplinary approaches. But aesthetic appreciations of occasional poetry do not help cultural historians understand the significance of these professors. So much more could have been done in terms of network analysis,

the social analysis of the student body of these somewhat peculiar institutes, their territorial role, migration patterns, social mobility, the social stratification of the world of learning, and teaching practices. When it comes to poetry, much more can be made of the Latin-vernacular divide, the role of theater and mnemotechnics in education, or the cross-institutional visualization of occasional-poetry networks. A parallel adoption of such methods or a conceptually more daring approach would have rendered the volume more exciting than the consistent defense of the Apollos against Febvre's seventy-year-old dismissal.

The edge of this volume lies in the clear presentation of much unknown material by a selection of some of France's finest early modern scholars. Their solid building blocks will enhance research into the leverage of what I would regard as the upper- and lower-middle classes of early humanism in France.

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