

Michael Randall. *The Gargantuan Polity: On the Individual and the Community in the French Renaissance.*

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The present study once more challenges the old idea that the modern individual came into being during the Renaissance by revising the mistaken notion that if the Renaissance was the cradle of individualism then the Middle Ages was necessarily “a period in which singularity and individualism were absent” (5). According to Michael Randall, the invention of the modern self is obviously not a creation *ex nihilo*, but rather a transmutation of two different kinds of individualism. While the medieval type is contractual and politically oriented, the later form is best understood in terms of subjective interiority and autonomy. The main objective of the project is to unveil how contractual individualism was defeated — or, “the extinction of an individual defined not by autonomy and subjectivity but by obligation” (242) — while the larger argument of the book defends the idea that our modern human rights sprang from medieval contractual individualism and not from the modern inward type. Randall’s working assumptions are that since the feudal system was rooted in a contractual relationship, and since the ethos of consensus is dominant in the later Middle Ages, one has to suppose that individuals were beyond contracts, and negotiations beyond consensus. Indeed the ethics of

concord and public common good did not neutralize the plurality of opinions and internal conflicts; on the contrary, it channeled a compromise between subjects and leaders in a mutual relationship of concession. The king was responsible for his policy and the people had the right to criticize the monarch but, I shall point out, concessions were made in a context of hierarchies, and contracts in a situation of domination. However, the critical voice was best expressed by authors who defended the people's right of resistance and denounced the imperfection of kings. Their aim was moral edification, not adulation. Indeed, they were sometimes ambitious enough as to believe that they could bridle the disordered will of the head, as did the council next to the pope in the councils of Basel and Constance, where the clergy affirmed its authority to depose the pope. Hence, well before a theory of natural rights, a medieval ethic of responsibility and resistance uncovers a subject engaged with and critical towards its leaders — perhaps even more so than a liberal citizen enjoying her negative freedom — in total contrast with the expectation of a subordinate dominated or passive subject. As a result, Randall's book is built on the assumption that this voice of resistance moved in the Renaissance from the public sphere to the inner life, a shift well illustrated by Montaigne's idea of inner self as an *arrière boutique*.

The book is chronologically structured and divided into seven chapters with a selection of theological, juridical, and political texts, through the core corpus is literary. It opens with the semantic and ideological fields offered by conciliarist thought, which gives the initial profile of the contractual individual (chapter 1). Randall then shows how these ideas are captured in poems written for the contests of the Puy de Rouen (chapter 2). Chapter 3 examines the Burgundian Jean Molinet's political thought in the *Ressource du petit peuple* (1481), while chapter 4 offers readings of more ambiguous authors such as Claude de Seyssel and Guillaume Cretin. Barthélemy de Chasseneux (chapter 5) is followed by Rabelais, whose Abbey of Thelema offers for Randall "the most complex portrait of the sixteenth-century polis" (chapter 6). The book ends with Agrippa d'Aubigné (chapter 7), whose work embodies the death of consensual politics (visualized in the telling rivers of blood of martyred Huguenots). In fact many more figures inhabit the book, such as, Jean Gerson, Philipppes de Commines, François Hotman, or Michel de Montaigne.

The Gargantuan Polity offers an original reading of texts composed roughly between 1414 and 1616. Texts such as Montaigne's *Essais* — usually associated with the so-called birth of the modern individual — remain in the margins of this project to give worthwhile room to understudied and non-canonical authors, such as Guillaume Cretin. In addition, the book skillfully interweaves between theological treatises (Cajetan), poems (Puy de Rouen), mirror for princes (Seyssel), and juridical treatises (Chasseneux). Though the choice of texts can perhaps be considered too arbitrary and inevitably designed to serve the dominant narrative, the author should have devoted more space to justifying this selection. But Randall is to be congratulated for articulating an argument with exceptional clarity and for offering valuable insights into some fascinating texts. The Gargantuan polis becomes under his pen a republican alternative to both the organic and to the

atomized consumer societies, a model in which “we can learn to be individuals not because we turn inward and away from others, but because we turn outward to them and make our polis a skein of rights and obligations that tie us together and protect our differences at the same time” (252). *The Gargantuan Polity* is a thought-provoking book and a refreshing addition to the literature on the making of the modern self, exploring the subtleties of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century French works in a way that will appeal both to literary scholars and to intellectual and cultural historians.

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