

Stéphan Geonget. *La notion de perplexité à la Renaissance.*

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A recent and welcome trend in French dissertations is to explore all the possible contexts and implications for the Renaissance of one Latin term; the problem with this one is that it deserves to be evaluated by a legal historian and a theological specialist as well as a literary critic. Readers of Rabelais already knew that *perplexity* was an important term in his chronicles, but I doubt whether many of us had any idea of the ramifications involved, or of the need to separate perplexity from Skepticism.

Of Geonget's three parts, the first is on the legal definitions and implications of perplexity, or antinomy, including discussion of Roman law, the Pandects, Montaigne, Rabelais, and twenty pages on Martin Guerre. Screech and others have already pointed out that perplexity is relevant to a number of Rabelais episodes, but Geonget (who often disagrees with Screech) goes into much more technical detail. His analysis is both historically sweeping (Justinian to Leibniz), and minutely detailed.

The second part, on theological perplexity, was almost entirely new to me. Geonget traces three traditions: Augustinian, Pauline, and Gregorian — for Augustine, perplexity was fundamental to man — contrasts Catholics and

Protestants, and finds examples in authors as different as Melanchthon, Marguerite de Navarre, Calvin, Montaigne, Buchanan, François de Sales, Shakespeare, and Marlowe. He sees them, and many others, as part of a movement leading from medieval tutorialism to seventeenth-century probabilism.

Readers of this journal will probably be most interested in part 3, which is ostensibly on Rabelais but also contains a wide variety of other material. Geonget states in his conclusion that perplexity is a central concept for Rabelais, and he certainly makes a plausible case. Of the three types of perplexity — hesitation over the meaning of a biblical text, hesitation over one's personal behavior, and hesitation over a potentially sinful situation, most examples in Rabelais involve behavior (Panurge, of course, but other characters also). Among other claims, Geonget proposes that Pantagruelism is more Christian than Stoic (disagreeing with Screech), and based on *epikeia* (equity); that the name Bacbuc in the Fifth Book includes the syllable *buc*, which means perplexity in Hebrew, and should be related to the witch Baboue; that *agilles* is a key word for Evangelicals and for Rabelais; and that we are intended to see the Abbey of Thelema as the Heavenly Jerusalem, and in a sense as the center of the world.

Rabelais should have been part of Geonget's title, since his first two sections also include substantial discussions of individual Rabelaisian episodes, and the critical debates about them. For instance, in the legal part 1 a long analysis of the Bridoye chapters details the precise legal contexts involved, and supports the interpretations of Derrett and Céard against those of Duval and Tourmon. And in part 2, à propos of "La conscience perplexe," Geonget instances Soeur Fessue as an example of the inevitability of sin.

This book is not an easy read, but it is packed with useful and stimulating material, much of which I am simply not qualified to evaluate. I recommend it both to Rabelais specialists and to general readers who believe in the necessity of relating literature to other contemporary disciplines.

BARBARA C. BOWEN

Vanderbilt University, Emerita