

Marcus Keller. *Figurations of France: Literary Nation-Building in Times of Crisis (1550–1650)*.

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Marcus Keller's study of France through a choice of literary texts written over a hundred-year span that roughly starts with the death of Francis I in 1547 and ends with the Fronde in 1648 is a welcome expansion of preceding analyses of literature and nationhood, most notably *Literature and Nation in the Sixteenth Century: Inventing Renaissance France* (2001) by Timothy Hampton. Outlining the concepts of "national community" and "figuration" as his analytical tools, and using Etienne Balibar and a number of postcolonial critics as his approach, Keller shows how the imaginary community of France points to themes of kinship and genealogy in a choice of literary texts. Keller teases out the notions of figuration and nation-building starting with the etymological context, then moves to read his chosen works, which may be said to thematize the notion of Frenchness and a French nation, and finally refers to the modern theoretical framework, thus avoiding an anachronistic reading of his primary texts.

That literature takes an active part in shaping the nation in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France is aptly illustrated in the first chapter, "The Language-Plant in the Garden of France: Imitation and Nation in *La Deffence et Illustration de la Langue Françoyse*," in which Keller through close reading shows that Joachim Du Bellay, in his programmatic and patriotic *ars poetica* of 1549, "conceives of the French as an imaginary community that, like language, is a product of both culture and nature and ultimately figured as a hybrid artifact, embracing both yet belonging to neither" (12). At the same time, Keller is aware of the contradictions in Du Bellay's manifesto, pointing in particular to the organic notion of language that the poet defends, which removes it from a determinable origin as well as from the notion of culture that the Pléiade poets institute. Through this analysis, Keller is able to relativize Benedict Anderson's claim that a territory was ideologically not associated with a language before the end of the eighteenth century.

For this reader, the most convincing chapter is the third, "'A Violent and Treacherous Schoolmistress': Custom and the Nationalization of the Individual in the *Essais*," in which Keller reads Michel de Montaigne's *Essais* as a work in constant contact with foreign elements: they can be books or travel experiences, and do not so much refer to the New World, but rather to "customs and other culturally determined forms of everyday life" (78). In this reading, the figuration of nation results from the common practices as well as customs that a certain set of people shares, fostering a nationalization of the subject. Custom here functions as negative and can be countered by knowledge and awareness of the limitations of national identity that is always relative. Reading the essays "Of Vanity" (3.9) and "Of Custom" (1.23), Keller shows that for Montaigne Frenchness is not tied to the French kingdom or the idea of statehood, but associated exclusively with Paris, a "composite construction of location, people, objects, and practices, fused to an imaginary place and being" (80).

In chapter four, “Faith in the Spirit of France: Mythology and the Myth of the Nation in Malherbe’s *Odes*,” Keller reads these works against the grain of much (modern) criticism and as supportive of literary nation-building, pointing out the creative and critical force behind the poet’s endeavor to programmatically invoke the Spirit of France and national identity based on an eradication of dissenting voices, so that he can develop a national voice as a patriotic fiction rather than a historical fact. This chapter sets the stage for the final one that shows how the ideal of fictive ethnicity that is construed in Corneille’s *Le Cid* is scrutinized in *Horace*, where it leads to tensions for both the individual and the community. Marcus Keller’s book is an even and solid study with steady attention to detail in which the author always succeeds in historically situating his texts and then brings to an existing discussion a series of diverse literary genres from a number of authors bridging a traditional century divide.

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