

REVIEWS

De la vicissitude ou variété des choses en l'univers: La traduzione italiana di Ercole Cato. Loys Le Roy.

Ed. Maria Elena Severini. Trans. Ercole Cato. Textes de la Renaissance 182; Studiolo humaniste 4. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014. 664 pp. €49.

Le Roy's *Vicissitude* might have amazed its obscure author by its popular success, had he lived longer following its first appearance in 1575. It was reprinted five times, with minor revisions, and it subsequently appeared in both Italian and English translations. The last of these, Robert Ashley's version entitled *Of the interchangeable course, or variety of things*, was dated 1594. From then until 1944, however, when Blanchard W. Bates published some selections from the French text, the book attracted little interest, except for a *thèse de doctorat* in the 1890s. It was not until 1988, well after Le Roy's work had begun to claim modern scholarly attention, that the 1975 text was reprinted, under the editorship of Philippe Desan. Since then, the pace has quickened, culminating in a conference devoted to the humanist in his native Normandy in 2008. Danièle Dupont, who has published several interesting articles on the *Vicissitude*, brought out the proceedings in 2011, as *Loys Le Roy, renaissance et vicissitude du monde*. Now comes the first comprehensive modern edition of any of Le Roy's works — Ercole Cato's Italian translation of 1584, with extensive commentary and notes by Maria Elena Severini.

Dr. Severini, a historian of philosophy who has worked on Guicciardini and Bruno and is currently on the staff of the Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento in Florence, has written extensively on Le Roy's political works, as well as on the *Vicissitude*. Le Roy's magnum opus, published two years before his death, stands at the end of one strand of intellectual history, and at the beginning of another. On the one hand, like Montaigne's *Essais*, it is in some sense a culmination of late vernacular humanism, with its encyclopedic awareness of ancient and modern secular learning, reflected in vast, often-unacknowledged appropriation. On the other, it represents a nascent stage in the development of a philosophy of history, whether conceived as an idea of progress, a departure from providential history, or a new kind of determinism.

Aside from making the Italian translation widely available, with useful and extensive notes, Severini's book offers a thorough and original discussion both of Le Roy's Italian sources — particularly Machiavelli and Guicciardini — and of his putative influence on later Italian thought. She finds the most interesting and extensive connections with Bruno, but also recognizes strong affinities with Vico, though these have long been recognized, especially by Donald R. Kelley. She also discusses the textual history of the two Italian editions and infers from the numerous examples held in Italian libraries that

the work was more influential in Italy than has previously been assumed. Severini also focuses needed attention on Ercole Cato, the Ferrarese courtier and academician who translated the *Vicissitude* and several other French texts. Though by 1585 Ferrara had long had close relations with France — Duke Ercole II's duchess was Renée de France, cousin of François I — such contacts were widespread, and both versions of Cato's translation were published by Aldus in Venice, rather than by Ferrarese printers like Mammarelli, who typically handled the work of local writers. Le Roy himself had a sure grasp of the transformative impact of print on European society and culture. Owing to the new technology, the decline of universal Latinity was more than offset by the abundance of texts. You could write in your own vernacular — and Le Roy generally did so despite his official role as a professor of Greek — while reaching a much bigger audience of your countrymen, and still assume that eventually readers of other modern languages would have ready access in their vernaculars. Other equally revolutionary technologies, military and scientific, convinced Le Roy and others that human history proceeds in a linear, nonteleological course.

In nearly 140 pages of introductory essays, Severini explores the text and context of Le Roy's work. Some of this discussion is a bit speculative, since nothing of significance has been added to Le Roy's biography since my early and largely unavailing efforts in the 1960s. She also offers an interesting thirty-seven-page appendix to the text, tracing the appearances and uses of the word *vicissitude* in Western literature from Terence and Cicero through Bacon and Galileo, and showing that the word itself had its vicissitudes. So, too, did Le Roy's remarkable book. Dr. Severini has advanced the discussion of its role in late sixteenth-century thought.

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