

Jean Céard and Marie-Luce Demonet, eds. *Rabelais et la question du sens*. Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance 474; Etudes Rabelaisiennes 49. Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2011. 306 pp. \$159. ISBN: 978-2-600-01415-1.

This latest addition to the large number of collective volumes devoted to Rabelais that have been published in the last two decades addresses one of the major issues in recent Rabelais scholarship: the ways of creating, transmitting, and distilling meaning from this famously complex text. The overwhelming consensus

among the contributors in favor of the polysemy, mobility, and ambiguity of signs, as Jean Céard underlines right from the beginning (10), does in no way negate the merits of erudition, philology, and historical context, notions that were often pitted against the aestheticist approach characterized by the above terms. Virtually all the studies show the necessity to draw on both sides of this often overstated divide to come to a better understanding of the stakes involved in interpreting Rabelais.

The first section (“Codes et Interprétations”) focuses on a number of case studies of specific episodes and chapters, starting with a discussion of the arbitrariness of gestural rhetoric as illustrated in the Thaumaste episode and documented in sketches drawn from John Bulwer’s 1644 *Chirologia: or the Natural Language of the Hand* and *Chironomia: or the Art of Manual Rhetoric*. An analysis of the Physètere chapters shows how Rabelais used his sources, in this case Olus Magnus’s *Carta Marina* (1539), to create an abundance of possible meanings. The obscenity of *Pantagruel* 15 is another concrete example of ambivalence, especially through the play on *mouse* and *mouches*, that conveys a parody of the depiction of serious topics such as the sacred or warfare. The presence of François Villon in two anecdotes from the *Fourth Book* serves as an example of the complexity of the interpretative process within the framework of *auctoritas* or *mediocritas*. The famous “Andouilles war” from the same book is reread as a satire of English Protestantism with all its religious and political implications. The miraculous “Pantagruelion” finally enables a reflection on the nature and proceedings of literary exegesis, which leads to an interpretation of the plant itself as a metaphor for the Rabelaisian book.

Most of the contributions of the second section (“Polysémies”) attempt to broaden the exegetic approach by choosing larger samples from the Rabelaisian chronicles, notably focusing on the *Third Book*. Occurrences of the “Y grégeois” in the *Third* and *Fourth Books* show to what extent Rabelais exceeds the traditional moral sense of the image. Similarly, diametrically opposed reactions to the central figure of the “horn” in the *Third Book* can be read as a guarantee of polysemy, as Panurge’s steadfast contradictions of Pantagruel’s fixed interpretation of this sign prevent its meaning from becoming rigid. The temporal progression and delays in the same text, illustrated above all in Panurge, Rondibilis, and Bridoye, is considered another essential element in the construction of meaning. The comic elements in the Bridoye episode (and to a lesser extent the Janotus episode) also constitute a promising facet for interpretation even though this article remains unfortunately somewhat trivial and superficial. The study of recurring patterns, themes, and episodes, integral to many of the contributions, attests to Rabelais’s way of rewriting his own text, an intratextuality that functions as an important tool of interpretation. The episode of the Sibylle de Panzoust demonstrates the status of *curiositas* that symbolizes an open-ended intellectual adventure and prevents knowledge and meaning from becoming fixed.

The third section (“Un surplus de sens”) offers the most sweeping approaches to the topic. An analysis of the chronicles’ titles, prologues, and the final chapter of the *Fourth Book* demonstrates the nature, limits, and implications of literal meaning, a vital counterpart to the more revered “higher meaning(s)” and essential for the passage from ambiguity to polysemy. Rabelais’s increasing skepticism towards the Kabbalah serves as

a case study for a proposed deontology of interpretation meant to avoid deplorable excesses of subjectivity and lack of objective knowledge (philology, history, sources). Rabelais's multiple rewritings of the initiation scene from the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* show the "perpetual displacement of the locus of meaning" (270) throughout the text. The profound lack of certainty and the consciousness of one's own limits implied in pyrrhonism offer an ambiguous lesson in ambiguity to close the volume.

Despite its late publication date, over ten years after the original congress, and the uneven quality of a few articles, this volume is an important contribution to Rabelais studies.

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