
REVIEWS

Michael Randall. *Building Resemblance: Analogical Imagery in the Early French Renaissance*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. 221p.

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This finely argued book analyzes the manner in which three early modern writers, Jean Molinet, Jean Lemaire de Belges, and François Rabelais, used allegorical and analogical imagery in their works. Tracing the presentation of resemblance and difference in selected works of these authors, Randall attempts to establish that “building” resemblance proved oftentimes illusory for these writers of the late medieval / early Renaissance period as they confronted the emergent presentation of self in early modern European society. He is, in large part, successful and his partial study of heretofore understudied texts makes for an interesting, albeit demanding, read. Randall concludes that the works of the earliest writer, Molinet, offer an uneasy balance between like and unlike, that those of Lemaire, “astride an epistemological divide,” emphasize resemblance, and finally, that the works of Rabelais champion difference (85).

One of the chief attributes of this work is its emphasis on the Burgundian court poets Molinet and Lemaire, authors whose works are less studied and certainly not in context with Rabelais’ œuvre. Randall first examines Molinet’s late fifteenth-century poems *Roman de la rose moralisé* and *Chappellet des dames*. The first, he argues persuasively, is an unusual and “flamboyant” allegory which links characterizations found in the *Roman de la Rose* to spiritual love. Randall offers Jean Gerson’s early fifteenth-century mystical theology as its theoretical parallel and demonstrates well Molinet’s dilemma: “The actual experience of the divine is beyond words, and yet Molinet must connect the carnal love of the Rose to the spiritual love of his gloss” (35). In his 1478 tribute to Mary of Burgundy, *Chappellet des dames*, Molinet compares her with the Virgin Mary. He uses what Randall terms an inverted analogy, with the perfect (the Virgin Mary) being used to describe the imperfect (Mary of Burgundy). There is a resultant “chaotic mix of earthly and secular” imagery which “has no structural support or function” (49). As contrast, Randall next features Lemaire’s *La Couronne margaritique* (1505) a poem modeled on the *Chappellet* but one in which the subject — Marguerite of

Austria — is viewed in the context of a coherent hierarchy of existence. Rather than attempting to compare the secular and the divine, as did Molinet, Lemaire, rather, uses symbols to bring the two together, creating a rational ontology. Randall's exhaustive study of Lemaire's *Concorde du genre humain* (1505) and *Concorde des deux langues* (1511) further proves Lemaire's attachment to the principle of harmony and hence to Neo-Platonism. These passages are detailed and demanding but very rewarding for the reader. In them Randall clearly presents how the traditional poetics of resemblance were in transition at the turn of the sixteenth century. Throughout the four chapters on Molinet and Lemaire, Randall demonstrates a solid understanding of the philosophies of Aristotle, Aquinas, and Ockham, theories which served as underpinnings of the literature presented.

Randall's last two chapters highlight the differences in analogical imagery he perceives between Rabelais' initial works and his final one, placing particular emphasis on the *Quart Livre*. In general, this work has been neglected by scholars and it is good to see it receiving close critical attention. Randall's fine theoretical analysis of the analogical distinctions between Rabelais' works, which at times refutes Foucault's reading of the Renaissance, is important and helps to dispel the popular notion that Rabelais' is a monolithic oeuvre. Notably, Randall provides some of the most succinct and reliable summations available of particular episodes. For instance, in describing Panurge's cowardice in the *Quart Livre*'s tempest scene, Randall rightly observes that Panurge's "words mean nothing. They are cut off from their referents, just as his use of dubious saints cuts him off from the simple truth of God as revealed through scripture" (119). Ultimately, however, Randall does not see the humor in this episode nor in the *Quart Livre* in general, and for this reader, misconstrues Rabelais' intent. Reducing Rabelais' last book to an example of "fractured resemblance" — that is, where there are no longer examples of absolute truths as seen in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* — Randall considers the *Quart Livre* the image of a "nightmare" and a work of "despairing skepticism" (104). This limited, and indeed, unjustified reading is a disservice to the richness of Rabelais' final work. While Randall certainly is accurate in portraying Pantagruel and his companions in the *Quart Livre* as becoming increasingly aware of the limitations to their knowledge, he does not acknowledge that Pantagruel is fully aware of what he *does* know: his boundless faith. Pantagruel suffers no *crise de conscience*, as Randall seems to suggest. Admittably difficult to classify, the *Quart Livre* nonetheless is demonstrably more than proof of an epistemological *impasse*. Its concluding passage, with a hearty laugh by Pantagruel and a call for drinks all around, belies Randall's selective interpretation.

Beyond its overarching thematic argument, *Building Resemblance* offers a valuable examination of pivotal analogical images by Molinet and Lemaire. It also offers learned readings of Rabelais, even if this reader did not always agree with their conclusions. Inappropriate for the casual reader, this book is useful to advanced graduate students and established scholars alike for its clearly articulated arguments and exhaustive bibliography. All of Randall's readings are well-researched and thought provoking, both hallmarks of a worthwhile academic study. ❁