Book Reviews/Comptes Rendus

Elizabeth A. Chesney. *The Countervoyage of Rabelais and Ariosto. A Comparative Reading of Two Renaissance Mock Epics*. Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1982. Pp vii, 232. \$20.00

This comparative study does for Ariosto and Rabelais what Giuseppe Mazzotta's acclaimed *Dante, Poet of the Desert* has recently done for the Florentine poet: it offers many close readings, probes linguistic ambiguities, makes use of a rich and varied critical vocabulary, displays impressive erudition, and raises issues that every student of the texts in question must ultimately treat. Elizabeth Chesney's work, like that of Mazzotta, may also prove controversial because of some of its revisionist conclusions. Nevertheless, as a whole it builds beautifully on the Renaissance studies of such distinguished scholars as Thomas Green, A. Bartlett Giamatti, Robert Durling, and the author's own mentor Marcel Tetel, who directed her work in its original form as a Duke University dissertation. The book consists of an introduction, five chapters ("The Voyage," "Myth and Fantasy," "The Narrator," "Time and Art," "Folly"), and a conclusion, nine-page bibliography, and ten-page index.

The Introduction contains an explanation of the purpose of the study and a rationale for the work's organization. Chesney does not desire to focus on Ariosto's possible influence on Rabelais, but rather wishes to examine the shared "difference" in the two authors. That which sets them apart from their medieval predecessors and links them to a new age and to each other is "their propensity for exploring the opposite of every truth and the other side of every argument," or what Chesney calls "a countervoyage, a critical reflection upon each conceptual pole by its other" (p. 5). She sees this dialectic as a pervasive structure in Ariosto and Rabelais, which accounts for textual ambiguities, sets them in the context of contemporary voyages of discovery, and relates them to the epoch's "antirationalistic movement" (p. 6). In Hegelian terms this self-criticism is the price a civilization must pay to evolve from one stage to the next. Ariosto at the end of the Italian Renaissance and Rabelais at the beginning of the French are transitional and pivotal figures, and as a result they engage in much consciousness-raising. Structures and themes highlighted during the era and developed in the two Renaissance mock epics become, therefore, the areas of Chesney's interest and form the basis of her five chapters. She justifies her multi-thematic approach as an attempt "to unite thematic and stylistic contradictions under the rubric of the countervoyage" (p. 15). The subsequent reading

of the *Orlando furioso* and the Rabelaisian *opus magnum* repeatedly shows synthesis-in-antithesis, convincingly argues for structural unity where little had previously been seen, and eloquently testifies to the value of Chesney's approach.

The first chapter warns against seeing the voyages depicted in Ariosto and Rabelais as a means for praising contemporary progress. Although topographical and nautical detail abounds in their descriptions of imaginary voyages, it serves primarily "to involve the reader in a spiritual odyssey" that will soon be spatially and temporally fragmented (p. 22). The voyage soon becomes "a vehicle for self-analysis and the formation of judgment" (p. 40), rather than an encomium of a Renaissance explorer. In the second chapter the uses of myth and fantasy are similarly revealed. While Chesney agrees that the widespread inclusion of pagan divinities in Renaissance literature "contributes to . . . man's own mythification" (p. 63), she argues that in the Ferrarese poet and the Gallic monk much of the myth is a parody and an indictment of the "indiscriminate valuing of antiquity over modernity" by their contemporaries (p. 66). The juxtaposition of fact and fantasy "demystifies by means of remythification" (p. 96). In other words, the authors use fantasy to remind the reader that illusion is part of being and the stuff of (re)mythification.

The next chapter, on the narrator, depends on Gérard Genette for much of its analytical terminology. It attempts to demonstrate that in Ariosto and Rabelais "narrative ambiguity . . . is . . . a mainspring of the countervoyage and, as such, contributes to the two works' conceptual unity" (p. 98). The narrator who is neither reliable nor consistently unreliable is designed to make the reader pause and consider the facets of knowledge; the consciousness of such a narrator "reflects the problems and contradictions of a transitional age" (p. 115). Chapter 4 treats the problem of time and art. Chesney identifies temporal vacillations in the two texts as evidence of "a temporal tension" in their descriptions of history and futurity (p. 136). The purpose of the tension is to demonstrate that the only constant is change; even art, which may transcend time, is subject to changing interpretations. The final chapter discusses the concept of folly as seen in such figures as Panurge in the Pantagrueline tales and Astolfo in the *Furioso*. Orlando's madness is analyzed as a "coupling of monomania with schizophrenia," a fact which supposedly makes him more polemical and didactic since he breaks with the typical literary type of fool (p. 188). The Conclusion acknowledges the geographical and temporal differences between Ariosto and Rabelais but concludes that these differences only serve "to render their profound similarities all the more intriguing" (p. 213). The bibliography, like the index, is exemplary, although Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis* essay on Rabelais should probably be included.

Chesney buttresses most of the above assertions with careful readings of multiple passages from both texts. Although she could be more careful when speaking of allegory in Ariosto (it is of a limited scope) and more attentive to the medieval currents in Rabelais (there are more than she credits), the book's overall approach—with its emphasis on the "divided consciousness" of the two authors—makes it a must for scholars of Renaissance comparative literature.

Mistakes and errata include "nouvi" for "nuovi" (pp. 4 and 22), "*Canzionere*"

for "*Canzoniere*" (p. 6), "provde" for "provide" (p. 39), "condemmed" for "condemned" (p. 45), "Ruggerio" for "Ruggiero" (p. 48), "noms" for "mons" (p. 68, l. 5), "lascai" for "lasciai" (p. 128, n. 39), "Aristo" for "Ariosto" (p. 165), "moveover" for "moreover" (p. 178), "scritte" for "scritto" (p. 186), "né" for "ne" (p. 191, l. 1) and an italicization problem on p. 34, n. 22. Notwithstanding these minor problems, the author's prose style is lucid, and the volume's printing is noteworthy for its clarity.

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Jonathan Goldberg. *Endlesse Worke: Spenser and the Structures of Discourse*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981. P.p. Xv, 177. \$17.50 US.

The title of this book is taken from Spenser's apology following the great 'river-canto' in the fourth book of *The Faerie Queene*. When the magnificent procession of water-gods and nymphs attending the marriage of the Thames and the Medway has been described, the poet exclaims, "O What an endlesse worke have I in hand, / To count the seas abundant progeny . . . Then blame me not, if I have err'd in count / Of Gods, of Nymphs, or rivers yet unred: / For though their numbers do much more surmount, / Yet all those same were there, which erst I did recount." Those gods he has named in his catalogue were in fact there, he reports, but there were many more he could not describe, crowding the hall even up to the door, "Yet were they all in order, as befell, / According their degrees disposed well" (IV. xii. 1-3). To give an exact account of "the seas abundant progeny" (IV. xii. 1) lies beyond his powers, even though he has been assisted by the muse. The very possibility of attempting to do so in writing invokes a dream of a complete and accurate representation, after the pattern of those "records of antiquitie" that are "layd up in heaven above" and to which "no wit of man may comen neare" (IV. x. 10). But the actual experience of writing calls forth a 'topos of modesty' (*excusatio propter infirmitatem*) in which the poet seems uncomfortably aware of the limitations of his medium. Not so, paradoxically, for the less reliable medium of Homer whose invocation before the catalogue of ships (*Iliad* II. 485 ff.) lays down the claim that he has a tremendous array of detail exactly correct because of the divine help given him by the muses. For Spenser, however, the event he has attempted to describe constitutes in itself a full presence that cannot be adequately represented within the confines of his art: "How can they all in this so narrow verse / Contayned be, and in small compasses held?" (IV. xi. 17).

To contemplate a writing that would seek to fulfill the dream of total statement, in which no portion or feature of its object would escape representation, is to contemplate the prospect of an 'endless work' advancing forever toward the end it projects for itself while remaining unfinished forever: there would always be one last thing to be extricated from the folds, one last detail to work in, and the more words we spend attempting to exhaust what is there, the further we seem to be from a representation that can be said to be complete. When the artist himself recognizes this situation he must respond by striking some attitude toward it, let us say of