

De la servitude volontaire: *Rhétorique et politique en France sous les derniers Valois*. Déborah Knop and Jean Balsamo.

Mont-Saint-Aignan: Presses universitaires de Rouen et du Havre, 2014. 248 pp. €12.

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This handbook on the *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* of Étienne de La Boétie (finished ca. 1554, published in 1574) is part of the French aggregation program of 2014–15 — in other words, the annual competition for future French secondary-school teachers in literature. Beyond students, who are its first public, the book will interest every specialist

of French and European humanism because of its two major assets: a synthetic approach (bibliographical and historiographical) and an ingenious interpretation of the *Discourse*.

The synthetic approach is twofold. It is first based on a presentation of the primary and secondary bibliography of the text, from the first printings of the *Discourse* to a selection of recent works until 2014 (215–34). It then introduces the history of the text and its numerous editions (“A Text and Its History,” 24–60; “Annex 1. Anthology of Critical Texts,” 195–206), and also interpretations and critical controversies around the *Discourse* (*The Discourse on Voluntary Servitude and Critic*, 7–25). The authors, Déborah Knop and Jean Balsamo, present three critical tendencies against which they erect their own interpretation. They first describe a scholastic approach that contributes to giving the text a considerably impoverished vision by dint of being repeated. The *Discourse* would appear to be a purely academic exercise from a young La Boétie, which would explain, for example, the numerous references to ancient authors. An ideological approach is also considered — that is, the way many commentators have their own political beliefs that mark their analysis of the text. La Boétie has sometimes been seen as a precursor of the French Revolution, a Marxist, or an informer of the great totalitarianisms of the twentieth century. This can also, when it is attenuated, slide into a more nuanced philosophical analysis. As a critic of tyranny as political regime, La Boétie would understand the present. But in doing so, it is the entire historicity of the text that we deny. Thereby the *Discourse* becomes a kind of catch-all text in which each author sees what he or she wants to see. Finally, the book proposes an ironic or concealing approach. This interpretation is proposed by Nadia Gontarbert, editor of *La Boétie* (1993). The reader should read between the lines of the *Discourse* to understand it. He or she should puzzle out a nonperceptible intent, almost coded, which would explain the whole text. Gontarbert sees in the *Discourse* a complicit attitude toward tyranny: La Boétie seems to denounce it while he takes advantage from it. Knop and Balsamo do not believe at all in that interpretation because it would have been much easier for La Boétie to praise directly the absolute power of the monarch if that was his intention.

Knop and Balsamo consider that the *Discourse* should be approached through a literary prism. The implementation of this approach is the focal point of the book. The literary method would uncover the rhetorical structure of the text, its references, tone, and vehemence; its stylistic effects; and its inclusion in the practices and debates specific to the 1550s in French and European humanist circles. Knop and Balsamo illustrate their approach in the last two parts of the book, one outlining the rhetorical and literary processes and themes of the text (“From Demonstrative to Deliberative Gender,” 63–155), the other presenting the results the two authors have achieved thanks to their method (“A Manifesto of the Senatorial Ideology,” 157–93). For the authors, the *Discourse* is a work that reflects the French Senate ideology then in full development in the parliamentary environment. In fact, it should be remembered that La Boétie sat in the Parliament of Bordeaux. The *Discourse* thus would aim to compete with the mode of eloquence practiced by antique models like Cicero, and to illustrate the French language

in the field of rhetoric. In this sense, the *Discourse* is fully integrated with two humanist tendencies: the illustration of vernacular languages and the construction of a new rhetoric, inspired by antiquity, a process that was particularly strong in France (and with Guillaume du Vair, in particular).

The authors choose an approach that goes beyond purely political and philosophical aspects. They have therefore managed to present a fairly challenging reading, certainly able to reproduce the complexity of this masterpiece of humanistic eloquence, which still fascinates readers today.

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