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**McClure, Ellen. The Logic of Idolatry in Seventeenth-Century French Literature.**

George Hoffmann

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McClure, Ellen.

*The Logic of Idolatry in Seventeenth-Century French Literature.*

Martlesham, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2020. Pp. 253. ISBN 978-1-8438-4550-8 (hardcover) US\$95; ISBN 978-1-7874-4689-2 (ebook) US\$24.99.

“Who could find a single person today so deeply ignorant as to claim a piece of wood, or a stone, for his God?” asked Catholic preacher René Benoist, dumbfounded at Protestant accusations (*Traicté catholique des images* [1564], 6). Even Calvin admitted that Catholics were not “so stupid that they did not understand God to be something other than stocks and stones” (*Institutes*, trans. Battles [1960/1559], 1:109). Yet, despite such protests, the notion of idolatry took on a life of its own. Regarded as widely practised and deeply ingrained, idolatrousness constituted the principal grief of early Reformation struggles. In explaining this inconsequence, Ellen McClure is right to look beyond immediate disputes over holy statues in order to identify a deeper conflict over how (or whether) the divine could find material expression. Charges of idolatry, McClure implies, insinuate the necessary failure of the sublime.

Thus, a theological question seemingly better consigned to the dustbin of history takes on central importance in painting, literature, and aesthetics more generally. At stake, no less, was the status of the material world as created—thus derivative of a higher power—against which the celebration of human creativity risked appearing spurious, if not downright blasphemous. Following a trend that has increasingly emphasized the Catholic origins of modernity, McClure traces the ultimate ascendance of human artistry and authorship not to the usual suspects of Vasari, the book market, or a disenchanted universe, but to Louis Richeome’s defense of the Counter-Reformation’s promotion of visual imagery (and the human ingenuity it required) as a refraction of divine creativity.

Linking aesthetics to theological debates about idolatry sounds plausible in theory, but what makes McClure’s case so compelling emerges in her case studies. It is one thing to point out that Christian Europe conceptualized the status of artistry with respect to divine creation. It is altogether a different proposition to show canonical authors like Racine and Molière deeply engaged in finer points of theological dispute. McClure begins with a tonic reading of Urfé’s *Astrée*, a work chronologically close to Reformation conflicts but whose pastoral conceits lie seemingly far from them. Yet she shows how the work

explores monotheism's prohibition against images by comparing *Astrée's* lovers to the Bible's jealous God, and their idolization of the beloved to idolatry's confusion between Creator and creature. McClure follows up with a deeply original reading of Descartes's *Meditations* as responding to these religious controversies and committed to providing a proof of God that bypasses representation, human projection, and the material world. Both case studies lead to their writers' problematic status as creators—potentially usurping God's purview through their own authorship.

The theme of authorship and its potential for idolatry are beautifully developed in a subsequent essay on La Fontaine. A handful of his fables explicitly evoke idolatry, itself not completely surprising given their proximity to mythology. However, in McClure's reading, La Fontaine generalizes idolatry to the human condition in order to critique our latent propensity toward self-exaltation. There follow sensitive yet game-changing readings of Sévigné, Molière, and Racine, with McClure's reading of *Phèdre* crowning the analysis.

One of the subtler qualities of McClure's study is how the readings grow finer as the work advances. In part, this results from a cumulative effect of developing the consequences entailed by idolatry, but one also suspects that she saves her favourite examples in order to clench her argument. Hence, she concludes with a curious set of interactions between Louis XIV's court and a delegation from Thailand in 1689, which allowed France to position its representational practices as securely outside the idolatrous attitudes of their guests. This fortuitous contrast notably enabled the unprecedented erection of multiple statues of the living king throughout the realm, now free from the taint of idolatry. McClure explains these events not merely as the apotheosis of divine right rule but, rather, as the solution to the problem of idolatry raised 150 years earlier by Protestant critics of Catholicism. The person of the king reconciled the fraught relationship between the material world and divine transcendence, and the divine sanction of his rule served transitively to sanction his representation in statuary.

As do other excellent recent studies (Katherine Ibbett's *Compassion's Edge* and Andrea Frisch's *Forgetting Differences*), McClure's work suggests that France took far longer than previously thought to assimilate the consequences of the Wars of Religion. It traces the relationships between idolatry, images, imagination, creativity, and authorship, a nexus that raised questions over the theological status of the arts in ways salient to seventeenth-century eyes,

but largely invisible to ours. Before a time when creativity could be taken for granted, authors and artists worked out their status and the significance of their activity in religious terms. McClure invites us to draw some surprising conclusions about writers and artists, made in the image of their God—as creators.

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**More, Thomas.**

*The Essential Works of Thomas More.* Ed. Gerard Wegemer and Stephen Smith.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020. Pp. xxviii, 1469 + 54 b/w ill. ISBN 978-0-3002-2337-8 (hardcover) US\$100.

*The Essential Works of Thomas More* is a tremendous scholarly undertaking published by Yale University Press. Edited by historians Gerard Wegemer and Stephen Smith, it is the outcome of an international collaboration between enthusiastic scholars and translators of More's work. Wegemer and Smith present the first collection of More's Latin and English essential writings in one comprehensive volume. The general preface speaks to the intellectual labour required to put this book together, while the literary endeavour as a whole attests to the immeasurable value of More's work for scholars of the early modern period.

This large volume begins with a chronology of More's life and writings. Before we immerse ourselves in More's universe, however, we are given the tools to explore and understand his writings in the context of historical events that shaped both his personal and professional life as a scholar, an official, and a man of the law. The text includes More's essential dialogues, books, letters, treatises, responses, instructions, collaboration pieces with other scholars, and his polemic writings. Besides More's prose, the volume contains a series of his poetry and rhymes, demonstrating the diversity of his skills. Wegemer and Smith suggest that More's translations of famous works, such as that of Lucian, speak also to his capability and reputation as a translator (17) and to