

Preface

This is a book about edges. It is about the edges of community and the edges of literature. It concerns itself with moments when communities face those who are their neighbors or adversaries, and it analyzes what happens when these moments are represented in literary texts. It considers the consequences of such moments of limitation, both for the representation of community and for the language and formal conventions of literature.

Literature and Nation in the Sixteenth Century explores the relationship between a series of ideological struggles over the meaning and limits of community in Renaissance France, and the emerging secular literary culture that reflects and responds to those struggles. The question of the edges of the nation and of the political and cultural vulnerability of France more generally is a central, though rarely analyzed, theme of French Renaissance literature: in this book, I trace the ways in which anxiety about the edges and definition of France places pressure on the conventions and the language of literary representation. And I show how the generic and rhetorical multiplicity that marks much of early modern French literature functions as a form of mediation, as a way of responding imaginatively to the breakdown of community.

In recent years students of early modern European culture have paid increasing attention to the cultural and political origins of the modern nation-state. In a sense, this marks a kind of sea change in the study of the period. The fertile and long-established concern with the relationship of "ancients and moderns," with such issues as imitation, classical authority, and the reception of ancient texts that dominated the field of Renaissance studies a decade or so ago, has slowly begun to give way to an increasing interest in the ways in which communities and cultures define themselves with regard to other communities and cultures. A synchronic focus is replacing a diachronic one. Such books as Richard Helgersen's *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England*, and Richard Marienstras's *Le proche et le lointain: Le drame Elisabethain et l'idéologie anglaise aux XVIe et XVIIe*

Preface

siècles, consider how cultural and political collectivities in Renaissance Europe mark out their identities and spaces. As the titles just mentioned suggest, this strain of thought has found Renaissance England, with its geographical insularity, its powerful queen, and its religious independence, a particularly fruitful object of study. France, however, surely provides the most widely influential model, in a European context at least, of the close bonding of literary culture and national spirit. Indeed, the blending of nationalism with the sanctification of literature is a central feature of French identity that has been exported with great success. One of my aims in writing this book is to trace the pre-history of the relationship between secular literary culture and national identity in France. Moreover, in the context of an emerging field of European studies, I hope, by focusing on the turbulent case of France, to offer a model for thinking about the relationship between culture and politics in the Renaissance that would counterbalance the conventional versions offered by scholars oriented toward more centralized and irenic collectivities such as England and Spain.

"I am driven to the conclusion that no 'scientific definition' of the nation can be devised; yet the phenomenon has existed and exists," writes Hugh Seton-Watson in his book *Nations and States*. How much more difficult, then, to try to define the relationship between literature and national identity. For if the "nation" itself can nowhere be pointed to, how is one to trace the ways in which it interrelates with literary and cultural production? To be sure, there is no lack of national literary histories, and such scholars as Colette Beaune, Claude-Gilbert Dubois, Anne-Marie Lecoq, and Walter Stephens have written compellingly about the symbols and myths that inform French nationhood. In a slightly different tradition, other scholars have focused on the images through which collective experience is defined. Thus, for example, in his study *Children of the Earth*, Marc Shell focuses on the metaphor of the nation as family and traces it through a number of literary texts from different periods. Jacques Derrida's *The Politics of Friendship* does something similar for the notion of political subjectivity as friendship. Less attention has been paid, however, to the problem of the simultaneous emergence of new images of the nation and new forms of secular literary representation. My book examines the dynamic and multifarious productions that mark a historical moment when neither literature nor national identity is clearly defined, when both texts and communities are in struggle, when many forms and figurations jostle for domination.

Preface

Any attempt to grasp and describe the relationship between the making of nations and the making of literary texts thus faces a difficult methodological challenge, since the two objects of study—nations and texts—define and shape each other. Scholars of the Renaissance have tried to meet this challenge in a variety of ways. One approach is to absorb literature into the larger category of “culture,” and simply read it as one discourse among others (law, cartography, etc.) that together are seen to construct a national consciousness. This approach occasionally produces fascinating interconnections between different spheres of writing. A comprehensive study of such discourses, however, would imply nothing less than a complete anthropological and historical reinvention of the period under consideration. To offset the massiveness of such a task, scholars produce new ways of dividing culture into manageable chunks. Thus, for example, in *Forms of Nationhood*, Helgerson wisely chooses to focus on a specific generation: the generation of male writers born in England between 1551 and 1564. These men, he argues, are the men who “write” the nation. This approach necessarily takes for granted certain preconditions (political stability, a set of cultural institutions, etc.) that frame the ideological construction of nationhood. It presumes that the nation must already be somehow “there” before it is given form in language by a specific generation of writers.

My book shows that the privileging of a particular group as a kind of synecdoche of the larger problem of culture and nationhood is impossible for the student of France during the period. For whereas England enjoys a certain political stability, France undergoes a complete political and social collapse in the last years of the sixteenth century. French identity is always at risk during the Renaissance, never quite able to take coherent shape. One cannot “write” the French nation because, haunted as it is by discontinuity, violence, and fragmentation, it escapes representation. And it is over and against this fragmentation that one may grasp the ideological significance of the notion of literary form. For while literature may be just one discourse among many, it does provide a set of rhetorical strategies, formal conventions, and self-conscious play with fictionality that makes it a particularly important site for thinking about the fictions and mystifications that underpin the imagination of nationhood.

This book argues that community is represented in French Renaissance literature as a concept in danger. It is depicted chiefly through moments at which it is threatened by some enemy or

Preface

stranger. Such threats to community are legible in literary texts at both the level of theme, and, more powerfully, the level of genre. The breakdown of community is also a breakdown of genre, a point at which literary conventions run up against the limits of their capacity to represent. In the works of such generically promiscuous writers as François Rabelais, Joachim Du Bellay, Marguerite de Navarre, and Michel de Montaigne, I argue, one may read the stakes of the struggle over community, as they stage the death of old literary forms and the birth of new ones. Thus literary discourse seeks to mediate a crisis of community through the production of new forms. On this level, this is a book about the ideological work done by literature in a particular set of political contexts.

But, in fact, the book traces out several interwoven trajectories. It provides a loosely chronological account of the relationship between literature and politics in the French Renaissance. Each chapter considers a different theoretical problem underpinning the representation of nationhood, from the definition of national character to the representation of territory. Moreover, the unfolding of the argument turns around a series of identity-threatening encounters between the French and the non-French—the Turks, the Americans, the Spanish, the Italians, the English. Finally, each chapter considers the relationship between an author of major influence and a particular ideological or political context. Through the exploration of these connections, the book seeks to articulate a model for thinking about the relationship between different literary genres and the literary construction of nationhood.

The crises of community on which I focus in this book often involve violence. On a thematic level, they feature scenes of torture, physical mutilation, madness, and confusion. The violence they depict is also linguistic, involving strange shifts in perspective, logical incongruities, and rhetorical exorbitance. I will be paying a great deal of attention to these moments of rhetorical energy, as a way of grasping the linguistic dimension of literary nationhood. Certainly, one can say that linguistic flux is a characteristic of Renaissance culture generally, from the puns in Thomas Wyatt and Shakespeare to the discussions between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza over the correct meaning of particular words and phrases. In the French tradition the linguistic exuberance of Renaissance literature has usually been seen either as a moment of exhilarating freedom before the fall into the constraints of *classicisme*, or as a mark of a more general “productivity”

Preface

that seems to characterize all texts. Without denying the importance of either of these perspectives, I will be arguing that much of the linguistic violence of Renaissance French literature is deeply historical, that it is a symptom of the crisis of community that afflicts French culture more generally during the period. As such, I will be particularly attentive to the ways in which tropes, figures, and genres distort and transform the terms of ideological discourse, often in ways that cannot be accounted for by the study of authorial intention. I will be trying to trace the ways in which literature is caught in the paradoxical contingencies of its worldliness.

The trajectories offered by this book are presented with the goal of opening a new perspective on the formative moment in modern French literary culture, pointing to the ways in which literature both reflects and redefines collective identity. The project of reconsidering French literature in its relationship to different communities and nations has recently acquired a certain urgency. The pressure exerted on traditional notions of European national identity by the new Europe emerging after the Maastricht Treaty suggests the need for new ways of imagining literary and cultural history. The new Europe demands an account of French culture that would focus on the borders of France and the edges of French identity. It calls for approaches not generally exploited by either conventional French literary history or the traditional categories of comparative literature. What is required is a history of the cracks and fissures in European culture, of the seams that shape community. In fact, one might say that our own historical moment makes the study of myths and forms of community urgent indeed, since we seem to be living through a paradoxical overlapping of the affirmation and the destruction of national communities. It is clear that the nation-state is reaching the end of its history, and that the precise definition of any type of "grouphood," be it national or ethnic, is virtually impossible in a post-modern, racially mixed, global economy and culture. Yet we live at this very moment among increasingly violent Balkanizations, essentialist affirmations of group identity (often produced, understandably, against the leveling effects of globalization) sprinkled across both the political map and the cultural landscape. The texts studied here may alert us to some of the cultural forces that shape moments of paradox like our own.

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