



PROJECT MUSE®

The Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi in Early Modern Europe: Encounters with
a Certain Something (review)

David Matthew Posner

Renaissance Quarterly, Volume 60, Number 1, Spring 2007, pp. 192-194
(Review)

Published by Renaissance Society of America



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/212681>

in his writing for a wider role for the vernacular. David Trotter offers an original and provocative analysis of the relative importance of Gascon, Latin, and French in the Pyrenees after the Villers-Cotterêts ordinance of 1539. He finds Gasconisms surviving into the eighteenth century and textual quotations from different languages for different purposes across the late Middle Ages and early modern period. He shows that the choice of language was always a matter of audience and context, as much before Villers-Cotterêts as after.

Yvonne Bellenger writes on Du Bartas's epic poem about the battle of Lepanto, itself translated from King James I's poem on the same subject. Bellenger remarks on the paradoxical nature of a Protestant poet collaborating on an epic commemoration of the Hapsburg (therefore Catholic) victory, while Marie-Madeleine Fragonard retraces the convoluted history of Agrippa d'Aubigné's efforts to support the Protestant cause in England. Yvonne Roberts, a doctoral student of Cameron's, publishes an article derived from her dissertation on de Baïf's political verse and his temporary alliance with Michel de l'Hospital against the Guises, while Michael Heath contributes a survey of (Christian) European representations of Turks during the sixteenth century. Like several other contributors, Heath remarks on the scandal of the Franco-Turkish alliance in apparent innocence of the Hapsburg-Persian alliance, which was formed in response to it.

Françoise Charpentier reviews the themes of voyage and discovery in Rabelais's fourth and fifth books and finds a rich meditation on French social life in the middle of the sixteenth century, while Frank Lestringant returns, in conclusion, to a subject on which he has contributed many of the most original insights of the last thirty years: early modern Europeans' consistent but unacknowledged use of others to arrive at a clearer understanding of themselves. This volume is a worthwhile addition to the study of the development of the idea of Europe, and a well-deserved tribute to the career of one of its early advocates.

EDWARD BENSON

University of Connecticut

Richard Scholar. *The Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi in Early Modern Europe: Encounters with a Certain Something.*

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. viii + 334 pp. index. bibl. \$95. ISBN: 0-19-927440-1.

The aesthetics of intersubjective experience in the early modern period articulate themselves around a void, always trying, with ever-increasing desperation, to say the unsayable. This unsayable has a number of names: *sprezzatura*, *galanterie*, *honnêteté*, and the term that gestures most explicitly towards its own incapacity to define that for which definition itself would be fatal: *je ne sais quoi*. Richard Scholar's book is a cheerful and exhaustive attempt to describe this phenomenon, readily — and consciously — embracing its inarticulability even while exploring nearly every corner of its territory. Despite its title, the book concentrates mainly

on French sources, for the most part appropriately so, since — as Scholar demonstrates — seventeenth-century France is where the term and its entourage really live. Scholar does attempt, however, to resist the centripetal pull of the term, both linguistically and generically, pursuing the *je-ne-sais-quoi* across late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts ranging from the aesthetics of behavior to natural philosophy. He also wants to resist a reductively sequential approach, borrowing Terence Cave's anti-chronological method of prehistory to avoid writing merely a teleological narrative of progress. Here, as elsewhere in the book, the theoretical apparatus feels at times creaky, if not superfluous; Scholar could do more here to show how this method differs (if indeed it does) from simply endeavoring to understand texts on their own terms.

The first part of the book presents itself as a word history: using Starobinski's notion of the tripartite life cycle of a word — from its emergence as a lexical entity, through a period of currency, to its demise in what Merleau-Ponty calls *sedimentation* — he traces the *je-ne-sais-quoi* from its birth from the Ciceronian *nescio quid* through Corneille, Retz, and Bouhours to its death-by-definition in the great dictionaries of the end of the seventeenth century. The second, more substantial portion of the book attempts what Scholar calls a "critical history" of the term's activity in three different discursive fields: nature, the passions, and culture. He rightly points out that the term's undefinability tends to disrupt settled discourses, and then attempts first to show how the term manifests itself in conflicts in the field of natural philosophy. This discussion is less successful than other portions of the book; the reader may not be convinced of the importance of the term in this context, and moreover the chapter's conclusions — for example, that Newton describes the workings of gravitation but does not attempt to describe its nature — are at best unremarkable. Much more consequential and persuasive is the chapter on the passions, where Descartes, Pascal, and Corneille rightly take pride of place, but where a number of lesser-known authors and texts also act to give us a more richly detailed view of how the *je-ne-sais-quoi* both does and does not describe the irrational, instantaneous experience of desire. Scholar here offers not a series of patient close readings, but a high-altitude view of the terrain, one which, while often frustratingly cursory, does give the reader a sense of the larger cultural context in which, for example, Pascal's remark on Cleopatra's nose ought to be understood. Likewise, the chapter on the aesthetics of polite discourse, with its nuanced discussion of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and its cousins *honnêteté* and *galanterie* in authors like Bouhours and Méré, properly follows the lead of critics like Michael Moriarty and Alain Viala in attempting to understand that discourse in its cultural and ideological contexts, although Scholar perhaps overstates the degree to which less-recent critics have failed to do so.

The penultimate chapter, on Montaigne, executes the prehistorical move already described, and deserves praise for its effort to understand Montaigne without anachronism or reductiveness. Scholar's resistance to making of Montaigne the precursor of anything, especially later versions of polite conversation, occasionally leads to distorted interpretations, as in the case of his strangely

decontextualized reading of “De l’art de conferer.” However, this does not substantially detract from the chapter’s greatest strength, which is to show how Montaigne, dancing around the term itself, offers to the reader a far more profound and complex sense of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* — especially with reference to the sudden, irrational, inarticulable experience of friendship — than any subsequent writer. The final chapter suggests that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is in a sense the lexical representation of what literature does in describing human experience, and moves to universalize that notion into a critical method, promptly applied in a global reading of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. This is rather less persuasive than what precedes it, and the book might have just as easily — and more elegantly — concluded with its discussion of Montaigne. I applaud, however, Scholar’s willingness, throughout the book, to attempt to explain something that by definition cannot be explained; as his own argument clearly shows, if you know what it is, it’s not what you’re looking for.

DAVID M. POSNER

Loyola University Chicago

Margarete Zimmermann. *Salon der Autorinnen: Französische dames de lettres vom Mittelalter bis zum 17. Jahrhundert.*

Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2005. 296 pp. index. illus. bibl. €49.80. ISBN: 3-503-07957-2.

Margarete Zimmermann sets out to respond to a slightly revised version of Villon’s question “où sont les dames d’antan?” (“where are the women authors of yesteryear?”), and to provide a German-speaking audience with a broad overview of French women writers from the Middle Ages to the beginning of the seventeenth century. In so doing she has written a work in the best tradition of feminist literary history. Her metaphor of the salon, although usually associated with the seventeenth century and writers such as Madeleine de Scudéry, calls up a locus in which women played multifaceted roles — as writers, critics, and patrons — and allows Zimmermann to explore these roles in the preceding centuries.

Some thirty women ranging from Baudonivia, a seventh-century nun, author of the *Vita Radegundis*, an early piece of hagiographic literature, to Marie de Gournay, whose protofeminist tracts were published in the 1620s and 30s, appear in this volume. Most students of French literature will know a few of these writers: for example, Marie de France, Christine de Pizan, Louise Labé, and Marguerite de Navarre. Specialists in French literature will certainly be familiar with others: Hélisenne de Crenne, Catherine and Madeleine des Roches, and Gournay. And certainly, medievalists or Renaissance scholars will recognize the others, such as Anne de Marquets and Nicole Liébault, even if they may not be able to cite their works. Zimmermann also paints with a wide brush to allow a variety of genres, including, but not limited to, writers of memoirs, letters, poetry, and philosophical tracts.