Guillaume Berthon


Anyone publishing a book about the French Renaissance poet Clément Marot and referring in the title to *the Intention of the poet*, ventures on thin ice. The term ‘intentional fallacy’ jumps immediately to mind (coined by Wimsatt/Beardsley in 1946 and relating to the movement of *New Criticism* in America). In France no one can speak about the meaning of any poem without taking into account the many similar caveats pronounced by scholars such as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. The author, Guillaume Berthon (professor of French Renaissance literature at the University of Toulon), is fully aware of this state of affairs, which he aptly summarises and discusses in the introduction. But he feels authorized to use this term because Marot himself also used it whilst editing the works of his father Jean Marot and François Villon. In the preface Marot promises to edit and publish their works according to *l’intencion de l’autheur*. This of course was in *tempore non suspecto*. The term is used precritically, but is not at all new. It already had a long history in medieval (Aristotelian) hermeneutics (*intentio auctoris*). More important than the backward link, is the link forward in time. In Marot reception many readers (both amateurs and professionals) have assumed all kinds of *intentions* in Marot’s mind and heart as the origin of his poems. Marot is still a poet surrounded by myths, a legendary poet. Admiring editors generally published his texts together with biographical notes, or accompanied by a complete ‘biography,’ creating a web of meaning in which many a reader got caught, since he did not know how *fantaïsiste* the so-called biographical facts were, often projections of the editor’s mind. If one adds to this that the list of Marot’s works is seriously contaminated with many poems not written by him, intentional and other fallacies must abound.

The first critical edition (in the modern sense of this word) of Marot’s works, published by C.A. Mayer (1950–1980), refuted many of these rash and literal interpretations (often stemming from Lenglet Du Fresnoy’s edition of 1731). In the accompanying bibliography and biography most of the historical facts and relevant documents were presented to the reader, in an ordered manner, connected with generally well-balanced hypotheses. Mayer took the editorial decision to order Marot’s enormously diverse corpus of poems by ‘genre.’ Based on Mayer’s work, a French branch of Marot research started to grow with its specific features, including a strong interest in the original form of Marot’s publications, in particular his first and most successful collection, *L’Adolescence clémentine*. A new editorial and interpretative wave started, when G. Defaux
published the complete works of Marot in the early 1990s. He did not use a
generic disposition like Mayer, but rather the full text of Dolet’s 1538 edition of
Marot’s *Oeuvres*, making it very difficult to find a satisfactory arrangement for
the remaining poems.

This review is not the place to go deeply into this matter, but it is relevant
because this new, profound, and voluminous study of Marot’s work by Guil-
laume Berthon tries to take a fresh approach to this field. He evaluates both
approaches, Mayer for the solidity of the text he produces, Defaux for the abun-
dance of stimulating peritext he produced, evoked (and sometimes provoked)
around Marot. Berthon, however, wants to return to the sources, literally to the
original editions. He wants to read and analyse the texts not only in their tex-
tual, cultural, and historical context, but in the original disposition in which
Marot brought them to light and presented them to his readers. According
to Berthon this is an opportunity to get as close to Marot and his *intention
as a poet* as possible. There are many things we do not know about Marot—
much more than we would like—but this we know: he frequented some of
the best booksellers and printers in the kingdom of France and closely collabo-
rated with them in editing his own texts. Berthon calls attention to the original
editions, trying—anew—to discriminate between authenticated publications
and counterfeits (with some surprising results!), perusing the heuristic power
of modern bibliographical science, as promoted by scholars like J. Veyrin-Forrer,
J.-F. Gilmont, and W. Kemp. He scrutinises the material (the physical copies)
and interrogates them in order to get information about Marot’s intentions. He
does this in particular by looking at the *disposition* of the works (the *disposi-
tio partium*, also a longstanding hermeneutical activity), looking for significant
lexical events in particular concerning the way in which the author *represents*
himself in the texts.

The main thesis this research produces is that Marot, once he had discovered
his popularity (his poems were printed without his authorization and became
a booksellers’ success), decided to use the same printing press to reclaim his
poems by personally editing them and thus gathering them in an ‘authorised
edition.’ These editions then became the ‘standard’ for all future official and
counterfeit editions. As such this does not sound very spectacular, but the
results of this attentive reading and analysis are quite surprising.

The author divides his book, which presents the results of his research to
the reader, into three parts. First he tries to understand what it means to be an
author in the beginning of the sixteenth century. This section is entitled *Réal-
ités* (pp. 41–204). This is largely a historical exercise. In a number of chapters
he traces the career of the young Clément, from his first job up to the presti-
tigious jobs with Margaret, Duchess of Alençon and her brother the King of