

De Vries on Barbier and Frobert, editors (2017)

Barbier, Jonathan, and Ludovic Frobert, editors. *Une imagination républicaine: François-Vincent Raspail (1794–1878)*. PU de Franche-Comté, 2017, pp. 260, ISBN 978-2-84867-598-5

Vicki De Vries, Calvin College

In the final chapter of *Une imagination républicaine*, Dawn Dodds writes, “‘Raspail’ est aujourd’hui assimilé plus spontanément à un boulevard qu’à une figure historique” (234). This collection of essays does much to rectify such an understanding. The eleven chapters, accompanied by a study of multiple visual representations of François-Vincent Raspail, a complete bibliography of his work, and a detailed description of available archival resources make for fascinating reading. A portrait emerges of not only Raspail as a man with wide-ranging interests and a deep respect and passion for the people, but also of the landscape of ideas he traveled, one fraught with controversies, and whose outcomes shaped the direction of both state and society.

The first four chapters focus on facets of Raspail’s work in, around, and against the scientific and medical establishments. Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent’s “Raspail et la science populaire” demonstrates how Raspail’s notion of popular science differs from the commonly held conception that it is a simplified version of the real science produced by academies and laboratories. His validation of observation, traditional practices, and collective wisdom as constituting a valid alternative form of science is indicative of a valorization of the people that translates to many of Raspail’s spheres of activity. Bensaude-Vincent’s contribution then, is foundational to the rest of the volume, rightfully taking its place as its first chapter.

José Ramón Bertomeu Sánchez illustrates Raspail’s anti-establishment approach in an engrossing analysis of Raspail’s multiple conflicts with Mateu Orfila i Rotger, the dean of the Paris medical school. His consternation regarding the growing medical establishment, especially as it concerned patient care, is the subject of Hervé Guillemain’s chapter. In it, Raspail emerges as a voice for equity and care for the poor, and against the profiteering central power that was emerging. The final chapter on Raspail’s activity in the medical arena focuses on the camphor-based remedies that he produced and marketed. Nicolas Sueur analyzes Raspail’s products, marketing practices, and widespread appeal, convincingly arguing that he successfully managed to merge savvy marketing practices with a genuine concern for those who used his products.

The volume’s editors, Jonathan Barbier and Ludovic Frobert, follow the four chapters on Raspail’s role in the scientific and medical domains with an analysis of Raspail’s portrayal in popular imagery. The number and variety of these images attest to the multiple facets of his public image and to his popularity during his lifetime. Fourteen images ranging from ceramics to bas relief to statues in public squares, each accompanied by a brief commentary, together illustrate Raspail’s symbolic importance on numerous levels and in many domains.

The remaining seven chapters focus on Raspail’s social advocacy in areas stretching beyond science and patient care. One of the most surprising is his protest against environmental hazards to public health. Thomas Le Roux’s chapter highlights Raspail’s role among the pioneers who recognized the detrimental effect of industry on the surrounding community and its link to illness and death, and denounced the government’s role in protecting industrial interests. Raspail sided with the underdog again in controversies surrounding the control of patents on major advances in manufacturing. François Jarrige presents Raspail’s work as a counter expert defending the knowhow of traditional artisans, as well as their right to beneficial advances in their field, reinforcing and enriching the volume’s portrait of Raspail as a voice speaking out against the establishment in favor of the people. Samuel Hayat presents the political realization of this fight in his chapter on Raspail’s candidacy for president in the December 1848 election. This chapter is an excellent example of the manner in which this volume elucidates not only Raspail’s multiple roles, but the broader stakes of the debates in which he embroiled himself. Hayat convincingly demonstrates how Raspail’s “impossible” candidacy went to the heart of the nature of the emerging new republic, and acted as a touchstone for worker identity formation.

Jonathan Barbier’s chapter continues in the same vein, calling attention to Raspail’s role in yet another key social question in nineteenth-century France, namely education. Barbier makes the case that educating the people was in fact the unifying thread linking Raspail’s diverse areas of engagement. Whether furthering popular science, empowering patients to take charge of their own health, or emphasizing practical application over theoretical debate, Raspail insisted that the people share in the benefits of progress, playing an influential role, Barbier contends, in paving the way for Jules Ferry. Ludovic Frobert analyzes Raspail’s *Almanachs* to differentiate his thought from that of his contemporaries, highlighting its originality and consistency despite previous critical evaluation that it was strong on application, but conceptually rather vague.

Christophe Portalez's chapter compares Raspail's trajectory with that of another republican from Carpentras, Alfred Naquet, highlighting the parallels and contrasts in their careers, before Dawn Dodds closes the volume with an analysis of Raspail's descent into relative oblivion, a fate rendered all the more surprising following the deep and engrossing depiction that emerges from this book as a whole. The editors of and contributors to this volume have done a masterful job of creating a portrait that is at once multi-faceted and coherent. This volume is indispensable to scholars interested in Raspail, but is also of enormous interest to any student of the issues critical to the political and social history of nineteenth-century France.

Volume: 47.3–4

Year:

- 2019