These Latin verses from 1582 conceal beneath their obscurity a taste of how the writers of the French Renaissance experienced the literary pressures and possibilities of their society’s socio-economic organization. Their subject was Odet de Turnèbe, the son of the royal professor and important classical scholar Adrien Turnèbe, who had died at the age of twenty-eight leaving as his legacy a small collection of poems, an unpublished prose comedy, and not-yet-registered letters of provision for the office of First President of the Cour des Monnaies, which regulated the mints and the precious metals. His death had cut short what, from almost any point of view, should have been an exemplary story of social mobility. In only two generations, hard work, an honourable reputation, exceptional talent for the humane letters, and royal favour had brought the Turnèbe family to the upper reaches of the robe nobility. But, like all offices in France, the first presidency of the Monnaies was at least in part venal, and while Turnèbe may have been able to buy it at a discount, money had certainly changed hands when he acquired it. Thus Baïf’s question: had humanist virtue or filthy lucre raised Odet to his high position? And if it were the latter, how could his (and by extension his father’s) literary efforts be ennobling?

Such questions haunted French literature from the reign of François Ier into that of Louis XIV. They were, evidently, specific forms of general questions that affect almost all literature: how society can or should best support and reward literary production; how literature should be consumed in light of the conditions of its production; and, perhaps most importantly, how literature might portray or thematize the social and economic conditions of its existence, ideally in ways that have some approximation of a universal resonance. Literary critics and historians have always been aware of these factors, but, illuminating as they can often be, such aspects have only intermittently come to the forefront of their

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1 Jean-Antoine de Baïf, in Othonis Turnebi in suprema curia parisieni advocati tumulus, ed. by Adrien (II) Turnèbe (Paris: Apud Mamertum Patissonium, in officina Roberti Stephani, 1582), p. 17, ll. 9–12. A rough translation would be: ‘Should counted coins, not worth, raise you up? | Is this how the court of moneys gives law? | An early death, as judge, settled this suit: | your own honour adorns you lest you grow swollen with a purchased one.’

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interpretative schemas. Still, the influence of Marxist critique is still felt, if not as powerfully as it once was.\(^2\) And more recently, scholars of anglophone literature working in the new historicism and its more narrowly focused offshoot, the ‘new economic criticism’, have made these issues central to their work.\(^3\) French studies have seen no such organized movement, but plenty of work addressing economic and socio-economic concerns exists, if in a disjointed form, and the historical literature provides the foundation for more.\(^4\) The goal of this essay will be to point out some of that work, while indicating a few areas where more investigation seems desirable to me, and providing an outline of what the broader contribution of a socio-economic approach might be to our understanding of the later French Renaissance.

One reason why such approaches may have figured less prominently in the criticism of French than of English Renaissance literature is a relative paucity of canonical texts with an economic focus. At least until the appearance of Molière’s *Bourgeois gentilhomme* and Furet’s *Roman bourgeois* in the 1660s, there was little in France that could compare with the socio-economic immediacy of, say, Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* or Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta*. Still, there are some French texts that have drawn attention, if usually rather scattered, for their equally episodic economic focus. For the sake of clarity I shall concentrate on four such groups of texts: Rabelais in the earlier part of the Renaissance; the Pleiade poets; Montaigne’s *Essais*; and Pierre Corneille and Charles Sorel at the dawn of the *époque classique*.

The *éloge des dettes* in Rabelais’s *Tiers livre* (Chapters 2—5) is one of the most comprehensively economic texts of the French Renaissance. It combines satire, farce, and evangelical allegory, extending themes that Rabelais had developed in *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* and introducing the increasingly complex social and religious reflections of the later books.\(^5\) Not surprisingly, it is the main subject of the most sophisticated piece of economic criticism yet produced in the


\(^4\) Though see the very interesting papers collected in *Or, monnaie, échange dans la culture de la Renaissance: actes du 9e Colloque international de l’Association Renaissance, humanisme, réforme, Lyon, 1991*, ed. by André Tournon and G.-A. Pérouse (Saint-Etienne: Publication de l’Université de Saint-Etienne, 1994).

Terence Cave’s *Pré-histoires II*. Cave’s study centers on the figure of Panurge and the resonance between his polyglot eloquence and his abundant and disordered economic action read in relation to the expanding commercial world of the sixteenth century. Its value is the way it relates the Renaissance sense of the simultaneous exuberant possibility and lurking danger of language — which Cave understands better than anyone — to the microeconomics of the age. Many other scholars have written extensively on the attitudes towards money and Christian virtue in this passage.

In one sign of the frequent disconnect between literary and historical scholarship, though, no one has yet attempted a reading of Rabelais in light of recent research on debt and structures of indebtedness in late medieval and early modern Europe. From this point of view, Panurge’s elogy appears almost as a realistic description of contemporary society, which was tied together by a complex web of indebtedness that both built on and helped to build a wide range of social relations. Early modern households could not survive without constant borrowing, and no business or elite household could function without advancing credit to clients and investing in loans to individuals, corporations, and the state. If Pantagruel had asked Rabelais’s readers ‘quand serez vous hors de debtes?’, they would, no less than Panurge, have replied ‘ès calendes greques’, and their debts and credits would also have been tied up in webs of sociability and mutual obligation. This does not make Panurge’s views and actions more sympathetic necessarily, nor Pantagruel’s critique of them less trenchant, but it does underline the ambiguities of these chapters.

The Pléiade, which emerged as the dominant voice in French poetry and poetics just as Rabelais reached the height of his popularity, exerted an even more powerful influence on the development of French literature in the medium term. It did produce some explicit discussions of money and the economy; Ronsard’s ‘Hymne de l’or’ is probably the most important such text, and its economic themes have interested Cave, among others. The poet injects an artificial but still complex and revealing image of his own economic status and ambitions into the hymn, which ends with the disclaimer that

Celuy qui dignement voudra chanter ta grace,
Ta vertu, tes honneurs, il faudra qu’il se face

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10 It shows up in Terence Cave, *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 233–42, as well as in *Pré-histoires II*. In both cases Cave (like others who have tackled this poem) continue in many respects the line of analysis pioneered by J.-C. Margolin in ‘“L’Hymne de l’or” et son ambiguïté’, *Bibliothèque d’humanisme et Renaissance*, 28 (1966), 271–93.
Argentier, general, ou tresorier d’un Roy,
Ayant tousjours les doigts jaunes de ton aloy,
Et non pas escolier qui de ta grand’ puissance
(Pour te voir rarement) a peu d’expérience!11

Apparently, lack of wealth as well as excessive wealth could undermine an author’s credibility! What appears here as commiseration in (relative) poverty appears in many other poems as a more or less direct request for patronage that would in turn be recompensed more or less directly by Ronsard’s literary services.12

In this respect Ronsard was typical of the Pléaïde. In a sense there was nothing new at all about this, and much the same thing had been true of many of the Hellenistic and Roman poets who were the Pléaïde’s models. Still, the insistence of this theme suggests that it was more real to them than to most, and it has given rise to a certain amount of interesting scholarly work. Much of that is to be found in the older collective or individual biographical material, most prominently in Henri Weber’s massive, maréciant work on La Création poétique au XVIe siècle.13 A picture emerges from critical work and from the biographical literature on the Pléaïde of a group of poets more than usually concerned with the material and social rewards of their creation, and of the way those rewards, forthcoming or not, could or should shape that creation. J.-A. de Baïf’s epitaph for Turnèbe was a typical product of the school, coloured by the fact that as an illegitimate child Baïf could not enter the honourable and sometimes ennobling careers favoured by his friends: ecclesiastical preferment, the learned professions, or venal office-holding.

One cannot do much more than speculate about why the authors of the Pléaïde were so concerned with their own rewards. Some reasons were probably external to their literary projects. The long economic expansion of the Renaissance was still underway as they came of age. At the same time, royal favour seemed until 1560 to remain a reliable means of social advancement, and it was not until well into the religious wars that hope began to fade of this system being soon restored. Living thus on the cusp of socio-economic promise and instability, the Pléaïde and its audiences could see courtly careerism as a worthwhile though very difficult pursuit. But there was an internal, literary logic that pushed them in the same direction. Reviving in France the glories of Augustan Rome was an inherently political project, and one that seemed self

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11 Pierre de Ronsard, Œuvres complètes, ed. by Gustave Cohen, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), ii, 274. The ‘general’ is presumably meant to be a général, or councillor, in the Cour des Monnaies; the ‘escolier’ could be Ronsard or the poem’s dedicatee, the royal professor Jean Dorat.


13 Henri Weber, La Création poétique au XVIe siècle en France: de Maurice Scève à Agrippa d’Aubigné, 2 vols (Paris: Nizet, 1956). Members of the Pléaïde were mainly from the lower nobility or were newly rising into it; J.-A. de Baïf was the major exception. I have found two older biographies particularly instructive: one of the social failure Étienne Jodelle by Enea Balmas, Un poeta del Rinascimento francese, Étienne Jodelle: la sua vita, il suo tempo (Florence: Olschki, 1962); and one of the social success Jacques Grévín by Lucien Pinvert, Jacques Grévín (1538–1570), sa vie, ses écrits, ses amis: étude biographique et littéraire (Paris: Albert Fontemoing, 1899).
evidently worthy of the highest rewards. Moreover, Rome itself was closely associated with the image of opulence, of a grandeur that in its magnificence and sheer scale implied economic abundance: ‘sa despouille conquise | Qu’Il avoit par tant d’ans sur tout le monde acquise’. Joachim du Bellay took as his personal theme the splendours of the imperial city and the promise of recreating it in France — but also the way that project related to his own and his friends’ careers. The political economy of the Defence et illustration and the Roman poems would reward further inquiry.

By the 1570s, as the Pléiade began to fade from the scene, the political and economic situation in France had become even less promising. This would have made open literary careerism less attractive, although the rather dire socio-economic condition of France retained its fascination. If this was not universally the case, it was certainly the situation of the literary colossus of the period, Montaigne, who cultivated an attitude of fascinated méfiance towards everything involving commerce and money. The most prominent student of that relationship is Philippe Desan, who has explored the problem of Montaigne’s ‘economic discourse’ extensively, proposing that the Essais marked the moment when such discourse took a vital place in French literature. The most striking result of this small critical school is also the simplest: the exceptional pervasiveness of economic, commercial, and monetary language in Montaigne. This is generally seen as reflecting and participating in ‘les tensions entre deux classes sociales’, the aristocracy and the perennially rising bourgeoisie.

That framework has a long history in the analysis of old-regime French culture, rooted in the period from the July Monarchy through the Third Republic when the ‘bourgeoisie’ did in fact seem to be the key actor in French society. But it is dangerous to project that primacy back into earlier periods; Sarah Maza has gone so far as to suggest that there was no such thing as a pre-Revolutionary bourgeoisie. And in fact since Roland Mousnier’s pioneering work on the ‘society of orders’, historians have discovered enormous complexity and ambiguity in the socio-economic divisions of early modern France.

16 One group that seems to have remained much more sociopolitically engaged was the Huguenots, who would certainly merit investigation in their own right.
19 His views are summarized, somewhat tendentiously, in Roland Mousnier, Les Hiérarchies sociales de 1450 à nos jours (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1969); but at an earlier stage in his career Mousnier wrote the most...
Over the past twenty years, work on the nobility as well as the middle classes has made it clear that the boundary between them was fluid and defined more often in terms of personal qualities and culture than of economic function. And since almost every elite family, over the course of a few generations, would straddle the boundaries of noble and roturier, of robe and sword, and of finance, office, and landholding, one should be suspicious of any literary interpretation that purports to discover neat divisions of class. One example of how understanding the complex contemporary views of social stratification can be fruitful in Montaigne studies is an article by Constance Jordan that examines the way Montaigne navigated an opposition between otium diligens on a rural estate and life in the market economy in which such an estate is embedded; she shows how this tension served Montaigne as a lived model for his political and literary engagement and disengagement. It is also the case that the essay as a form implies a certain kind of detached social critique; it is not coincidental that the essay rose to prominence during the crisis of the Wars of Religion.

But many of the most interesting texts dealing with the problems of social structure and social mobility in early modern France are from a slightly later date, from the end of the Wars of Religion through the first third of the seventeenth century. During this period renewed stability, the institution of the ‘paullette’ tax, which formalized the heredity of offices, and debates surrounding the Estates General of 1614–1615 brought the problems of France’s social hierarchy to the fore. And as classicism made its appearance, literature played a more active role in negotiating France’s socio-economic tensions. The intertwined emphases on ‘honnête’ deportment and correctness of diction, in particular, served as status markers at once more abstract and more closely tied to personal merit than either wealth or race: Michael Moriarty’s Marxist exploration of this phenomenon is particularly notable, and, as he points out, there is good evidence that the circles of the précieuses served to integrate elite women of various


22 Montaigne’s near-contemporary, the neglected but interesting essayist Antoine du Verdier, makes an interesting comparison in this context. On him see Hervé Campagne, Savoir, économie et société dans les Diverses leçons d’Antoine du Verdier, Bibliothèque d’humanisme et Renaissance, 58 (1993), 623–35.
backgrounds around a common cultural programme. One good place to examine this development is in Corneille’s earlier plays, which did a great deal to advance it, deploying socially diverse protagonists uniformly admirable for their pure yet natural speech and their embrace of honest (that is, neither brutal nor mercenary) social relations. These plays have long been a fertile field for students of sociology and letters, and they will doubtless continue to be so. And Corneille himself, who rose by sheer force of genius from the obscure lower fringes of the provincial robe to the court nobility, was a prominent and controversial example of socio-economic mobility.

But if I were to suggest one figure to sum up the socio-economic obsessions of the entire French Renaissance — or at least one less obscure than Odet de Turnèbe — it would be Francion. The hero of Charles Sorel’s Histoire comique de Francion is one of the most socially protean in classical French literature. Created by a man sufficiently ensconced in the middle classes to have served under the most transparent of pseudonyms as the (anti-)hero of the Roman bourgeois, Francion is in many ways a prototypical noble by personal merit as well as (on his own account) by blood and by title. If not perhaps entirely bonneête, he does abundantly possess that quality’s sexier and slightly more aristocratic cousin, galanterie, a term Sorel would do much to popularize. Yet, despite this exemplarity, he is subject to money troubles that severely endanger his social standing. As a student, having rejected his late father’s plan that he should study law, he has all his money stolen and for a time is declassed in appearance and subject to various humiliations at the hands of courtiers, judges, and other unworthy but wealthy elites. And in a conclusion added for the final, 1633 edition, the very profusion of his wealth almost brings him down as he is accused and very nearly convicted of counterfeiting — by an Italian noble who was himself a counterfeiter, ‘pour ce que les affaires de sa maison alloient souvent en decadence, et qu’il ne pouvoit trouver dequoy fournir a ses sumptuositez’.

Francion is involved in a complex series of socio-economic negotiations, with his fellow characters and his readers. Like Turnèbe, he needs money to get his

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social position and his literary merit recognized, but the very fact of his wealth attracts suspicion that his status is bought and paid for, and even that the wealth itself is a mirage, rooted only in its possessor’s moral bankruptcy. Sorel wrote about and for a society obsessed with money and yet (even more than most) profoundly ambivalent about it. In such circumstances — and this is one of Francion’s major themes — literary virtuosity itself could become a primary way of demonstrating personal and social worth. But if eloquence could serve to manifest a writer’s or a character’s real worth as against the problems of commerce and money, it was also subject to many of the same weaknesses as money. Eloquence could be borrowed or inflated; it could support vice as well as virtue (or call that distinction into question, as the erudite libertines did); it could attract honours, status, or political influence out of proportion to one’s birth or merits. Almost all of these issues appear in both literary and economic forms in the story of the fast-talking Francion. Their prominence is a function and a symptom of the restless yet highly constrained cycle of self-invention that ruled the society of the old regime. Such self-creation was the driving force of Renaissance literature, but in practice it was a necessarily economic phenomenon, and texts that reflected on it — that is, most of the literary texts of the era — reflected on the socio-economic constitution of society as well.