# Review

Rozanne Versendaal, *Le Mandement joyeux et la culture joyeuse en France et dans les anciens Pays-Bas (xv^e^-xvii^e^ siècles)*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2026, 244 pp. ISBN 9782503620800.




From its opening pages, Rozanne Versendaal's monograph [*Parodic Ordinances and Festive Culture in France and the Low Countries, Fifteenth to Seventeenth Centuries*] stands out for its sustained effort to clarify the terminology surrounding the two key concepts at the heart of the study: the nature of mock proclamations modelled on official ordinances (*mandement joyeux*) as a literary and performative genre, and the central role this genre played in the self-representation and social functioning of the festive associations of early modern Northwestern Europe.

Such attention to definition addresses one of the principal challenges facing a field of research that has long remained fragmented and difficult to delineate. The book situates itself within a historiographical tradition stretching back to Émile Picot's pioneering work on medieval parodic literature at the end of the nineteenth century, and to the studies of Jean-Claude Aubailly and Herman Pleij in the 1970s. The author nevertheless seeks to move beyond several limitations of this body of scholarship. On the one hand, she rejects the tendency to view mock proclamations solely through the lens of theatrical performance. On the other, she challenges interpretations that view social contestation as its primary function. Her central argument is that the *mandements* also operated as instruments of mediation, discussion, and cohesion. The introduction establishes the theoretical and methodological foundations of a comparative investigation based on twenty-eight *mandements joyeux* drawn from French- and Dutch-speaking regions, including the Kingdom of France, the Burgundian territories, and the Low Countries, from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century.

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The first chapter examines the origins, forms, and contexts of the *mandement joyeux*. Versendaal presents the genre as a descendant of the *ars dictaminis*, the tradition of drafting official documents and letters that developed within medieval chanceries from the twelfth century onwards. She demonstrates that mock proclamations and parodic ordinances reproduce with remarkable precision the structure of official legal mandates while inverting their content. This rhetorical fidelity is crucial to understanding the workings of parody: as Katell Lavéant has shown (*Les festivités joyeuses et leur production littéraire*, 2019), parody does not necessarily degrade its model but rather preserves its mechanisms in order to redirect their function. Rozanne Versendaal further emphasises the performative dimension of these texts. Just as official mandates were proclaimed by public criers, their parodic counterparts appear to have been designed for festive performance. Her analysis of the texts' insertion into liturgical and festive calendars reinforces this interpretation.

The second chapter explores the social functions of the *mandement joyeux*. Versendaal shows that these texts are almost invariably attributed to fictional authorities. In this context, the mock ordinance emerges as a flexible instrument capable of organising festivities, strengthening communal bonds, transmitting behavioural norms, and even mediating tensions within a group. One of the chapter's most stimulating contributions is its analysis of the 'joyful language' associated with the Dutch-speaking chambers of rhetoric, drawing on a concept developed by Arjan van Dixhoorn (*Lustige geesten*, 2009). Versendaal argues that this language was not merely an identity marker but also a pedagogical tool through which rhetoricians learned shared values and modes of expression. It relied, in particular, on role reversal and on the representation of extraordinary situations that rendered social norms visible precisely by turning them upside down. The chapter concludes with an important discussion of the editorial circulation of *mandements joyeux*. The author demonstrates that they should not be regarded as productions intended solely for an unsophisticated readership. Rather, they constituted a genuine 'editorial branch' (133), identifiable through distinctive material features and specific modes of dissemination. One of the book's most significant findings concerns their longevity: several texts remained in circulation well into the eighteenth century, attesting to the adaptability and lasting relevance of the genre.

The third chapter develops the argument that the *mandement joyeux* functioned as a 'platform for discussion'. Three recurring themes are examined: gender relations, social marginality, and religious tensions. Versendaal acknowledges that the texts emerged within a cultural environment deeply marked by misogynistic traditions. She nevertheless argues that certain works allowed for a reconfiguration of gender roles: in Jean Molinet's *Mandement de froidure*, a text associated with the festive culture of the late fifteenth-century Burgundian world, the joint participation of fantastical male warriors and personified female sexual organs ("cunts") is interpreted as producing a degree of balance between the sexes. One may nonetheless question whether such a reduction of women to sexual anatomy genuinely supports the notion of gender equality, despite the author's attempt to read it in such terms. Likewise, although the marginal figures who frequently appear among the addressees of parodic authorities, including criminals, the poor, traitors, and heretics, may well have contributed, as the author argues, to the affirmation of communal values

of concord and harmony, they can also be interpreted as playful markers of the symbolic boundaries separating legitimate members of festive communities from the forms of alterity they chose to stage. Finally, the analysis of the *Mandement de l'ennemi* highlights the genre's capacity to intervene in sixteenth-century religious controversies, whether in the context of confessional debates or of appeals to crusade.

The book's main achievement is its ability to clarify a body of work that has long been difficult to understand due to its multilingual character and fragmented transmission. Versendaal successfully combines rhetorical, historical, material, and sociological approaches to reconstruct the complexity of the *mandement joyeux* as a textual form, cultural practice, editorial product, and communicative device. The clarity of the exposition and the boldness of the arguments deserve particular praise. The book's central claim that the *mandements joyeux* fostered social cohesion is largely convincing. One may nevertheless wonder whether this cohesive function operated at the level of society as a whole or primarily within the festive communities that produced and appropriated these texts. This question does not challenge the book's central thesis; rather, it emerges from the richness of its argument and invites further reflection on the social scale at which such cohesion was experienced.

The conclusion outlines several promising avenues for future research. These include the study of interactions between parodic ordinances and other artefacts of joyful culture, the analysis of their editorial reuses during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the development of critical editions that would finally make these still difficult-to-access corpora available to modern readers. In this respect, as in many others, this book is pioneering. By offering a renewed definition of the *mandement joyeux* and a stimulating reflection on the relationship between parody and sociability, it establishes itself as an indispensable reference for the study of late medieval and early modern festive cultures.

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