
H-France Review Vol. 10 (October 2010), No. 162

Daisy Delogu, *Theorizing the Ideal Sovereign: The Rise of the French Vernacular Royal Biography*. Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2008. viii + 300 pp. Notes, bibliography and indices. \$72.00 U.S. ISBN 978-0-80209807-8.

Review by William Chester Jordan, Princeton University.

This book has many excellent features. It takes a number of texts often treated as ‘mere’ historical artifacts and subjects them to the careful scrutiny of a well-trained literary scholar. It does not shy away from confronting texts, like Joinville’s *Life of Saint Louis*, which have generated an enormous amount of scholarship; the author has genuinely got control of the mountains of work that her predecessors have produced. In addition, although the book covers a long period from the late thirteenth century until the early years of the fifteenth, the author appears to have a very good command of the context—the history—within which the texts need to be evaluated. These are, as I have already intimated, great virtues in the book and the author.

And yet *Theorizing the Ideal Sovereign* might have accomplished more. It is a study of French vernacular royal biography. This is a category, of course, but is it a genre as the author implies? If so, what are the precise genre conventions? A reader may be able to piece these together from comments here and there early in the book, but I was never fully satisfied that the author had sufficiently, that is to say, systematically, addressed the issue. Nor was I persuaded that the texts and the authors whom Professor Delogu studied were actually lived up to her title and engaged in much serious “theorizing” about ideal sovereigns or sovereignty. Claims about what makes a good king (like Saint Louis or Charles V) or a potentially good king (like the Black Prince) occur over and over again in all the texts under discussion, but this is not the same thing as theorizing—embedding these claims in philosophically or theologically sophisticated analyses of the nature of power and rule. One way that Professor Delogu might have made her case more cogently would have been by showing in precise detail that these claims drew from ancient and contemporary analytical commentators. Unfortunately, there is not a great deal of attention devoted to Augustinian and Aristotelian ideas or the ideas of the great twelfth- and thirteenth-century philosophical and theological interpreters who, as it were, ‘domesticated’ and ‘christianized’ Aristotle and would have provided the sources for her would-be theorists. The occasional general invocations of or gestures to the ancients and the medieval thinkers, which are made in *Theorizing the Ideal Sovereign*, do not seem to me to suffice.

I think Professor Delogu’s vernacular texts must owe a great deal to the bible. Yet, the wonderful repository of medieval interpretations of power, the glosses on the bible, so ably excavated in recent work, is scarcely invoked in *Theorizing the Ideal Sovereign*. Philippe Buc’s book, *L’ambiguïté du Livre: prince, pouvoir, et peuple dans les commentaries de la Bible au moyen âge* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1994), which is a treasure trove on this subject, is nowhere cited. I also think that there is a lost opportunity in Professor Delogu’s apparent decision not to pursue a comparison in detail with the various chronicle traditions in France. The vernacular royal biographies differ in their assessments of kings: Charles V is hardly an ideal sovereign in the *Vie du Prince Noir* of the Herald Chandos, although of course he is a hero in Christine de Pizan’s

Livre des faits et bonnes meurs du sage roy Charles V. How, one might ask, do chroniclers contemporary with the production of these texts treat the kings? Do they differ in the same or similar ways? A good approach here would have been to attempt something parallel to what Chris Jones accomplished in his book on late medieval chronicles that treat the nature of the French kingdom, explicitly in relation to the Holy Roman Empire. In *Eclipse of Empire? Perceptions of the Western Empire and Its Rulers in Late-Medieval France* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), Jones shows that French royal chroniclers differed considerably from provincial ones in their attitude toward and idealization of French rulership and sovereignty. Could Professor Delogu's royal biographies also have been in dialog with these views?

Another reviewer has pointed out that Professor Delogu in treating French vernacular royal biographies draws little or no meaning from the fact that some she discusses were written in prose and others in verse (Jean-Claude Mühlethaler in *Speculum*, 85 [2010], 130–31). That she does not deal with this issue is particularly surprising, since she invokes more than once the insights found in Gabriel Spiegel's book on vernacular texts. True, the struggle between Latin and 'Romance' is central to Spiegel's *Romancing the Past: The Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1993), but she is equally insistent in that book on the importance of the battle between prose authors and poets about the limits of truth and moral authority in prose and poetry.

I hope that Professor Delogu follows up on these matters in future work, for it is obvious to me that she is more than capable of bringing fruitful insights to them, if only because the quality of what she actually did spend time on—careful literary readings of her texts—is so fine. I am also convinced that many insights on these matters are present though scattered and not fully formed in *Theorizing the Ideal Sovereign*. If she had ventured a real conclusion, rather than end with a text-based chapter, her book might have been spared this observation on my part. True, the short closing section of this text-based chapter uses the plural "Conclusions" in its last subsection, whereas all the other chapters except the first opt for the singular of this word. But these last "Conclusions" do not accomplish what a genuine stand-apart conclusion would have, and this is regrettable. Every interested scholar, I believe, would benefit from Professor Delogu's systematic reflections, since she obviously knows her texts so extraordinarily well.

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