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Rima Devereaux. *Constantinople and the West in Medieval French Literature: Renewal and Utopia*. Gallica, 25. Woodbridge, Suffolk and Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 2012. Xii+234 pp. \$90.00 US (cl). ISBN: 781843843023.

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As recently as a generation ago, one could find references to “Graeco-Byzantine” romances as an afterthought in histories of medieval French literature. In the past few decades, however, the development of long histories of Mediterranean cultures and the impact of postcolonial and orientalist studies have rendered these previously obscure writings newly important. Even so, the role of Constantinople and Byzantine culture in the imagination of Western Europe, both medieval and modern, remains ambiguous. What Rima Devereaux seeks to do in this book is, as it were, to explain rather than erase this ambiguity.

She does so by examining the place of Constantinople in a series of paired works from different genres of Old French and Franco-Italian literature, including romance, poetry and chronicles. She chooses these works on the basis of the categories of her subtitle, “renewal” and “utopia,” but she provides an impressively detailed appendix cataloguing many of the references to Constantinople in Old French literature (I could think of none to add). While she reminds us occasionally of some of these other works, her analysis is driven, somewhat relentlessly, by her thesis.

That thesis describes contrasting and usually mutually exclusive views of the city of Constantinople in this literature, on the one hand an exotic and splendid utopia, on the other a model for the future development of Western Christendom. Since progress and utopia are much later political constructs, Devereaux instead suggests a more traditional medieval nomenclature. In the process of *translatio imperii*, the course of Empire running East to West, Greece to Rome, and Rome to Western Europe, Constantinople provided a model of imitation (*aemulatio*) for the West to achieve its own renewal (*renovatio*). Such concepts depended on identification and intimate dynastic connections with Byzantium. By contrast, Constantinople was also interpreted as a utopia, fantastic and exotic, invoking a response of *admiratio*, a somewhat awestruck admiration. Devereaux calls on familiar authorities such as St Augustine to describe how medieval thinkers regarded the city as a political and theological construct, especially regarding the place of the viewing subject. At the same time, Devereaux also argues that writings about the city provide us with a focal point to distinguish among, and collapse distinctions between, different literary genres. Inevitably, the turning point in her account is the Fourth Crusade and the sacking of Constantinople in 1204 by the crusaders, and the establishment of a Latin Kingdom of Constantinople that held until 1261. She convincingly contends, however, that conflicting attitudes towards Constantinople were established previously and bridged this divide.

The chapters that follow pair some of these genres and investigate both widely studied and relatively obscure works. The book is divided into three parts, and part one contains chapter one, developing the thesis described above, and chapter two, which studies two twelfth-century romances in detail, the *Pèlerinage de Charlemagne* and Gautier d'Arras' *Eracle*, which express the tension between utopia and a model for renewal in their heroes' adventures in Constantinople. Part two, “Constantinople Desired,” contains chapter three (“*Aemulatio*: The Limitations of East-West Alliance”) and chapter four (“*Admiratio*: Utopia as Social Critique”), analyzing works in which the difficulties and contradictions of these two ways of regarding the city are explored. The twelfth century verse romance *Partonopeus de*

Blois and the *Chanson de geste Girart de Roussillon* both deal with marriage alliances between their protagonists and Byzantine princesses. The magical and erotic aspects of the narratives mingle with a historical reality in which competing feudal lords seek advantage by an external dynastic alliance with the distant empire. In other works, such as the little known Franco-Italian *Chanson de geste Macario* and Robert de Clari's chronicle of the Fourth Crusade, the *Conquête de Constantinople*, the less intimate utopian view of Constantinople is invoked. In *Macario*, the unjust accusation against Charlemagne's Byzantine wife starts the chain of events, largely because Charlemagne himself does not defend her. The narrative begins with the collapse of the marriage alliance, and Constantinople itself seems almost a utopian alternative to the internecine treachery of feudal France. In Clari, it is the illegitimate Byzantine ruler whose treachery justifies the actions of the crusaders, who are at the same time dazzled by the splendors of Constantinople, but whose disarray at the end of his account is described as the result of their own excesses in sacking the city.

Part three, "The *Renovatio* of the West," covers texts largely from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Chapter five studies what Devereaux calls "didactic" works, including the romance *Marques de Rome*, a version of the widely disseminated legend of the Seven Sages of Rome, and some satirical poems by Rutebeuf. Embedded narratives in the romance as well as the fictionalized persona of the poet in Rutebeuf, which is attacked by the hypocritical friars he includes as characters, complicate the truth embodied in their plots or descriptions. The obscuring of gender, visually and verbally (a character is given the illusion of female genitalia to absolve him of accusations of rape) in the romance and the implosion of allegorical personifications in Rutebeuf's poems expose the conflicting values of the journeys to Constantinople that play a large role in these texts, even though their authors take very different positions on such issues as the value of the fraternal orders in inspiring reform. Chapter six examines the complex and rich relations between Venice and Constantinople in two works. One is a Venetian manuscript containing Villehardouin's *La Conquête de Constantinople*, which Devereaux analyzes in terms of its codicology and manuscript context. The other is Martino da Canal's *Estoire de Venise*. These works both critique and justify Venice's involvement in the Fourth Crusade. As with many of the other works she studies, Devereaux implies that the representation of Constantinople in these works is as much about Western European self-definition as it is about the Byzantine Empire.

Like the marriages it analyzes, this book yokes together some quite different ways of talking about literature. It is both traditional, with attention to philology, iconography, patristic theology and bibliographic analysis on the one hand, and self-consciously current, with attention to gender representations, territorial expansion and hegemony, and cultural studies on the other. That's not an unusual combination in literary studies today, but in the case of this book the shifts between gears are jarring, and one feels that the various methodologies the author calls upon are not entirely synthesized. This may be why Devereaux is compelled to remind us so frequently of her thesis and how it relates to her readings. Interestingly, the chapter that reads most smoothly is Chapter 6 on Venetian historiography. Readers of this site suspicious of applying literary interpretation to historical documents might not agree, but I thought that Devereaux was most successful in uniting her various interests and methods in this chapter.

Despite the broad claims advanced by the structure of this book, its most appropriate audience will be specialists in Old French literature, who will benefit from Devereaux's detailed readings of peculiar passages in the canon. Readers further from this field would probably prefer some of the studies that Devereaux builds upon, and which she generously acknowledges. Alain Labbé in *L'architecture des palais et des jardins dans les chansons de geste* and subsequent articles, for instance, described some of the literary representations of Byzantium in considerable detail.[1] Krijnie Ciggaar's *Western Travellers to Constantinople* established much of the historical and conceptual groundwork for Devereaux's argument.[2] Influential studies of Clari's chronicle by Sharon Kinoshita and of the *Voyage de Charlemagne* by Eugene Vance would probably be easier starting points than Devereaux's narrower exposition.[3]

This book appears in a series that has already produced some extremely well-received volumes, including an all-star study by Zrinka Stahuljak, Virginie Greene, Sarah Kay, Kinoshita and Peggy McCracken called *Thinking Through Chrétien de Troyes* and an excellent *Marie de France: A Critical Companion* by Kinoshita and McCracken, as well as important new books by Helen Dell on the *trouvère* and Luke Sunderland on Old French heroic cycles.[4] Devereaux's book is extremely well-produced and edited given its complexity, and the errors I could find were extremely minor oversights.

With few exceptions, the rich scholarly literatures surrounding medieval Byzantium and Western Europe could be about different planets. The exceptions—studies of medieval and early modern Venice and of Central Europe, and of the Fourth Crusade—prove the rule. Rima Devereaux's *Constantinople and the West in Medieval French Literature: Renewal and Utopia* is an earnest and worthy step in the right direction.

NOTES

[1] Alain Labbé, *L'architecture des palais et des jardins dans les chansons de geste: Essai sur le thème du roi en majesté* (Paris and Geneva: Champion-Slatkine, 1987).

[2] Krijnie Ciggaar, *Western Travellers to Constantinople: The West and Byzantium, 962-1204, Cultural and Political Relations* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996).

[3] Sharon Kinoshita, *Medieval Boundaries: Rethinking Difference in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), pp. 139-175; Eugene Vance, "Semiotics and Power: Relics, Icons, and the *Voyage de Charlemagne à Jérusalem et à Constantinople*," *Romanic Review* 79 (1988), 164-83.

[4] Zrinka Stahuljak, Virginie Greene, Sarah Kay, Kinoshita and Peggy McCracken, *Thinking Through Chrétien de Troyes*, Gallica 19 (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2011); Sharon Kinoshita and Peggy McCracken, *Marie de France: A Critical Companion*, Gallica 24 (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2012); Helen Dell, *Desire by Gender and Genre in Trouvère Song*, Gallica 10, (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer: 2008); Luke Sunderland, *Old French Narrative Cycles: Heroism between Ethics and Morality*, Gallica, 15 (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2010).

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