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Michael A. H. Newth, trans., *Heroines of the French Epic: A Second Selection of Chansons de Geste*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2014. xi + 422 pp. Glossary and bibliography. \$90.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-84384-361-0.

Review by Jason Jacobs, Roger Williams University.

English translations of Old French literary works have been appearing with greater frequency over the last several years. The demand for these translations can be interpreted positively as evidence that scholars and students are increasingly eager to read comparatively across disciplines and national borders, or less hopefully, as a sign that linguistic training in medieval languages has been deprioritized in beleaguered and underfunded Humanities programs. In either case, those undertaking the difficult work of translation bear a heavy burden of responsibility, as their selection and presentation of works can shape readers' perceptions of the medieval literary corpus, set contemporary horizons of expectation, influence research agendas and syllabus choices, and either confirm or complicate received ideas about the medieval world. In this regard, Michael Newth's energetic commitment to rendering Old French epic poems or *chansons de geste* into modern English is to be taken very seriously. Having published a number of translated *chansons* individually, in 2005 Newth published a volume of six translated twelfth-century poems under the title *Heroes of the French Epic*.^[1] With *Heroines of the French Epic*, which includes the poems *The Capture of Orange*, *The Song of Floovant*, *Aye of Avignon*, *The Song of Blancheflor*, and *Bertha Broad-Foot*, Newth makes another substantial contribution. He is now indisputably the most prolific translator of Old French epic poems into English and has done more than anyone to ensure that readers without French will have access to the full scope and variety of this important medieval vernacular genre.

Heroines of the French Epic complements the *Heroes* volume in several ways. First, the poems in this collection skew slightly later, the first from around 1150 and the last from about 1270. Second, the inclusion of less canonical *chansons* will expand the reader's sense of the genre and attract a wider readership to fascinating but seldom studied works such as *Floovant* and *Aye*. Third and most importantly, Newth has organized this latest translation project around poems featuring women in prominent roles. Though Sarah Kay argued some time ago that the perception of the *chanson de geste* as "a masculine genre, about men's deeds and interests" was the result of "a distortion created by selective reading," Newth nevertheless frames his translations as evincing "the range of roles gradually accorded to women in these originally militaristic narratives" (p. ix).^[2]

While dedicating a major translation project to the medieval epic's unjustly overlooked women is a laudable contribution, Newth's argument about the changing status of women in the corpus rests on somewhat dated notions. In the general introduction to the volume, Newth sets up the *Chanson de Roland* as a starting point for the development of the genre, asserting that it could only cast women in a "subordinate and supportive role" (p. 1). From the mid-twelfth century on, he continues, women's roles in literary texts diversified and became more prominent "as the aristocratic male audience of such tales developed rapidly into a more democratized, and female readership, delighting more in the emotionally tangled battlefields of 'Romance'" (p. 2). This, in essence, is the old theory of "romance influence" on the *chanson de geste* that Kay is often credited with having debunked, though seen here as a feature of the

genre's evolution rather than of its decline. In the short introductions to each of the volume's three sections, Newth paints with a similarly broad and familiar brush. "Saracen Sirens" reflect admiration for Muslim cultural refinement and the development of Western courts devoted to the "conscious cultivation of a new relationship between the sexes" (p. 7). "Bartered Brides" represent the lived reality of powerless women traded as commodities in a world of "marriage by hierarchical arrangement, for gain" (p. 125). And the "Martyred Minds" of certain mistreated heroines bear witness to the "iconification of women" that intensified along with the rise of Marian adoration in contemporary religious practice (p. 231).

These well-worn representations of women's place in medieval society suggest that Newth has not fully engaged with current work in feminist history and literary criticism that looks beyond the symbolism of women's roles and the much-cited pronouncements of church fathers to consider instead the evidence of how women actually operated within, and often despite, the constraints placed upon them. A list of suggested further readings at the close of the volume includes six historical sources on medieval women, only half of which were published in the last fifteen years (and these are very general historical works of broad scope). Similarly, Newth's list of literary critical works neglects several of the most influential feminist scholars in the field. Sharon Kinoshita's articles on the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Prise d'Orange* are an especially troubling omission, since she persuasively challenges the myth that women are unimportant in the *Roland* and reframes the Saracen princess motif with considerable theoretical and historicizing nuance.^[3] Other scholars such as E. Jane Burns, Roberta Krueger, and Peggy McCracken, though they work primarily on romance, have in common with Kinoshita and other feminist scholars of their generation a critical goal to *interpret* the ways in which women function in medieval texts rather than taking these representations at face value.

Heroines of the French Epic will nevertheless be of great value for Newth's intended audience: students of medieval history, comparative literature, and gender studies (p. x), and perhaps especially for students of medieval English literature who desire a more in-depth understanding of the Old French tradition that inspired so much adaptation and literary creation in the Middle English period. For students hoping to work their way from the translations to the original texts, however, *Heroines* poses a certain number of difficulties due to Newth's selection of editions. Newth lists the editions on which his translations are based in his Translator's Preface (p. x), but does not discuss his choices. The decision to use editions of *Aye d'Avignon* and *Macaire* (translated as *The Song of Blancheflor*) prepared by François Guessard and Paul Meyer for the *Anciens Poètes de la France* series in the mid-nineteenth century is especially curious. *Aye* is available in a 1967 edition by S. J. Bord (Droz) and *Macaire* has been edited by both Aldo Rosellini and Leslie Zarker Morgan in their editions of the *Geste Francor*.^[4] Newth may well have his reasons for choosing to translate Guessard's more than century-old editions, but he does not share these reasons with his readers. Furthermore, Newth risks throwing his readers off track by splitting *Aye d'Avignon* into two separate poems, beginning his line numbers over for part two. Though Guessard speculated that the first and second parts of *Aye* were composed by different authors some years apart, he did not introduce any division into his edition of the text, meaning that a reader wishing to compare Newth's translation of the second part of the poem with Guessard's edition must transpose the line numbers.^[5]

Relatedly, Newth reveals in a brief note on his translation of *Floovant* that an italicized passage—the note indicates pages 70-78 when in reality the passage runs from pages 67 through 75—consists of the translator's "attempt to reconstruct the tone and content of a narrative episode known to be missing from the only edited manuscript of the poem" (p. 10). Since the nineteenth century, editors of *Floovant* have attempted to fill the hole left in the narrative by a manuscript lacuna, usually employing a combination of more recently-discovered fragments and related passages from Andrea da Barberino's fifteenth-century *Reali di Francia*, a compendium of Old French and Franco-Italian chivalric narratives rendered in Tuscan prose. Newth's effort to "complete" the text is therefore a bold and interesting move, though one that runs the risk of obscuring rather than highlighting the problems of the incomplete medieval textual record for non-specialist readers. A fuller treatment of the process through which

Newth and *Floovant's* editors have tried to determine what the poem's missing folio might have contained would have provided a valuable opportunity for educating non-specialist readers on the imaginative work of reconstruction that so often produces the medieval texts we read today, whether in critical editions of the "original" texts or in translation.

That Newth says so little about his choice of editions and the textual problems of the poems he translates is especially odd given his dedication to providing readers with translations that match the form and evoke the performance style of the *chansons de geste*. While other translators of Old French epic into English have come to prefer free verse, Newth is consistent in producing translations that copy the genre's characteristic structure, featuring ten- or twelve-syllable lines linked by assonance into *laissez* of varying lengths.[6] Though Newth chooses to simplify the *chansons'* elastic use of tenses—which is related to narrative rhythm—into a uniform past tense, his translations nevertheless capture the energy and animation of the Old French originals, moving the reader along at a pleasing clip. Here his conscious choice to make freer use of enjambment works very much to his advantage (p. x). As is perhaps inevitable, metrical constraints can lead to some awkward word choices and turns of phrase, such as the Old English-sounding "finger-ring" (*Bertha* line 207) or an instance where a French king comforts his wife, "Don't sorrow so my chick! / Forget about this servant—God rot the lunatic!" (*Bertha* lines 531–32). More seriously, Newth shows a willingness to deploy terms denoting racial difference where they are not clearly called for in the original texts. The term "blackamoor," for instance, appears in Newth's translations where the Old French gives "Turs" ("Turks," *Taking of Orange* line 440), "la gent que tant hé" ("those I so despise," *Floovant* line 1347), or a simple comparison of a light complexion to a dark one (*Floovant* line 1801). Terms referring to or even denigrating physical and cultural differences do appear in the *chansons de geste*, but it is important not to exaggerate those instances, especially by introducing terms from entirely different histories and cultures of racism.

As I stated at the outset, these choices matter because translations can have a crucial impact on the perceptions that non-specialists form of societies different from our own. Images of the medieval era as the benighted other of modernity are frustratingly tenacious. More hopefully, Newth's volume includes texts that respond productively to one of the most important current critical trends, the effort to locate the use of the French language within a broad intercultural frame that exceeds the boundaries of France to include much of Europe and the Mediterranean world (though this does not seem to be Newth's intention, given his insistence on the *French* epic). The text translated as *The Song of Blancheflor*, better known as *Macaire* or *Macario*, is after all an example of the many *chansons* performed and copied in a mixed Franco-Italian language on the Italian peninsula in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. While the Guessard edition that Newth translates was part of the avowedly nationalist *Anciens Poètes de la France* project, the text's hybrid language attests to the aesthetic and ideological appeal of French-language chivalric narratives throughout Europe. Similarly, the thirteenth-century *chanson* that Newth translates as *Bertha Broad-Foot* is the work of Adenet le Roi, a poet known to have lived and composed in the Flemish territory of Brabant (today in Belgium), which was not part of the French kingdom in Adenet's day.

In the introduction to her 2013 translation of the same poem, Anna Morton evokes the political and cultural context in which Adenet lived and worked, noting that "Although both Flemish and French were spoken in Brabant and Flanders, both Gui de Dampierre [into whose service Adenet had drifted by 1270] and his friend Duke Henry III of Brabant [at whose court Adenet appears to have been raised] cultivated the French language." [7] Morton further indicates that Adenet accompanied Gui de Dampierre on his voyage through France and Italy to join Saint Louis on the Eighth Crusade and attributes the "largely Parisian French in which Adenet writes" to this sustained contact with members of the French court. These details provide a backdrop against which to consider Adenet's indication, near the beginning of *Bertha*, that "It was a common custom in German-speaking realms / For every count and marquis or mighty lord of men / To have some Frenchmen with him, at court or where he went, / So that his sons and daughters could learn to speak in French" (lines 148–51). Thus *Bertha's*

parents Flor and Blanche-flor, stars of yet another beloved European narrative tradition, both raised at a Muslim court in Spain and now monarchs of Hungary, “Could speak the French of Paris as well, in most respects, / As if they had been natives of Saint-Denis itself” (lines 154–55).

In sum, Michael Newth’s prolific work as a translator of *chansons de geste* is unparalleled and of great value, though more could be done to alert English-speaking readers to the complicated realities from which these texts emerge, from the political/cultural/linguistic circumstances of the texts’ composition and circulation to the manuscript witnesses that preserve these texts today.

NOTES

[1] *Heroes of the French Epic: Translations from the Chansons de Geste* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2005).

[2] Sarah Kay, *The Chansons de Geste in the Age of Romance: Political Fictions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 14–15.

[3] Sharon Kinoshita, “‘Pagans are wrong and Christians are right’: Alterity, Gender, and Nation in the *Chanson de Roland*,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31.1 (2001): 79–111, and “The Politics of Courtly Love: La Prise d’Orange and the Conversion of the Saracen Queen,” *Romanic Review* 86.2 (1995): 265–87. Both of these essays appear in revised form in the same author’s *Medieval Boundaries: Rethinking Difference in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

[4] Aldo Rosellini, *La “Geste Francor” di Venezia: edizione integrale del Codice XIII del fondo francese della Marciana*. Pubblicazioni del Centro di linguistica dell’Università cattolica. (Brescia: La Scuola, 1986) and Leslie Zarker Morgan, *La Geste Francor: Edition of the Chansons de Geste of MS. Marc. Fr. XIII (=256)* (Tempe, Ariz.: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2009).

[5] In her *H-France* review of Newth’s 2010 *Fierabras and Floripas*, Lynn Ramey notes that the translator’s choice of two nineteenth-century editions of *Fierabras* over Marc Le Person’s 2003 edition for Honoré Champion yields a translation that “does not bear an easily identifiable relationship to any one edition.” <http://www.h-france.net/vol11reviews/vol11no66Ramey.pdf>

[6] See A. Richard Hartman and Sandra C. Malicote’s translations of *Elye de Saint-Gilles* (New York: Italica, 2011) and *Aiol* (New York: Italica, 2014) and Anna Moore Morton’s translation of *Bertha of the Big Feet* (Tempe, Ariz.: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2013).

[7] Morton, *Bertha of the Big Feet*, p. 1.

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