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Brîndușa Elena Grigoriu, Catharina Peersman, and Jeff Rider, eds. *Le Lai du Conseil*. Liverpool Online Series Critical Editions of French Texts, 18. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013. 133 pp. Notes and bibliography. ISBN: 978-0-9545406-8-5 (eb).

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This entry into the Liverpool Online Series of “Critical Editions of French Texts” joins a small but interesting and useful list of French works provided for free download at the website of the Department of Modern Languages and Cultures of the University of Liverpool (<https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/modern-languages-and-cultures/study/subjects/french/liverpool-online-series/>). The series offers scholarly editions of short- to medium-length texts (as well as a couple of anthologies), with “introduction, notes, and bibliography as appropriate.” Each volume provides “either unedited or otherwise unobtainable material, or material which for scholarly reasons requires an up-to-date edition.”^[1] Paper copies of a number of the volumes are also available for purchase from the department, and it is one of these that was sent to me for review.

The *Lai du Conseil* is one of those, unfortunately all too common, “little known but deserving of greater attention” Old French texts. Extant in five manuscripts all dating from the late thirteenth or early fourteenth centuries (all at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris: fr. 837, fr. 1593, NAF 1104, Rothschild 2800, and Moreau 1727 [a copy of the first 335 lines of the poem from Turin, Bib. Nat. ms. L. V. 32]), it clearly enjoyed a certain popularity at that time. (For comparison, the majority of Marie de France’s *Lais* appear in only one or two manuscripts.) The *lai* recounts a conversation during a Christmas court celebration between a married lady and a poor but well-regarded knight, whom the lady has asked for advice regarding which of three knights seeking her love she should choose. After a long disquisition by the knight on various aspects of love (approximately 540 lines out of 862), the lady chooses none of the three, but instead the knight whose counsel she has requested. The *lai* ends with a brief description of their happy life as lovers, until the lady’s husband dies, whereupon the two marry. Given its relatively short length, dialogue format (although the knight’s advice fills by far the greater portion of the text), and its echoing of Andreas Capellanus’s *De Amore* (as well as lyric *jeux partis*, and other courtly *lais* such as Jean Renart’s *Lai de l’Ombre*), the *Lai du Conseil* would be an interesting addition to any number of courses on medieval literature and/or culture.

The overall very high quality of the edition and translation provided by Grigoriu, Peersman, and Rider (as well as, of course its ease of access, and lack of cost), all contribute to the usefulness of this edition for teaching purposes. However, the introduction to the volume is somewhat less successful, both as pertains to teaching as well as more generally. The introduction opens with a list of the five extant manuscripts that offers only minimal information: which folios hold the *Lai*, and some small indications of date and dialect. Readers wanting more information about the manuscripts are directed, via elliptical references, to the appropriate entries in the bibliography, i.e., to the editions by Barth and Kaufman and the manuscript study by Capusso.^[2] Barth’s 1912 introduction is in German; Kaufman’s edition is in an unpublished 1970 Harvard dissertation. Only Capusso is recent (2005); however, it is in Italian. In other words, it is

fairly unlikely that any are usable by students, and even many scholars would find access to manuscript details somewhat challenging. In addition, the editors do not provide any indication as to whether these three references agree as to the details of the manuscripts, their relative quality, etc.

Perhaps even more surprising, the editors offer no discussion of their own dating of the *Lai*, its dialect, or provenance more generally, rather they discuss the comments by Barth (and to a much lesser degree, those of Kaufman and Capusso). One must assume they agree with his conclusions, but a scholarly edition and translation, particularly one aimed at a student audience, deserves to have a bit more attention to questions of author, date, language, et. al. Happily, in the discussion of the edition itself, the editors do provide a fuller treatment of the relationships between the manuscripts. They also lay out their editorial principles in reasonable detail, although here, again, it would have been helpful to know more about the language and in particular the dialectal traits of the base manuscript and, if possible, the original text.

The brevity of the sections of the introduction devoted to the manuscripts and the text contrasts quite markedly with the remainder, which includes an extremely detailed plot summary and a lengthy discussion of the themes of the text, which focuses on socio-cultural elements and only provides passing commentary about literary technique. Indeed, nowhere in the introduction is there any mention of versification, rhymes, figures of rhetoric, etc. Overall, the discussion of themes demonstrates a strong impulse to take the text as a historically “valid” document (in a cultural, not literal, sense). For example, and to choose just one, the section entitled “Hiding” (pp. 22-24) considers romantic love as “one of the strongest affective relations and the one most likely to disturb the relative social stability established by family relations” (p. 22) and discusses the theories of sociologist Irving Goffman (“face-work”), but does not mention troubadour poetry, nor any theoretical work on “courtly love” by literary scholars.[3] Much of the discussion of the social structure inherent in the scenario is interesting and worthwhile, but it drowns out any other type of analysis.

In the last two sections of the introduction, entitled respectively, “A love story” and “A mirror of faith,” the editors do engage, to a certain degree, with literary aspects of the text. In the second to last section, they discuss the ambiguity of the presentation by the author/narrator of the situation between the lady and her counselor at length; they conclude that the most likely interpretation of the situation is that the lady’s request for advice is simply a ruse, designed to engage the man who truly interests her in conversation (p. 36-67). In the final portion of the introduction, they engage with earlier literary scholarship (e.g., Maddox, Beston, Brook, et. al.) and the question of the resemblance, the possible *mise en abyme*, of the narrator to the knight asked for his advice.[4] Yet, even in these sections, referentiality dominates the discussion, and unfortunately much of it is based on the outdated, and generally now refuted, theses of George Duby about the position of aristocratic women, and the existence of a class of landless young knights (the “juvenes”), etc.[5]

In short, the introduction has some real shortcomings for classroom use. It does not provide the kind of information that it ought, particularly about the manuscripts, the language of the author and the scribes, etc., but also about the literary context of the *Lai*. In other areas, it provides extensive analysis, none of which is “bad” or “wrong” but it is unbalanced, focusing heavily on socio-historical readings of the text which are based, in part, on now discredited theories, and giving short shrift to more literary analyses of both the text and its love advice.

Turning to the text itself, and the translation, the editors note that they have produced a translation that is “broadly speaking source-oriented rather than target-oriented. It aims principally, that is, at helping a non-expert reader understand the Old French text rather than creating an independent, idiomatic version of the text that conforms to conventional modern English usage” (p. 12). Here, they have succeeded admirably in their aim, and any quibbles I might have with the translation are just that, and so not worth mentioning.

In sum, this edition and translation fills an important lacuna in modern, scholarly editions and translation of Old French texts. Its presentation of the text, and the translation provided, are excellent. However, for classroom use in particular, the introduction needs to be used with discretion.

NOTES

[1] Series description from website.

[2] Albert Barth, “*Le lai du conseil*. Ein altfranzösisches Minnegedicht. Kritischer Text mit Einleitung und Anmerkungen,” *Romanische Forschungen* 31 (1912), 799–872; Marcia Gay Williams Kaufman, “Critical Edition of Two Old French Narrative Lays: *Lai du Conseil* and *Lai d’Amours*,” (unpublished doctoral thesis, Harvard University, 1970); Maria Grazia Capusso, “Note sulla tradizione manoscritta del *Lai du Conseil*,” *Studi Mediolatini e Volgari* 51 (2005), 27–57.

[3] Particularly notable is the absence of any discussion of feminist scholarship on “courtly love,” such as that of Sarah Kay, Roberta Kruger, or Simon Gaunt, to name just three.

[4] John Beston, “The Psychological Art of the *Lai du Conseil*,” *French Studies Bulletin*, 33, no. 123 (2012), 26–28; Leslie C. Brook, “*Omnia vincit rhetorica*: the ‘*Lai du Conseil*,’” *Studi Francesi* 44 (2000), 69–76; Donald Maddox, “Rewriting Marie de France: The Anonymous *Lai du conseil*,” *Speculum* 80 (2005), 399–436.

[5] For cogent critiques of Georges Duby’s theses, see, among others, Theodore Evergates, “The Feudal Imaginary of Georges Duby,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27 (1997): 641–60; Kimberly LoPrete, “Women, Gender and Lordship in France, c. 1050–1250” *History Compass* 5/6 (2007): 1921–1941; and the essays in Theodore Evergates, ed., *Aristocratic Women in Medieval France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999) and Kathy Krause, ed., “Beyond Women and Power: Looking Backward and Moving Forward,” Special Issue, *Medieval Feminist Forum* 51.2 (January 2016 for 2015), <http://ir.uiowa.edu/mff/vol51/iss2/>.

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