

H-France Review Vol. 4 (March 2004), No. 25

R. Howard Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003. xii + 367 pp. Notes and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-226-05968-5.

Review by R. W. Hanning, Columbia University.

At one point well into the crowded, often tendentious introduction to his major study of the poetry of Marie de France, R. Howard Bloch, having offered a partial (in both senses of that word, as noted below) summary of antecedent scholarship about the twelfth century's best known (indeed, only known) francophone woman poet, asks (himself, his readers), "what, then, is the book about Marie that I would like to read? The book that I would write?" (p. 17). Having just alluded to Walter Benjamin's observation that "one writes the books one wants to read," his twofold answer is, first, that it is "a book that takes into account all of her works"--the *Fables* and the *Espurgatoire Seint Patriz* as well as the much more fully studied *Lais*--and thus offers "a redress of what has for two centuries been a critical imbalance that has favored one field of her work... to the detriment of the other two" (pp. 17-18). (*The Anonymous Marie de France* is not literally the first book to treat all three texts; Emanuel Mickel's 1974 volume anticipates Bloch, but his survey's proportions--seven pages on the *Fables*, nine on the *Espurgatoire*, ninety on the *Lais*--supports Bloch's claim.)^[1] And second, "this is a book that seeks... to resolve the question of Marie's anonymity not through recourse to documents outside of her works, but through close consideration of the evidence contained in all three of her texts" (p. 18).

But the task set by the author is grander still, being nothing less than a complete revision--indeed, an overthrow--of what he sees as the reigning critical consensus about Marie: "I am wagering that it is possible to prove from within not only the coherence of Marie's oeuvre but that, far from being the simple, naive, natural, spontaneous, delicate, modest, clear, sincere, comforting, Christian figure she has been portrayed to be, Marie is among the most self-conscious, sophisticated, complicated, obscure, tricky, and disturbing figures of her time--the Joyce of the twelfth century." In sum, "Marie was not only a woman but...she was also a poet" (p. 19).

There is something almost old-fashioned (I use the term non-pejoratively) about the task Bloch has undertaken: a close reading of the entire extant works of a poet from which is to be derived a sense of her (gendered) identity, and which aims to confirm the high level, and the coherence, of her artistry. As he puts it in his conclusion, "what I have offered here is a psychological portrait of Marie from the point of departure of salient aspects of her works, a reconstructed internal portrait and a cultural biography based upon a great artist's language as a 'sensitive index'...to the world around her" (p. 312). Bloch describes that circumambient world as one where "an essentially oral lay culture ... breaks rather suddenly into writing", and assures us in somewhat convoluted prose "that her works represent not only expressive symptoms of social change but dynamic forces in the transformation in the High Middle Ages of the nature and practice of legal process, and, in the case of the *Espurgatoire*, a moralization of the social bond and a legalization of the afterlife that can be understood in the specific historical context of the conquest, pacification, and administration of Ireland in the final decades of the reign of Henry II" (pp. 19, 23). But his concern with Marie's "consciousness of the ways literature negotiates between individual and community" recalls approaches to twelfth-century romance texts popular in the 1960s and 1970s, while his tracking of her anxieties about language's referential ambiguities and implication in the processes of desire recapitulates critical tropes deployed in a revisionist spirit (by Bloch himself, among others) in the mid and late 1980s (p. 24).

Above all, the critic's obvious affection for, even identification with, his subject--evinced in statements such as, "For her (as for me, which is perhaps why we get along so well), the essence of the human condition is an effort to impose meaning upon a diffident world"--recalls an earlier era in which such intimate and pleasurable engagement was a good deal more in evidence (and less frowned upon, at least implicitly) than is now the case (p.46).

Perhaps it is his affection for Marie--inflected as a desire not to share her with others--that leads Bloch to make a fundamental error in judgment in locating himself within the spectrum of studies devoted to her. I have quoted above the passage on page 19 of *The Anonymous Marie de France* in which Bloch contrasts the inadequate judgments of his critical predecessors--Marie is "simple, naive, natural, spontaneous, delicate, modest," and so on--to his own clearly superior sense of his poet as "self-conscious, sophisticated, complicated, obscure...the Joyce of the twelfth century." The only problem with this comparison, which Bloch supports with extensive quotations from other scholars--primarily male French scholars of the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries--is that it overlooks, or gives only briefest mention of, a great deal of work done on Marie in the last twenty years by the increasingly large cohort of medievalists, predominantly but not exclusively women, who share, or anticipate, his appreciation of her sophistication and complexity. To cite but one egregious example, the complete effacement from his text or notes of the achievement of Joan M. Ferrante--doubtless known to Bloch--as Marie's translator and penetrating feminist commentator is little less than scandalous.[2] The many virtues of this book would not be lessened by the courteous admission that it is not unique in taking Marie seriously.

I think its most welcome virtue is to place Marie's complete opus under extensive scrutiny within the covers of one book, and its most provocative claim is that such scrutiny reveals how the *Lais*, *Fables*, and *Espurgatoire de Seint Patriz* interact as constituent parts of an evolving poetic career. That career, in Bloch's reading, is defined by evolving moral and linguistic concerns; by constant themes (e.g., the importance of remembering, or reassembling, the past; the stakes involved in translation from Latin to vernacular or one vernacular to another); and by a nuanced relationship to the shifting norms of Anglo-French culture, as to the political goals, social crises, and bureaucratic methods of the centralizing Angevin state that took advanced form during the reign of Henry II of England.

Bloch treats the fact that we know nothing of Marie besides her name as "a conscious choice" by the poet (p. 11). But, he argues, in telling us so little about herself she leaves herself open to appropriation by her readers; she becomes then "a name into which... those who read her might also read themselves." In doing so, Bloch implies, Marie enacts at the level of identity a key fact (and danger) of her, and all, writing: the inevitable gaps and obscurities in any narrative, as well as the chronic ambiguity of language, invite the reader to participate, to fill in the blanks, and ultimately, out of desire and envy, "to supplant the writer, to usurp the...power connected...to authorship" (p. 12). Hence any self-aware writer such as Marie "can only remain anxious"; and her anxiety, "explicitly articulated in the prologue [to the *Lais*? to "Guigemar"?) as a concern with reputation," Bloch also sees "expressed throughout the *Lais*,...negotiated in the *Fables*...[and] resolved in the *Purgatoire Seint Patriz*." Wounded by envious critics, whom she likens to biting dogs in the opening lines of "Guigemar," and by "gaps in language that come back...to harm" (p. 13) Marie appeals for sympathetic readers or listeners, whose praise will allow her to flourish, one of whom--indeed, the foremost of whom, by his own account--comes to her rescue in *The Anonymous Marie de France*. [3]

Bloch accepts the traditional sequence of Marie's poems: *Lais*, *Fables*, *Espurgatoire*, vigorously supporting it via internal, above all linguistic, analysis rather than (unavailable) external documentation. As he puts it, "words for Marie are not merely a vehicle, a transparent medium through which we glimpse the portrait of a world that is narratively reclaimed and contained, but a theme--perhaps the theme--of the *Lais* as well as the *Fables* and *Espurgatoire*" (p. 52). More circumstantially, "...the coherence of the works of Marie de France lies in her constant concern with language; ...this concern is expressed

in three quite different ways in the three works attributed to her, and...the critical issue for France's first woman poet is precisely the question of how language might negotiate relations between individuals in a world that is less and less defined by military might and increasingly ruled by models of mediated social exchange..." (p. 21).

By reading Marie's texts in this way, Bloch contends, we recognize that they "are precious documents for the historical transformation of the twelfth century; for they are...founding articulations of what was for the time a new mental and social landscape based upon civilized, that is to say, nonviolent forms of interpersonal exchange, an increasingly abstract notion of civil polity, and the principle of an internalized psychology" (p. 21). In support of this analysis, *The Anonymous Marie De France* elucidates Marie's poetic endeavors as, for example, a major contribution to the transformation of (in Marc Bloch's famous terminology) "the first feudal age" (pp. 19, 24); a response to the rise of a court culture within a centralized monarchy ruling through an administrative bureaucracy (chapter six); a participant in the recovery of Aristotelian ethics (pp. 146-147); and a contributor, through the *Espurgatoire*, to Angevin imperialism in Ireland, a colonial adventure represented by its defenders as the taming of a violent, barbaric people (chapter nine).

But, at least to this reviewer, language remains at (and as) the center of his engagement with Marie's poetry. Bloch asserts that "Marie's obsession with language in the *Fables* and the *Espurgatoire Seint Patriz* is no less [than in the *Lais*], but...this obsession is worked out in different--more socially engaged--ways.... Thus, we shall trace in the *Lais* Marie's articulation of the fatal effects of language conceived to be independent of the world, a view associated with theological attitudes toward the relation of words to material reality characteristic of the early Middle Ages. Second, we shall follow the ways in which the fatal speech acts contained in the *Lais* become in the *Fables*...a means...by which individuals might both control the instincts of their own body and survive in a 'dog eat dog' world. Finally, we shall see the extent to which the *Espurgatoire* represents a synthesis of Marie's two other works in its presentation not of a fatal but of a salvific view of language, or rather language as a means of salvation, in a vision that integrates both earlier theological and social postures before the question of language's efficacy in the wider world" (p. 21).

The Anonymous Marie de France most impresses in its elucidations of this comparative and progressive paradigm. "In contrast to the linguistic fatalism that hovers over the *Lais*, the *Fables* constantly proffer the notion that words are powerful not so much because they kill...but because words are the instruments of relations between animals, and, of course, between men" (p. 137). As a result, language takes on an ethical valence in the *Fables* that Bloch contends is lacking in the *Lais*: "the truth of the *Fables* lies not in the dispensation of truth, but in the exposition of an opposition between truth and lies, more and less credible illusion, to be translated into the good and the bad, and, finally, into appropriate and inappropriate action...." (p. 141). "[T]here is a sense that fables produce philosophical truth--or a practical version of philosophical truth, practical wisdom--through the animal in the fable" (p. 147). The *Fables*, that is, are repositories of Aristotelian ethical thought, centered around the concept of *phronesis/prudentia/practical wisdom*.

Another example: commenting on the advice given Owen, the knight who visits purgatory in the *Espurgatoire*, that he utter the name "Jhesucrist" when threatened by its resident devils, Bloch notes, "In the repeated utterance of the single syllable [sic] that rescues Owen from impending and everlasting disaster, we detect an infallible salutary language effect. More precisely, what we find in the *Espurgatoire* is the very opposite of the fatalistic language of the *Lais*...that is, a salvific language...a magic language that dispels danger in the instant of speech.... So, where we find an ontology of language in the *Lais*, [and] an ethics of language in the *Fables*, the *Espurgatoire* promulgates a hermeneutics of language according to which a speech act--or, more precisely, a failure to speak--might prove fatal, but according to which saying the right word at the right time produces a liberating result" (p. 223).

Not everything Bloch says about Marie's language is correspondingly persuasive. More self-indulgent than convincing are the forays (preserved from some of his 1980s articles) into teasing out multiple meanings, and quibbles, from within character and place names, and key terms such as *lai* and *aventure*, in the *Lais*. This fascination with verbal ambiguities risks declining into mere lexicographical play; and by linking it to his contention that Marie's poetry is "not at all the simple, naive, spontaneous, artless creation it has been taken to be", Bloch again manages to efface or impugn the achievement of the many recent scholars who, while less entranced than he with language's potential for equivocality, have *not* therefore taken Marie's poetry to be naive or artless (p. 82).

The text is by and large carefully prepared, but a few corrections should be made in future printings: "Milun" for "Gurun" (p.64); page references should replace "below p. 000" on page 188, and "above p. 000" on page 269. And the references to "Matthew of Paris" (which Bloch has obviously taken from the Introduction to Michael Curley's translation of the *Espurgatoire de Seint Patriz*, where the same mistake is made) should be corrected to "Matthew Paris."^[4]

In sum, *The Anonymous Marie de France* is a useful contribution to a sophisticated critical discourse on Marie de France that is much more widely practiced (and has been for some decades) than its author seems willing to admit.

NOTES

[1] Emanuel J. Mickel, Jr., *Marie de France* (New York: Twayne, 1974).

[2] Joan M. Ferrante, *Woman as Image in Medieval Literature* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1975), pp. 95-97; idem., *To the Glory of Her Sex. Women's Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 195-204; idem., "The French Courtly Poet, Marie de France," in *Medieval Women Writers*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), pp. 64-89; idem., "A Woman's Voice in England, Marie de France," in *The Harvard History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 50-56; and Robert W. Hanning and Joan M. Ferrante, trans., *The Lais of Marie de France* (New York: Dutton, 1978. Reprinted Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1984; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995). The translation contains a critical Introduction and separate commentaries on each *lai*.

[3] *Marie de France, Lais*. Ed. Alfred Ewert (Oxford: Blackwell, 1947), "Prologue," lines 5-8.

[4] Marie de France, *Saint Patrick's Purgatory*, trans. Michael J. Curley (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1993).

Robert W. Hanning
Columbia University
rwh2@columbia.edu

Copyright © 2004 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on

the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 4 (March 2004), No. 25

ISSN 1553-9172