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Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet, *A New History of Medieval French Literature*. Translated by Sara Preisig. Rethinking Theory Series. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. 165 pp. \$65.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN-13: 978-1-4214-0303-8.

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Literary history has undergone a transformation in the last three decades. No longer an enumeration of genres and periods, it has quietly morphed into a theoretical and speculative enterprise. Instead of postulating universal categories, new literary histories seek to analyze the potential impact of historical and social movements on literary production. Context, geography, intellectual evolution, and engagement with the heritage of thought and letters figure in the analysis of literary modes. By admitting the impact of political events, scientific discoveries, social movements, intellectual debates, esthetic issues and the role of language itself, histories of literature have immeasurably increased our understanding of literature as a potent social mediator. Not surprisingly, they also extend our historical understanding *tout court*.

That is certainly the case with Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet's *A New History of Medieval French Literature*. To begin with, she rightly asks whether we should even contemplate medieval literary history in the same way we do for modern literatures. A major observation—and the premise on which she grounds her book—points to the absence of the subject she is meant to address: “literature.” “Medieval literature presents itself as an enigma,” she observes, because society had not yet established an autonomous vernacular literary or artistic culture (p. 129). “Literature,” in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, referred to Latin literature. “The word *literature* does not seem to have been used with the meaning that we give it today until the end of the Middle Ages, the very end” (p. 1). So her first theoretical task is to write “a history of literature before the age of literature” (p. 129). Her solution has the logical acuity of all truly original insights. She proposes to analyze descriptively the body of texts that we have anachronistically been referring to as medieval literature.

This is not sophistry. On the contrary it is a profound insight. By stripping medieval texts of their alterity—by making them, in other words, conform to literary norms formulated at a later period—we can neither understand nor appreciate the poetic language poets were inventing or the representative modes they devised. Cerquiglini-Toulet conveys brilliantly the fact that poetic language in the Middle Ages is not “literary,” i.e., aesthetic, so much as anthropological. It orients the narrative toward revealing the shared ontology of author and reader within a world itself contained in a universal history.

But we should not understand shared ontology in the modern sense of personal subjectivity. Names are ironic descriptors intended to depersonalize the writers (p. 30), as do their self-portraits. “When they do so, authors refer to themselves...with a distinctive mark. Most often this mark is ugliness; modeled upon the legendary ugliness of Socrates, or Aesop, or of Aristotle...Whether real or fictional...the trait portrays humility, even humiliation of the cleric in comparison with the knight, or of the poor cleric in comparison with the rich layman” (p. 31). While poets are understandably proud of their achievement—they frequently proclaim the superiority of their story over other narratives—their sentiment in no sense corresponds to our concept of intellectual property. Quite the reverse, poets seek to take upon

themselves the power of another's name to the point of creating what Cerquiglini-Toulet terms "the fictions of the author" (p. 33).

"The name grants permission. Great works in prose from the thirteenth century are placed under the authority of a fictitious author's name" (p. 33). Often the very first act of poetic imagination is to create a name with sufficient authority to envelop the new work with its power. Like Prometheus, this involves stealing light—if not fire, the luster of a recognized authority. Take, for example, Walter Map, a twelfth-century churchman and courtier to King Henry II of England, who wrote the enduringly popular Latin work, *De nugis curialium* ("On Courtly Trifles"). Perhaps on the strength of the association of the Arthurian legend with England, Helie de Boron attributes the authorship of the prose romance, *Lancelot*, to Walter Map. "But Helie de Boron is, itself, an invented name that combines a biblical name, 'Helie,' with a fragment of the name Robert de Boron, who authored a section of *Merlin*..." (p. 33). Similarly, the fictitious author of the *Prose Tristan* styles himself, "I, Luce, knight and lord of the Castle of Gat..." not only because "he is a knight and therefore part of the world of the heroes he is going to evoke"—which is also that of his readers—but also because he is "neighbor to the earl of Salisbury," in whose library "Master Walter Map found the adventures which he recounted 'in his book of the Holy Grail.'" All of this allows Cerquiglini-Toulet to conclude with one of the pithy *mots* that dot her work: "Fiction feeds the fiction that must guarantee the truth" (p. 33).

Authorship is but one of the components we associate with literature. Cerquiglini-Toulet identifies others essential to literary works in order to show their medieval specificity. Like the question of the author, her choices offer maximum opportunity for conveying fascinating historical information, as well as covering a broad range of poetic examples. She groups her categories in the three parts that structure the book: "Writing in the Middle Ages;" "The Field of Literature;" and "Building the Sense." The four subsections of part one fix the production of poetic works within a collective social context: "The Materiality of Writing;" "The Question of the Author;" "The Work and its Audiences;" and "The Work and its Milieux."

One doesn't need François Villon's lament, "I thought I could finish my work,/ but my ink was frozen/ and I found my candle blown out" (Je cuidé finer mon propos; / Mais mon ancre trouvé gelé / Et mon cierge trouvé soufflé; / De feu je n'eusse peu finer; / Si m'endormis, tout enmouflé, / Et ne peus autrement finer) to realize the difficulty for writing in this period.[1] Writing materials were awkward, expensive, and—by modern standards—scarce. Parchment made from animal skins was the most common medium and, even when paper did come into use in France toward the end of the thirteenth century, its quality was inferior to the more costly sheep- or cowhide. Wax tablets could be used for taking notes or composing, but the content needed to be transferred to parchment relatively quickly as wax was a fragile and impermanent medium. Since "publishing" could only be achieved by laboriously copying works from one manuscript to another, writing was hard work, as an eighth-century Latin scribe notes: "Three fingers write; two eyes see; one tongue speaks; the whole body works" (p. 16). The anonymous scribe's reference to speaking while writing reminds us that until relatively late in the Middle Ages, readers spoke the words on the page. Silent reading was a belated technology.

Since literary transmission relied on copying by hand, we should not be surprised to learn that "writer," *escrivain*, denoted a scribe, acquiring our modern connotation of creative artist only later in the period. Lay scribes were numerous by the thirteenth century, but their living could be tenuous. Some of the best-known *escrivains* were attached to the courts of noblemen. As the possession of a library was a hallmark of a courtly aristocrat—and since governance of aristocratic domains could be complex—scribes became important members of noble households. Sometimes the role of scribe and poet would blur. "Jean Joret, official scribe of Kings Charles VII and Louis XI, dedicated a poem of his own making about the alphabet, *Le Jardin salutaire* (1483), to Charles VII in order to be retained in his service. So although the boundary between *escrivain*-scribe and the *escrivain*-author was porous, their status was different" (p.

19). Nobles like Thibaut de Champagne or Eustache Deschamps could be poets and they might even transcribe their own compositions, but they would never be scribes.

A vigorous poetic tradition presupposes readers and, in the Middle Ages, listeners, since works could be intended for public recitation as well as private reading. Poets leave little doubt as to the anticipated nature of the work's consumption. They formulate demands for the audience's benevolent reception of the work in either case, but modulate the formula according to the mode of reception. A public recitation might prompt the poet to write: "Quiet please, and lend me your hearts and ears, for words that are not understood by the heart are lost completely" (*Faites pais; cuer et oroilles me rendés, Car parole oïe est perdue/ S'ele n'est de cuer entendue*) (p. 50). A reader, on the other hand, may be exhorted to "fix your gaze upon the truth" (*Aiguise ici, lecteur, ton regart sur le vrai*) (p.50).

But what was the nature of the audience for whom poets addressed? There was no such concept as the mass audience. Medieval authors may have hoped to reach a broad public, but they had to write for the aristocratic elite who could attach them to their court or otherwise remunerate them. As a result, "the audience is usually defined by the nature of the prestigious person to whom the work is dedicated. Noble or not, the reader or the listener is thus indirectly qualified" (p. 50). Moreover, authors explicitly excluded an amorphous, but reviled category, "the villain." This was both a class--the rustic, uncouth peasant--and a type: the *déclassé* who could appreciate or understand art. The latter could be singled out in advance: "Whoever will be displeased, may he forthwith withdraw, may he leave now" (pp. 51-52).

Cerquiglini-Toulet reminds her readers that, from its inception early in the twelfth century, vernacular literature acknowledged noblewomen as patrons and audience. To this end, they accorded prominent roles to women in their compositions. In the 1170s, Chrétien de Troyes, the most accomplished of the early writers of Arthurian romance, described King Arthur's court as having a "great number of beautiful courtly ladies, skilled at conversing in French" (p. 52). Christine de Pizan urges works suitable for reading "in a proper setting--at the table of queens, princesses, or decent bourgeois ladies" (p. 53). Besides the dedication of works to aristocratic female patrons, we can also deduce the kinds of works medieval women of the upper classes and bourgeoisie read from the inventories of royal and ducal libraries. "Examples include the libraries of Philip the Bold's second wife, Maria of Brabant; Clementia of Hungary, second wife of King Louis X of France; and Jeanne d'Evreux, widow of King Charles IV" (p. 55). Finally, in recognition of the association of cultural production with specific cities and regions in France--Paris, Champagne, Languedoc, Picardy, Lyon, et cetera--poets give women a dynamic role in debates like Guillaume Cretin's "Debate of the Women of Paris and Lyon" (p. 61).

In the second section of the book, "The Field of Literature," Cerquiglini-Toulet turns to the literary matter that traditionally forms the basis for medieval literary history: "The Subject Matter;" "The Paths to Writing;" "Modes of Composition;" and "Models of Writing." Here, the approach relies on a dazzling range of literary examples to demonstrate how the four categories arise from theoretical interrogation as it evolved over the course of the Middle Ages. Her first question--what is the subject matter (*matière*) of medieval French authors--takes inspiration from the medieval Latin *accessus ad autores*, "a series of interrogations intended to facilitate the reading of the classics by explaining the life of the author, the title of the work, the intention of the writer, the subject of the book, the utility of its contents, and the branch of philosophy to which it belongs" (p. 20).

Matière in French denotes "the construction material used to make something, its planking (*merrain*), and the people of the Middle Ages heard in it...an echo of the word *mere* ('mother')" (p. 65). Linguistic invention and word play are hallmarks of medieval subject matter, so *matière/mere* and (Latin) *mater* and *Maria* made a logical association "between God's creation of the world starting with a *prima materia* (first matter) and his recreation thanks to Mary, *lucida materia* (pristine or shining matter), because she bore the Christ child, the instrument of redemption," as Hildegard of Bingen put it (p. 65). Such imaginative associations were possible because, following Aristotle, medievals viewed matter as "that

which is not yet organized by a form: in the domain of literary creation, subject matter is what sets in motion, or makes possible, the process of writing” (p. 65).

Cerquiglini-Toulet seeks to demonstrate how the components of medieval poetics arise from philosophical engagement with the world. If, for Guillaume de Machaut, Nature and Love are the wellspring of his poetry, it is that he knows that Nature forms matter, which, in the case of poetry, has three forces: sense, rhetoric, and music. Love shapes his poetry thanks to forces he personifies as Sweet Thought, Pleasure, and Hope. Form is a principle of poetry since it imposes order and conveys coherence or sense...in short, harmony.

Aesthetics plays a major role in medieval works because its components, like beauty and the pleasant or agreeable, belong to the tradition of philosophical anthropology which theologians like Augustine, Eriugena, Grosseteste, and Aquinas equated with moral living. The inner life and character of humans, they believed, played a determinate role in defining what they called beauty. The principles that commanded esthetic judgment were the same that constituted the ideal person: *integritas* (completeness, purity, honesty); *proportion, consonantia* (proportion, harmony); and *claritas* (radiance, purity). “First of all order. Measure is a principle that is both moral and esthetic. Art must be measured in order to be beautiful” (p. 81).

But what pleases was also new. Deeply rooted in and influenced by the natural world, medieval literature esteemed both renewal—in the sense of the ever-fresh repetition of natural cycles—and “the ‘new’ as in that which has never been seen before” (p. 85). This perspective, of course, touches upon two essential aspects of medieval writing: the continual renewal of content such as love poetry, quest romance, dream allegory, epic, et cetera, and the intensive formal innovation to be seen in the astonishing variety of lyric modes, musical forms, prose genres, narrative poetry of all kinds, satiric modes, debate poems, or enumerative and evocative poetic modes created in this period. Here again, one must remember that formal or thematic innovation also has a moral purpose: the quest for truth.

Perhaps because of the innovation imperative, medieval poets incessantly experimented with and devised modes of composition and models of writing. Cerquiglini-Toulet formulates categories for the most persistent of these, while noting that they all had in common the impulse to formulate a means of capturing major aspects of life in ways that maintained a tension between the serious and the comic, the satirical and the reverential, but always within the framework of philosophical reflection or, if one prefers, existential meaning. But such meaning, as they showed, remained elusive.

It is to the credit of medieval authors that, despite working within a system of belief that appears absolutist to our eyes, literary modes offered ever more complex, ever more ambiguous narratives. Figures of power, like Fortune or Nature, remained inscrutable, contingent, and arbitrary. Allegory and dream literature enjoyed perennial popularity for promising to penetrate the opacity of the everyday world for those too lazy (or morally compromised) to work things out for themselves. What these modes really did and were so intended was to highlight the unbridgeable divide between desire and reality, and with it the fallacy of human omniscience. In so doing, allegory and dream literature, along with all of the other literary forms invented in this most fertile of literary periods, “lead the reader to the heart of an essential problematic: What is literature for? What can it do?” (p. 133).

NOTE

[1] François Villon, Le Lais, st. XXXIX, vv. 3-8; *Poètes et romanciers du Moyen Âge, texte établie et annoté par Albert Paufilet* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), p. 1145.

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