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H-France Review Vol. 12 (April 2012), No. 48

Adrian Armstrong and Sarah Kay, *Knowing Poetry: Verse in Medieval France from the "Rose" to the "Rhétoriciens."* Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2011. xii + 249 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 U.S./£29.50 (cl). ISBN 978-0-8014-4973-4.

Review by Douglas Kelly, University of Wisconsin at Madison.

*Knowing Poetry* is the outcome of a research project on the relationship between verse poetry and knowledge in France funded by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council. It covers the years between 1270, the date assigned to Jean de Meun's *Roman de la rose*, and 1530 when Jean Bouchet, the last *rhétoricien*, had completed what the authors deem his most significant work (p. 3). Relevant contemporary Occitan works are also treated. The volume therefore bridges the years between the end of the early medieval period and the early decades of the French Renaissance. Of critical importance is how poetry came to transmit knowledge and how versification, including rhyme, shaped the knowledge it transmitted.

The research project included not only the two authors of *Knowing Poetry*, but several other scholars who contributed to the research and who are named on the title page: Rebecca Dixon, Miranda Griffin, Sylvia Huot, Francesca Nicholson, and Finn Sinclair. Several other complementary studies proceed from this project: Sarah Kay's *The Place of Thought; Poetry, Knowledge, and Community*, edited by Dixon and Sinclair; Sylvia Huot's *Dreams of Lovers and Lies of Poets*; Armstrong's *Virtuoso Circle*; and Kay's *Parrots and Nightingales*.<sup>[1]</sup>

The volume's extensive bibliography reveals numerous channels of critical scholarship that contributed to this book's argument. The bibliographical background to *Knowing Poetry* is important because it indicates the full context and ramifications of the project of which it is a part. By "thinking about the role of poetry in transmitting and shaping knowledge in late medieval France," (pp. viii) the participants in this team effort aim to correct the common view of the relation between prose and verse in medieval writing according to which prose allows a more accurate expression of truth because verse, by using rhyme, must necessarily falsify its subject matter. In addition, the chronological scope of the subject matter allows them to reconsider the commonplace division between the medieval and Renaissance periods in French and Occitan literature.

The Introduction sets out the scope and goal of the book. As the authors put it, "[u]ltimately and paradoxically..., a direct consequence of the so-called rise of prose [in the thirteenth century] is the forging of a new relationship between poetry and knowledge in which poetry not only transmits what we can reasonably call "knowledge," but also, through its own reflective and self-reflective procedures, shapes that knowledge and determines how it is received' (p. 4). They distinguish serious from non-serious verse. *Poetrie* is serious verse because it transmits "what we can reasonably call 'knowledge.'" *Poetrie* is, therefore, the subject of the book.<sup>[2]</sup>

Key texts in the emergence of French verse as a transmitter of knowledge are Jean de Meun's *Roman de la rose*, the *Ovide moralisé*, and Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, including its vernacular translations/adaptations and their use of prose and/or verse. Moreover, knowledge is related to individual experience such that self-examination is a factor in receiving and interpreting knowledge. This explains the rise in the importance of the personifications *Connaissance*, *Raison*, and *Entendement*. In

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order to explain these factors, the volume's authors occasionally look to modern critical theorists like Lacan, Lyotard, and Agamben (to name those singled out in the introduction).

The book contains two parts entitled, respectively, "Situating Knowledge" and "Transmitting and Shaping Knowledge." Each part contains three chapters. Part one clarifies what late medieval poets mean by "knowledge." The first chapter critiques previous studies that support the commonplace "true prose" vis-à-vis "mendacious verse."<sup>[3]</sup> It notes the continued use of verse to transmit knowledge and the kinds of works or genres that do so. They also define knowledge in terms more in line with individual experience as a source of knowledge, especially poetry meant for public reading, as in the poetic contests at northern French *pays* and the Occitan consistories in Toulouse and Barcelona as well in the theater and *entrées royales*. The primary mode is debate. The staging of debates engages an audience with the knowledge they transmit. Validation or rejection often occurs on a personal level. Chapter two takes up the role of patrons in verse chronicles written for them and in historiographical works in verse translations and adaptations from Latin into French. Laudation of the patron is a critical mode, but so are contingency, uncertainty, and mutability in private life and the experience of the Hundred Years War. Finally, the third chapter focuses on the three crucial works singled out in the introduction: Jean de Meun's *Rose*, the *Ovide moralisé* (and other adaptations of Ovid), and Boethius in verse adaptations that Christianize their model's instruction.

Part two turns to the *translatio studii* commonplace and the shape or formal structure of knowledge transmitted in verse. Here the authors return to a distinction among different kinds of knowledge that they identify in the introduction: referential knowledge, textual knowledge, and ideological knowledge. Each kind receives a chapter.

Chapter four treats referential knowledge like that contained in encyclopedias, especially those in verse, an implicit correction of the charge that verse, by its very nature, must be mendacious. A key distinction is made between the encyclopedia as a complete compendium or *summa* on God and the cosmos He created and the "encyclopedic text." Such "texts" are insertions, often as amplifications or digressions that contain, as it were, excerpts from implicit encyclopedias. The reader may be expected to recognize the intellectual framework for these "texts" and their role in interpreting the poetry into which they are inserted. The primary examples are the *Roman de la rose* and the *Ovide maralisé*, but other works also receive special attention as encyclopedias: Matfre Ermengaud's *Breviari d'amor*, the *Image du monde*, and the *Lumière as lais*. Encyclopedic texts are found in Machaut, Froissart, Deschamps, Christine de Pizan, *Renart le contrefait*, and Chartier. The sheer breadth of encyclopedic knowledge demonstrated by these texts produces, whatever shape the transmission of knowledge takes, a pervading sense of melancholy in the "reflective poet," a negative sentiment because it may distort one's view of the world (p. 133).

Moving on to textual knowledge in chapter five, the authors focus on poetry not only as source of knowledge but also as a vehicle of transmission "specific to itself" (p. 135). The vernacular arts of poetry and (briefly) music, as well as codicological factors in manuscript format and transmission, are scrutinized for the ways that they shape knowledge. Allusions in quotations, lyric insertions, the prosimetrum that juxtaposes verse and prose, and "audience's shared understanding" (p. 164) of artistic techniques permit readers and audiences to engage seriously the knowledge transmitted in verse. Under allusion, the authors devote special attention to hope<sup>[4]</sup>, although their assertion that the "theological sense of hope is little explored in fourteenth-century vernacular allegorical poetry" (p. 149) ignores the special sense that Machaut gives to the idea in the *Confort d'ami* and, by implication there, to the *Remede de Fortune* and other Dits and lyrics.<sup>[5]</sup> Thomas de Saluces's *Chevalier errant*, Christine de Pizan's *Advison Cristine*, and Chartier's *Livre d'esperance* bear witness to the ongoing importance of theological

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hope and of the medieval Christianization of Boethius's *Consolation*. Study of the virtues and vices and the way they are interpreted is a desideratum that *Knowing Poetry* might well inspire.

Chapter six on ideological knowledge, which more often than not refers to religious beliefs, builds on Brian Stock's notion of textual community.[6] What ties a community together is a common body of knowledge and a shared interpretation of that knowledge. The social context is urban. Its ludic forms question cultural distinctions such as courtly versus ordinary language and sense versus nonsense. Arras is one such urban center; the tavern is an image of the urban milieu. The tavern audience is made up of diverse social groups that come together for both amusement and debate. Theatrical genres are prominent, especially because these works speak "uncomfortable truths" (p. 170), a feature they share with Jean de Meun's *Roman de la rose*. First-person narrators proliferate, acting on the world as stage in order to confront individual experience with transmitted knowledge.

*Knowing Poetry* is an important book. In its way, it is itself a study based on the evidence of "encyclopedic texts" because of its reliance on a large body of medieval literature much of which is not well known today, and, to a lesser extent, modern critical theory. It sets out a program for reading verse as a medium to communicate knowledge. It also looks forward to the stylistic means the authors use to achieve their goals. In communicating knowledge, however, verse also shows how unstable, debatable, and rhetorical knowledge can become. With this comes the awareness of the contingency of ideological knowledge (p. 195). One becomes aware, while reading *Knowing Poetry*, of what one scholar has named the important "distinction between intellectual context and what poetry is doing on its own literary terms." [7] *Knowing Poetry* invites further exploration of the large corpus of late medieval-early Renaissance poetry in the light of its re-evaluation of verse as transmitter of knowledge in French and Occitan literature.

A number of directions for future investigation occur to me. First we must henceforth focus more on individual authors and even more so on individual works in order to identify how they use verse to communicate knowledge and what that knowledge may be in specific intellectual contexts.[8] This will refine and enhance our appreciation of how poetry, from individual authors to textual communities, shapes knowledge and influences its reception by the procedures they use. What are those procedures? They would include, I believe, the following: first, how must we define prose poems (p. 163) and prosimetra, given the opposition the authors argue between the two modes?[9] For example, the epistolary exchange in Machaut's *Voir Dit* includes fixed forms together with prose letters as well as one letter entirely in verse. Letters and verse treat the same subjects as the *Dit*'s narrative in octosyllabic rhyming couplets. How prosaic and how poetic are these different examples of prose and verse? Second, *Knowing Poetry* shows the importance of verse and prose adaptations of antecedent texts. One might also investigate the effect of diverse versions of the texts—for example, the different versions of the *Ovide moralisé* identified by Marc-René Jung, some of which delete or reduce the allegorical interpretations of the rewritten Ovidian tales.[10] Allegory is a fundamental mode in medieval *poetrie*. Are Ovidian tales without allegory serious poetry? Next, the medieval Latin art of poetry and prose and its French and Occitan adaptations emphasize topical invention[11], ornamental amplification and abbreviation using tropes and figures[12], and the Aristotelian formal cause as *forma tractatus* and *forma tractandi*. These are obvious techniques for shaping verse and prose composition.[13] Attention to what poetry is doing using its own terms can move critical scholarship towards a better understanding and appreciation of poetry's contingent knowledge, of debate in and among textual communities, and of the goals and quality of poetic invention in verse and prose.

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[1] Sarah Kay, *The Place of Thought: The Complexity of One in Late Medieval French Didactic Poetry* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Rebecca Dixon, Finn E. Sinclair, Adrian Armstrong, Sylvia Huot, and Sarah Kay, eds., *Poetry, Knowledge, and Community in Late Medieval France* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008); Sylvia Huot, *Dreams of Lovers and Lies of Poets* (Oxford: Legenda, 2010); Adrian Armstrong, *Virtuoso Circle* (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, forthcoming 2012); and Sarah Kay, *Parrots and Nightingales* (forthcoming).

[2] This differs from *poetrie* as brief summaries of examples. see Marc-René Jung, “*Poetria*: zur Dichtungstheorie des ausgehenden Mittelalters in Frankreich,” *Vox Romanica* 30(1971): 44-64.

[3] Wlad Godzick and Jeffrey Kittay, *The Emergence of Prose* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *Romancing the Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

[4] See Elizabeth Eva Leach, *Guillaume de Machaut* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 177, who wrote “the role of Hope in court culture more broadly conceived was not negligible in this period” because “courtiers found it attractive and efficacious.”

[5] Guillaume de Machaut, *Le Confort d’ami*, v. 2241-50, in Guillaume de Machaut (Ernest Hoepffner ed.), *Œuvres*, vol. 3 (Paris: Champion, 1921).

[6] Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983); Pierre Chastang, “L’Archéologie du texte médiéval,” *Annales* (no.2-2008): 265-269.

[7] Helen L. Swift, “*Tamainte consolacion/me fist lymagination*: A Poetics of Mourning and the Imagination in Late Medieval Dits,” in Catherine E. Léglu and Stephen J. Milner eds., *The Erotics of Consolation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 160, n. 1. See also Friedrich Wolfzettel, “La Poésie comme cadeau ou le goût de la lectrice vers la fin du Moyen Age,” in Danielle Bohler ed., *Le Goût du lecteur à la fin du moyen âge* (Paris: Léopard d’Or, 2006), pp. 150-156.

[8] The wealth of authors and works is evident in the following: Daniel Poirion ed., *La Littérature française aux XIV<sup>e</sup> et XV<sup>e</sup> siècles*, vol. 8/1 of *Grundriß der romanischen Literaturen des Mittelalters* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1988); and Armand Strubel, “*Grant senefiance a*: *Allegorie et littérature au moyen âge* (Paris: Champion, 2002).

[9] See Catherine Croizy-Naquet, “Nus contes rimés n’est verais,” *Revue des sciences humaines* 276(2004): 29-44 (with additional bibliography pertinent to the period prior to 1270).

[10] “*Ovide, texte, translateur et gloses dans les manuscrits de l’Ovide moralisé*,” in Douglas Kelly ed., *The Medieval “Opus”* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 75-98.

[11] Topoi in this sense are transmitted to vernacular writers by Brunetto Latini (Francis J. Carmody, ed.), *Li Livres dou tresor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948; repr. Geneva: Slatkine, 1998), pp. 359-382; and Jacques Legrand (Evencio Beltran ed.), *Archiloge Sophie* (Paris: Champion, 1986), pp. 85-133.

[12] On the ongoing use of Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Poetria nova*, as well as commentaries and glosses on his treatise across Europe during the 1270 to 1530 period, see Marjorie Curry Woods, *Classroom*

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*Commentaries* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010). Although it predates the period covered in *Knowing Poetry*, one can also consult as a model the exemplary study of this subject in Danièle James-Raoul, *Chrétien de Troyes, la griffe d'un style* (Paris: Champion, 2007). *Griffe* identifies the “signature” or style of an author.

[13] The fundamental studies are Judson Boyce Allen, *The Ethical Poetics of the Later Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982) and Alastair J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship* (London: Scolar, 1984).

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ISSN 1553-9172