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Noah D. Guynn and Zrinka Stahuljak, eds., *Violence and the Writing of History in the Medieval Francophone World*. Gallica, general editor, Sarah Kay. Cambridge, U.K. and Rochester, N.Y.: D. S. Brewer, 2013. xii + 210 pp. Figures and index. \$90.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-84384-337-5.

Review by Robert M. Stein, Purchase College, Emeritus.

Noah Guynn and Zrinka Stahuljak have assembled a wide-ranging collection of essays by primarily well-established scholars. Grouped into four parts with titles that would indicate a wide historical perspective—Theorizing Violence; Institutions and Subversions; Gender and Sexuality; Trauma, Memory, and Healing—the essays range from concerns with the rhetorical maneuvers by which violence is justified (Guynn, Sullivan, Cowell) to scandalous humor (Shopkow), to the roles of common coinage and linguistic diversity in the western representations of Mongols (Gaunt). In what follows, I will signal some of the essays I found either most interesting in themselves or most revealing of the aims and scope of the book.

This very diverse collection is unified primarily by a disciplinary approach rather than by any specifically historical question or by any theoretical or historiographical perspective within it. Virtually all the essays operate exclusively by literary critical means—even the essay by Leah Shopkow, the one medieval historian in the collection—and they share the rather generally widespread literary critical hermeneutic imperative to understand how the texts under examination speak more than, less than, and other than what they consciously purport to say. Thus, for example, Matthew Fisher presents the historiographical accounts of the spectacular punishment of the Scots “rebel” Wallace as always susceptible to reading against the grain. While intended to demonstrate the power of the king against the forces of national union, the publicly displayed bodily fragments, he argues, “at once witnessed the ritualized humiliation of the king’s enemies and recalled the relics of saints’ bodies” (p. 84). Similarly, David Rollo argues that in the *Chronique des ducs de Normandie*, Benoît de Sainte-Maure, although writing under royal commission, “took subtle pains to distance himself from his material and his patron” (p. 118), and that throughout the text Benoît “proceeds through indirection, ...subtly contradicting the official version of events he elsewhere endorses” (p. 132). And co-editor Noah Guynn, in his very interesting contribution examining providential rhetoric in Villehardouin, contends that “an analysis of Villehardouin’s providential and historiographical rhetoric reveals not only strategies for justifying the Crusade’s diversion and its violent assaults on Christian strongholds, but also a continuous rearticulation of doubts about the morality of these actions, doubts that are an inescapable by-product of, as well as a condition for the production of, faith in the Crusade as a just war” (p. 51).

Sometimes an approach such as this can feel like the workings of a well-oiled literary critical machine running on automatic; sometimes it can yield real historical knowledge. In her fine contribution, co-editor Zrinka Stahuljak re-examines the vernacular accounts of the public execution of Hugh Despenser. Since the ground-breaking publication in 1980 of John Boswell’s *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, Edward II’s sexual identity and practices and the role of Despenser have been staples for historians of sexuality providing prime evidence for the late medieval condemnation of same-sex practices.[1] Stahuljak’s extremely attentive reading of the chronicle representations—and her comparisons of them to accounts of the public execution of Roger Mortimer, Edward III’s counselor—

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leads her to contend that for the medieval historians in question, it is not the illicit nature of the acts themselves, sodomitical or adulterous, but rather “repetition—and, specifically, the compulsion to repeat sex acts, whether between men or between men and women—...that provokes violent events that shape history” (p. 135). Her conclusion has wide resonance for historical practice applicable to histories of sexuality and beyond:

“Historians of sexuality have turned to medieval historiographical texts seeking for information about the sexual desires and practices of historical figures and for evidence in the acts versus identities debate. In large part, their attempt has been to legitimate the interrogation of modern sexual norms by providing historical evidence for different configurations and deployments of sexuality from the past and thereby to counter the claim of a transhistorical hetero-normative order. But studying same-sex relations in relative isolation from contemporaneous representations of other, opposite-sex practices has in some cases occulted the ways in which medieval historians use different sexualities to elucidate (similar) historical events and has precluded us from asking to what purpose they choose to include issues of sex in their historiographical representations. Thus what we have been reading as the oppression of a sexual minority belongs in a larger framework of historiographical strategies for depicting political events...” (p. 147).

Deborah McGrady’s stimulating contribution is similarly revisionist, while like most others in the collection, it is more strictly literary in its aims than that of Stahuljak. Its rereading of the poetic correspondence of Charles d’Orléans is thoroughly grounded in manuscript studies and aesthetically recuperative, especially of the exchange of poems between Charles and Philip the Good where Philip’s poems, often dismissed as having no literary interest, are read as important witnesses to Charles’s contemporary reception. McGrady’s essay both convincingly places the poems within the frame of traumatic memory studies and the workings of the literary tradition. Charles’s poems reflect on past poetry while remaking it, and they remember wartime suffering in a way that “celebrates the power of lyric” and in this case, it is the specific power of his lyric to use “lyricized memories of past violence to forge a new history” with peaceful aims (p. 167).

In their general introduction, the editors assert their collection’s affinity with “posthistorical” criticism (the scare-quotes are the editors’ own), and they quote and paraphrase Elizabeth Scala’s and Sylvia Federico’s call, in their preface to *The Post-Historical Middle Ages*, to “remain open to the stakes of our present engagement with the past” (p. 5), as well as to the complex ways in which texts are embedded within their own historical context.<sup>[2]</sup> Yet, virtually all of the essays in this collection operate within a medievalist version of what we perhaps need to call the Old New Historicism, in which history remains simultaneously an abstract category (History, with a capital H, a grand narrative whose lineaments we all know very well) and something small, local, anecdotal, and entirely *événementiel*. The essays in the collection, many of which have “violence” in their titles, virtually all begin either by summoning “violence” as something we all know: the “no longer tenable” distinction between violence and gift-giving (p. 20), the violence of thirteenth- and fourteenth- century crusading with its attendant virulent Islamophobia (p. 187), violence as “central to the reality of historical experience in late medieval France and Burgundy” (p. 169). Or else, they begin in true New Historicist fashion with a scene or anecdote: Robert the Frisian’s seizing of the county of Flanders, Ramon Roger’s ambush of a group of travelers (pp. 99-100), a beer drinker’s boast and terrible punishment (p. 71). Then, they all immediately proceed to leave literal violence behind while proceeding to their own real topic: rhetoric, traumatic memory, diversity and otherness, etc.

In fact, I think the book is seriously mistitled, and that is a shame because until well into the book the title kept me from appreciating the real excellence of some of the essays. Violence is precisely what the collection is not about. What the book is about is announced, it seems to me, twice. In their introduction, the editors ask “What might we discover by working in the instability of multiple, parallel temporalities [something the essays in fact never do, restricting themselves to conventionally grounded

literary-criticism of their chosen medieval texts] and striving to understand not what really happened or how things actually were...but how the past acquired significance in medieval cultures through processes of textual mediation, rhetorical elaboration, and visual translation?" (pp. 14-15). Similarly, and as if to lay bare the arbitrariness of the book's architecture, Karen Sullivan, in one of the strongest essays in the book, concludes that "physical violence possesses no meaning in and of itself but only acquires meaning within the social and cultural context within which it transpires." And a bit further on, "Throughout the *Canso* [*de la Crozada*] violence is ultimately never about violence..." (p. 114).

In brief, violence here is what the great director Alfred Hitchcock called a McGuffin. It serves to enable the telling of a story and is what we think the story is about until we know better. What the individual essays, each in its own way and some more successfully than others, address are precisely those techniques in narrative that create meaning, that make a narrative about something, what Aristotle long ago referred to by the now very unfashionable term universality. That is where he tried to differentiate historical narrative, subservient to contingency, from fiction, which could more readily shape its material to bring out more efficiently what it was about.[3] The literary analysis of these kinds of operations of meaning production in historiographical literature—and it is a laudable feature of this collection that historiography is very widely construed to include epic and lyric representation as well as prose chronicles—is among the most essential business of literary criticism, and in our own current media-saturated environment, it has become an urgent necessity.

I do not think the editors should have shied away from what is most obviously their real interest, for it is an important one and well worth a medievalist's perspective. At the same time, we still need a good collection of essays by a team of scholars on violence in medieval historiography. And if such a collection began from the theoretical foundation provided by Walter Benjamin and the late essays of Jacques Derrida, it would be all the better.[4] The rest of the title, specifying the medieval Francophone world, is similarly problematic. The essays do take their texts from the wide dispersion of French vernacular writing from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, and these texts include Langtoft's chronicle, written in the French of England, the so-called Franco-Italian of the Marco Polo manuscripts, the Occitan *Canso de la Crozada*, and others written within and without the hexagon. Yet, the significance of this dispersion, the specificity and difference lodged in the interior of the concept Francophone, the relation of French to Latin and to the other vernaculars with which it cohabited, like violence, the Francophone, announced as a subject of the book, here has the appearance of simply an uninterrogated given, an arbitrary way to frame the material. Readers looking for a discussion of violence in the medieval Francophone world will be disappointed, but those wanting a collection of essays about the creation of meaning in narrative, historiographical and otherwise, will find some things here very worth thinking about.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Noah D. Guynn and Zrinka Stahuljak, "Historicity, Violence, and the Medieval Francophone World: *Mémoire Hystérisée*"

Andrew Cowell, "Violence, History, and the Old French Epic of Revolt"

Noah D. Guynn, "Rhetoric, Providence, and Violence in Villehardouin's *La Conquête de Constantinople*"

Jeff Rider, "Vice, Tyranny, Violence, and the Usurpation of Flanders (1071) in Flemish Historiography from 1093 to 1294"

Leah Shopkow, "Marvelous Feats: Humor, Trickery, and Violence in the *History of the Counts of Gines and the Lords of Ardres* of Lambert of Ardres"

Matthew Fisher, "Dismembered Borders and Treasonous Bodies in Anglo-Norman Historiography"

Karen Sullivan, "The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Violence in the *Canso de la Crozada*"

David Rollo, "Political Violence and Sexual Violation in the Work of Benoît de Sainte-Maure"

Zrinka Stahuljak, "The Sexuality of History: The Demise of Hugh Despenser, Roger Mortimer, and Richard II in Jean Le Bel, Jean Froissart, and Jean d'Outremeuse"

Deborah McGrady, "'Guerre ne sert que de tourment': Remembering War in the Poetic Correspondence of Charles d'Orléans"

Rosalind Brown-Grant, "Commemorating the Chivalric Hero: Text, Image, Violence and Memory in the *Livre des faits de messire Jacques de Lalain*"

Simon Gaunt, "Coming Communities in Medieval Francophone Writing about the Orient"

#### NOTES

[1] John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[2] Elizabeth Scala and Sylvia Federico, eds., *The Post-Historical Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). The passage used by the editors and quoted above is on page 1. The political thrust animating this collection and the editors' sense of the meaning of post-historical is exactly what distinguishes it from the book under review. See, for example, "The richness of the past with which we are engaged deserves our most self-conscious critical attention; we encourage the readers of this volume to reflect further on methods and practices that might prod historicism out of its contemporary political inertia, take some risks, and connect with what's radical about the study of the Middle Ages" (p. 10).

[3] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451b.

[4] I am thinking particularly of Walter Benjamin, "Zur Kritik der Gewalt," *Gesammelte Schriften*, II.1, (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), pp. 179-203 and Jacques Derrida, "Force de loi: le 'fondement mystique de l'autorité'"/"Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'," *Cardozo Law Review* 11(1990): 940-1045.

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