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Jean d'Arras, *Mélusine; or, the Noble History of Lusignan*. Trans. with introduction and notes, by Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012. viii + 251 pp. Maps, preface, notes, bibliography, and index. \$69.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-271-05412-4.

Review by Stacey L. Hahn, Oakland University.

Jean d'Arras's Middle French prose *Roman de Mélusine* is one of the most fascinating, yet relatively little known works, of the late fourteenth century. Written in 1393 by Jean d'Arras for his patron Jean, duc de Berry, this romance, along with a later octosyllabic verse version of the work written around 1401 by Couldrette for Guillaume Larchevêque, Lord of Parthenay, enjoyed wide popularity, first in manuscript form and later in print. Although the appeal of the myth, never having faded away entirely, continued up through the nineteenth century, very little critical attention has been paid to its literary merits until recently. Much of the current fascination with the work has to do with its unique, enigmatic structure that does not conform to any one genre. Like its hybrid heroine Mélusine, the founding mother of the illustrious Lusignan family, who partakes of both human and fairy nature, the romance itself seems a hybrid in that it contains elements of various medieval genres both historical and fictive, making it an amalgam of chronicle, myth, penitential romance, crusade narrative, genealogy and epic. Renewed interest in the work due to its singular nature, the charismatic appeal of its heroine and its association with the Lusignan dynasty and other important medieval families of the late fourteenth century, has generated a succession of critical editions and translations in recent years in both modern French and English.

A testimony for this renewed interest occurred in 1993 during a colloquium organized to commemorate the sixth centenary of the publication of Jean d'Arras's *Roman de Mélusine*, which resulted in a collection of important essays by prominent medieval specialists edited by Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox.^[1] As promised in the preface of their edition of essays, Maddox and Sturm-Maddox have published the first modern, free standing English translation of this important and until recently, neglected work. The translation, designed to appeal to "a wide range of readers," will undoubtedly do much to spark further interest and research into this fascinating and unique romance which combines folklore with history.

The annotated translation consists of an introduction with notes and bibliography of primary and secondary sources. Specialists and readers new to medieval romance will appreciate the succinct plot summary in the introduction that ties together the disparate strands of the adventures of Mélusine and her family that can be difficult for the modern reader to follow and digest. The contextualization of the historical underpinnings of adventures and characters, wherein fact is sifted from fiction, aids the reader in grasping the breadth of d'Arras's ambitions in writing the romance. Without these clarifications, a lay reader might mistake the historical inaccuracies for fact. Extensive notes keep the reader up to date on current research and attuned to further avenues of inquiry. This reader appreciated the annotations to the translation, especially those that reference the various geographical regions where Mélusine's sons and husband go traveling. The distances covered range from Brittany and the Middle East, through Eastern Europe to Spain. It is difficult to keep track of these various regions given the huge disparity between ancient and modern geography, particularly when the names of many have changed or when

some of the information given by d'Arras is incorrect. It is also helpful knowing the historical significance of the families linked to these historical sites and for what reasons, political or geographical, d'Arras might have mentioned them. The book is divided into sections with headings which, although not extant in the manuscript itself, make for easier reading and allow the reader to keep abreast of the multiple characters and plot.

This translation, based on the earliest of the ten prose *Mélusine* manuscripts, Arsenal 3353, considered to be the best and most complete, was the base manuscript of Louis Stoff's 1932 edition [2] as well as Jean-Jacques Vincensini's more recent critical edition with modern French translation (2003). [3] The translators have relied on the Stoff edition but follow Vincensini's edition where he has corrected or clarified content in Stoff. [4]

As stated in their introduction, the editors have opted not to render a literal translation, which would make the text very difficult for a modern audience to follow, given the peculiarities of Middle French prose with its convoluted syntax and lavish use of synonyms. At the same time they have striven to keep the feel of the original French by modifying the syntax only when necessary to clarify or to give a more nuanced reading. The translators acknowledge Jean d'Arras's wide range of styles according to the context, speaker, and direct and indirect discourse. Thus, the tone and style of the prologue and *Mélusine's chastoiments* would be more sententious and solemn than the style one would find in a battle scene or in a scene of great emotion and crisis.

In order to test the translation, I compared several translated passages with the original. For the first extract, I chose the intensely emotional scene where Geoffrey Big Tooth flies into a rage upon hearing that his brother Fromont has become a monk. Certain passages such as "En ceste partie dit la vraye histoire que," "En ceste partie dit l'ystoire que" and "Et sachiez que" (p. 250) were omitted, since in the first two instances, the phrases would have encumbered the translation with the medieval preoccupation with veracity, and in the third instance, the oral exhortation to the reader would sound odd to the modern ear. The interjection "par les dens de Dieu" came up on three occasions throughout the course of the episode (pp. 250-251). The first time it was translated as "by God's molars" and later as "by God's grinders," which adds a bit of comedy through alliteration, and finally, as "by God's teeth" (pp. 187-186). The use of different terms to describe the teeth adds drama, and although it might be considered by some to add additional connotative meaning not in the original, it makes for a more compelling read, especially given Geoffrey's violent temper in the scene. Additions to the translation such as rendering "car je les ardray tous" by "I am going to burn them all to a crisp," gives the English translation a more idiomatic feel in that "to a crisp" naturally follows the verb "burn."

The second type of discourse I examined were the *chastoiments* (lessons in conduct) where *Mélusine* gives solid advice to her sons Urian and Guyon and later to Antoine and Renaud before they set off on their adventures. The tone here is solemn and *Mélusine's* discourse is strewn with legal and moral prescriptions. The first part of *Mélusine's* discourse: "Enfans, entendez ce que je vous vueil dire et commander" was omitted, most likely because its content is understood and redundant when compared to what directly follows: "Enfans, dist Melusigne, veez cy deux anneaulx que je vous donne ..." (p. 84). An economy of expression can keep a translation from bogging the reader down in minutiae as in the following passage which would sound awkward if translated literally: *Mélusine* is speaking to her sons about the powers of the rings she bequeaths them: "tant que vous userez de loyauté, sans penser ne faire tricherie, ne mauvaitié, et que vous les ayez sur vous, vous ne serez desconfiz par armes..." (p. 84). The translation "as long as you wear them and practice loyalty, shunning wickedness and treachery, you shall never be defeated" (p. 74) captures the nuance of both wearing the rings and acting loyally without having to state the ideas in separate clauses. As a general rule, as indicated in the introduction, the translators strive to give nuance to some of the Middle French language that would seem flat to modern ears by filling in the gaps or by avoiding unnecessary repetition and choosing more precise rather than general, overused vocabulary. Further examples are too numerous to cite in this short review. Given the

purpose of the translation, which is to make the work accessible to a broader audience, the translation makes for an accurate and enjoyable read, fully in keeping with the spirit of the original.

In addition to Matthew Morris' bilingual and modern English edition, based on three manuscripts (Arsenal 3353, MSS 1482 and 1485), which references the translation in English to Middle French, [5] this free standing English translation, designed "to bring a wide range of readers to this extraordinary story," (vii) represents a valuable contribution for its eminent readability and accessibility to those not familiar with French. Specialists will appreciate the extensive notes that attest to the erudition of the translators, their breadth of knowledge and the bibliography which includes an overview of the latest scholarship. By virtue of its hybrid nature, the work is bound to appeal to historians, literary aficionados and folklorists alike.

NOTES

[1] Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox, eds., *Méluſine of Lusignon: Founding Fiction in Late Medieval France* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996).

[2] Jean d'Arras, *Méluſine, roman du XIVe siècle publié pour la première fois d'après le manuscrit de la Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal avec les variantes de la Bibliothèque nationale*, Louis Stouff, ed., (Dijon: Publications de l'Université de Dijon, fasc. 5, 1932). Repr. (Geneva: Slatkine, 1974).

[3] Jean d'Arras, *Méluſine ; ou, la noble histoire de Lusignan, roman du XIVe siècle*, Jean-Jacques Vincensini, ed. and trans., (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2003).

[4] References to Middle French will be based on the Stouff edition.

[5] Jean d'Arras, *A Bilingual Edition of Jean d'Arras's "Méluſine; or, l'Histoire de Lusignan"*, Matthew W. Morris, ed. and trans., 2 vols., (Lewiston, Maine: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007).

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