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Brîndușa Grigoriu, *Actes d'émotion, pactes d'initiation: Le spectre des fabliaux*. Craiova: Editura Universitaria, 2015. 262 pp. Bibliography. 30.00 lei. ISBN 978-6-0614-0912-9.

Review by Daniel Smith, Michigan State University.

In this book, Brîndușa Grigoriu analyzes six medieval fabliaux through the lens of affect theory and the history of emotions. She focuses on fabliaux that treat the subject of sexual initiation, acknowledging the vast cultural differences between the Middle Ages and the twenty-first century, particularly with regard to attitudes toward rape. In an effort to challenge the misogyny of the fabliaux, Grigoriu emphasizes the agency of women characters in developing emotional scripts that valorize collaboration and consent. The book combines rigorous textual research spanning multiple manuscript versions of primary sources with an interdisciplinary critical apparatus incorporating psychoanalysis, sociology, and performance studies. Grigoriu places her work in conversation with scholars who advocate understanding fabliaux as spoken spectacles, texts for performance analogous to stand-up comedy or dirty jokes. She also builds on feminist readings of Old French literature.

Grigoriu's introductory chapter traces the reception of fabliaux in various historical periods, noting that the humor and eroticism of these short texts offer fertile ground for analysis of their emotional impact from biological, psychological, and socio-historical perspectives. Moving beyond readings of the fabliaux that engage with such concepts as the Bakhtinian carnivalesque and Bergson's superiority theory of humor, Grigoriu contends that fabliaux present a complex emotional experience for the reader or listener. She understands characters from fabliaux as deploying emotional intelligence to navigate a traumatic transition from sexual innocence to sexual experience. Starting with emotional scripts that can be observed or transgressed, individual characters attempt emotional expressions that may be accepted or rejected by other characters. Thus, the fabliau genre has its own emotional stylistics that combines humor and humanity, evoking both laughter and discomfort.

The six primary texts are paired up and the pairings are divided into three chapters: "Games of Chatter and Initiation"; "Initiation and Transgression"; "Initiation and Confrontation." The first chapter, "Jeux de *jangle* et d'initiation" treats two fabliaux in which women who challenge social norms are dominated by men who use word play, role play, and trickery in pursuit of sexual conquest. *De la pucelle qui voloit voler* is the tale of a young woman who refuses to marry because she wants to learn to fly. Considering Dedalus as a classical antecedent, Grigoriu argues that the protagonist's desire for scientific knowledge sets her in opposition to church teaching, and her refusal to marry positions her as rejecting social norms. A man who claims he can teach the maiden to fly encourages her to imitate a bird, providing costume elements such as wings, a beak, and a tail. When he uses the insertion of the "tail" as an alibi for sexual assault, the young woman conflates this sexual experience with the sensation of flight. (*Dix-huitiémistes* may be struck by a similar strategy used by Père Dirrag in *Thérèse philosophe*.) Though she notes that the tale encourages the listener to laugh at the young woman's naïveté, Grigoriu also takes the question of rape seriously. She cites medieval law and distinguishes between courtly and non-courtly culture to conclude that what happened to the winged girl would probably not have been prosecuted as rape at the time. Imagery of

flight contrasts with imagery of grounding, as the young woman realizes she is pregnant. Grigoriu's use of affect theory enhances her original reading of this tale: by valorizing the protagonist's emotional state of sadness, she posits a resistant, sympathetic response. While two of three manuscript versions suggest marriage as a "happy ending," Grigoriu points out that society depersonalizes the young woman by forcing her into a feminine role she did not want. Her focus on how social forces shape the protagonist's emotional journey thus suggests a potential critique of rape culture.

The second fabliau in this chapter allows for an extended meditation on the relationship between language and emotion. *La damoiselle qui ne pooit ouir parler de foutre* is the story of a young woman who feels sick anytime she hears a dirty word. A young man pretends to be similarly unable to withstand hearing coarse language, and he is hired as a servant. Ultimately the two share a bed and use euphemisms to describe their body parts to each other, culminating in a sexual encounter in which his "horse" drinks from her "fountain" or eats from her "field." Three variants dating from the middle to the end of the thirteenth century exist in different manuscripts, and Grigoriu offers thoughtful readings of each version in chronological order. Her overarching argument is that the tale offers a nuanced emotionology that explores norms of verbal and nonverbal comportment (p. 73). Using Erving Goffman's theory of presentation of the self, Grigoriu analyzes the gendered language used by the two protagonists in describing their bodies and their erotic connection to one another. In the first version she studies, the male descriptors tend toward military language, while the female body is presented through metaphors of food as an object to be consumed. A second version develops the role of the father, compresses the action, and names the male protagonist David. David focuses on the efficacy of language, ironically rendering speech as more dangerous than actions. The third version gives much more agency to the young woman, who initiates the game of bodily description. This version ends with a misogynistic moral about feminine hypocrisy. Across the three versions, Grigoriu notes a movement in affective ties from tolerance of the other to a quasi-religious experience of sexual initiation. Comparing this tale with *De la damoisele qui voloit voler* yields, for Grigoriu, a central idea of characters talking to each other, trying to find the right language to describe and accomplish verbal and physical communication.

In the second chapter, "Faux pas: Initiation et transgression," Grigoriu discusses fabliaux in which married women engage in extramarital sexual relationships that necessitate the use of trickery and negotiation to maintain the triangle of initiation. Grigoriu's reading of *Auberée*, a text that survives in eight manuscripts, analyzes the text's use of emotional scripts to underscore the rules of romantic and sexual relationships. The title character is a procuress who serves as a mediator, providing a wealthy young man access to a young married woman; helping to convince the young wife to acquiesce to his desires; and reuniting the wife with her husband in a way that allows him to expiate his anger about her infidelity while allowing her to continue the extramarital affair. Grigoriu explicitly compares *Auberée* with examples of women as mediators in classical and medieval romances and implicitly compares her to clever servant characters from Roman comedy by focusing on *Auberée*'s mastery of theatrical strategies as an actress and a director. Another important contribution in this section is Grigoriu's sensitive reading of the question of consent; the primary emotional rule is that of self-preservation. According to Grigoriu, the world of fabliaux develops a gendered emotional dynamic in which feminine cultivation of pleasure contrasts with masculine manifestation of rage. Deploying revelations and counter-revelations, *Auberée* manipulates the emotions of the husband by staging his wife as an object of religious devotion.

Grigoriu's reading of the next tale in her corpus begins with a reframing of gender norms, as she notes a more celebratory tone with regard to women's trickery and a reversal of expectations with regard to positioning a male character as exhibiting naïve curiosity. *De la sorisete des estopes* features a newly-married couple who fail to consummate their marriage because the husband is unable to make use of language in a way that would render him more desirable than his wife's lover and because he has a very poor understanding of anatomy. His wife claims she has left her genitals at her mother's house, and when he goes to pick them up his mother-in-law plays along with her daughter's ruse by giving him a basket. When he opens the basket, a mouse jumps out and he conflates the mouse with the object of his desire. In contrast to the fabliaux analyzed in the preceding chapter, Grigoriu argues, the husband's vulgar language

fails to persuade his wife to take part in his sexual initiation. The wife's withholding of sexual initiation is valid in the logic of the fabliau because the husband shows no interest in her own desires. The most ingenious aspect of this chapter is Grigoriu's use of the term "emotional reality" (p. 166) to explain the husband's fetishizing of the mouse. Because he is supposed to be the head of his household, he expects to dominate his wife sexually. However unrealistic the events of the tale, his efforts to take care of the mouse in order to be able to assert power over his wife are consistent with his worldview, his emotional reality.

"Initiation et confrontation," the third chapter, treats two fabliaux in which sexual violence is undeniable, though presented through filters of dreaming and cross-dressing in order to remain within the comic expectations of the fabliau genre. In her analysis of *De la Damoisele qui sonjoit*, Grigoriu returns to gendered emotional and discursive understandings of erotic encounter. She argues that this tale presents a debate between a feminine view of sex as collaborative and a masculine view of sex as combat. A young man rapes a sleeping woman four times. When she wakes up from what she has perceived as a dream, the young woman insists on repeating the sexual encounter. The young man's physiological inability to do so eventually leads to a reversal of positions and, to an extent, of power dynamics. Grigoriu complicates traditional readings of this tale's misogynist underpinnings by delving into the emotional stakes, citing affective and oneiric links between the two main characters. Drawing significance from the dreamer's snoring to suggest that she is pretending to be asleep, Grigoriu argues that this is a story about avoiding, facing, and finally overcoming fear. Her analysis of the characters' actions deploys the Aristotelian concept of *akrasia* to claim that both are acting against their own best interests; the young woman in particular must realize that her actions would weaken her credibility in a criminal lawsuit (p. 203). Grigoriu combines the notion of mood-congruent memory effect with analysis of the young woman's linguistic choices to valorize consent: the protagonist dreams of doing something "with" a man, rather than having a man do something "to" her.

The final fabliau in this spectrum is Rutebeuf's *Frère Denise*, which has a somewhat more bitter tone and an anticlerical stance. The beautiful young Denise refuses her many suitors because she feels called to a religious vocation. She meets Frère Simon, a Franciscan monk who convinces her that she can join his order, so she cuts her hair and wears male clothing. Other monks are taken in by this deception, and Frère Simon takes advantage of the situation to seduce Denise. In their travels together as a pair, Denise is recognized as a woman and Simon is coerced into paying for a dress so that Denise can get married and become a lady. Grigoriu is interested in this tale for its "emotional gymnastics" of sexual identity, especially Denise's genius for metamorphosis (p. 211). Her reading hinges on the emotional aesthetics of Denise's return to the marital economy; it is less important for her to be a virgin than to appear to be a virgin. The affective ties of marriage are important to the community, and the secret relationship between Denise and Simon does not provide the communal emotional satisfaction required by societal norms.

The book concludes with an exhortation to read the fabliaux generously, as Grigoriu has modeled throughout. In spite of their frequent sexism, Grigoriu sees these fabliaux as presenting "truthful emotional communication" and illustrating a "culture of empathy" (p. 243). She lauds the emotional intelligence of the characters, who connect with fellow travelers while protecting their own self-interest to the extent they can.

Grigoriu writes in an accessible French prose style, peppering the text with references to contemporary popular comedy such as *Shrek* and *The Simpsons*. She frequently displays a mordant wit worthy of the *jongleurs*, notably referring to one of the male protagonists as a "minimalist seducer" (p. 106). The book could have been rendered even more accessible to non-specialists by providing modern French translations of Old French citations within the text. Grigoriu does include such sources in her footnotes and bibliography, so readers without knowledge of Old French can consult these.

Early in the book, Grigoriu suggests a focus on performance, but her analysis is limited to tropes of theatricality and performance within the fabliaux themselves. Further exploration of the performing tale-teller as a potential ally in her resistant readings might have been productive. While she posits a performer

and an intended audience, Grigoriu tends not to consider the multiplicity of choices available to a comedian in interpreting the text. Facial expressions, characterization, and tone of voice could go a long way in playing against the more misogynist notes of the fabliaux. Perhaps Grigoriu's work will inspire performance-based research in this area.

Some scholars might quibble with Grigoriu's selection of texts. She briefly cites *Cele qui fut foutue et desfoutue pour une grue*, a fabliau that could merit an expanded reading in her book due to its framing of sexual initiation as an economic transaction. However, the protagonists of this tale seem to gain little knowledge or emotional satisfaction from their sexual encounters, so in that regard it does not fit Grigoriu's argument.

On the whole, Grigoriu has created an impressive work of scholarship that fuses the erudition of a medievalist with the sophistication of a contemporary theorist of emotion. This immersion in the world of the fabliaux, viewed through a twenty-first century lens, reminds the reader of the complexity of comedy in its particular historical moment and offers new ways of understanding provocative material.

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