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H-France Review Vol. 18 (December 2018), No. 235

Marie-Pascale Halary, *La Question de la beauté et le discours romanesque au début du XIIIe siècle*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2018. iii + 788 pp. Bibliography and indices. €98.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-7453-4550-9.

Review by Kathy M. Krause, University of Missouri-Kansas City.

As is all too often the case with volumes in this Champion series (Nouvelle Bibliothèque du Moyen Âge), Halary's study of beauty and the beautiful in early thirteenth-century Old French romance is a lightly (if at all) revised dissertation. While Champion is to be thanked for its willingness to take on substantial dissertations about French medieval literature, the series does a real disservice to its authors when it publishes the dissertations with so little editorial intervention. It is particularly notable when, as in this case, the resulting volume weighs in at just under 800 pages. Indeed, this study overwhelms the reader, and the reviewer, from the start; it demonstrates a manifest desire for exhaustivity, which expresses itself not only in the number of pages but even more so in the manner in which it approaches its topic: every possible facet of the "question of beauty" is dissected and analyzed in each of the texts of the corpus.

Due to the book's length and density (and even given the generous space provided by H-France), a review cannot hope to address, even superficially, everything included in the study. Simply describing the contents in any detail would result in pages of summary (the table of contents in the book itself runs to six pages). As a result, I will limit my review to remarks about the book's overall arguments and its possible interest for readers of H-France.

Let me note first that the book is excellently written, which makes the lack of editorial intervention even more regrettable. It truly is a pleasure to read Halary's limpid prose, despite the excess number of pages.

The topic of the book is well represented by the title: Halary is interested in all aspects of beauty and the beautiful in early thirteenth-century romance discourse. She interrogates each facet with rigorous thoroughness and takes nothing for granted, which contributes in no small measure to the volume's enormous length. From the canons of beauty to what or who can be beautiful, from the theological definitions of beauty to the possible relationships to and with the beautiful, it is all first defined and then examined in detail. The only restraint placed on the investigation is the corpus of texts interrogated: six early thirteenth-century romances including five Arthurian texts, three in prose (*Lancelot*, *Queste del Saint Graal*, *Perlesvaus*) and two in verse (*Le Bel Inconnu* and *Meraugis de Portlesguez*) plus Guillaume de Lorris's portion of the *Roman de la Rose*. According to the author, in addition to their near contemporaneity, the texts all "thématisent la beauté" (p. 12). However, if the aim is to interrogate the "question of beauty" at a particular place and time in Old French literary history, the corpus is somewhat lopsided including as it does only Arthurian romances and the *Rose*. Left out are any non-Arthurian texts of the same era, several of which "thematize" beauty as well, such as Jean Renart's *Roman de la Rose*, in which the protagonist falls in love with the heroine via a description of her beauty, or Philippe de Rémi's *La Manekine*, where the protagonist's beauty ostensibly causes her father's

incestuous desire, and whose religious sensibilities would have provided an interesting counterpoint to the *Queste* and *Perlesvaus*.

As for the analysis itself, it is often hard to find the important points amidst the profusion of words. In her desire to establish every nuance of the question of beauty *de novo*, the author often retraces well-worn paths, leading to the reader losing interest and/or patience, particularly in the first section. This too is unfortunate, as the *deuxième partie* of the book (to utilize the book's own system of divisions) and in particular its *deuxième* and *troisième parties* offer the determined reader the book's most original and interesting analyses. The *deuxième partie* focuses on theological conceptions of beauty found in canonical texts of the period, such as those of the Victorines, or Bernard of Clairvaux, and their possible influences and correspondances with the literary corpus. Halary uses the theological concepts of beauty to parse romance's apparently facile equation of physical beauty with moral goodness or chivalric superiority. Here, the author's methodical analysis serves the material well. It allows, to give just one example, the analysis to distinguish between a vertical "*semblance-ressemblance*" by analogy with the Creator in the *Queste* and *Perlesvaus* and a horizontal "*semblance-apparence*" in the four other romances, where beauty defines what a human being should be in terms of a purely human ideal.

Despite its length and often frustratingly methodical style of argumentation, the study proposes both original insights into the role of beauty and the beautiful in romance discourse in the early thirteenth century and, in the very last sections of the book, interesting possibilities about the transformation of the concept of beauty by romance discourse. These larger questions of aesthetics are finally articulated in the book's conclusion, but their argument has been carefully, minutely laid out in the preceding subsections of the *deuxième* and *troisième parties*.

It is in these latter sections of the book, then, that readers of H-France who are not scholars of the six Old French romances considered in this study will want to turn; intellectual historians, scholars of aesthetics, but also social historians working on questions of "class" in the Middle Ages, for example, will find material potentially of interest. It is to be hoped that they will stay the course (even if, perhaps, they start the book halfway through) despite the book's painstaking approach.

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ISSN 1553-9172