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Jean-Claude Mühlethaler, *L'écrivain face aux puissants au Moyen Âge: De la satire à l'engagement*. Honoré Champion, 2019. 369 pp. Index. €38.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2745350732.

Review by Deborah McGrady, University of Virginia.

With this publication, Jean-Claude Mühlethaler offers readers a comprehensive and cohesive introduction to his prolific corpus of scholarly work through a carefully curated selection of essays dating from the second half of his forty-year career. Mühlethaler had a treasure trove of more than seventy articles to his name to select from and his choices, consisting primarily of previously published essays, reflect a clear desire to stitch together a coherent narrative. Indeed, the collection reads much like a monograph, thanks especially to two opening essays that introduce the collection followed by three interlocking sections that reflect the author's enduring interests in late-medieval political writings and the strategies adopted by authors to turn readers' attention to contemporary political and social issues. For faithful readers of Mühlethaler as well as new audiences, the collection is of great value. Many of the articles included are from collections that are not frequently easily acquired, two articles are translations into French of work previously published in German and English, and one essay has never been previously published. Read together, the essays provide one of the most comprehensive studies of late-medieval literature; alongside frequent in-depth studies of the works of the most celebrated period writers, including Guillaume de Machaut, Eustache Deschamps, Christine de Pizan, and Alain Chartier, readers will discover full-length essays dedicated to lesser known writers, such as Martin le Franc, Octovien de Saint-Gelais, Pierre Michault, and Regnaud Le Queux.

Two opening essays provide a global view and touch on the intersecting topics that are woven throughout the three main sections. The "Avant-Propos," written as a brief introduction to the collection, achieves two goals: it assures the coherency of the selected essays by stating from the outset that the political upheaval that marked the late Middle Ages led authors to recognize and assume their responsibility as writers who, given their learning and literary talents, must speak out against injustices. Building on their role as educators, their mastery of the art of rhetoric, and their intimate knowledge of current affairs, late medieval authors are said to have dared to confront the powerful with the power of the word. Mühlethaler's assessment of late medieval francophone writers as politically engaged and fearless in their willingness to "abandon praise for blame" (p. 10) leads to the second goal of the introduction: to assert the currency of these late-medieval writers today. To this end, Mühlethaler moves beyond his well-known association of these writers with Jean-Paul Sartre to evoke the names of Malala Yousafzai and her battle to see Afghani girls educated and Al Gore's use of his celebrity to fight for climate change. For Mühlethaler, medieval writers and these modern political celebrities use the power of language

“to shake us out of our stupor, to tear their contemporaries away from a suicidal blinding” (p. 14). The second “introduction” to the collection is a reprint of a 2008 article that functions perfectly as an entryway into the ensuing essays since, as its title indicates, “Pour une préhistoire de l’engagement littéraire en France: de l’autorité du clerc à la prise de conscience politique à la fin du Moyen Âge,” it sketches out an “early history” of literary engagement by tracking the political awakening of learned writers from the mid-thirteenth through the fifteenth century. The essays cover works stretching from the thirteenth through the fifteenth century. Key works included are Jean de Meun’s continuation of the *Roman de la Rose*, Rutebeuf’s poetry, the *Roman de Fauvel*, the *Ovide moralisé*, Guillaume de Machaut’s poetry, the commissioned translations of Charles V, and, finally, fifteenth-century intellectuals, in particular Alain Chartier and Christine de Pizan, who are shown to have used their literary talents to intervene in political events and who, according to the author, merit recognition as important precursors for the political engagement of sixteenth-century writers. This opening essay offers a further advantage in that it encourages us to read the next two sections as intimately linked to the closing section that will return to the Sartrian concept of “littérature engagée” as a model for understanding late-medieval French literature.

Following these introductory essays, the collection is organized into three sections that contain their own coherency thanks to the repeated pattern of opening each section with an essay that introduces in broad strokes the issues to be developed over the subsequent entries. Part one on “Louer, blâmer, enseigner” includes six articles that examine the methods used by late medieval writers to engage their immediate public in discussions of contemporary issues. The section opens with the only unpublished essay in the collection and it introduces an “emotional scale” that ranks the affective investment of late-medieval writers. The scale moves from “degré zéro” or complete emotional detachment of the author in face of contemporary tragedies to the height of emotional engagement or “degré trois” in which an elevated emotional experience eliminates all possibility of reasoned assessment of an event. To delineate the different levels, Mühlethaler first turns to the writings of Jean Froissart, Eustache Deschamps and Christine de Pizan before turning full attention to two late crusading works that are rarely placed in discussion, Machaut’s *Prise d’Alexandrie* and the two versions of the *Roman de Mélusine*. In this final section of the essay, the proposed emotional register allows for a nuanced assessment of the affective strategies adopted by the authors in an effort to lead the audience toward greater critical engagement with crusading ideals. The focus placed here on authors’ manipulation of readers’ emotions to encourage critical thinking is repeated in the next five essays that provide several close readings of contemporary works. The next article examines competing critical readings of the court festivities surrounding Charles VI’s accession to the throne in 1389 to track the differing degrees in which various authors insert their personal viewpoint to critique the events. The next three articles are concerned with how writers use convention and popular interests to direct readers to deeper reflection on moral issues. First, there is discussion of Eustache Deschamps’ reworking of contemporary views on Hermaphroditus to draw attention to social issues. The next essay examines subtle changes to the Mirror of Princes tradition during the reign of Charles VI that reveal later writers shifting from detailing ideal behavior to deeper discussion of vices considered particularly rampant, specifically anger and avarice. In his study of Martin le Franc’s *Champion des dames*, Mühlethaler exposes the author’s savvy manipulation of the topic of love and amorous service to address Burgundian hostility against the French king. The final entry in this section turns to Saint-Gelais’ *Séjour d’honneur* to examine the widespread techniques adopted by late-medieval writers to attract an audience that extended beyond the designated privileged recipient to allow these authors to engage critically with their status at court.

The five articles in section two on “Mouvances satiriques” reflect Mühlethaler’s interests in satire that date back to at least the publication of his *Fauvel au pouvoir: Lire la satire médiévale* (1994). The section opens with an impressively expansive discussion of the “poetics of satirical literature at the end of the Middle Ages.” For this collection, this previously published article has been translated from German into French and its positioning at the outset of this section provides a wonderful introduction to the mechanics of satire. The essay treats in particular the satirists’ dependency on shared values and public trust to use amusing observations to incite indignation and anger in the audience. The next essay returns to the *Roman de Fauvel* to examine the use of allegory to convey satire with particular attention given to the function of images in BnF, MS fr. 146, an issue not developed in his monograph on Fauvel. The remaining three essays move into the later Middle Ages to examine the continued use and development of satirical literature. The third essay in the section turns to the satirical work of Pierre Michault, *Le Doctrinal du temps present* (1466), and introduces a “grammar of vices” that highlights Michault’s virulent attack on clerical culture. Thereafter, an essay dedicated to the rarely studied *L’Abuzé en court* (c. 1470) examines the use of satire to attack court culture. The final entry in this section links more explicitly thirteenth- through fifteenth-century satires by examining the “recycling” of satire by late medieval writers. Herein Mühlethaler distinguishes between rewriting or “réécriture.” The latter is subtler in its use of past texts and its relation to the messaging of earlier works by guiding readers to recognize and appreciate the hidden and typically satirical treatment of contemporary events.

The closing section on “Le poids de l’histoire: vers une écriture ‘engagée’” consists of four essays. Herein, Mühlethaler provides close readings of key fifteenth-century authors to argue convincingly for recognizing their work as precursors if not prototypes for Jean-Paul Sartre’s concept of the “engaged writer.” The opening essay returns to the issue of emotions developed in the opening section to examine how affective language was deployed in political writings during the reign of Charles VI to sway opinion. Allusions to the emotional scale detailed in that earlier section come into play when speaking of the growing dependency on emotional language over the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The second essay also takes a wide-angle view on the writers under Charles VI to argue for Sartre’s concept of “littérature engagée” as first taking shape in late medieval France. This chapter is particularly helpful in its lengthy reflection on the key differences between medieval and modern versions of Sartrian literature. The final two articles provide very insightful close readings of the works of Christine de Pizan and Alain Chartier, respectively, as examples of early forms of Sartrian literature.

As one of the most important literary scholars of the French late Middle Ages, Mühlethaler has done the field a great service in working back through his scholarship to provide these sample gems from his treasure trove. The collection promises to be a valuable, manageable, and inspiring introduction to late-medieval French literature and it serves as an admirable example of the importance of turning a literary eye to political writings. Too often the works studied by Mühlethaler are mined for references to historical events. The sensitive close readings found herein remedy this problem by making the point time and again that these late-medieval writers were not just documenting events but using their literary power to change history. Mühlethaler himself is an “engaged writer” who militates for the power of the written word and he powerfully makes the point that literary production that engages with the contemporary is less a *reflection* of events and more a *force* that sets out to shape thinking and to call on reader to take critical action.

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