
H-France Review Vol. 22 (December 2022), No. 202

Isabelle Delage-Béland and Anne Salamon, eds., *Le Dit du berceau au tombeau (XIIIe-Xve siècle)*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2022. 178 pp. Bibliography, indices, résumés, and tables. €16.00. (pb). ISBN 9782406128946.

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

This collection of seven essays (plus introduction and indices) attempts, as the title indicates, to survey the “genre” of the medieval French poetic *dit* from infancy to senescence. Although some essays are less directly relevant to the overall project than others, taken as a whole the volume offers a significant elaboration of the thorny question of what the *dit* was and what medieval authors, scribes and, to a lesser degree, readers, understood by the term. Concomitantly, it provides a series of object lessons in reading texts, paratexts, and metadiscourse closely and seriously.

As Delage-Béland and Salamon note in the opening of their introduction, scholars have long considered the problems associated with defining the *dit* “nobreux et insolubles”: not only has the *dit* been called “indéfinissable sur le plan de la thématique comme sur celui de la forme,” even the corpus of *dits* remains “à peu près impossible à établir malgré les efforts répétés” (p.7). The editors counter such critical pessimism by turning to the ground-breaking work of Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet, for whom the disparate character of the *dits* “ne conduit pas à l’impasse, au contraire : elle devient le point de départ d’une réflexion sur la richesse et la complexité de la nature composite d’une œuvre” (p. 9). Building upon and broadening Cerquiglini-Toulet’s observations, the aim of the volume is thus to offer a panorama of complementary studies that will form, according to the editors, a “reflexion plurielle” on the *dit* (p. 10).

The essays themselves follow a mostly chronological order, from an examination of the earliest texts to be designated a “*dit*” to Guillaume de Machaut’s *Remède de Fortune*, via the *Ci Nous Dit*, Baudouin and Jean de Condé, and the narrative *dits* of the turn of the fourteenth century. The volume closes with Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet’s exemplary revisiting of her own work on the *dit*, expanding and complicating her analysis beyond the *dits* of Guillaume de Machaut that were originally her focus.

First, Patrick Moran explores the *berceau* of the book’s title, looking at the earliest Old French works (before 1200) to be designated as “*dits*” either in the text itself or in their manuscript paratext (incipit or explicit). Moran’s corpus is restrained: Hélinand de Frodmont’s *Vers de la Mort*, Jean Bodel’s *Congés*, and three works by Raoul de Houdenc (*Roman des Eles*, *Songe*, and *Dit*). Close examination of the surviving manuscripts of these texts demonstrates that, as Moran puts

it, “les désignations génériques de ces textes ne se stabilisent absolument pas au fil de leur histoire manuscrite” (p. 35). From this multiplicity of labels, he concludes that the forerunner status of these early texts led to the fluidity of the designations used to describe them.

Francis Gingras focuses on one, albeit composite, text, the *Ci nous dit*, an early fourteenth century collection of nearly 800 very short exemplary narratives, nearly all of which begin with the phrase that became the title of the collection. Gingras connects this work to the question of the *dit* via the verb “dire” itself. Looking in particular at the grammatical and lexical structure of the incipits of the individual tales, his exploration of the multiple connotations of “dire” foregrounds the tension between orality and writing at the turn of the fourteenth century. Although the essay is something of a “sidestep” (as the editors put it) in the context of the volume, Gingras concludes by effectively linking the demonstrative and didactic aspects of the *Ci nous dit* and the *dit* as genre, and in so doing offers an interesting perspective on the “mouvement de légitimation” of fiction and the vernacular (p. 51).

Where the *Ci nous dit* differs notably from the *dit* is its lack of a first-person narrative voice; indeed, we might place the collection of tales at the other end of the *énociateur* spectrum from the *dit*. The importance of the first person to the *dit*'s generic identity comes out clearly in Madeleine Jeay's contribution, which logically follows Gingras's essay thanks to its focus on metadiscourse in Baudouin and Jean de Condé. Her examination of their *dits* brings to the fore the increasing solidity of the generic understanding of the *dit* as the son, Jean, develops his father Baudouin's model. She also constructively explores how the Condés link their status as *ménéstrels* with their narrative technique in the *dit*. “Quels que soient les termes que Baudouin et Jean de Condé utilisent pour désigner leurs compositions, ils définissent non seulement les textes eux-mêmes, mais la conception qu'ils se font de leur métier de ménestrels” (p. 67).

Continuing with the Condés (entirely appropriate needless to say given the central position they occupy in the elaboration of the *dit*), Yasmina Foehr-Janssens considers the literary relationship between father and son. Moving from an examination of the two manuscripts that present Baudouin and Jean's works in parallel (Paris, BnF, Arsenal 3524 and Paris, BnF, fr. 1446) to a comparison of several of their *dits* with similar subjects, she deftly demonstrates how literary and codicological analyses can be fruitfully combined. Her conclusions echo those of Jeay as to the interconnectedness of the figure of the author and the development of the *dit*: “Plus qu'un genre, plus qu'une mode, le dit est un mode de faire littéraire déterminant pour le XIIIe et le XIVe siècle parce qu'il sert à consolider l'émergence de la figure de l'auteur. Dans le cas de Jean de Condé, la métaphore de la filiation, tant littéraire que biographique, qui le lie à Baudouin de Condé, est au cœur de cette affirmation de soi” (p. 86).

For his part, Gabriel Cholette focuses on those *dits* with a predominately narrative character. He constitutes this “sub-genre” by excluding from the list of all texts ever called a “*dit*” (including by modern critics) established by Monique Léonard “tous les textes qui se désignent comme *fable*, *fabliau*, *lai* ou *miracle* dans le corps du texte ou dans le paratexte” (p. 91) as well any allegorical *dits* because “ils n'utilisent pas le récit de la même façon que les autres membres du sous-genre strictement narratif” (p. 93, n. 3).^[1] The remaining thirty-four texts display a number of common characteristics, of which the most notable, according to Cholette, is the “dispositif énonciatif,” which moves from the first person singular in the prologue, to the third person singular in the narrative proper, and finally to the first person plural in the epilogue. Cholette associates this schema with the exemplary character of the *dit*, which seems somewhat self-

evident; however, he claims that the use of the third-person plural in the epilogue distinguishes the narrative *dit* from other short narrative forms, including the miracle tale (except the early texts found in Adgar's *Gracial* and the Anglo-Norman collection). Although he cites two of Gautier de Coinci's miracle tales to support his thesis, the use of a third-person plural is a constant in Gautier's epilogues to his tales, usually appearing as an object pronoun in a call to prayer or to imitate the behavior of the protagonist in the tale. Nevertheless, rather than contradict Cholette's main thesis, this simply reinforces the linkage between the *dit* and exemplary narratives.

Mathias Sieffert's chapter examines Guillaume de Machaut's *Remède de Fortune*, which is called a *dit* once, near the end of the text: "De bon cuer et a lie chiere / verra ce dit qu'ai mis en rime" (ll. 4288-89, quoted on p. 111). The *Remède* is an elaborate construction combining genres and intertexts whose intricate structure Sieffert unpacks with skill and insight. Although the contribution of this analysis to the overall concerns of the volume is perhaps a bit tenuous, Sieffert demonstrates how the *Remède*, as an extreme example of what a *dit* could become in the hands of a master poet like Machaut, "se donne à la fois comme un traité de poésie, comme un témoignage fictionnel en *je*, comme un texte philosophique" (p. 127).

Finally, Jacqueline Cerguiglini-Toulet's essay traces the development and decline of the *dit*. Beginning with the medieval French uses of the term *dit*, Cerguiglini-Toulet proposes "un inventaire des critères, qui, combinés, permettent de cerner l'idée médiévale du *dit*" which considers the *dit*'s form (verse), its relationship to the truth, and the question of length (p. 131). The final section then confronts the term "*dit*" with that of "*livre*," demonstrating the gradual narrowing of the meaning of *dit* to that of a poetic fixed form by the fifteenth century. Cerguiglini-Toulet's elegant analysis offers a fitting conclusion to the volume, moving as it does from the "*berceau*" to the "*tombeau*" of the *dit*.

NOTES

[1] Léonard's 1996 study often serves as a point of reference for the studies in the volume. Monique Léonard, *Le 'Dit' et sa technique littéraire des origines à 1340* (Paris: Champion, 1996).

Kathy M. Krause
University of Missouri-Kansas City
KrauseK@umkc.edu

Copyright © 2022 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views

posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172