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Charlie Samuelson, *Courtly and Queer: Deconstruction, Desire, and Medieval French Literature*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2022. viii + 229 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-8142-1498-5; \$49.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-0-8142-8197-0.

Review by Emma Campbell, University of Warwick.

The core argument of this incisive study is neatly encapsulated by the ampersand in its title (expanded to an “and” everywhere but the book cover). *Courtly & Queer* invites us to understand these terms as intimately conjoined while leaving room for what Samuelson describes as “the persistent ambiguity of the relations between courtliness and queerness” (pp. 208-209). Through a suite of beautifully crafted readings of medieval French texts, the book points to the tenacious queerness that Samuelson locates at the messy heart of French courtly discourse, rather than at its margins. The sophistication characteristic of major courtly genres such as verse romance and *dits*, he argues, depends as much on the queer indeterminacy of gender and sexuality as it does on the indeterminacy of language and poetics. This understanding of courtly discourse calls into question the stability of heterosexuality implicit in previous scholarly criticism of this tradition and, more broadly, the solidity of heterosexuality in modernity. The close readings in the chapters themselves thus aim to show how medieval formulations of courtly love—as a plural, rather than a singular phenomenon—intersect with influential critiques of modern heterosexuality by putting the inner workings of courtly texts into dialogue with today’s queer theory.

The book’s chosen corpus reflects this interest in deconstructing central features of courtly discourse as it developed in French. The study is oriented around the confrontation of two genres that have been much studied by French medievalists, though not usually together: high medieval verse romance and late medieval *dits*. While intertextuality is characteristic of each of these genres, their reliance on lyric poetry is what, Samuelson suggests, makes them especially interesting for the book’s argument about gender and sexual politics. Though lyric gets no chapter of its own in the study, the forms of courtly expression with which it is associated are tackled through these narrative genres, perhaps most explicitly in the third chapter on lyric insertion. The focus on romance and *dits* means that the primary material discussed ranges from the mid-twelfth to the early fifteenth century (ca. 1170-ca. 1405); the corpus encompasses texts by major figures such as Chrétien de Troyes and Guillaume de Machaut, as well as material that has received less scholarly attention. *Courtly & Queer* thus concentrates on French literary texts that exemplify the intimacy of courtliness and queerness as a fulcrum of courtly literature—not all of which have previously been subject to queer readings. Indeed, one of the book’s innovations

is to shine new light on the *dits* as a genre more interested in sexual politics than has generally been thought.

Samuelson's understanding of queerness draws theoretical inspiration from established queer thinkers, most notably Judith Butler and Lee Edelman. Edelman's work is especially prominent in the later chapters and shapes one of the book's principal arguments about the disruptive negativity of queerness, as a force that sits in perverse relationship to received narratives about major genres of medieval French courtly literature. The book equally builds on important work within medieval studies by (among others) William Burgwinkle, Carolyn Dinshaw, L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, Carla Freccero, Karma Lochrie, Robert Mills, and James A. Schultz. By inviting us to reconsider what passes for the stable core of courtly discourse, *Courtly & Queer* develops a seam of criticism exemplified by Schultz and Lochrie, each of whom (albeit in different ways) is interested in how medieval sources can unsettle modern and contemporary understandings of normative heterosexuality.[1] This queer scholarship reflects on what it means to suspend binary conceptions of normative and non-normative sexualities that postdate the Middle Ages but that continue to shape critical approaches to medieval texts today. At the same time, the book's approach is in sympathy with medievalist strains of post-historicism, which are critical of affirming the radical otherness of the past—a positioning that overlaps with Freccero's and Dinshaw's work.[2]

Each of the book's four chapters is oriented around a formal issue or thematic concern of significance to scholarly debates on courtly literature: subjectivity, metalepsis, lyric insertion, and irony. Chapter one, "Reflexive, Ambivalent, Queer Subjects," explores the indeterminacy of the subject in three texts: Christine de Pizan's *Duc des Vrais Amans*, Machaut's *Fonteinne amoureuse*, and Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette*. Butler's analysis of subject formation in *The Psychic Life of Power* is used to illuminate the political and psychic dimensions of these works' interrogation of the subject.[3] The subject's relationship to itself and to power is, in Butler's account, reflexive (the subject is both subject and object of itself and of power) and ambivalent; this relationship is replicated on the level of desire, which, if it brings the subject into being, does not originate in any autonomous subjectivity, making the subject and object of desire queerly indeterminate. Samuelson argues that Christine's text—which has been taken both as a romance and as a *dit*—uses reflexivity to trouble the desiring subject and to underscore the writer's ambivalence to herself and to power. This opens a perspective on the instability and ambivalence characteristic of the reflexive subject in earlier, male-authored texts by Machaut and Chrétien.

One of the insights of this chapter is that the ambivalence characteristic of the emerging subject in these works has consequences for the attitudes sometimes attributed to these medieval writers. Viewing subject formation through the perspective of Butler's work invites, for example, an appreciation of the ambivalence of Christine's attitude to courtly love in the *Duc*, or a reframing of the questions of shared authorship and intentionality surrounding the *Charrette*. While critical discourse conventionally seeks to resolve or smooth out ambiguity, Samuelson's approach thus aims to illuminate and amplify it, both as a significant feature of medieval and postmodern subject formation, and as a point of non-identical contact between medieval texts and queer perspectives: "[I]f the relationship between the medieval subject and the postmodern queer one is certainly not one of total alterity...it is also not one of pure identity. Rather, it is paradoxically fitting and logical that the medieval courtly subject and the modern queer one would have a messy and illogical relationship, because courtly literary and queer theory both focus on the illogical nature of the reflexive subject" (p. 69).

Chapter two, “Medieval Metalepsis: Queering Narrative Poetics,” considers the implications of the interaction among narrative levels in courtly texts for gender and sexual politics. Often associated with the intervention of an extradiegetic narrator in the diegetic world, metalepsis is understood in this chapter as the interpenetration of ostensibly discrete narrative levels or textual elements through repetition. This capacious definition thus encompasses *mise en abyme*. Following Debra Malina, Samuelson suggests that this feature of courtly narratives prompts us to read deconstructively, that is, to resist recontaining or reducing meaning and to remain open to unresolvable ambiguity.^[4] The chapter further contends that the troubling of inside and outside that accompanies metalepsis has consequences for sex and gender. Samuelson’s readings of *Partonopeu de Blois*, *Le Roman de Silence*, and Froissart’s *Prison amoureuse* explore how disorderly narrative poetics go hand in hand with disruptive gender and sexual politics in texts that deal with *fin’amor*. In doing so, this chapter offers fresh interpretations of these three rather different texts. Though much has been written about gender and sexual politics in *Silence* in particular, the focus on narrative poetics makes a distinctive contribution to how queerness might be conceived in this romance. In its conclusion, the chapter proposes that metalepsis—in cultivating an undecidability that troubles normative notions of before and after, inside and outside, cause and effect—may offer a model for reconceptualizing the relations between verse romances and *dits*, and between courtly literature and modern queerness.

Reprising elements of the conceptual framework developed in the first two chapters, chapter three, “On Sameness, Difference, and Textualizing Desire: Queering Lyric Insertion,” contends that the insertion of lyric pieces into narrative texts functions deconstructively in both verse romances and *dits*. Lyric insertion, Samuelson submits, troubles binary contrasts—between orality and literacy, code and message, diachronic and synchronic temporality—on which critical interpretations of this phenomenon tend to rely. Focusing instead on how the surrounding narratives supplement inserted lyrics in the deconstructive sense, Samuelson revisits examples of lyric insertion in three works: Jean Renart’s *Roman de la Rose ou de Guillaume de Dole*, Jakemés’s *Roman du Châtelain de Coucy et de la Dame de Fayel*, and Nicole de Margival’s *Dit de la Panthère*. The queer disruptiveness of lyric insertion in these texts is brought into dialogue with Edelman’s claim in *Homographesis* that queer sexuality effects a “disorientation of positionality” for normative sexual identity and apparently stable meaning.^[5] Adapting this claim, Samuelson argues that the insertion of lyric not only challenges the criteria of difference that distinguish lyric and verse narrative, but also constitutes an invitation to read courtly love in an alienating way, by denaturalizing the desire paradigmatically associated with courtly lyric. The practice of lyric insertion models a dynamic that, Samuelson emphasizes, characterizes his own “insertion” of Edelman’s work into the chapter (p. 156); this dynamic might equally inform new ways of thinking about the relationship of the courtly to the queer.

Chapter four, “Queer Irony in Chrétien de Troyes and Guillaume de Machaut,” examines the chaotic negativity of irony in verse romances and *dits* by two major authors most associated with these genres. Resisting a view that sees irony as a feather in the cap of medieval authors, Samuelson approaches the now familiar association of medieval courtly expression with irony from a position that foregrounds the latter’s queer, deconstructive qualities. This analysis draws its inspiration from the relationship between de Man’s conception of irony as a radical negation of explicit meaning and the negativity of queer desire in Edelman’s *No Future*.^[6] Examining two romances by Chrétien (*Erec et Enide* and *Cligés*) and a selection of Machaut’s *dits* (the *Jugement* poems and *Voir Dit*), the chapter explores how deconstructive irony in these works “neither

fosters the coherence of narratives nor plays into the ‘author function’” (p. 161). These characteristics intersect with irony’s queerness as an immoderate, antisocial force that threatens the meaningfulness and consistency of desire.

What *Courtly & Queer* is not, then, is a book about queer identification or identity in any straightforward sense. Samuelson’s approach, which demonstrates a careful and scholarly handling of medieval texts, is nonetheless rooted in a thorough understanding of queer theory and philosophy. His exploration of the queer potential of indeterminacy and ambiguity in courtly literature is—perhaps paradoxically—admirably clear. Samuelson himself explains early on that his interest in queerness intersects with his commitment to deconstructive reading: “I am more focused on the deconstruction of the center—the negativity continuously threatening the courtly lover’s most basic and cherished claims—than on sexualities at the margins; more concerned with the corrosive effects of linguistic or poetic indeterminacy on gender and sexuality than the struggles and claims of determinate groups at precise historical moments as reflected in (or repressed by) literary texts” (pp. 22-23). This approach might frustrate those interested in marginal sex-gender formations or in more historicist methods. The book’s deconstruction of courtly love as a phenomenon conventionally seen as only superficially disruptive of patriarchal sexual politics also makes for an understandable focus on male desire and male authors (the exception being Christine de Pizan). I confess to wondering what such an approach might yield with a different selection of courtly texts or with the forms of courtly critique found in other major genres of vernacular literature, such as hagiography.

Yet there is only so much that a single study can encompass and this book’s capacity to provoke such reflection is one of its strengths. *Courtly & Queer* ultimately demonstrates what queer scholarship still has to gain from a deconstructive approach that can illuminate the limitations and messiness of sexual categories past and present. As the book’s conclusion emphasizes, deconstructive work is not incompatible with scholarship that chooses to take a different tack. Such work complements research focused on marginal genders and sexualities, by inviting us to reconsider the stability of heterosexuality at the centre of one of the discourses most associated with it in the European Middle Ages. Furthermore, as Samuelson repeatedly affirms, the book’s understanding of queerness is valuable not only for deconstructing the libidinal investments of courtly texts, but also for destabilizing the generic categories and (often teleological) historical narratives into which such texts are inserted. This is smart scholarship that repays careful reading and that gives literary historians, as well as queer medievalists important food for thought.

NOTES

[1] James A. Schultz, *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) and Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn’t* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

[2] Carla Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2006); Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 1999); and Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2012).

[3] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

[4] Debra Malina, *Breaking the Frame: Metalepsis and the Construction of the Subject* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), p. 19.

[5] Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 183.

[6] See Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), especially p. 165; Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004).

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