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Věra Soukupová, *La construction de la réalité historique chez Jean Froissart: l'historien et sa matière*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2021. 554 pp. Notes, references, and index. \$131.37 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9782745354952.

Review by Andrea Tarnowski, Dartmouth College.

Engaging with an extended analysis of Jean Froissart's ever-evolving narratives--the features of his "I" and the nature of his claims to authority, the structures that he calls upon, both chronological and rhetorical--the reader is tempted to gauge the modern author's voice in relation to the same themes. How does the contemporary historian proceed in studying the medieval chronicler? Věra Soukupová has written a work striking for its combined reach and discretion, its purchase over scores of critical perspectives, and its quiet modulation of others' conclusions to posit the author's own.

To achieve her goal of exploring Froissart's methods, Soukupová convenes an impressive number of interpretations, not only in early expository pages but in a meticulous weave throughout. She holds ever present a host of scholars--Peter Ainsworth, Françoise Autrand, Florence Bouchet, Cristian Bratu, Godfried Croenen, George Diller, Élisabeth Gaucher, Bernard Guenée, Laurence Harf-Lancner, Laetitia Le Guay, Didier Lechat, Marie-Thérèse de Medeiros, Jean-Marie Moeglin, John Palmer, Susan Wales, Michel Zink and many others--whom she assesses in detail, creating among them a multi-part conversation. She calls her stance "conciliatoire" a word she uses when speaking of her "voie conciliatoire," or conciliatory path, a middle way between opposing viewpoints (p. 27). Indeed, her work gives the impression of constant weighing and sifting. She recognizes the merits of each assessment and its counterpart in a sustained search for middle ground. But when she gently registers disagreement or seeks to add a new thread of thinking to the already strong critical canvas concerning Froissart, her remarks always emerge from thoroughly absorbed research.

La construction de la réalité historique chez Jean Froissart: l'historien et sa matière claims unusually large scope by taking as its object the full series of the *Chronicles'* four books (it also makes good use of Froissart's poetic works as counterpoints to some of the *Chronicles'* goals). Working from editions published in book form as well as those available on the digital site *The Online Froissart*, Soukupová accents the construction and evolution of Froissart's narrative--the texture of the phrases with which he names himself in successive prologues, the formulae that mark the act of

composition as it is performed ("je vous dis," "je vous compte," p. 164), the timelines of historical events that he alternately establishes and suspends in favor of other information, such as the speech of an eyewitness. From the beginning, Froissart is concerned with asserting the legitimacy of his claim to write; he is the first medieval historian to designate himself as an "actères," or author (p. 181). Over time, he becomes progressively more assertive about his role as conduit between an exterior reality and its inscribed expression; he conveys his consciousness of process, the choices involved in writing history, the selection of scenes and witnesses and the privileging at any moment of one perspective over another. But this recognition of the work and role of the author does not lead to a sense that truth is relative, a function only of the rhetoric the author deploys. Rather, a dedication to truth—"une vérité morale" in Soukupová's words (p. 466)—characterizes Froissart's enterprise. High ideals and devotion to the values of chivalric culture animate his writing.

La construction de la réalité historique chez Jean Froissart is divided into four main parts; distilled into their most compact form, they can be said to treat Froissart's identity, his authority, his sources, and his reconstitution of historical reality. Part one, "Les facettes d'une identité et l'appréhension du monde," evokes the notion of intersectionality to portray Froissart's being as a space or place traversed by multiple cultural currents in a constant state of evolution. Soukupová then offers the idea of nation—another space of identity, for a collectivity rather than an individual—as the organizing principle for her commentary. She asks what elements of group self-definition most affected Froissart. Chief among these is language. Born in Picardy, a francophone zone outside the realm of France, Froissart was convinced of the excellence of French, whose merits transcended geography and politics. Confirming Froissart's perspective, Soukupová cites George Diller's phrase that "l'écrivain revendique pour lui-même, non pas un attachement politique quelconque, mais l'honneur d'une grande oeuvre en langue française" (p. 48). Froissart saw French as a universal means of communication, a vehicle of noble court values of courtesy and chivalry. The speaker of French would feel at home anywhere; mastery of the language ensured a sense of social belonging. Soukupová notes that at the beginning of book three of the *Chronicles*, Froissart explicitly refers to himself as "françois" (p. 47). But while he advocated for the universality of the language, Froissart also laid emotional claim to his birth region, Hainaut. He calls the land both his "pays" and his "nation" (p. 50). Froissart's affection proceeded in part from his admiration for his patroness, English queen Philippa of Hainaut; the chronicler joined Philippa's entourage in England from 1362 until her death in 1369. But Philippa was an exemplar, the embodiment of refined francophone courtly culture; Froissart's allegiance was more to these qualities than to the idea of a Hennuyer people. Soukupová writes that Froissart "ne s'identifie jamais avec les Hennuyers, en tant que membre d'une communauté ethnique ou nationale" (p. 51). Rather, he feels connected to the land where he spent his early years and which he views as a retreat—a writing retreat. Soukupová remarks that Hainaut represents, in Froissart's mind, the chance to clarify his notes and compose. She gives several examples from the *Chronicles* in which he pledges to pen the next part of his history once he has returned to his home region. She offers that "l'origine hennuyère de Jean Froissant est mentionnée presque exclusivement en rapport avec son travail d'écriture" (p. 50).

Attendant on questions of Jean Froissart's methods and emergence as a historian is the identity of his dedicatees and patrons. Soukupová looks across the *Chronicles* to examine the presence in their pages of Robert de Namur (dedicatee of book one in version A); Gui de Blois (dedicatee of books three and four as well as of a late copy of book one, the Newberry Library f. 37); and Enguerrand de Coucy (whom Godfried Croenen proposed as the unnamed dedicatee of the

Amiens redaction, a hypothesis Soukupová ultimately lays aside). Though Froissart gives increasing color and texture over time to portraits of his patrons, Soukupová argues that his constant desire to appear impartial—a kind of professional badge of honor and mark of truth-seeking—maintains him in a certain sobriety of expression. He does not engage in fulsome praise to flatter his employers' vanity; when he commends the qualities of his subjects, he does so out of personal goodwill and sentiment.

The book's second part, "L'auteur, le récit et la construction de l'autorité," continues the subtle semantic interpretation first deployed in discussion of the terms "French" and "nation." Soukupová describes several stages in the way Froissart chooses to sign his work. Initially, he is a narrator, referring to himself as "je, Jehan Froissart." By the time he writes book three, he has become "je, acteur de cette histoire/chronique;" the "I" is a historian. Finally, in book four, the two signature phrases are combined, and the first-person pronoun links both the narrator's and the author's status. Froissart's speaks of himself as "je, Jehan Froissart, acteur de ces croniques." Soukupová affirms: "L'acteur de l'histoire n'est pas seulement le témoin ou la garantie de l'authenticité d'un témoignage, mais celui qui assume la pleine responsabilité de l'écriture historique et qui se positionne par rapport au récit...la fonction attribuée à 'je acteur' en vient...à se rapporter à la totalité des rôles qu'un chroniqueur doit accepter pour mener à bien son projet" (p. 242). Three additional points anchor these remarks on Froissart's authority. First, Soukupová sees the textual interventions of Froissart's "I" as efforts to define his place in types of social networks, whether these are composed of patrons, witness-sources, or participants in specific historical events. Froissart's gestures as an individual always have a context and implicate other people. Second, whenever Froissart speaks for himself, conveying closely or deeply held feelings, he does not pronounce any formula of authority; in other words, he separates himself from his role as author, or divides the man who is an actor upon the stage of his era from the "acteur" of the *Chronicles*: "Sa propre vie est ainsi séparée sur le plan idéologique de la matière historique dont il traite" (p. 247). Finally, Soukupová cites the twin forces governing Froissart's lived experience as his passion for his writing and his nostalgia for the past.

Until this juncture in *La construction de la réalité historique*, Soukupová has examined the evolution of Froissart's writerly methods and the differentiation of his versions of the *Chronicles* over time. In the third section of the book, she applies the same modes of analysis to Froissart's sources, both written and oral. Froissart cited only one written source by name, Jean le Bel of Liège (c. 1290-1370). Le Bel had innovated in his *Vraies chroniques* by depicting noble feats of chivalry in prose rather than in verse, and in French rather than in Latin; he also distinguished himself by incorporating testimony about events only from eyewitnesses. The prologue of the A redaction of Froissart's *Chroniques* cites Le Bel explicitly; in later versions, he is a source, but not the singular model. Froissart also makes increasing use of eyewitnesses himself, interviewing heralds as well as knights and squires who participated in battle personally. Soukupová stresses the importance of these oral interviews in conferring authenticity and a sense of truthfulness to the narrative. The historian's work consists of making inquiries of oral sources and then consolidating, arranging, and ordering their stories. As of book three, comments Soukupová, Froissart focuses on collecting the material that justifies what he writes. His method is markedly different from the solitary, study-and-compilation-based process of gathering information that chroniclers often implemented up to and through his time; Froissart both tests and demonstrates his chronicles' truth value by giving voice to others.

In her fourth part, "La réalité historique et le récit du chroniqueur," Soukupová affirms the *Chronicles'* attention to and investment in external temporal reality. Froissart seeks to create a timeline in which each event gives rise to the next on a continuum of causality. This is easily discerned in books one and two, whose structure is more conventional and linear, but also holds true for substantial portions of books three and four. One example Soukupová cites concerns the hatred of Duke John IV of Brittany for Constable Olivier de Clisson V. Encouraged by John, Pierre de Craon attempted to assassinate Clisson; to punish John and Craon, Charles VI and a recovered Clisson marched on Brittany. During this expedition, Charles experienced his first fit of madness, an episode for which Clisson was blamed. In consequence, Clisson took refuge in Brittany and became the ally of his former enemy John IV. None of these events is portrayed as a discrete unit in a series of dates; rather, Froissart's account presents the actions as a linked temporal chain. His description offers information, but more importantly, imposes sense and generates meaning.

A second method of fostering meaning counters the alignment of successive historical scenes. In his later books, Froissart often departs from his timeline to stage narrative introductions by those with whom he engaged in dialogue. As noted above, these are meant to enrich and validate Froissart's own words. They shift attention from chronology and basic facts to perception and perspective. Froissart uses them as a means of world-building: a resonant environment. Acutely aware that history is created in the telling, he draws on the cultural networks that informed his identity to connect himself to his surroundings. This role of historian allows him—indeed, in his understanding, compels him—to mediate between the two. In her well-elaborated inquiry, Věrá Soukupová has also exercised a mediating and interpretative function, bringing into our own present a sensitive reading of late medieval authorial consciousness.

Andrea Tarnowski
Dartmouth College
andrea.tarnowski@dartmouth.edu

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