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Rebecca Dixon and Finn E. Sinclair, eds., with Adrian Armstrong, Sylvia Huot and Sarah Kay, *Poetry, Knowledge and Community in Late Medieval France.* Woodbridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2009. xiv + 250 pp. Figures (4 b&w plates, 4 tables, 4 musical examples), notes, bibliography, and index. $105.00 U.S. (hb) ISBN: 9781843841777.

Review by Michel-André Bossy, Brown University.

This volume, in Boydell and Brewer's Gallica series, gathers together fourteen papers mostly concerned with French poetical works from the mid-thirteenth to the mid-fifteenth centuries. All fourteen, hail from a conference held at Princeton University in 2006--with prior support from the UK's Arts and Humanities Council. The volume's objective, as stated by Finn Sinclair in the preface, is to examine "the role of poetry…in transmitting and shaping knowledge" within late medieval French culture (xi). However, as we trek through the fourteen contributions, each with its own focus and hermeneutic approach, the "role of poetry" looks ever more diverse and protean. Poets, in essence, are no easier to herd than cats. The volume's contributors train their attention on the relations between poetry and knowledge. Community, the third item in the title, receives less notice than we might expect.

The insightful introductory essay by Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet surveys the three topics designated in the title from the vantage of Christine de Pizan's writing career. The knowledge to which Christine aspires is the *sophia* of ancient poets and later theologians, as opposed to the erotic sophistries touted by the *Roman de la Rose* and other vernacular love treatises derived from Ovid's *Ars amatoria.* She can dream of intellectual affinity with a learned community of shades, akin to the "bella scola" that greets Dante in canto 4 of *Inferno.* But inevitably the path toward learning that she must take in her early years is solitary and atypical. As a woman--and, moreover, a widow--she cannot indulge in a thirteenth-century (male) poet's expected career trajectory: the poet first falls in love with love ("un amour de l'amour"), then later he eventually reaches love of learning ("amour de la connaissance") (p. 2). Departing from this male poetic pattern, Christine early on chooses love of learning as her true goal. Yet, as she sets aside amorous desire, the ideal of learning finds itself "eroticized." In short, the sublimation of eros into learning characterizes Christine's practice of allegorical interpretation and also her conception of poetry as learned writing rather than mere versecraft: "Le désir de savoir, érotisé au départ chez Christine de Pizan car il fonctionnait comme substitut du désir amoureux, est devenu désir de Dieu.…Christine a transformé le *carmen*, le chant caractéristique de la poésie de ses prédécesseurs--Guillaume de Machaut en particulier--, en *poema*, poème philosophique » (pp. 14-15).

Cerquiglini-Toulet stresses the contemplative side of Christine, but her "activist" side should not be neglected. In the *Cité des Dames* and her other post-apprenticeship writings, Christine enlists both learning and literary art to advocate toward reshaping the ethos of community within the body politic in general and among women in particular. It would have been good if the volume's introductory essay could have dealt a bit more with Christine as a social and political writer.

Part one of the collection, "Learned Poetry/ Poetry and Learning," opens with a salute to one of Christine de Pizan's *bêtes noires*, Jean de Meun. In his chapter on "Poetry and the Translation of Knowledge in Jean de Meun," David F. Hult discusses the implications of the shift from verse to prose in

Jean de Meun's literary career. After completing his sprawling continuation of Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose*, Jean undertook several prose translations of Latin texts, one of which was Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. Jean's translation preface (addressed to Philip the Fair sometime after 1285) spells out his intent to transpose Boethius's sometimes difficult Latin "into clear and understandable French," in order to assist both lay and clerical readers. Jean's aims are consonant with other "service" translations that were beginning to appear in the late thirteenth century. At the same time, they contrast sharply with the *Rose*, into which Jean often inserts spirited poetic transpositions of Boethius. Hult characterizes the *Rose* "as adaptation gone berserk," whereas the Boethius translation stands as an early landmark of "service" translation (p. 26). Hult offers incisive views on related topics, such as the rise of literary prose, poetic claims of veracity, playful figurative meanings in the *Rose*, and Jean's technical virtuosity--many riches here yet hardly any remarks about communities.

A paper by Amandine Mussou deals with a dream vision much indebted to the *Roman de la Rose*: the *Eschés amoureus* (c. 1375), a lengthy, albeit incomplete, poem to which Evrart de Conty appended a vast prose commentary. Mussou focuses on the episode in which the dreaming poet loses a game of chess against a wise and skillful young lady. The checkmate suffered by the dreamer is a necessary apprenticeship that subordinates him first to Venus (youthful love passion), then to Juno (the active life), and finally to Pallas Athena (the contemplative life). Christine de Pizan's self-story, as Cerquiglini-Toulet points out, draws on the same tripartite paradigm extracted from the Judgment of Paris (pp. 6, 14-15).

Jean Gerson, Christine's ally in the *Querelle de la Rose*, takes center stage in the remaining two chapters of Part One. Mishtooni Bose considers the clerical subjectivity that Gerson reveals in his Latin poetry. She sees it as oscillating between a superego that prompts him to speak "as the authoritative exegetical poet" and an ego that is more personably "articulate and vulnerable" (p. 59). Lori J. Walters turns to Gerson's vernacular writings and their several points of contact with Christine's works. Here we finally encounter the question of community. Walters observes that in a France beset by war and civil strife, Gerson and Christine together share the dream of healing the kingdom's inner divisions. Drawing inspiration from the Psalms, they both "see themselves as Davidic-styled watchkeepers over public morality who compose 'poetry' possessing spiritual resonance" (p. 77). In terms of poetics, Walters outlines Gerson's distinction between *carmen* ("expression of the living word of God") and *poema* ("fictive discourse" in general), then clarifies Christine's concept of poetry. Christine makes the term "equivalent to 'allegorical fiction', whether that fiction is in prose or in verse." Poetic discourse is for her "similar to the proleptic discourse of Scripture" (pp. 73-74), points later revisited by Suzanne Akbari.

Titled "Poetry or Prose?," Part two starts with a lucid and provocative chapter on thirteenth-century prose commentaries affixed onto earlier lyrics. Michel Zink's "Les *razos* et l'idée de la poésie" is also an excursus away from French culture that leads us south into Occitan troubadour circles. Implicitly, the chapter even takes us over the Alps into northern Italy, since that is where prose commentaries (*razos*) and pseudo-biographies (*vidas*) were copied into troubadour *chansonniers*. Zink proposes to rescue the *razos* from the ridicule usually heaped on them by modern scholars. *Razos* claim knowledge of the specific circumstances that gave rise to a given song. The anecdotes they spin around its lyrics are, however, clearly bogus--rickety yarns concocted by means of literal-minded readings of isolated images and tropes. Far from denying that those anecdotes are fictional, Zink argues that their fictions disclose the psychological inner springs of the troubadour lyrical corpus as a whole. An analysis of six *razos* enables Zink to demonstrate how consistently they stage scenes of jealousy, frustration, and voyeurism, all of which propel an endless cycle of erotic desire sparked by resentment and imitation. Time and again, *razos* confirm René Girard's theory of mimetic desire and thus, by narrative means, make known the latent implications of lyric. That, concludes Zink, is the critical knowledge held and conveyed by them. What were the specific effects of that knowledge on the court communities to which the troubadours and *razo* writers catered? Zink stops short of pursuing that question.

Deborah McGrady brings us back to French literature, and specifically to its three thirteenth-century translations of Ovid's *Ars amatoria*. McGrady instructively shows how one of these texts, *L'art d'amours en prose*, pits the Roman author (*auctor*) against the French commentator (*acteur*) and, furthermore, "Latin against vernacular, prose against poetry, learned against popular" (p 100). The translation seeks "to remain faithful to the source" while also finding medieval substitutes for Ovidian concepts and Roman customs, as, for example, when the prime location for seductions shifts from amphitheatre to church. The *Art d'amours en prose* "de-lyricizes" the Ovidian text but ushers in a sundry vernacular lyric voices and conflicting viewpoints. At times the commentator slips in opinions that flatly contradict Ovid. The enduring success of this translation is attested by four fifteenth-century manuscripts, two of which McGrady expertly discusses.

Stephanie Kamath surveys the prose adaptations of Guilllaume de Deguileville's *Pèlerinage de la vie humaine* and the responses provoked by their *dérimage* (or "deversification"). She also examines the occasional inclusions of verse within these prose renderings.

David Wrisley inspects verse passages that were inset as shards from earlier times within *Gérard de Nevers*, a mid-fifteenth-century prose adaptation of Gerbert de Montreuil's thirteenth-century *Roman de la Violette*. He then indicates how those verse insertions helped *Gérard de Nevers* to celebrate the past in ways that suited the cultural preferences and political aims of Philip the Good's Burgundian court.

Suzanne Conklin Akbari takes up again the question of Christine de Pizan's "capacious definition of 'poesie'" (p. 141). She broadens the notion so much that it "accommodates not just 'fabulous narration' and 'fiction' but also myth, history, and natural philosophy" (p. 143). Consequently Christine's shift from verse to prose as the medium for her post-1403 treatises does not signify that she turns away from "poesie." The case is quite the reverse: In her later prose treatises she purposely places the figurative powers of "poesie" at the service of philosophical inquiry.

Part three is titled "Poetic Communities," yet even here the focus is on intertextuality per se rather than on the roles played by intertextuality in the formation or reshaping of communities.

Nancy Regalado's opening remarks concern the numerous Old French manuscripts that string together seemingly disparate works. Such books "lead readers to consider different kinds of texts together as they manipulate the pages," a back-and-forth hermeneutic practice that she terms "reciprocal reading" (p. 152). The compilation to which she devotes her chapter is MS fr. 146 of the Bibliothèque nationale de France. That manuscript, known for its handsomely illustrated version of the *Roman de Fauvel*, also contains a set of thirty-four lyrics, ascribed by an index rubric and an acrostic to Jehannot de Lescurel (a pen name sardonically lifted from a murderer and rapist hanged in 1304). As a moral and political satire, the *Fauvel*, whose deceitful title character is a horse, lambasts the royal court's great adultery scandal of 1314, in which two of Philip the Fair's daughters-in-law suffered ignominious disgrace. A third daughter-in-law, Jeanne de Bourgogne, wife of the future Philip V, was exonerated. Regalado shows how the elegant repertory of Lescurel lyrics echoes, cross-references, and counterbalances a series of thirty-nine lyrics in the *Fauvel*, all sung (or whinnied?) by the equine protagonist. For instance, the final Lescurel lyric alludes to the exonerated Jeanne de Bourgogne through a character, tellingly named "Jenette," who sings the praises of her husband and denounces the perils of false love.

Jennifer Saltzstein identifies the popular musical refrains that Adam de la Halle chose to insert in his *Jeu de Robin et Marion* and then elucidates their "intertextual narrative connection to the play" (p. 179). While some of these refrain citations derive from the idyllic genre of the *bergerie*, others echo abduction and rape motifs from *pastourelles*. Superimposed memories of contrasting earlier songs may have drawn the *Jeu*'s thirteenth-century spectators toward "diverse modes of reading and listening" (p. 186).

Denis Hüe pores over the correlations between Jean Meschinot's *Ballades des Princes* and Georges Chastelain's *Les Princes*, in order to clarify what prompted these two poets to rail against bad princes. It should be noted that Meschinot purposely grafted his cycle of twenty-five hortatory ballades onto the twenty-five sexains of Chastelain's poem. (For its refrain each Meschinot ballade adopts the first line of a Chastelain sexain--each of which begins with the word *prince*.) Does that form-conscious intertwining of poems signal a joint satirical attack against one specific "prince," namely, King Louis XI? Did Meschinot, a retainer of the dukes of Brittany, and the Burgundian diplomat and chronicler Chastelain knot in the 1460s a poetic alliance whose chief intent was to undermine the French king? Scholarly opinions have long been divided on this question. The conclusion reached by Hüe is that both poets had a more universal target in mind. In their poems, says he, the bad prince stands for any human being who succumbs to passion and temptations of power. Chastelain's sexains are brief satirical sketches, from which Meschinot's skillful *amplificatio* draws and fleshes out cautionary ballades. Meschinot's cycle reiterates its major points to dispense knowledge, to educate in the manner of a Mirror for Princes. The two poets collaborate, yet each follows his own literary bent. They belong to separate political communities, but the interactions of each with his own community remain to be defined.

Part three, like the ones before it, closes with a chapter on Christine de Pizan. Thelma Fenster alertly contrasts there the status and function of *fama* ("common knowledge" or "public opinion") in *L'Advision Cristine* and the *Songe veritable*, an anonymous poem of Burgundian propaganda, roughly contemporaneous with the *Advision* (1405). These two dream visions diverge in outlooks as well as form. In its scurrilous attacks on the Orleanist party and Queen Isabeau, the verse *Songe* readily presents the hearsay of Common Knowledge (*Commune Renommee*) as consonant with visual proof provided by the Mirror of Experience. By contrast, the prose *Advision*, a more "contemplative, multi-level work than the *Songe*" (p. 214), calls into question the reliability of Opinion, "daughter of Ignorance and Desire to Know" (p. 211). At the same time, it aligns Experience with ocular proof, learning and study, pillars around which a firmer form of community consensus could presumably take shape.

How well do these chapters work together? In the collection's conclusion, Rebecca Dixon valiantly seeks to establish overall cohesion, but neither she nor Finn Sinclair in the preface can convincingly harmonize the often abrupt shifts of direction from one chapter to the next. Those fourteen units remain fairly dispersed--even if Christine de Pizan's presence in five of them supplies one unifying thread. More unity might have arisen if the three categories mentioned in the collection's title had received equal attention. "Poetry" obtains due coverage, but the categories of "knowledge" and especially "community" remain by and large under-discussed, the former in terms of epistemology and the history of education, and the latter in terms of social and political history. Taken as a whole, however, this volume supplies an assortment of knowledgeable studies, and several chapters--in particular those by Cerquiglini-Toulet, Zink, McGrady, and Fenster--are strongly innovative.

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