

H-France Review Vol. 11 (March 2011), No. 66

Michael A. H. Newth, ed. and trans., *Fierabras and Floripas: A French Epic Allegory*. New York: Italica Press, 2010. 292 pages, 17 illustrations, glossary, bibliography. \$20.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-59910-157-6. \$10.00 U.S. (electronic) ISBN 978-1-59910-158-3.

Review by Lynn Ramey, Vanderbilt University.

Fierabras and Floripas is a modern English verse translation of the twelfth-century epic tale of a Saracen brother and sister who join ranks with their archenemy, Charlemagne. Michael Newth has authored his translation from two parts of the Charlemagne cycle—the *Destruction of Rome* and *Fierabras*. In connecting these two poems and translating them, Newth has made this cycle, popular throughout the medieval west and the most successful of the French epic cycles in medieval England, available to those unable or unwilling to read the Old French original. The translation is fluid, melodic and measured as it provides the reader with a sense of what epic poetry might have felt like to the twelfth-century audience.

Newth's thirty-two page introduction situates the tales within the epic cycle known as the *geste du roi* (King Charlemagne), and provides important historical information about Muslim excursions into Spain and France, and Charlemagne's involvement, both historical and mythical. The story told in the cycle is that of the sack of Rome (*La destruction de Rome*), Charlemagne's pursuit of the relics stolen by the Saracens during Rome's sack (*Fierabras*), and finally the return of the relics by Charlemagne to various abbeys in Christendom (*Le pèlerinage de Charlemagne*). Newth subscribes to the notion that this story cycle was conceived in order to encourage pilgrimage to Saint Denis in the twelfth century, since the relics of Saint Denis figure prominently in the cycle. At the end of the introduction, Newth includes a select but very useful bibliography of secondary readings on the *geste*. The books and articles that Newth lists would be excellent resources for a graduate class or an advanced undergraduate class. Also included are the primary sources that Newth uses, including two editions of the Old French *Fierabras* and two editions and a modern French translation of the *Destruction of Rome*.

Newth combines the *Destruction* and *Fierabras* and then divides them into *gestes*, which he says are "discernible but not distinguished or named thus in the original manuscript" for the ease of the modern reader (p. xxxi). Aside from these partitions he has created and named (Prologue, Vanity, Submission, Desires, and Deserts), he has other divisions that would correlate to the *laissez*, one would assume, though they are not numbered as such. The first *geste*, Vanity, a text generally found separate in the manuscript tradition from the text referred to as *Fierabras*, relates the destruction of Rome by the Saracen giant Fierabras. The story begins with the Moorish King Balan sporting about in Spain, where he is interrupted by the tale of a lone, harried captain who lost a fleet of goods bought for the king when Roman Christians attacked his vessels and slaughtered the crew. The king vows revenge on the Romans and their emperor, Charles. King Balan's daughter, Floripas, then makes her appearance in this *geste*, as she agrees to marry Balan's best knight, King Lucifer, if Lucifer manages to slay the entire flower of French chivalry. A typical Saracen princess, Floripas has fallen in love with a Christian knight upon hearing of his prowess, and she knows that Lucifer will be very unlikely to defeat the best of the French. Newth's heading of the *geste*, Vanity, comes from the selfish

and vain desires of Floripas in this part of the tale, and by extension the vanity that leads the Saracens to attempt a foolhardy attack against the renowned French armies of Charlemagne. The Saracens, led by Balan's son, Fierabras, sack Rome and Fierabras himself kills the pope.

The second, third, and fourth *gestes* adhere to the plot of *Fierabras*, where Oliver is the only French knight brave enough to avenge Charlemagne for the wrong that was done by Fierabras. Oliver defeats Fierabras, who upon suffering the nearly fatal last blow is suddenly converted to Christianity. Fierabras, once recovered, fights his father, king Balan, alongside Charlemagne's men. The Muslims capture several of Charlemagne's most valiant men. Floripas recognizes the Christian knight about whom she has heard so much talk, Gui de Bourgogne, and she contrives to release the knights, join the Christians, and marry her man. Charlemagne and his men get their revenge by killing Balan and his men and taking their Spanish stronghold, Aigremore.

Following the main story, *Fierabras and Floripas* has twenty-nine pages of appendices. The first appendix provides the reader with extracts in Old French depicting key moments in each of the four *gestes*. The author states that his goal was to make this material available for those who might wish to work on Old French, compensating in part for the lack of the original language in the book. The second appendix, entitled "Fierabras ex libris," traces the legacy of Fierabras in artistic production from the Middle Ages to the present. From Rabelais to Gustave Doré, reimaginings of Fierabras have held a prominent place in successive generations' refigurations of medieval culture. Newth provides the reader with a glimmer of the enduring importance of this tale, surely provoking at least some readers to look into the medievalisms that surround these literary conversions.

While this review does not attempt to give an analysis of all previous versions of Fierabras, it is helpful to understand where Newth situates his translation in relation to previous editions and translations of the text. The most recent edition of the work is a 2003 version done by Marc Le Person (Champion) that uses a manuscript from El Escorial in Madrid as its base and that includes variants from all manuscripts currently available. Newth used as the basis for his translation, however, the 1860 edition by Kroeber and Servois that is almost entirely based on BNF ms 12603. According to Newth, this choice allows him to provide a more complete and integral "performance" of the text, since it is based on almost exclusively one manuscript. While it may be true that a single manuscript can give a sense of one time and place, this argument did not seem entirely convincing. Le Person did base his edition on the oldest and most complete manuscript available in the world, and he provided variants from other manuscripts. Le Person's edition is superior to the 1860 edition in just about every modern editorial practice used. Newth says he compiled his translation from the 1860 version, and took the first part from an 1873 Gröber edition published in Romania. Newth does not explain what he means by the "first part," but upon comparison with the three editions he cites we must assume the first part correlates to what he calls the "first geste." Thus, the completed translation does not bear an easily identifiable relationship to any one edition, meaning that the line number system, while used by Newth, does not correlate to any of the editions (and indeed the 1860 edition did not use line numbers).

Newth makes it clear that his edition is aimed at the general audience, so this lack of parallel would not concern his intended audience who would be unable or unlikely to refer to any edition, but I found it detracted from the usefulness of the volume for teachers and students of Old French, who might use the translation in tandem with an edition in order to better understand the original or to perfect their own reading of the Old French. This makes it somewhat less useful for what would seem the ideal audience, students of medieval English literature whose skills in Old French are lacking but not non-existent. For this group of students, who might well want to work on the *geste* of Charlemagne but who are unable to read

the entire text in Old French, Newth's translation provides them with access to a story which will later figure prominently in Middle English texts both as a touchstone referred to by other medieval writers and in adapted translation, but it cannot serve as a reliable source for scholarly writing on the epic. A good scholarly work would require that translated verses be backed up with a citation of the newest edition (Le Person's), which is very difficult to align with this translation.

In addition, Newth includes the first two parts of the cycle, and one is left wondering why he didn't also include the *Pèlerinage*, if for no other reason than to round out the story. A very good translation of the *Pèlerinage* exists, but is out of print and difficult to find.^[1] For students, being able to buy the complete story in one volume might be very appealing, and the 900 extra lines would only add about twenty pages to the volume; perhaps Italica and Newth could consider adding this to a later edition.

In sum, Michael Newth's translation of the two Old French texts, *La destruction de Rome* and *Fierabras*, fulfills an important role in medieval epic study. Newth provides the reader who is not proficient in reading Old French with a readable and lovingly crafted poetic rendition of the stories. His translation is ideal for someone wishing to learn the story of Floripas's and Fierabras's conversions and integration into French nobility in order to grasp the importance of this story to medieval audiences. While not a word-for-word translation, Newth's version provides a highly readable and enjoyable book that might entice the reader to venture further afield in medieval epic. While, for the purposes of scholarship, Newth's text cannot substitute for a close reading of an Old French edition, he achieves his goal of creating what amounts to a modern English performance of an Old French epic. The pricing of the book (particularly the electronic edition) makes this a very affordable textbook for a comparative epic or introduction to medieval literature class, and one might hope that, with an electronic edition, the text would remain available to students and teachers for a very long time. One constant frustration with teaching medieval sources is that the editions tend to become very difficult to find and/or prohibitively expensive for classroom use. Michael Newth and Italica Press are to be commended for making these important epics accessible to an English-speaking audience.

NOTES

[1] Glyn S. Burgess, ed. and trans., *Voyage de Charlemagne à Jérusalem et à Constantinople* (New York: Garland, 1988).

Lynn Ramey
Vanderbilt University
lynn.ramey@vanderbilt.edu

Copyright © 2011 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 edistribution/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