
H-France Review Vol. 5 (October 2005), No. 107

Michael A. H. Newth, trans., *Aymeri of Narbonne: A French Epic Romance*. New York: Italica Press, 2005. xxxvii + 169 pp. Maps, glossary, appendices, and bibliography. \$17.50 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-934977-67-4.

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In the last decade or two editors and translators have provided a great wealth of Old French texts in modern editions—either works that were long available only in great libraries with specialized collections, or works well-edited (perhaps in the nineteenth century) but never offered in translation.[1] Now these works are coming into more general circulation, with the prospect of much more informed scholarship and teaching in medieval French literature and history. This splendid flood of Old and Middle French texts has in fact reached the classroom no less than the individual and specialist scholar's study. The massive Vulgate or Lancelot-Grail Cycle, published in the 1990s (though now sadly out of print in its entirety) is an excellent case in point.[2]

Michael Newth has been a significant contributor to this process of providing new translations. The text being reviewed here is the fourth Old French *chanson de geste* he has translated since 1989. This epic romance, *Aymeri of Narbonne*, was edited in 1887 by a French scholar for the Société des Anciens Textes Français, but has never been translated into English. Newth's volume will make a welcomed addition to the growing shelf of Old French literature in translation.

Written early in the thirteenth century, probably by Bertrand de Bar-sur-Aube (who made use of even older epic material), *Aymeri of Narbonne* is one of the two dozen poems making up the cycle of the great hero William of Orange; the present text sets out the great deeds of William's father. It is linked, as were so many *chansons*, to the even more famous *Song of Roland*, for it continues the story of that work, telling of the return of Charlemagne's army from the losses and final triumph at Roncesvalles.

Passing by the much-admired city of Narbonne, held by the Saracens, the king conceived a great desire to take the place, against advice that his weakened army was not up to the task, and despite refusals from each of the twelve peers when asked to conduct the assault. Aymeri, of course, offers to take Narbonne and—no surprise—boldly carries it by storm. Charlemagne's army rides back to sweet France and the stage is set for the second part of the story.

Deciding he lacks only a wife for complete happiness, Aymeri settles on the fair Hermenjart of Pavia in Lombardy. He dispatches a force to bring her back, willing or not. They encounter a band of Germans who are likewise going to collect Hermenjart. Winning the ensuing fight, the French must deal with the wily King Boniface of Pavia, who tries to starve them once they have arrived in his city. Yet all turns out well. Since Hermenjart is smitten with love for Aymeri, the marriage is agreed. Although the Germans try to take their revenge on Aymeri as he travels to Pavia, this fight, too, comes out right and Aymeri and Hermenjart meet at last.

The Saracens return to Narbonne, setting the third part of the tale in motion. Now Hermenjart plays the heroine, bravely riding to Aymeri's uncle, Duke Girart, for martial aid. The aid is provided and, although it fills many lines, the action in short is cavalry to the rescue. A sumptuous wedding and the engendering of suitable heirs (the second son being the ever-famous William of Orange) fills out the short final portion of the *chanson*.

It is no small task to render Old French poetic lines in English verse. Usually Newth carries this off, but occasionally a reader will be puzzled or stopped short in his reading. The term “shire” (passim) may provide a rhyme needed repeatedly, but it is a technical term for an administrative unit of Medieval England, not France; this means likewise that “sheriff,” the reeve of the shire, should have been banished from the translation. The same is true of the longbow, which appears here a good century or two early and on the wrong side of the Channel (line 3642: where the French version says only a bowshot from the walls: “Si près des murs que tresist j. archier”). Are not axes sharpened rather than pointed (line 4142: the French version says only that axes are carried) and would barges be iron-sheeted in this metal-poor society (line 269: might “ferré” here simply mean “stout” or even “fastened with nails”)? Why use a term such as “every ten” (line 2903) to describe the extent of a battlefield massacre? I am not sure what “shields...shattered through the splice” means (line 1433 of the translation). The effort to retain a poetic form rather than give in to a more literal prose translation surely is worthy—we need to remember that this is a poem!—but at times the difficulties get in the way of meaning. A dozen pages of the original Old French are provided in an appendix so that any reader can appreciate the text and the challenge of translation personally. A map and a short glossary are added to help the student or general reader.

Newth’s introduction provides the essential contextual information for readers with clarity. He explains the place of the text within medieval French literature, the likely author and date of composition, the artistry of the poetry and characterization of main figures. In the translation he aims for a presentation of the epic quality of the work without literalism (he helpfully renders verbs in a uniform past tense, despite the Old French usage, for example). He has divided the text into parts and chapters; though these are not to be found in the original, they seem to be called for by the text and will be highly useful to a modern reader and a modern student in particular.

All readers can hope that Newth will provide yet more Old French texts in accessible form.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Michael Newth, tr., *The Song of Girart of Vienne by Bertrand de Bar-Sur Aube* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1999); Thomas Vesce, trans., *Jehan, The Marvels of Rigomer* (New York and London: Garland, 1988); Samuel N. Rosenberg and Samuel Danon, trans., *Ami and Amile*, afterword by David Donstan (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Corin Corley, trans., *Lancelot of the Lake*, introduction by Elspeth Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Nigel Bryant, *The High Book of the Grail: A Translation of the Thirteenth-Century Romance of Perlesvaus* (Cambridge, U.K.: D. S. Brewer, 1978).

[2] Norris Lacy, gen. ed., *Lancelot-Grail: the Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, 5 vols (New York: Garland, 1993-96).

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