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Sharon Kinoshita, *Medieval Boundaries: Rethinking Difference in Old French Narrative*. The Middle Ages Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. 311 pp. \$59.95 (hb). ISBN 0-8122-3919-9.

Review by Sylvia Huot, Pembroke College, Cambridge.

Sharon Kinoshita's book is a welcome addition to the field of medieval studies and postcolonial theory. As Kinoshita points out, much work of this type focuses on fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Britain and stresses the late medieval roots of Orientalist, nationalist, and colonialist discourses as they developed over the past several hundred years. The current book greatly widens the debate by opening it up to an earlier period—the twelfth and very early thirteenth centuries—through a series of Old French texts that are set not only in the northern lands of France and Britain, but also in French, Byzantine, and Islamic territories around the Mediterranean basin. Some of these explicitly concern contact between Christian and 'Saracen' cultures—the *Chanson de Roland*, the *Prise d'Orange*, *Floire et Blanchefleur*, *La Fille du comte de Ponthieu*, *Aucassin et Nicolette*—while others recount real or imagined journeys from northern Europe to Constantinople: the *Pèlerinage de Charlemagne* and the *Conquête de Constantinople*. A different sort of cross-cultural conflict and exchange—that between Anglo-Norman colonial rulers and indigenous Celtic peoples in the 'contact zone' of twelfth-century Wales—is examined in the *Lais* of Marie de France. Finally, Kinoshita uses the *Chanson de la croisade albigeoise* to consider how western Christendom, having already turned against their Byzantine co-religionists with the sack of Constantinople, targeted an even more intimate 'enemy within'.

Kinoshita argues that it was only in the later Middle Ages that the boundaries between Christian, Jewish and Islamic peoples and cultures were conceptually hardened and policed in such a way as to produce the beginnings of 'nationalist' or 'Orientalist' discourses in the modern sense. In the twelfth century, she argues, ideas about ethnic and cultural difference were more fluid and flexible than is generally acknowledged today. Texts from this period present models of circulation and exchange, of hybrid ancestries and of friendships or love affairs that cross racial, religious, or cultural lines; the stereotypical model of a "clash of civilisations" simply does not fit the overall picture that emerges from a careful reading of Old French texts. Kinoshita further identifies the early thirteenth century as a time of 'epistemic rupture', showing that in texts from this slightly later period one can already discern shifts in attitude and orientation.

Even some of the earlier texts that she examines reflect what might—in hindsight only, of course—be thought of as 'proto-Orientalist' tensions and, as it were, look ahead to these subtle redefinitions of difference. In *Roland*, for example, the arch-villain Ganelon is an appeaser who grows impatient with Charlemagne's protracted efforts to conquer Saracen lands. Instead, he recommends accepting tribute and withdrawing back to France in the vague hope that the Saracens may, at some later date, embrace Christianity. Kinoshita points out that policies of co-existence, based on the payment of tribute, would have been very familiar to the original audience for the *Roland* and might have seemed to them perfectly acceptable. The poem, however, uses the uncompromising Roland as a means of positing a new ideal, in which one does not negotiate with Saracens but fights to the death. In Kinoshita's reading, Roland is sacrificed to the ideal of 'la douce France'. This implacable warrior, able to fill an entire *laisse* with the enumeration of peoples and territories that he has brought under Carolingian rule, embodies the very

principle of violent ideological intransigence. With his death, that precarious past can be laid to rest, becoming legend rather than living memory. In forcing Charlemagne to return to Spain and confront the Saracen army, his death inaugurates a policy of violent eradication of an enemy defined as truly 'other', rather than one of peaceful coexistence. Ultimately, differences within Christendom are acknowledged but suppressed, while the borders between Christendom and the rest of the world are intensified, politicised, militarised.

In *Floire et Blanchefleur*, a twelfth-century text that purports to explain Charlemagne's maternal ancestry, one finds a similar gesture towards intolerance and the policing of identities. Most of the text, as Kinoshita so eloquently shows, presents a model not of uni-directional *translatio* but of circulation around the Mediterranean, and the relationship between Floire and Blanchefleur, characterised by intense love and near-identical resemblance, seems almost a metaphor for the charitable love that might link the 'sibling religious' of Islam and Christianity. And yet, as she also notes, the poem ends not only with Floire's conversion to Christianity, but also with the mass slaughter of all the inhabitants of his kingdom who fail to follow suit. What remains, by implication, is an ethnically-cleansed Spain from which all non-Christian and non-Western elements have been eliminated. Again the text has it both ways, entertaining the fantasy that the divide between French and 'Saracen' cultures is easily crossed, yet in the end also showing that any blurring of that boundary comes at the price of violence and death. Charlemagne may be imagined as having a maternal line leading back to Muslim Spain. But his origins are also marked by violent forced conversions that recall the equally explosive outcome of his own Spanish campaign as imagined in the *Roland*.

In the slightly later *Fille du comte de Ponthieu*, tensions of this sort are only intensified. As Kinoshita argues, this text explores the healing processes that may result from bridging the Franco-Saracen divide, and the redemptive consequences of a journey into and out of the Saracen world. Famously, this text even posits a maternal French lineage for Saladin, complementing the maternal Saracen lineage imagined for Charlemagne in *Floire et Blanchefleur*. But as Kinoshita also shows, it marks the mixed-blood son brought back to France as irreparably 'different', unable to share in his grandfather's heritage, and therefore never more than partially integrated. As for the mixed-blood daughter left behind in Spain, she too is devalued (in that her father, the sultan, loses his affection for her) once her mother has reverted to being French. And it is surely a complicated message indeed to state that the descendant of this imagined union between a French woman and a Muslim ruler is the formidable Saladin. The crisis of lineage and succession in the counties of Ponthieu and St-Pol may have been solved by the once barren lady's detour through the Muslim world, but that trajectory was also one that produced an enemy leader that the West might have preferred not to have faced. While the mixed-blood descendants in the West are neutralised in a comfortable obscurity, those in the East ultimately rise to power in a way that is decidedly threatening. If it is perhaps reassuring to imagine that the redoubtable Muslim warrior owes some of his prowess to a hitherto unsuspected French ancestry, I would think that there is equally something disturbing in this vision of an implacable rival as at once very foreign and very intimately related.

An interesting thread linking some of the texts discussed here is provided by Kinoshita's examination of the motif of the Saracen queen or princess who embraces Christianity out of love for a Western knight. Erotic desire and shared lineage are then ways of blurring, effacing, or otherwise negotiating the inter-racial or inter-confessional divide, as well as providing a means of resolving feudal crises or revaluing a woman who has become problematic for her husband, her feudal lord, or her kin group. Kinoshita points out that this motif operates not only in the obvious texts, such as the *Prise d'Orange*, where a Saracen princess literally converts to Christianity and surrenders herself and her kingdom into the hands of a Christian knight; but also in other texts where the motif may seem less obvious. In the *Fille du comte de Ponthieu*, for example, the eponymous heroine is stigmatised through a combination of barrenness, rape, and rebellion against the husband who witnessed her degradation; but once she has become a Saracen queen, she can be absolved and absorbed back into her original family through the process of

(re)conversion and (re)marriage. *Aucassin et Nicolette* offers a more light-hearted treatment of the motif. As long as the heroine was already a Christian living in the West, her origins as a Saracen captive served only to lower her value; but once she reverts to being a princess living in a Muslim kingdom, she can re-enter France as a conscious, willing 'convert' with a correspondingly high value that allows her to marry the young Count.

The *Lais* of Marie de France, finally, allow for exploration of similar concepts and themes in a different context. In a fascinating comparison of *Yonec* and *Milun*, Kinoshita uncovers opposing views of the old (Celtic) and new (Anglo-Norman) orders. If *Yonec* betrays nostalgia for an old, occluded kingdom that provides a welcome antidote to the rigours of the new order, *Milun* expresses optimism for a new, modern, and more 'international' regime that is also more flexible, allowing more scope for individuals to negotiate their own positions. Just as the *Lais* do not reflect any one view of love, marriage, or adultery, similarly they do not offer any one view of cultural or ethnic difference or identity. It would be interesting to extend this analysis to other *lais* such as *Lanval*, where the hero chooses to flee the court, depicted as corrupt, in order to carry on his relationship with a mysterious fairy-lady who can never be integrated into it. Or *Bisclavret*, where the shape-shifting knight is welcomed into the court; and the woman who tries to suppress the 'alien' element, is herself redefined as alien—sent into exile, where she produces a race of descendants whose shameful difference is marked on their bodies.

In all, *Medieval Boundaries* is a rich and important book. It deserves to be read by all those working on French literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as well as by all medievalists with an interest in the literary treatment of cross-cultural and inter-confessional contact and exchange.

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