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Sharon Kinoshita and Peggy McCracken, eds., *Marie de France: A Critical Companion*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012. x + 230 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$90.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781843843016.

Review by Mark Cruse, Arizona State University.

Sharon Kinoshita and Peggy McCracken set themselves an ambitious goal in this study of Marie de France. As the opening of their preface states, “This *Companion* is for all those interested in the works of Marie de France—students, teachers, and general readers as well as scholars. ... [W]e set out to rethink standard questions such as those of origins, context, plot, character, structure, and influence...” (p. vii). Their task is all the more challenging given that each of the readerships they mention comes to Marie de France with very different motivations and kinds of knowledge, that what they propose is not an annotated bibliography but a panoramic study, and this given the great variety of the works attributed to Marie and the vast amount of research on her. Yet it is very likely that readers of all stripes will be satisfied with this book, which manages to cover an enormous amount of ground in a concise, engaging, and accessible manner.

Chapter one, “Introduction: The World of Marie de France,” provides an overview of the topics to be covered and has short sections on “Who was Marie de France?,” “Marie’s world,” “Marie’s languages,” “Reading Marie de France,” and “Organization of this book.” The authors situate Marie within a broad literary and cultural field that encompasses many places, eras, traditions, and languages. From the beginning they neutralize any lingering nationalist associations that the name “Marie de France” may evoke, and provide numerous references to the latest research on the transcultural contacts and dynamics that shaped northern European literature in the late Middle Ages.

Chapter two is entitled “Communication, Transmission, and Interpretation: Literary History.” The first section, “Transmission and translation in the *Lais*,” focuses on the complicated prologue to the *Lais*. Particularly useful here is the observation that Marie’s prologue, though in many ways traditional, also differs considerably from other contemporary justifications for writing by rejecting hagiography, classical material, or wisdom literature, and by “acknowledging the multiplicity of living languages” (p. 27). The second section, “Modes of transmission,” discusses the complexities of stories that recount their own production. The authors see this emphasis on transmission as complementing Marie’s concern with translation, which indicates not only authorial self-consciousness, but the fundamental processes by which vernacular texts were composed in Marie’s time. The third section, “*Ysopë*,” pays particular attention to how Marie thematizes translation and transmission by giving an overview of the history of the Aesopic tradition. The authors show how Marie not only respects this tradition by emphasizing the practical (as opposed to moral) wisdom of the *Ysopë*, but also adapts it by stating that her source is not in Latin but English. The final section, “*Espurgatoire seint Patriz*,” shows that here again Marie is original in her conception of her work. She states that she composes this religious text because she is inspired by her admiration for her patron—not, as one might assume, by her love of God, although the composition leads her to a greater love of God. Here as in the *Lais* and the *Ysopë*, Marie inserts herself into a complex chain of transmission by evoking the text’s translation, authenticity, and association with charismatic and saintly figures, and yet at the same time asserting her own authorial and translational activity and its spiritual benefit for the laity.

Chapter three, “Courtly Love and Feudal Society: Historical Context,” argues that Marie’s works, in particular the *Lais*, are meditations on the values and practices undergirding medieval social order. The chapter opens by demonstrating that the feudal notions of *auxilium* (military service) and *consilium* (counsel) are crucial to understanding Marie’s work and courtly literature in general. While noting the importance of the “relationship between vassalic and marital or erotic love” (p. 55) in the *Lais*, the authors show that this relationship is complex and variable across these stories. The second section, “The *Lais* and the feudal politics of lineage,” argues that marriage and procreation are central themes to the *Lais* because they underscore the subversive and potentially destabilizing aspects of the courtly love ethos. The third section, “The *Fables* and feudal society,” shows that while in the *Lais*, “vertical power relations are tempered by the ideal of the reciprocity of responsibility, however unequal the partners” (p. 91), in the *Fables* power is equated with domination and victimization. The authors elaborate this comparative reading to show the many ways in which the *Fables*’ version of feudal society is the inverse of that in the *Lais*. The fourth section, “*Espurgatoire seint Patriz*,” analyzes how Marie crafts a didactic tale for the laity about Purgatory, at the time a recent theological innovation, by employing a protagonist (the knight Owein), descriptions, and feudal values that appealed to the secular nobility. This chapter concludes with a brief consideration of the *Vie seinte Audree*, a hagiographical text whose attribution to Marie is still debated. Overall, the authors make a convincing case that Marie’s works are, as they say of the *lais* in particular, “experimental variants” (p. 55) concerned with rules, codes, beliefs, and the complexities of social interaction and organization.

Chapter four, “Movement and Mobility: Plot,” explores movement as a multifarious subject in Marie’s works through analysis of characters in space, of time, and of textual *mouvance*. More than a theme, “Movement generates meaning in all of Marie’s narratives, though in different ways and to different ends in each” (p. 114). The first section, “Mobility and adventure in the *Lais*,” argues that travel is central to the literary and didactic effects that Marie seeks to create. The authors make interesting observations about *Guigemar*, in which the protagonist’s travel shifts from purposeful chivalric touring to the defamiliarized mobility of the magical boat; about gender distinctions; and about the cultural associations evoked by the different settings Marie deploys. The second section, “Staying at home in the *Ysopë*,” argues that the fables are “cautionary narratives about the dangers of change” (p. 131) that define mobility as a negative challenge to social order. The fables value staying the same and staying at home as equivalent virtues. The third section, “The passage through Purgatory,” shows that movement organizes the plot of the *Espurgatoire seint Patriz* much as it does in the *Lais*, but in the *Espurgatoire*, mobility is cosmic and hierarchical rather than terrestrial and horizontal. There are useful observations about the texts’ differing visions of movement and time, as when the authors contrast the amorphous chronology in individual *lais* with the strictly ritualized time of the *Espurgatoire*.

Chapter five, “Bodies and Embodiment: Characters,” argues that “Marie uses forms of embodiment to point to categories of identity” (p. 143) and these categories’ mutability, since bodies are often changeable in her narratives. The authors note that this variation extends to Marie’s works themselves, since each draws on a different tradition for its representations of embodiment: the *Lais* on courtly literature, the *Ysopë* on Latin animal fables, and the *Espurgatoire* on popular and learned understandings of how souls inhabit bodies. The first section, “Embodiment and animality in the *Lais*,” focuses on three tales in which a bird is featured (*Yonec*, *L’aüstic*, *Milun*), because these animals problematize bodies and agency in the *Lais*. The discussion of *Yonec* shows the open-mindedness of the authors’ approach as they pose a series of questions about the text’s mysterious representation of bodies, questions they not only do not seek to answer, but for which they give two references with contrasting arguments in the note (p. 148). Overall, they argue that “Conflicts between social roles for bodies and the relations of desire that draw bodies out of such scripted roles subtend most of the *Lais*” (p. 156).

The second section of chapter five, “The limits of the body in the *Ysopë*” (p. 158), draws heavily on the work of Jill Mann, who argues that “the usefulness of animals to the fable is a resistance to moral

evaluation that is located in their very animality” (p. 158). Most of Marie’s fables, like those of other traditions, are not about the mutability of physical identity but about knowing one’s place—about “embodiment as destiny” (p. 163). The third section, “Bodies and souls in the *Espurgatoire saint Patriz*” (p. 164), argues that this work’s representation of the spiritual made material “is not simply an orthodox repetition of medieval theology” (p. 165), but rather exhibits a creative and didactic notion of embodiment. The fourth section, “Embodied categories of identity,” makes the important point that “In all of Marie’s works, embodiment has to do with groups rather than individuals” (p. 168). This last section focuses on *Bisclavret* as a chief example of how her works debate the relationship between body and social identities.

Chapter six, “Repetition and the Art of Variation: Narrative Techniques,” is an insightful examination of the ways in which Marie’s works enact the duplication and adaptation inherent in medieval art of all kinds. The first section, “Reduplication, multiplication, and the crisis of non-differentiation,” observes that several *lais* place characters in identical yet competing relationships (i.e. one man loves two women, one mother loves two daughters but only keeps one). This “thematics of reduplication” (p. 175) and non-differentiation of relationships, the authors argue, is a challenge to the courtly love tradition, with its focus on a single love object. The second section, “Repetition and variation,” is an analysis of the various elements (verses, scenarios) that repeat in the *Lais* and of how Marie inventively changes their use and meaning. The third section, “Marie’s *Lais* and the *Lais anonymes*,” is a brief but useful section that demonstrates what makes Marie’s *Lais* distinctive in the context of the larger *lai* tradition. The fourth section, “From short forms to long ones,” analyzes the effect of the brevity of Marie’s *lais* and fables, whose lessons are “multiple and situational, and liable to be contradictory” (p. 198). In the *Espurgatoire*, on the other hand, “the significance of what is to be ‘remembered’ is given in advance” (p. 199)—a difference that stems from this text’s longer form and religious content.

Chapter seven, “Posterity: The Afterlives of Marie’s Work,” is a brief examination of how Marie de France and her texts have been remembered. The first section, “The manuscripts of Marie’s works,” discusses the dates, contents, and compilational approaches in these codices. The second section, “Marie’s fame,” discusses references to Marie by her contemporary Denis de Piramus and others. The third section, “Rewriting Marie’s *Lais*,” discusses her influence on both other *lais* and on the romances *Ille et Galeron* and *Galeran de Bretagne*.

The authors combine close reading, philological analysis, socio-historical context, literary history, comparative material, and traditional and current scholarship to investigate some of the more difficult interpretive problems posed, and interesting aesthetic issues raised, by Marie de France’s work. There are insightful observations in every section of every chapter. As the authors state in their “Note on Editions” (p. ix), they assume that readers are familiar with the *Lais* and therefore do not give plot summaries except where needed, but they do provide descriptions for the fables they discuss and for the *Espurgatoire saint Patriz*. This approach seems reasonable, particularly since it gives them more room for uninterrupted commentary and allows for succinct comparative examination of the different *lais*, which are the focus of most of their attention. The analysis throughout is rich and multi-faceted, the writing clear and accessible. Quotations from Marie’s texts are provided in the original and in English translation. The arguments, although varied and multiple like the subject they treat, are easy to navigate thanks to the useful subdivisions and topic sentences.

A drawback to this book’s approach, but one that is for the most part admirably avoided, is that at points the thread of the argument is attenuated by the desire to fit so many different modes of analysis and related topics together around a single story or text. For example, the discussion of the *Ysopë* in chapter two reads like the condensation of a larger study of the Aesopic tradition and does not foreground the *Ysopë* as much as it could. The thematic approach, and perhaps too joint authorship, lead not only to repeated returns to the same works, such as *Guigemar* and *Eliduc* (which figure prominently in chapters three and four) or Fable 26 (which appears on pp. 133 and 159), but also to the repeating of a quotation

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in note 57 on p. 101 and in the body of the text on p. 135, and in one instance to the repeating of the same phrase in the same paragraph (“characters experience the world through their bodies,” p. 143). For the most part, however, the authors do a good job of avoiding such repetitions and of approaching the same work from significantly different angles, so that each new pass sheds different light on the meaning. One questions the decision not to include a complete bibliography, since it means that key works (such as Caroline Bynum’s on metamorphosis) are cited in the text but do not make it into the “Further Reading” list.

Medieval literature specialists will no doubt feel themes or questions important to them are missing or could have been treated more fully—I would have liked more on the relationship between Marie’s work and performance, for example—but such reactions are inevitable with a study such as this one, and are indicative less of deficiencies on the authors’ part than of the richness of the material. This book is a creative example of literary interpretation that invites (and indeed inspires) one to read Marie’s works, whatever one’s familiarity with them.

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