
Review by Domenic Leo, Duquesne University.

Douglas Kelly’s most recent publication is a notable addition to his substantial body of work on late-medieval French literature. Readers will profit greatly from the breadth of his knowledge on the poetry of Guillaume de Machaut (c. 1300-1377). Machaut was prolific, and Kelly’s command of this corpus is impressive. He weaves in transtextual citations, originating within the microcosm of Machaut’s work, to support and elucidate his own interpretations of it. As an art historian, my understanding and appreciation of Kelly’s book is necessarily different than that of a specialist in literature. Amidst burgeoning interdisciplinary Machaut studies, this presents an exceptional opportunity to emphasize the way in which this book can inform readings of illuminated Machaut manuscripts.

Kelly centers his book on Machaut’s *Livre dou voir dit* (*The Book of the True Story*, hereafter *Voir dit*), the latest (1363-1635) and most complex of his fourteen *dits*. In the poem, an elderly and infirm poet named Guillaume transmits his work and skills to an as-yet-unknown admirer, Toute Belle, with whom he falls in love. Kelly characterizes the *Voir dit*’s curious construction of poetry and prose, the latter in the form of epistolary exchanges, as “an extensive model of what its author deemed exemplary composition” (p. 100). Thus Kelly lays the groundwork to demonstrate “what Toute Belle would have learned about the poet’s art when, as a young teenager, she began to read and admire Machaut’s poetry so much that she sought out his guidance for her own artistic ambitions” (p. 22). The author uses case studies from Machaut’s *dits*, composed from the early 1340s to the late 1370s, and begins by establishing a basis for examining Machaut’s evolving concept of “good love”—to some degree a virtuous love which “is chaste...and self-sufficient”—a theme which pervades the book (p. 22). This process leads to an identification of a variety of sources which the poet assimilates, reworks, and reconfigures, “making materia remota into materia propinqua—a new version” (p. 134). This observation resonates with an art-historical concern, reconstructing the iconographer’s task: to create an image from a new text.

Kelly introduces the concept of “*gradus amoris*” (the degrees of love, pp. 55ff) in the *Voir dit*, leading to a critical moment in the narrative, “the mysterious consummation of Guillaume and Toute Belle’s love” that takes place under Venus’ cloud” (p. 56). What follows, the “*continuatio amoris*” (the continuation of love), is a reflection on this thematic lynchpin (pp. 62-65). Kelly begins his substantial investigation of the midpoint scene with the question: Is this a physical consummation? After sifting through the text to formulate a response with no precise answer, he turns to the accompanying miniatures, but the lack of conformity between text and image creates complications, “The two surviving manuscript illuminations...are of no help in interpreting ‘what happened’” (p. 76, n82). I suggest, however, a full examination of the text-image link here that refers solely to MS A. It is the first extant copy of the *Voir dit*; it was created in Machaut’s lifetime; and there is evidence enough to explore the possibility that the poet himself played a role in producing it (fig. 1).
The disparity between text and image does not make the latter ‘incorrect’. Rather, it reveals the iconographer’s dilemma: How to manufacture an image to operate in tandem with a novel, secular scene for which there are no visual precedents? If the iconographer chose to depict Guillaume and Toute Belle having sex, he would have surely painted them nude, one atop the other under a blanket. Instead, they lie side by side, fully clothed on a neatly made bed; they are looking at each other. It is, though, a potentially erotic moment. We only see the ‘before’ and are left to anticipate—and imagine—the ‘after.’

The odd position of the figures’ bodies holds meaning. Guillaume has his hand on his breast, connoting respect and, here, perhaps good intentions. The meaning of Toute Belle’s body language, on the other hand, is more provocative. She offers her sex by placing her hands on either side of her vagina, where the drapery folds create the outlines of the labia. The creases are the result, however, of her crossing her legs, denying the possibility for penetration. A testament to the iconographer’s engin, Venus’ gesture and the shape of the cloud before her derive from imagery related to God creating matter from chaos—a chaste genesis? Perhaps, then, we can marry text and image in this instance: both represent the truth of the ‘tease’ more than the fictional fait accompli. Machaut does not “go that far,” writes Kelly, for the poet seeks the survival of ‘good love’ in the Voir dit, which “befits his emphasis on chastity and honor” (p. 92). In this sense, both text and image signify that “Venus…hides not intimate eroticism, but the honorable love of two unlikely lovers” (p. 129, n129).

In the second part, Kelly gives a detailed description and analysis of the undergirding of Machaut’s ‘art of poetry,’ giving the reader insight into Machaut’s painstakingly-planned intricacies. The degree to which one is rewarded is commensurate with the degree to which one actively seeks subtle, perhaps hidden meanings. For example, the roughly chronological ordonnance of the dits “corresponds grosso modo to the evolution of Machaut’s thoughts on good love. A forma tractatus is also evident in each of Machaut’s dits” in the sense that “the traité’s mathematical midpoint can be crucial” (p. 128). In the short third part, Kelly demonstrates the impact Machaut’s work had on his followers in an innovative fashion, examining “the dits and some inserted lyrics as if Machaut’s apprentices wrote them” (p. 231). Of note is the gracefulfulness of his analyses of nuances in the shifting concepts of transmission and manners of reception of poetry in the second half of the fourteenth century. Kelly ends with a brief foray
into the “musical context of Machaut’s invention, essential according to Toute Belle if one wants to enjoy Guillaume’s poetry fully” (p. 275).

Kelly’s choice of reference material to art historical studies is, as one would expect in this context, reductive. He relies heavily on two literary historians. The interdisciplinary analyses in Sylvia Huot’s pioneering work remain deeply influential; she focused her readings of Machaut’s work within the context of the two complete-works illuminated manuscripts created during his lifetime, and C and A. Deborah McGrady, building on Huot, is sensitive to the Machaut manuscripts as physical objects, and interprets them for traces of the manner in which their producers manipulated details to appeal to specific audiences; her tight, subtle interpretations of image-text segments have also inspired a new generation of interdisciplinary scholars in the field, such as Helen Swift. Julia Drobinsky, the sole art historian’s voice in Kelly’s text, is only mentioned in passing. Just as there is no ur-text copied from one complete-works manuscript to the next, so too no one iconographic program is repeated. Inherent to this means of production is the fluidity and element of constant change between one manuscript and another—mouvance—even those written and painted by the same scribe and artistic atelier.

Figure 2. BnF, ms. fr. 1584, The Collected Works of Guillaume de Machaut, fol. 242r, A127 (http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84490444/f505.item.r=machaut%201584.zoom, last accessed Jan. 7, 2017) Le livre dou voir dit. Toute Belle watches Guillaume write music on a scroll (Image: Bibliothèque nationale de France, used with permission).

There is another image in MS A, on fol. 242r, that is intimately bound up with Kelly’s theme of apprenticeship (fig. 2). In it, a young man dressed as a cleric (meant, however, to represent the elderly Guillaume) is seated on a bench. He lifts his quill from parchment, ruled with red lines and dotted with musical notation, having just finished writing the word ‘balade.’ There is an inkwell, of necessity, nearby, but the capped leather tube which hangs from the corner of the bench makes it clear that the parchment is a scroll, which makes for ease of transport. A fashionably dressed and coiffed young woman—in conformity with the generic representation of women throughout this manuscript—stands in front of the bench, looking down at the scene with her hand held up in amazement—again, a generic posture. An examination of the manufacture of this iconography reveals tension between image and text, and a unique relationship between this miniature and the norm for an image of author-patron interaction. Kelly describes ‘anomalies’ in the relationship between Guillaume and Toute Belle. For example, she “initiates their gradus amoris, contrary to the conventional passive role courtly literature assigns to the woman,” and “becomes the teacher of the art of love” (p. 56; p. 65). The image, too, can be
interpreted as a wry inversion of the ubiquitous author portrait in which a man sits at a desk; he is writing or at times looking out at the reader, even showing his book. He is normally alone, thus the presence of Toute Belle has meaning.[14] She is at once patroness, urging him to write, and apprentice, learning the craft. This is a striking example of Machaut’s manipulation of his matiere and the indistinct division between truth and fiction in the Voir dit.[15] Whether or not she is a reference to a real young girl, the Toute Belle persona was created by Machaut as the Galatea to his Pygmalion. When the miniature operates in tandem with the text, her persona functions as catalyst, subject matter, and eventual performer. Both Machaut and his textual persona, Guillaume, literally put their words in her mouth.

Both miniatures, importantly, are part of an iconographic program of thirty miniatures in the Voir dit which merge with rubrics, thousands of lines of rhyming couplets, and lyrical interpolations in MS A. Although this miniature probably dates to the late 1370s, the style of the illuminator as well as the place of execution—certainly not Paris—remain a mystery.[16] Together, images and texts comprise the first extant ‘presentation’—for the text here is inseparable from the whole—of the dit. They are part of a physical object that represents a macrocosm in relation to Kelly’s microcosm, relatively speaking: “The correlations evident between lyrics and dits weave the given anthology manuscript into a complex, but coherent montage…” (p. 47).

Kelly’s book will be daunting to scholars new to this material, especially those from different disciplines. They will profit best from careful readings of select passages, dipping into Kelly’s beautiful series of oftentimes self-sufficient subsections. In Kelly’s defense, this issue is due in large part to the time it takes to build the foundations necessary for grappling with the complexity of Machaut’s œuvre as well as the manuscript tradition. Recent advances in access to images, the ever-growing editions and translations of Machaut’s corpus, and the interest in interdisciplinary methodologies, however, will facilitate this process. Kelly’s book is a considerable contribution to Machaut scholarship, and it offers a rich resource—and a challenge—for future generations seeking to experience the manuscripts as the master himself intended.

NOTES


[5] For an argument proposing that the iconographic programs have a meaning in addition to that created by their rapport with the text, see Domenic Leo, “The Empty Bower and the Lone Fountain: Exploring Visual Paratextuality in Two Illuminated Guillaume de Machaut Manuscript” *Perspectives médiévales* (forthcoming, 2017).

[6] In the first image of Lady Fortune (fol. 297r, A147; http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84490444/f615.item.r=machaut%201584; accessed Jan. 6, 2017), the goddess holds a wheel, its fulcrum placed over her vagina, the labia also suggested by the placement of the drapery folds; see Domenic Leo, “The Program of Miniatures in Manuscript A,” in Leech-Wilkinson and Palmer, *Le livre dou voir dit*, pp. xci-xciii, p. xciii. The use of the frilly, ribbon-like folds which make up the cloud are oftentimes used to separate a scene on earth from one with God, who looks down from the sky.


[11] On this matter, see Richard H. Rouse and Mary A. Rouse, *Manuscripts and Their Makers: Commercial Book Producers in Medieval Paris, 1200-1500* (Turnhout: Harvey Miller, Brepols Publisher, 2000). This concept is clear in comparisons of the number and placement of miniatures, as well as rubrics, in illuminated Machaut manuscripts; see the charts and concordance of the illuminated *dits* in Earp, *Guide to Machaut*, pp. 139-188; and the discussion in, Leo, “Authorial Presence,” pp. 55-61.


[14] On the connected manipulation of ‘author portrait’ images in the appended bifolium of MS A, painted at a later date, see Domenic Leo, “The Beginning is the End: Guillaume de Machaut’s Illuminated Prologue,” in Yolanda Plumley, Giuliano Di Bacco, and Stefano Jossa, eds., *Citation, Intertextuality and Memory in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, vol. 1, Text, Music and Image from Machaut to Ariosto (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2011), pp. 84-96, nn, pp. 233-240.


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