

H-France Review Vol. 2 (June 2002), No. 43

Sarah Kay, *Courtly Contradictions: The Emergence of the Literary Object in the Twelfth Century*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001. xiii + 382 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$55.00 US (cl). ISBN 0-8047-3079-2. \$22.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-8166-3887-X.

Review by Constance B. Bouchard, University of Akron.

Medievalists have recently begun to reconceptualize the nature of the contradictions common in twelfth-century texts, arguing that they were not (as was once assumed) set up almost accidentally by pre-modern authors struggling with literary forms, but rather were put into those texts quite deliberately by their careful and sophisticated authors. Within a four-year period there will be three books published on the subject of contradictions in medieval texts, written by three scholars who decided independently to address the topic. Catherine Brown, who, like Sarah Kay, is a literary specialist, was the first, and I myself, writing from a historian's perspective, will be the third.^[1]

Each of these books, of course, approaches the topic quite differently. Sarah Kay, a scholar of Old French literature, is probably best known for her edition and translation of the epic *Raoul de Cambrai*,^[2] but she here turns her attention from the epics to the romances, another aspect of courtly literature. Concentrating especially on some of the works of Chrétien de Troyes, on the *Lais* attributed to Marie de France, on vernacular saints' lives, and on troubadour tales, all from the twelfth century, she argues that stories built around a central tension or contradiction would have proved enduringly popular with their audiences. Although she never quite says so, she implies that our modern literary conventions were created during the twelfth century, along with vernacular writing in general.

The most distinctive feature of *Courtly Contradictions* is the inclusion of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Realizing that most medievalists will have little familiarity with—and probably equally little interest in—theories that Jacques Lacan developed in the 1950s to explain structures of human thought, Kay provides a thorough introduction to someone she readily admits is "an abstruse—indeed, sometimes an impossible—writer," and thus urges the readers of her book to "skip the parts they find tiresome" (p. ix). The result is a book that will, as she acknowledges, probably be read very selectively by medievalists. Given its classification as a book of literary history and criticism, its existence will probably not even be noted by those interested in post-Hegelian thought, which unfortunately means that Kay's careful and energetic efforts to make Lacan comprehensible will be skipped both by medievalists and by those actually interested in understanding his theories.

Kay includes Lacanian psychoanalysis in the first place because she sees her book's major purpose as explaining why the courtly literature of the twelfth century continues to resonate with readers at the beginning of the twenty-first century. For her, modern sensibilities react well to contradictory structures in literature, even if the modern version is different in substantial ways from the medieval version of contradiction. But by giving so much of her book to an attempt to fit medieval literature into a modern psychological mold, that she herself calls "not . . . wholly reconcilable," the medieval texts themselves end up in a position which she characterizes as "piggy in the middle" (p. 300). Thus the works of courtly literature sometimes threaten to become invisible in a book that is supposedly about them.

The book still has a number of good insights into twelfth-century literature, especially that written by Chrétien and by the troubadour poets. Kay argues against a large body of scholarship that has sought to reconcile the contradictions in these texts into unitary right answers, where the apparent contradictions are brushed aside as no more than irony. She also dismisses, almost in passing, Catherine Brown's suggestion that contradictions were intended primarily for didactic purposes, suggesting rather that the full flourishing of "courtly contradictions" came in the last quarter of the twelfth century, when earlier didactic literature gave way to what she terms a literary "object," a source of "pleasure and diversion" (p. 2). Embedded in this discussion is also an implied dismissal of the way in which any literature--medieval or modern--gains much of its force through an underlying moral and critical commentary on its society and its readers' expectations. To give Kay credit, she never reduces literature to simple entertainment, but her Lacanian distinction between literature that focuses on the "subject" or on the "object" certainly leads in this direction.

Kay is weakest on the philosophical underpinnings of twelfth-century contradictions. She asserts that the roots were strictly Aristotelian, and indeed draws a contrast between Platonism (including Christian neo-Platonism) and Aristotelianism, arguing that only the latter sought to find answers through a balance of contraries, and that the neo-Platonists, especially Augustine, favored unity. Her brief survey of ancient and late antique philosophy omits the harmony through dissonance that played such a large role in the thinking both of Plato himself and of such Christian neo-Platonists as Boethius. Kay also skips the early twelfth-century growth of scholasticism, where every question was answered both No and Yes, even though this twelfth-century way of approaching philosophy, theology, and law provides the context in which literary works were structured on similar principles. It is unfortunate that she was not able to incorporate some of the ideas of Richard Kaeuper about chivalry and courtliness, especially his argument that the noble audience for courtly literature was intensely aware of the inherent contradictions within a chivalric culture that stressed both Christianity and violence.[3]

The major strength of the book is Kay's familiarity with a wide range of vernacular (primarily French) literary sources, many of which have been little studied by other scholars. Indeed, there are so many different authors cited that she found it necessary to include an Appendix to list, characterize, and date them all. As a historian I would have preferred to see the book's focus squarely on those authors rather than on modern psychoanalysis or the interplay of subject and object, the discussion of which quickly becomes self-referential almost to the point of parody. And yet there is a great deal here to engage both the historian and the literary specialist. With three books on twelfth-century contradictions appearing so close to each other, the discourse of opposites may soon become the new paradigm of medieval literary structures, against which future scholars will feel themselves compelled to rebel.

NOTES

[1] Catherine Brown, *Contrary Things: Exegesis, Dialectic and the Poetics of Didacticism*. Stanford University Press, 1998. Constance Brittain Bouchard, *"Every Valley Shall Be Exalted": The Discourse of Opposites in Twelfth-Century Thought*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002 (forthcoming).

[2] *Raoul de Cambrai*, ed. and trans. Sarah Kay. Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 1992.

[3] Richard W. Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Copyright © 2002 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 redistribution/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