
H-France Review Vol. 5 (February 2005), No. 13

Catherine Brown, *Contrary Things: Exegesis, Dialectic, and the Poetics of Didacticism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998. xv + 210 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 (cl). ISBN # 0-8047-3009-1.

Review by Constance B. Bouchard, University of Akron.

“So it goes with contrary things: they are glosses of one another, and the person who wants to define one of them must keep the other in mind, or else, no matter how hard he or she may try, definition will be impossible” (p. 2). This quotation, taken from near the end of the thirteenth-century French *Roman de la Rose*, provides both the title and the central theme for Catherine Brown’s study of medieval literary texts. She argues that authors from the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries not only tolerated but embraced contradictions, using them especially as a teaching tool.

She develops this argument through a close reading of five texts. Four are from twelfth-century France: works of biblical exegesis, the *Metalogicon* of John of Salisbury, the life and experiences of Peter Abelard (here treated as a text), and the *On Love* of Andreas Capellanus (usually translated as *The Art of Courtly Love*). The fifth text, the only one written in the vernacular, is the *Libro de buen amor*, a collection of songs and stories from fourteenth-century Spain. Although the *Roman de la Rose* provides her title, it does not receive the same close attention as these other texts. The motifs to which the study constantly returns are the nature of love and the nature of teaching.

Professor Brown is astute to have identified the medieval tendency to set up a series of contradictions, using them especially in their definitions, even though this tendency is quite foreign to a modern way of thinking. As soon as one starts looking for balanced opposites in medieval literature, however, one will find them everywhere. Too often they are dismissed as no more than a literary conceit, a form of irony. In focusing on the contradictions themselves, Brown comes much closer to the medieval mode of perception than do the many scholars who attempt to force a mid-point reconciliation on these contradictions, or else seek to suggest that medieval authors must have “really” advocated one position or the other. Indeed, I have been working myself for some time on this prevalence of opposites in medieval thought, and my principal criticism of the book is that, in treating contradictions simply as a tool for teaching, Brown is too timid in her conclusions.

There is also some awkwardness in how the book is structured. Her argument would have worked better had she stayed with Latin texts from twelfth-century France. She justifies including an Iberian text from 200 years later on the grounds that Iberian studies have been undeservedly marginalized, which while doubtless true does not do much to integrate the *Libro* into a study which is mostly concerned with entirely different texts. Her chapter on medieval theology and biblical exegesis could have been the book’s most illuminating, given her perceptive comments in the *Introduction* that medieval teaching was not the unproblematic transmittal of received doctrine, but rather a struggle to define and understand what was not yet understood. Unfortunately, however, the exegesis chapter, the shortest of the book, ranges far too widely, from Augustine and Gregory the Great in late antiquity, to twelfth-century theologians Peter Abelard, Hugh of St.-Victor, and Peter the Chanter, to the modern scholar/novelist Umberto Eco. While it was certainly an intriguing idea to frame Abelard’s seminal *Sic et Non* by details of Abelard’s own personal life, in which he was both a teacher and a monk, both a husband and an abbot, neither his life nor his scholastic thought ends up being particularly illuminated by the other. In her analysis of Andreas Capellanus and his *On Love*, she quite rightly points out how in

the final section he tries to dissuade the reader from the love he advocated in the first part. But this chapter would have been strengthened by a closer reading of the text, particularly a discussion of how even in those parts of his book where Andreas provides helpful dialogues with which men can supposedly win women's hearts (and bodies), the women consistently rebuff their would-be suitors.

This book deserves a wide audience among both literary scholars and intellectual historians. Readers may be put off by the denseness of the subtitle, the broad scattering of terms like "signification," "self-theorizing," "performative," and "bipolar univocities", the author's rather arch use of imagined scenes of youthful scholarship (both medieval and modern), and her sometimes surprising characterization of medieval thought as involving a "tasty" trope (p. 17) or a "yakkity clamor" (p. 36) or even different approaches "duking it out" (p. 8). But it is certainly worth pushing through both the jargon and the forced playfulness in order to reach the central ideas of the book.

Constance B. Bouchard
University of Akron
CBouchard@UAkron.edu

Copyright © 2005 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. ISSN 1553-9172