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Desire by Gender and Genre in Trouvère Song (review)

Glynnis M. Cropp

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Dell, Helen, *Desire by Gender and Genre in Trouvère Song* (Gallica 10), Woodbridge & Rochester, D. S. Brewer, 2008; cloth; pp. x, 241; R.R.P. £50.00, US\$95.00; ISBN 9781843841647.

This carefully constructed book on a complex topic extends ideas of which Helen Dell gave a foretaste in *Parergon* 22.1 (2005). The lyric poetry of the northern French trouvères has been less studied than that of the Occitan troubadours, which makes this a welcome publication. Although Dell has drawn on recent troubadour scholarship, notably that of Pierre Bec, Simon Gaunt, Jean-Charles Huchet, and Sarah Kay, her own approach is different and original. She explores the gendering of desire, reading the lyrics in connection with the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, trying 'to follow seriously the logic of signification of difference' (p. 1). With a corpus showing northern appreciation of a wider range of genres, she analyses desire in the low, uncourtly register, where the feminine voice is more often heard, and in the high register of *fin' amor*, the masculine domain. Working across genres and genders, she aims to reveal 'a discourse of unspoken desire, masculine and feminine in trouvère song' (p. 22).

In chapters 1 and 2, she describes the song system, distinguishing genre and register. She begins with the masculine high-style song of *fin' amor*: Thibaut de Champagne's 'Ausi conme unicorne sui', where desire impedes the lover's rational thought, and the playful rondeau 'C'est tot la gieus en mi la prez' (pp. 36-41). Whereas in courtly love lyrics the lady is silent and absent, in low-style, feminine-voice songs, the 'textual' woman is present and ready for action, as illustrated by 'Deduxans suis et joliette, s'amerai', a *chanson de femme* of the *chanson d'ami* type (pp. 62-6). Feminine and masculine voices are unequal, resembling Aristotelian matter and soul.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with desire: masculine desire, firstly in the low-style *pastourelle*, where lust makes the man try and seduce the shepherdess with varying outcomes, and then in the high-style *chanson* where among contradictions and obstacles hope of fulfilment is evoked but unrealized, creating unsatisfied desire. On the other hand, low-style feminine desire brings both sorrow and joy. Sometimes the defiant *amie* can triumph; but other women lament failure. Behind these feminine voices must, however, be presumed a masculine author, as there were few women among the trouvères.

The next two chapters are on the chronotopes of desire, i.e. desire in relation to time, space, change, etc., beginning with the low-style *chanson de femme*, the *chanson de mal mariée*. With narrative implications and circularity, it supposes a triangular situation where the woman is an object between her jealous husband and a lover, and lacks the will to change. Dell then explores in the *chanson* the ambivalent masculine propensity to look up at courtly ladies and down at shepherdesses, oscillating between serious ethical issues and free-time diversion. Lacan's notion of extimacy (p. 156) supports discussion of the *cœur/corps* separation. A good conclusion (p. 165) brings together both voices as victims of a situation, which neither acts to change, although one resorts to defiance and the other to self-abasement.

In a particularly interesting final chapter, Dell studies nine *chansons*, which might be considered truly feminine, where the lyric subject 'has stated something of herself in her desire' (p. 168). One senses a story behind the utterance, especially of the pain of having loved and lost through the lover's death or departure on a crusade.

In Afterthoughts (pp. 204-9), Dell reflects on the absence of satisfactory answers, and the surprising discovery that it has not been possible for anyone 'to place woman securely within the trouvère song system' (p. 207). In the writing process, she has gained this knowledge, which curiously reflects the position of the trouvères who live their desire in the process of composing a song.

Examples are quoted with parallel English translation. Editions with English translation and English translations of Lacan are used. A useful Index completes the book. Given the care with detail, it is surprising that numerous errors appear on pp. ix-x, including the former names of the British Library and the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Also the running headings of chapter 6 have 'Chronotypes' instead of 'Chronotopes'. Occasional typos occur, e.g. 'c'a;pot' (p. 151, v. 7). Perhaps 'escarlate' (p. 133, v. 4) should be translated by its alternative meaning 'best quality fabric'.

Helen Dell writes with ease and clear definition of concepts, sometimes expressing ideas more than once in different terms and introducing many literary and cultural parallels. The author of 'Por coi me bait mes maris' would no doubt be surprised at the length of the analysis (pp. 121-6), that includes reference to Aristotle's *Physics* and Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Colourful turns of phrase, e.g. 'this juggernaut of a woman' (p. 177), 'the pressure-

cooked erotic' (p. 165), enliven the dense argument that frequently moves from Lacan to a poem and back to Lacan, for the book is to some extent an assessment of the critical theory as well as an analytical study of the poetry.

Glynnis M. Cropp
School of Language Studies
Massey University

Einbinder, Susan L., *No Place of Rest: Jewish Literature, Expulsion, and the Memory of Medieval France* (Middle Ages), Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008; cloth; pp. 267; 2 illustrations; R.R.P. US\$55.00, £36.00; ISBN 9780812241150.

Close to half of this book is made up of notes, bibliography and index, but these scholarly materials truly enhance the analyses and discussions of the six constituent chapters, as well as Introduction and Epilogue. By diverting much of the technical matter related to her main argument, Einbinder gives a more powerful flow to her elegant text. In many places, it is eloquent and charming, rather than, as happens all too often these days, full of jargon and ideological sludge.

The main arguments may be set out as follows: the series of exiles and other disasters in the fourteenth century that displaced and shook to its foundations the Jewish communities of what is now the France of the Mediterranean coast seems to have left little or no direct record in the rabbinical writings that have survived. Nonetheless, in indirect form – through seemingly obscure and baroque poetry on biblical themes, especially in liturgical hymns, but also in medical texts and romantic lyrics – the history of people's experiences may be traced out, as can the attempts by communities to reconstitute themselves and their social and individual memories, and the specific cultural strengths of Jewish cultural discourses revealed.

In addition, Einbinder argues that re-examining the documentary record is also illuminating of the dynamics of Jewish cultural memory. In this she means both literary expressions themselves, in the sense of poetic, exegetical or scientific texts, and in the sense of physical manuscripts owned by particular individuals, transferred from place to place in the *diaspora*, and recreated by scribes, redactors and *ad hoc* scribblers of notes on the pages of these manuscripts and later printed versions. By so doing, the author finds it necessary, as she says, to trample modern interdisciplinary boundaries, thus