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Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Thelma Fenster and Delbert Russell (eds.). *Vernacular Literary Theory from the French of Medieval England: Texts and Translations, c.1120–c.1450*. Cambridge: Brewer, 2016, xix + 590 pp., 12 illustr., £ 75.00.

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This book is a landmark achievement in the on-going reassessment of the place of French in medieval English culture. In historical linguistics, the old view that Anglo-Norman represented a debased form of Continental Old French has been revealed to be the product of an erroneous comparison between Anglo-Norman and a “standard” now acknowledged to be chimeric: Francien.¹ In a parallel move, the expiration date of the Insular dialect, once set to the mid-thirteenth century, has now been moved forward to the mid-fourteenth.² The interpenetration of French and English lexis has been re-illuminated via the continuing compilation of the *Anglo-Norman Dictionary*, now into its second edition, and the imbrication of French and English cultures has been demonstrated throughout the Middle Ages. Perhaps most interestingly, as Ardis Butterfield has argued, as French and English, and England and France, begin to separate out from one another over the protracted period covered by the Hundred Years War, French

¹ The re-assessment of Anglo-Norman has been a long-term, collaborative project. For seminal treatment of the topic, and for further bibliography, see Trotter (2003).

² See Ingham (2012). For the earlier expiration date, see the influential essay by William Rothwell (1975–1976) on “The Role of French in Thirteenth-Century England”.

becomes more, not less, important in England.³ Against the backdrop of these developments, *Vernacular Literary Theory from the French of Medieval England* offers a welcome opportunity to review the intelligence, vitality, and variety that characterize the French-language literature produced and circulated in England in the later Middle Ages. Its editors' particular aim is to demonstrate the critical thinking that lay behind the conceptualization and social positioning of these materials by their scribes and authors, and thus to shed new light on the expectations of their readers.

To this end, Wogan-Browne, Fenster, and Russell have selected fifty-six text extracts that show French-language writers thinking about their work. While vernacular authors of the Middle Ages did not typically theorize their production after the more explicit fashion of the late Latin writers, it is nevertheless possible to capture a rich series of what the editors call "self-reflexive moments" in their output, moments where we see their texts "identifying themselves, discussing their own production and strategies, interpellating their audiences, and positioning their materials" (xiii). Each of the extracts is provided with an introduction outlining the necessities for their comprehension (date, provenance, author, sources, nature of the text, manuscript source) as well as suggestions for further reading. They are made newly accessible here by their translation. In each case the original French text is accompanied by a parallel Modern English version.

The fifty-six extracts are presented in five parts showcasing critical and creative thinking about language choice (Part I); the interrelated topics of authorship and patronage (Part II); the modes of access to text envisaged by French-language authors (Part III); the place of the audience (Part IV); and the role played by French-language writing in the broader project of cultural transmission (Part V). Thinking within and across these parts is by no means unified. Thus whereas John of Howden demonstrates a highly sensual mode of access to the divine in his gorgeously wrought *Rossignos*, an anonymous sermon on Joshua warns us to guard our senses and to be wary of the gilt of rhetoric (extracts 21 and 23). The highest forms of clerical learning are emulated in Pierre d'Abernon de Fetcham's *Lumere as lais*, which opens with a vernacular *accessus*, but they are presented as arrogant excesses in the anonymous *Vie de seint Clement* (extracts 19 and 25b). Audiences are imagined as immediately present, as in the *Destructioun de Rome*, which begins with a sonorous call to silence of which the first twenty-nine lines share the same rhyme-sound (extract 18); they can also be addressed as the readers of deliberately

³ The *Anglo-Norman Dictionary* can be consulted online at <<http://www.anglo-norman.net>>. On the interpenetration of French and English lexis, see Trotter (2013). On the imbrication of French and English cultures in the later Middle Ages, see Butterfield (2009).

disposed manuscript images and texts (extracts 20a–d, 24a–b). Finally, French can be a language that extends knowledge enshrined in Latin to the unlearned, a recurring topos throughout these extracts; or its enhanced authority and traditional connections to Latinate culture can make it a prime vehicle for parody, as in Hue de Rotelande's *Ipomedon* (extract 4); or it can be counted on to perpetuate the exclusion of rustics, as in the *Vie de saint Clement* (extract 25b, again).

As will be apparent from these selections, one of the most remarkable qualities of the French-language literature of medieval England is its variety. Few readers will be familiar with all of the materials presented in this volume and, as such, the editors have done a great service to their subject by making so broad a selection of texts available and by rendering their extracts accessible to medievalists working outside the narrow (but, it appears here, highly fertile, and developing) field of Anglo-Norman Studies. One factor that unifies many of the works extracted is the persistent role that English noblewomen play both as their inscribed or actual audiences and as their patrons; of the twenty-two historical patrons identified in the passages anthologized in the volume, twelve are women. Nevertheless, one wonders how long the logic behind the grouping of such various texts by language, as here, will continue to be persuasive. One of the most powerful take-home points from the volume for this reviewer is the sheer indeterminacy of the relationship between language choice and textual orientation among the extracts anthologized. Categories above and beyond language – genre, historical and social situation, gender, medium – would seem to play a greater role in shaping the implicit theoretical approaches that the volume's editors seek to elucidate.

With reference to this last point, it should be noted that *Vernacular Literary Theory from the French of Medieval England* does for French texts what an earlier volume, also co-edited by Wogan-Browne (1999), set out to do for Middle English writing.⁴ Given the closeness of the projects, it is odd that more consistent attempts to cross-reference these anthologies were not made: this would have been one means of integrating what these works can tell us about medieval English vernacular theory, which was conducted concurrently in England's two main vernaculars, French and English, for the benefit of audiences that overlapped. Comparison between theorizing in English and French is facilitated by the editors' inclusion of Middle English versions of ten of the French entries in Part VI of the volume, but the work of interpreting these parallel texts is almost entirely left to the reader, and the net needs to be cast much wider to include materials existing uniquely in Middle English and in Continental Frenches and Latin.

⁴ This book, titled *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280–1520*, pioneered the approach to vernacular theory deployed in the volume under review.

For researchers interested in understanding medieval English literary culture in its multilingual totality, *Vernacular Literary Theory from the French of Medieval England* will be an indispensable resource. Its editors have done much to achieve their stated aim, which is to “redress the balance” (6) between the attention paid to vernacular theorizing in Middle English and French. The balance needed to be redressed, and if the task of creating an integrated perspective on vernacular theorizing in England remains to be begun, the editors have provided us with a great many tools to this end that will be of enduring value. Besides the fifty-six text extracts and their individual introductions, the volume also includes an illuminating general introduction, discursive introductions to the volume’s individual parts, and two interpretative essays, the first of which offers the best and most concise history of French in medieval England known to this reviewer; the second interpretative essay devotes welcome attention to the traditionally fraught topic of Anglo-Norman versification and the relative valences of French verse and prose. Other reference tools include a timeline and extensive glossaries of French and Latin literary terms drawn from the edited extracts that in themselves constitute an important contribution to the lexicography of medieval literary theory. Finally, there is a wonderfully rich and up-to-date bibliography, to which frequent reference is helpfully made throughout the volume. *Vernacular Literary Theory from the French of Medieval England* will command a broad readership among students of medieval England. All users of the volume will be quick to recognize the great debt of gratitude owed to Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Thelma Fenster, and Delbert Russell for their work.

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