

*Heroines of the French Epic: A Second Selection of Chansons de Geste.*

Translated by Michael Newth. Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2014.

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IT IS DIFFICULT to know what to say about Michael Newth's volume of translations of Old French epics (*chansons de geste*). He has chosen an interesting range of *chansons de geste* to translate: *Prise d'Orang*, *Floovant*, *Aye d'Avignon*, *Macaire* [which Newth entitles *The Song of Blanchefleur*], and *Berte as grans pies* [Newth's title is *Bertha Broad-foot*]. For this, and for the focus on female characters, I wish I could endorse the volume. In addition, the translations are engaging and lively; using assonanced stanzas (of varying line-length although there is an attempt to stay near the decasyllable or alexandrine lines of the original chansons), Newth does not try for literal translations. While sometimes his word choice can be a bit disconcerting for this medievalist, I generally found the translations to be faithful to the general sense of the original, and I am amazed at the effort it must have taken to accomplish "poetic" translations of so much material. On the other hand, the use of assonance does lend a somewhat "light" tone to all of the translations; this seems more than appropriate in the semi-comic *Prise d'Orange*, but not so for the other texts, whose original tone is quite serious.

The texts were chosen "to illustrate the range of roles gradually accorded to women in these originally militaristic narratives" (ix), and Newth goes on to explain that "Four key narrative roles have been selected—woman as helpmeet, woman as lover, woman as victim, and woman as spiritual model—in order to illustrate some major changes in the social status of women that took place during the period of this popular genre's existence" (ix). However, the volume is divided not into four sections but three, "Saracen Sirens," "Bartered Brides," and "Martyred Minds," and the short introductions to each section (the only introductions to the various texts) do not pick up on the initial four categories with anything but an infrequent passing mention. The main introduction itself is also very short (just over four pages). It focuses on the depictions of women in the earlier *chansons de geste* (*Chanson de Roland*, *Chanson de Guillaume*) and is once again rather disconcerting as it rapidly charts a purported development of female characters in the *chanson de geste* from "helpmeet" to "romantic heroine" (4). Scholarly discussion of a topic, such as the figure of Aude in the *Roland* begins well, but then rapidly veers off and becomes less scholarly in tone and content: "in the song called *Girart of Vienne*, . . . Aude reappears as an independent, even forward young beauty who is quick to exchange witticisms

with any man and to flirt openly with her new admirer, an over-ardent Roland” (2). Similar passages can be found in each of the section introductions as well.

Perhaps the problem is that this book has competing aims, as it were. At the end of his preface, Newth says that the translations are intended for “general readers” or for “students of Western civilisation in such disciplines as history, comparative literature, and gender studies” (x). The minimal introductions and lively, engaging translations are most appropriate for a general public readership, and that would seem to me to be the audience for whom the book should be destined. However, it is published by an academic publisher, and D. S. Brewer is, one assumes, targeting a student audience. However, faculty are unlikely to assign more than one or two of the texts in any given course, and so I think it unlikely they will require students to buy the entire volume. More significantly, faculty will expect well-developed and decidedly more rigorous introductions to each text, and to the *chanson de geste* and to women’s roles more broadly. The various introductions lack any significant information about the individual texts, and in several cases the information provided is based on severely outdated editions such as Guessard and Meyer’s text of *Aye d’Avignon* (which is where Newth derives his presentation of two separate “chansons” of Aye). In addition, statements such as “Among the returning Crusaders such experiences [contact with ‘Infidels’ on the battlefield and with the ‘exotic’ beauty of their ‘Pagan’ wives] had awakened in them . . . the intention to imitate and enjoy the more refined personal and inter-personal lifestyles that they had witnessed among the Moslem populations” (7) with no supporting historical references are truly inappropriate in a volume for students and make it impossible for me to recommend this book for class use.

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