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Review Essay: Epstein, Marcia Jenneth. *Prions en chantant: Devotional Songs of the Trouvères*

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Book Reviews

Epstein, Marcia Jenneth. *Prions en chantant: Devotional Songs of the Trouvères*. Toronto Medieval Texts and Translations, 11. University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1997. 240 pp. Paperback \$19.95. ISBN 0-802-07826-5. Hardback \$50.00. ISBN 0-802-00840-2.

It's true, as Marcia Jenneth Epstein points out, that vernacular devotional songs have not received the attention they deserve from scholars. The challenge of unraveling the complexities of amorous lyrics and establishing their relation to ritual, social practices, and patronage still exerts a strong pull. In *Prions en chantant: Devotional Songs of the Trouvères*, Epstein counters many of the preconceptions one might have about working on devotional lyrics and fills several lacunae in scholarship by showing us just how complex and rooted in social practice these same devotional songs were. She has written an accessible, erudite, and entertaining volume that should attract new scholars and performers to the material she presents. While not exhaustive, Epstein's volume offers a broad and representative view of devotional song in northern France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Her careful attention to the musical as well as poetic text and her interest in performance practice, both past and present, make this a timely and rewarding addition to scholarship on the medieval lyric.

Her samples are taken from two late thirteenth-century manuscripts found in the collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. MS X is an exquisitely produced presentation copy compiled for a noble patron; MS V is less fastidious, abounding in omissions and metric irregularities. Epstein uses the differences between the two to make several points about

aural-visual transmission: (a) performers could be scribes; (b) not all scribes were trained in new mensural styles; (c) variants and discrepancies like the ones found in these devotional songs were allowed and are found also in transcriptions of well-known folk material. Many of the songs she studies are contrafacta and either substitute new lyrics for old melodies (usually secular) or incorporate citations from well-known melodies within the new song's structure, a common feature of today's popular hip-hop music. Epstein concludes that the musical notation of monophonic songs may have served as a sort of *lingua franca* that allowed for great flexibility in interpretation. The manuscripts preserved these songs in a visual medium at a time in which the songs were experienced (learned and listened to) largely as an aural phenomenon.

The songs found in MSS X and V are largely anonymous and, while included in manuscripts of secular music, they are grouped together, in a separate section—identified in MS X as songs to the Mother of God. It is their almost exclusive emphasis on Mary as virgin mother and protector that marks them as distinct from extant liturgical songs of the same period. This attention to the Virgin also distinguishes them from secular *trouvère* songs, which they often closely resemble in form and content, and especially in their focus on a feminine Other. Epstein speculates that the audience for these songs consisted of the urban bourgeoisie and nobility, local and court clergy, and professional entertainers. Such songs are as likely to have been composed by jongleurs as by court clerics, for entertainment as well as edification. Her introductory chapters offer the broadest possible view of secular composition and are refreshingly open to considering the influence of the audience and its beliefs and tastes on the production of the artwork.

Epstein's overt purpose in presenting the texts along with musical notation is to encourage the reader to produce the music, to make it audible. Hers is not a definitive critical edition of the texts. She is not interested in seeking out a putative base text but rather in respecting the "delicate accord of text and with music," even when a source such as her MS V shows signs of having been copied hastily or carelessly. Her justification makes good sense: the manuscript was used as it is and therefore has its own logic and integrity. We, like the medieval user, should make accommodations as required. Epstein's section on editorial decisions is a model of clarity and concision that allows her to justify her choices while emphasizing flexibility. The lyrics themselves are well presented—a complete text followed by a partial text under musical notation. Her volume actually resembles the manuscripts she has studied. It is a modern medieval production that collects and classifies the lyrics but can itself also be used in performance. Each of the songs is classified by text

category (courtly, laudatory, catechetical, political, or personal) and music category (chanson-style, through-composed, round-chanson, or serpentine) as well as by the rhyme scheme and source number, and contrafacta are identified when appropriate.

Her translations are faithful and elegant and allow the songs themselves to shine—and what lyrics! Along with some well-worn metaphorical conceits on virginity and motherhood, spring and budding flowers, we find great attention paid to the body of the mother and child and to popularization of more learned references to light and impregnation (#34), as well as a menagerie of symbolic animals (#37) and literary heroines (#25). Some of the songs have been anthologized before but none conveys the collective force of these lovely lyrics as well as Epstein's anthology. Anyone interested in medieval lyric will find it an invaluable addition. Epstein's attention to the interplay between genres, rhetorical registers, court and church, lady and virgin leads us toward new areas of inquiry and to reevaluation of others.

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Williams, Gary Jay. *Our Moonlight Revels: "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in the Theatre. Studies in Theatre History and Culture Series*, ed. Thomas Postlewait, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 1997. 340 pp. \$39.95. ISBN 0-877-45592-9.

Not merely "a stage history," this beautifully produced book sets out to identify the cultural contexts in which *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has been produced (or in which it has not seemed worth producing). Beginning with the hypothetical first performance (which, Gary Jay Williams argues firmly, was not intended for an aristocratic wedding) and working up to productions as recent as 1996, Williams goes on to describe a remarkable range of interpretations: the Purcell *Fairy Queen* (with orange trees appearing in the final scene as a tribute to Queen Mary II and her husband, William of Orange); the nineteenth-century habit of casting Oberon as a woman and Puck as a child; the radical experiments of the twentieth century, from Granville Barker's "aesthetic" interpretation and Reinhardt's explorations of folklore to Peter Brook's gymnasium setting—which, Williams notes, seems an unconscious fulfillment of Barker's 1915 statement that "What is really needed is a great