Review Essay: Kevin Brownlee and Walter Stephens, eds.,
*Discourses of Authority in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*

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GENERAL


These essays originated in the 1985 Dartmouth College Colloquium on Medieval and Early Modern Romance Literatures. The editors’ introduction seeks to place the essays in the context of contemporary criticism’s preoccupations with *inter alia*, authors and authority, texts and intertextuality.

Albert Ascoli discusses Dante’s construction of a superpersonal poetic authority against the limitations of poetic language and his construction of the poet as an individual man by historicizing the self and by suggesting the analogy of “binding words” (*Convivio* 4.6.3–4) to divine creation. Giuseppe Mazzotta sees Dante solving the same problem by exploiting the role of play in the *Commedia* to figure the poet’s work as God’s work, a transcendental aesthetics that grounds ethics and knowledge. François Rigolot studies Ronsard’s comparable wrestling with the problem of suprapersonal authority in the *Franciade*: the poet’s unresolved claims for the historically circumstanced authority of Vergil and the originary epic authority of Homer, imagined as beyond time and circumstance. The one essay on a later figure, Donald Verene’s on Vico, shows an analogy in Vico’s preference for the authority of *sapienza poetica* over that of documented history.

Nancy Vickers writes on Petrarch’s appropriation and reinterpretation of Dante’s “widowed verses” (*Vita nuova* 31) in the first of Petrarch’s *in morte* sonnets, which rewrites Dante’s community of mourning into an isolated and individualized widowhood to construct a more poetically masterful authority. Authorial self-consciousness is also at issue in David Hult’s essay on Chrétien’s *Charrette*, a text whose authority is evidently shared between Chrétien and his presumed continuer “Godefroi de Leigni.” Whether or not “Godefroi” was Chrétien’s creation, the text precludes a single intentionality.
BooK REVIEWS

Marina Scordilis Brownlee studies a sequence of appropriations: Boccaccio’s use of Ovid’s Heroides in the Elegia di madonna Fiammetta and the continuation of the Elegia by Juan de Flores in Grimalte y Gradissa. She interprets the tension between Boccaccio’s mythologizing (universalizing) and psychologizing (individualizing) as a crisis in linguistic referentiality, the split being then widened by Flores through reversal of the conventional signifying movement from word to referent. A similar problem is explored by James Burke in Libro de buen amor and El Conde Lucanor: both enact the hermeneutics of distinguishing signs of the true and the false, the former confident in its discernment of the counterfeit, the latter skeptical about the referentiality of signs.

Kevin Brownlee finds Christine de Pizan’s authority in Dité de Jehanne d’Arc deriving from collaboration between woman warrior and woman poet, the former in a figural line of female saviors, the latter in the sibylline line of female prophets, both equally empowered by God. Through instances of Tasso’s implicit imitations and borrowings from other texts in Gerusalemme liberata, Walter Stephens finds, in contrast to some recent readings, an unstable and scarcely consistent plurality of representations of marital relations and the roles of women.

In his study of Petrarch’s Rime 131, William Kennedy finds Renaissance commentators and poets (Louise Labé and Shakespeare) responding in different ways to the poet’s complex gendering of self and audience. Nancy Struever’s essay seeks to show how Machiavelli and Montaigne redefined ethical inquiry in the humanist tradition—Machiavelli by resisting the exemplum as a narrative prop to canonical moral counsel, Montaigne by accentuating the autonomy of moral belief within public situations that test it; both writers appeal to an anti-authoritarian “moral work” enacted through a break with the authority of traditional moral discourse.

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MEDIEVAL