

DUBIN, Nathaniel E., trans. 2013. *The Fabliaux: A New Verse Translation*. New York: Liveright Publishing. 978-0-87140357-5. Pp. xxxii + 982 and 1 illustration. Hardback. \$29.95.

Bawdy, irreverent, and often obscene, the corpus of Old French fabliaux has long been the purview of medieval French scholars. With more than one hundred and fifty extant tales in multiple manuscripts, the fabliaux comprise a substantial body of medieval comic literature, but until now only a select few have been available to the wider public. Nathaniel Dubin's new verse translation, with facing page Old French, redresses that lacuna and offers a scintillating selection of these riotous tales. This beautifully bound volume, complete with black-satin ribbon marker, offers unapologetic translations of the fabliaux, several of which appear here for the first time in English.

Introduced by noted French medievalist R. Howard Bloch, the volume explains the place and significance of the fabliaux in medieval society from the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries. The fabliaux cover everything from marriage to money lending, preaching to promiscuous priests, and chivalric klutzes to loquacious anatomy. As Bloch explains, these tales are mirrors of society. Both Bloch and Dubin categorize the fabliaux as a misogynist and highly conservative genre, though several critical studies in the last ten years have challenged aspects of that view. Dubin acknowledges the paradox that the fabliaux are rebellious despite their conserva-

tism, but he does not expand on that premise. The fabliaux do, however, as Bloch asserts, provide a rare window into the domestic sphere of medieval life and inflect that glimpse with a certain realism.

In his note to the translations, Dubin clearly outlines his method and his editorial choices. His own edition of the manuscripts is based on the full critical transcription by Willem Noomen, the *Nouveau Recueil Complet des Fabliaux*. At times he disagreed with Noomen's editorial choices and so made his own, and from that compilation crafted his unique translations. Compared to collections like *Fabliaux Fair and Foul* by John DuVal, as well as the much more critical translations DuVal produced with Raymond Eichmann from Bibliothèque nationale de France, fonds français 837, Dubin's translations are often fairly loose, but they are exceptionally funny, capturing the essence of the tales and preserving the humor and raunchy possibilities of linguistic play. He acknowledges that some of his decisions were made to please himself, and for artistry rather than for accuracy. As an example, he offers a verse from *Le Foteor* (*The Fucker*), which begins: "Qui fabloier velt, si fabloit, / mais que son dit n'en affebloit / por dire chose desresnable" (vv. 1–3), which he translates as "Let fabulists confabulate; / but tales too fabulous deflate / a fable's worth and make it feeble" (839). It is not a strictly literal translation but the tongue twisting alliteration is charming.

The translations are, of course, the centerpiece of the collection; having produced nearly one thousand pages of poetry, Dubin can be forgiven for skimping a bit on the textual apparatus. Despite the complexity and textured nature of his translations, his explanations and limited analysis are somewhat one-dimensional. He skips over alternative readings of the fabliaux as parody to focus on the aspect of gritty realism. The explanatory notes are exceptionally brief and cover only references that may be obscure for modern audiences. There are very few secondary citations and the short bibliography at the end includes only three works from this century, barely scratching the surface of current fabliaux scholarship. Dubin does, however, include a very useful list of surviving fabliaux manuscripts, and a map locating the provenance of the extant texts.

The texts are separated into three groups: "The Social Fabric", "The Comedy of Errors", and "Sinning, Sex, and Saintliness". The first section brings together fabliaux that give an overview of medieval life—creation stories, tales on the organization of society, the three social estates, women, family, and then, three final tales on the afterlife. The second deals with trickery and tricksters, upon whom the tables are often turned. The final set focuses on the Seven Deadly Sins, primarily lust and gluttony, with

a foray into greed and envy. In many cases, individual fabliau could easily fall into all three categories, so the divisions seem somewhat arbitrary. Each section begins with a brief explanation of its properties, but only two explain which texts were included and why. The preface to the middle section actually talks more about the contents of the previous section.

The 69 tales included in this collection are only a portion of Dubin's extensive translation project. They represent a cross-section of his work, and of the surviving poems. His translation style conveys the sound and sense of poetic euphemism and double entendre, and makes these texts come to life. Presented with the original language texts, the translations function much like Seamus Heaney's edition of *Beowulf*—modern readers who may not be familiar with the genre, the discipline, or the language can experience the exhilaration of these fabulous fabliaux. This is the perfect collection for an undergraduate class being introduced to the genre for the first time. Students will laugh at titles like *Le Chevalier qui fesoit les cons parler* (*The Knight Who Could Make Cunts Talk*); they will snicker at the antics of *Le sot chevalier* (*The Stupid Knight*); and they will gasp in horror at the abuse of *La Dame escoilleé* (*The Gelded Lady*). But they will be enchanted, and ideally ask for more.

The Fabliaux is not a critical edition, nor should it be mistaken for one. It does not really need to be one. Overall it is a valuable collection that makes some of the funniest, most engaging medieval poems available to a wide audience of both specialists and students. Dubin is to be commended for producing such a wonderful volume. It is a celebration of comedy and the comic tale that elevates the discourse of medieval literature, even as it rolls around in the linguistic gutter, laughing gleefully.

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