Book Review


Sharon Kinoshita’s book is an excellent study employing a most fruitful approach to a useful understanding of medieval vernacular literature, namely, cultural interaction, or, more precisely, and as Kinoshita terms it, “cross-cultural contact.” As the title, *Medieval Boundaries*, indicates, the idea of boundary or frontier is preeminent. Boundaries separate, are crossed, and exhibit various degrees of permeability. The boundary today, indeed seeming chasm, between the Islamic world and the Western, highly secularized, but still predominantly Christian world, is essentialized by the popularly touted concept of a clash of civilizations. Yet we know that travel, education, and the fact of immigration—which creates diversity, at least in Western populations, with its concomitant interaction and dialogue—work to counter the weight of stereotyped perceptions of the Other, at least when conflict does not overwhelm interaction. When looking at boundaries in a far-distant time period, such as the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries in medieval Europe, it is easy to slip into simple dichotomies of East/West or Christian/Muslim, failing to probe the lived realities of people on both sides of what was not always a clear divide. Kinoshita probes that reality and finds that boundaries in this period in medieval Europe exhibited a certain permeability which in turn informed the literary production of that period. As she states, speaking of the twelfth century, “Representations of alterity were notably more fluid and less marked by the racializing discourses typical of later centuries than we sometimes assume” (p. 5).

*Medieval Boundaries* itself is informed by post-colonial theoretics without being overwhelmed by them. The point in Kinoshita’s work is the texts themselves and how they can be understood through “the the-
matics of cultural interaction” (p. 1), how the contact between cultures, not only Christian and Muslim, but also Anglo-Norman English and Welsh, Latin and Byzantine, is articulated in and through early French vernacular literary production. It is the study of historical context at its finest.

The core of Kinoshita’s argument in *Medieval Boundaries* is set out in the introduction. First she explains the three axes along which her argument is laid, namely, periodization, geography, and vernacularization. The first has to do with the crucial tactic of avoiding the tendency to lump the many centuries of the Middle Ages into one uniform period. The second concerns the importance of recognizing the wide geographical range of knowledge of cultures beyond the frontiers of the modern Hexagon that informs the literature. The third acknowledges the significance of the choice of composing in the vernacular as opposed to Latin.

Kinoshita acknowledges the important work done in the past on the relationship between the Christian and Muslim worlds, but, as she points out, that work focused on polemic, that is, the treatises articulating the longstanding clerical hostility toward Islam, whereas her interest lies in “medieval Christians’ lived reactions and interactions with Muslims and the Islamic world” (p. 6). It is this historical contextualization that allows for a new look at many canonical and less widely studied texts.

The first section, “Epic Revisions,” has two chapters, beginning with “‘Pagans Are Wrong and Christians Are Right’: From *Parias* to Crusade in the *Chanson de Roland,*” which focuses on the poem that Kinoshita points out has been “canonized as *the* foundational text of the French Middle Ages” (p. 9). Kinoshita reads it through the historical context of a culture of accommodation between the *ṭa‘īfa* kings of Muslim Spain and their Christian counterparts, which included the payment of *parias* or tribute. Kinoshita points out that the medieval audience would have understood the meaning of the message from Marsile to Charlemagne in the opening scene of the poem as a reference to payment of *parias* and is able to make a strong argument that the poem is, in essence, a polemic against such accommodation and a cry for crusade, as opposed to the *Olifant*.
more traditional interpretation that sees it simply as informed by the contemporary culture of crusade. Roland is the “agent of this transformation” (p. 24) who utters the immortal line: “Pagans are wrong and Christians are right.” Kinoshita calls this a “militant declaration of Carolingian superiority [that] conceals an anxiety born of a crisis of differentiation” (p. 31) – that is, a fear of too much accommodation.

The second chapter, “The Politics of Courtly Love,” concerns the motif of the Saracen princess who falls in love with the Christian knight and converts to Christianity, which the author examines through the prism of *La Prise d’Orange* and three texts offering alternative treatments of the theme, namely, *La Chanson de Roland*, *Le Pèlerinage de Charlemagne*, and *Aucassin et Nicolette*. Kinoshita interprets the theme of “conquest-by-seduction” (p. 47) as a safety valve of sorts for the dangerous implications of courtly love and its threat to proper lineage. By projecting adulterous desire on a foreign queen and recovering her through seduction for Christianity, all menace to feudal stability is sublimated.

The next two chapters fall under the section heading “Romances of Assimilation” in which *Floire et Blancheflor*, treated in the third chapter, “In the Beginning Was the Road,” reflects some of the particularities of “cross-confessional understanding” (p. 77) in medieval Iberia, while the two *lais* of Marie de France with Welsh settings, “Yonec” and “Milun,” represent dramas of questions of legitimate heredity in lands colonized by the Normans after 1066 that are shaped by “the relations between an indigenous past and a colonial present” (p. 131).

The last section of the book, “Crisis and Change,” moves into the thirteenth century, a period of reordering of power: the consolidation of power on the part of the French monarchy, the Latin colonial conquest of Constantinople, and the continued reconquest of the Iberian peninsula. In her fifth chapter, “Brave New Worlds,” Kinoshita reads Robert de Clari’s *La Conquête de Constantinople* as the account of a colonial enterprise interpreted through his own conceptual models of epic and adventure. Chapter Six, “The Romance of MiscegeNation” explicates the expulsion
of “La Fille du comte de Pontieu,” her conversion to Islam and ascen-
dancy to a Saracen throne, her reintegration into Christian society, and
her role in the ancestry of “‘Saladin the courtly’” (p. 177) as a challenge
to “questions of identity and cultural difference” (p. 184) and “the por-
ousness of the confessional divide” (p. 185). The last chapter, “Uncivil
Wars,” analyzes the Chanson de la croisade albigeoise (in particular, the
Anonymous Continuation, which places itself squarely in the camp of the
Occitanian resistance) as the representation of another colonial enter-
prise, the war that began as a crusade to repress a heresy and ended up
suppressing a culture based on paratge—an idealization of high lineage
and legitimate inheritance of land among Occitan nobles, threatened by
the crusaders from the north.

The critical apparatus is strong—careful footnotes with not only full
references but also extra material that would have burdened the flow of
the chapter narratives and a thorough bibliography. The only work I
found missing that might have been helpful is Paul Bancourt’s 1982
study Les Musulmans dans les chansons de geste du cycle du roi, as
Bancourt did try to sort out the variance between textual motifs and his-
torical reality.

Kinoshita’s stated purpose in the Introduction is “to give students of
medieval French literature a stronger sense of the historical context
grounding the works we study” (p. 12). This book does deliver on that
premise for the period it chose to focus on. It would be fruitful to apply
her method more thoroughly to later texts. Late medieval epic and ro-
mance, in particular, have sometimes been denigrated as a sign of the
decadence of the literary tradition, but waxing interest in Middle French
literature would be well served by a deeper study of historical context
informed by post-colonial theoretics.

SHIRA SCHWAM-BAIRD
University of North Florida

Olifant