

Book Review

Gaydon. Chanson de geste du XIII^e siècle, présentée, éditée et annotée par Jean Subrenat. Traduite en collaboration avec Andrée Subrenat. Louvain-Paris: Peeters, 2007. Pp. 803.

The thirteenth-century *chanson de geste* *Gaydon*, a sequel to the *Chanson de Roland*, tells the story of young Thierry d'Anjou, Charlemagne's champion in the famous judicial combat that decides the outcome of Ganelon's trial. The ongoing feud between Thierry, rebaptized Gaydon, and the traitor's clan, resulting in a military standoff between Anjou and the King of France, is not without resonances of contemporary history, although the anonymous poet seems to intend first and foremost to write a literary text, being more concerned with general moral questions than with political ones. *Gaydon*, therefore, is an ideal example in which to study the development of the epic genre in the first half of the thirteenth century, when the weakening of political opposition to the King of France is lessening the political impact of the genre. Topics touched upon by the *Gaydon* poet include social and moral nobility, the relationship between love and warfare, and the conflict of generations. The main theme of this epic, however, is the contrast between loyalty and treason under an aging, weak Charlemagne, who is depicted as an easy target for bribery, inclined to overreact emotionally, unable to uphold justice among his barons, and easily taken in by the traitors, who several times almost succeed in killing him. This highly interesting *chanson de geste* has been rather neglected by scholars over the past decades, owing mainly to the lack of an easily accessible modern edition replacing the one published by François Guessard and Siméon Luce in 1862 in the *Anciens Poètes de la France*. Subrenat's new edition now finally fills this long-lamented lacuna.

The volume opens with a brief general presentation followed by a summary of the plot. Brief introductory chapters deal with the

manuscripts, the date, the literary position of *Gaydon*, the text, and its translation. A short bibliography precedes the edition proper, with the modern French translation facing the Old French text. In the text, the caesura of the decasyllabic lines is marked by a larger space, which students struggling with the metre will find helpful. A few footnotes indicate corrections and omissions from the manuscript upon which the edition is based. The latter part of the volume contains a list of variants, notes, a thematic index to the notes, a list of proverbs, an index of proper names of persons, and another index of place names.

From an editorial point of view, Subrenat's edition cannot, and does not, claim to be very original. There are three known manuscripts of *Gaydon*, called [a] (BNF fr. 860), [b] (BNF fr. 15102, which Subrenat, relying on Guessard and Luce, still calls "suppl. fr. 2510"), and [c] (BNF fr. 1475). While [c] is a late, fifteenth-century copy, both [a] and [b] belong to the thirteenth century, with [a] having recently been re-dated to the second half of that century, whereas [b] was very likely copied before 1250. Nevertheless, Subrenat, like the preceding editors, and to his explicit regret, finds himself compelled to edit the text of [a] since [b] presents too many lacunae to be taken into consideration as a base text. He tries to compensate for this by including a long, though not exhaustive, list of variants from [b], including the different opening laisses (the only passage where [b] radically diverges from [a], parts of which were already published by Guessard and Luce), as well as by giving a synoptic edition of four selected laisses in all three manuscripts. The corrections to Guessard and Luce's transcription are few and are concerned mainly with the resolution of abbreviations. The merit of Subrenat's edition lies in the fact that he clearly states both his reasons for preferring ms. [a] and the rules adopted in his transcription.

As is the rule in the *Ktemata* series, a modern French prose translation accompanies the text. This translation is the product of a collaboration between Jean Subrenat and Andrée Subrenat. Although it keeps, generally speaking, quite close to the source text, it is written in an extremely legible style and very often presents fine solutions to Old

French expressions that are difficult to translate. A few remarks on the translation technique seem nevertheless indicated. We don't wish to put too much stress on a few *lapsus*, such as the *esperon* which becomes an "étrier" (l. 1627) or the verb *estuier* which is translated as "essuyer" (l. 210)—these are quite rare. However, it seems relevant to point out that the modern French text does not necessarily imitate the syntactic structure of the Old French one, not only changing the order of clauses (a practically unavoidable corollary of writing in correct modern French) but also leaving out, for instance, some of the synonyms which are so typical of medieval epic style; thus "La nes ardoit et aloit esprennant" becomes "le navire était en feu" (l. 4546).

Where the meaning of a word is unclear or debated, sometimes more vague terms are used. This is the case, for instance, with the poisoned fruit sent to Charlemagne at the outset of the plot, the "parmains" repeatedly referred to throughout the poem and translated, in most cases, as "fruits." While there is a reference in the notes to diverging interpretations of this word, no explanation is given for other simplifications such as the verb *desraisnier* rendered by a simple "paroles" (l. 686). Technical terms of warfare are more than once trivialized in the translation. The phrase "que jamais change an soit" (l. 950, where "change" is mentioned as a possible, but rejected, alternative to killing—it seems clear that the term refers to either the exchange or the ransoming of prisoners) is rendered as "qu'il en soit autrement," while the traitor Amboyn's cry by which he reassures his troops that the enemy is outnumbered, "lor force est outree," becomes "ils sont à bout de forces" (l. 7939). Moreover, the translation is not always consistent in its choices; it often seems to draw undue inspiration from the immediate context. An intriguing example is the expression *en avoir garni*, which in line 776 is rendered by the phrase "Vous m'en avez bien averti," while in line 1090, it is translated as "Vous avez fait ma fortune."

While the translation certainly cannot in any way be considered as an attempt at a literary rewriting, it still departs from the grammatical structure of the source text a bit too often and is not consistent enough in

its lexical choices to be a real help for a learner of Old French, who, baffled by an unusual term or a more difficult syntactic structure, might wish to check the interpretation of the editor. Rather than a learning tool for students, the translation is useful for nonspecialists, who are unable to read the Old French original, to whom it provides a fairly close rendering of the text.

The introduction and other critical parts of the edition are somewhat restricted in length and scope. There is no extensive discussion of the language of the manuscripts or of the author (although a few characteristics, e.g. the profusion of the short form of the possessives, observable both in [a] and [b], might warrant an explanation). The discussion of the date of the text, though rather brief, is certainly more precise than the one in Guessard/Luce. It is based on the mention of the Franciscans and Dominicans (as “cordeliers” and “jacobins”) in line 6465. (Subrenat does not explain, however, why he believes these terms to have been generally known around 1225 but not before). It also takes into account new datings of the manuscripts, leaves out vague motif parallels, and adds the curious remark of Alberic de Trois-Fontaines about the death, registered under the year 1234, of an old man in Apulia passing himself off as Roland’s squire Thierry, also named Gaidonius. The time window thus obtained for the composition of the poem is from c. 1225 to 1240, very likely between 1230 and 1234.

While Subrenat’s hesitancy to take into account motif parallels in *Parise la Duchesse*, *Gui de Nanteuil*, or *Macaire* is certainly commendable (Guessard and Luce had determined somewhat arbitrarily that *Gui de Nanteuil* precedes *Gaydon* while *Parise la Duchesse* and *Macaire* draw on *Gaydon*), he errs perhaps a bit in the opposite direction in his discussion of the “literary position” of *Gaydon*, refusing to trace any influences to specific texts and preferring to speak about the “climat épique littéraire de son temps” (p. 23). It seems far more likely to us that a thirteenth-century poet did make use of one of the versions of the rhymed *Roland* and of one of the versions of Pseudo-Turpin’s *Chronicle* (which had already been translated several times into the vernacular at

that point) rather than relying on vague (oral?) traditions or whatever else is meant by “climat épique littéraire.”

The notes on the texts consist mainly of explanations of vocabulary based on a number of dictionaries. They also point out specific rituals and customs, explain what might be construed as inconsistencies on the content level, and mention a few relevant paleographical or codicological details (expunctuation, repetition of lines at the point where a new quire begins, etc.).

The most baffling aspect of Subrenat’s edition is the discussion, or the absence of a discussion, of a possible historical background for the *Gaydon* poem. In a footnote on pages 19-20, Subrenat quotes his own earlier study of the text (*Etude sur Gaydon. Chanson de geste du XIII^e siècle*, Aix-en-Provence: Editions de l’Université de Provence, 1974, pp. 50-51) in which he established, quite convincingly, a relationship between the text and military and political events in 1230-1234, while at the same time asking the reader to be prudent in accepting what he wrote at a younger age. No reasons are given for this more hesitating attitude. This is curiously disappointing. One is left to wonder, wishing to know more.

The whole volume thus conveys the impression of having been put together not exactly hastily but perhaps under some constraints of time—in any case without carrying out new extensive research around the text. While we do not in the least wish to diminish the merit of this edition, which makes available a long-neglected and highly interesting text and compares favourably with the only complete edition which precedes it, we do hope that Jean Subrenat will at some point find the time to take up his earlier study on *Gaydon* in another context and tell us what he thinks about its background now.

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