Book Review
Fierabras and Floripas: A French Epic Allegory

Michael A.H. Newth, *Fierabras and Floripas: A French Epic Allegory.* New York: Italica Press, 2010. Pp. 254.

Michael A.H. Newth, who previously published a translation of *Aymeri of Narbonne* with Italica Press, has produced another volume of French epic rendered in English. In this case, he has chosen to publish as one continuous tale two separate works, *La Destruction de Rome* and *Fierabras*. Both are part of the popular French epic Charlemagne cycle, and *La Destruction* clearly precedes *Fierabras* in the connected narrative, although the composition of the latter may predate the former. As Newth explains in his introduction, both trace their origin to a lost epic commonly referred to as **La Chanson de Balan*. Thus, by combining two tales that have come down in separate manuscript traditions and recounting them as a single narrative, Newth offers an approximation of what one might surmise to be the older version of the story. Moreover, by giving it the title he does, he not only focuses on the legend of the fierce Saracen giant Fierabras who triumphantly seizes the holy relics of Christ's passion from a vanquished and pillaged Rome, battles a wounded Oliver, and, once defeated by this champion of God, converts enthusiastically to Christianity, he also highlights the important secondary story of Fierabras's beautiful and aggressive sister, Floripas, who falls ardently in love with Gui de Bourgogne and, with energy and an appreciable dose of violence, overcomes every obstacle in the path towards fulfillment of her passionate attachment.

Newth provides a twenty-four page introduction divided into sections entitled Genre, Authorship, Artistic Achievement, Sources and Influences, and Editorial Policy—standard divisions for introductions to American editions of medieval works. This is followed by a bibliography which unfortunately is not always clearly tied to the introduction. For example, Newth lists several studies of the motif of the Saracen princess

but makes no reference to them in his introduction aside from Crosland's (although appropriately so as a negative example—he quotes her reference to Floripas as "one of a line of repulsive females" [p. xx]). It might have been helpful for him to explain on what basis he formulated his proffered Select Bibliography, which includes many works beyond those actually cited. Another quibble is an unfortunate slip whereby the full bibliographical citation for a parenthetical reference on page xxv of the introduction, "(Stimming, 550-88)," fails to appear in the bibliography.

When translating medieval works, there is always a choice to be made as to how literal a translation to produce. Even a translation clearly intended for scholars (and particularly a facing-page translation) which attempts to follow the original language as much as possible must veer from strict literality owing to the differences between one language and another. But poetic choices can range more widely in a translation removed from its original and intended for a more general audience. Newth gives us an adaptation that renders the liveliness and vigorous qualities of the original and plumbs the varieties of English poetic language to do so. He chooses to use approximate assonance in most of the lines of a laisse since it is impossible without excessive straining to provide rhymes throughout as in the original. He also adds numerous alliterations that add much to the pleasure of reading the text. Moreover he excels in maintaining the humor, the dynamic violence, and the dramatic tension of the tale. I particularly enjoyed his version of the episodes recounting the siege of the Muslim stronghold where a group of Christian knights along with Floripas and some of her maidens are enclosed in the Saracen keep. The knights sally forth to seize food supplies or to engage in battle the Saracen forces surrounding them, but at times, the ladies join in the battle, hurling rocks from on high on the enemy forces below.

Another feature of Newth's translation is a happy use of English rhythms and imagistic vocabulary. For example, he renders l. 1263 "Li moustiers en poi d'houre fu des payens poeples [*sic*]" as "Till every aisle

was seething with Satan's renegades" (p. 36)." In another instance, "Li fix Renier de Gennes" is rendered twice as "Geneva's pride and joy" (p. 52)—far from literal, but providing a rhythm to fit the line and using an expressive English epithet for "son."

On occasion, one might find the liveliness of the translation a bit excessive, as in the rendering of the following passage:

> Rollans et Oliviers adonques s'atourna,
> En une camber vint où Mahomet esta,
> Apolins et Margos, ù l'ors reflambois.
> Cascuns a prins le sien, à son col le carça,
> Rollans tint Apolin, durement se hasta,
> Ens en la gregneur presse de paiens le froissa.
> Et Ogiers prinst Margot, après lui le lancha;
> Oliviers, Tervagant, après aus le rua.
>
> Count Olivier spun round as gallant Roland sprinted
> To reach that vaulted room where false Mahoment's figure
> Was cast in shining gold, beside his evil kindred.
> Each baron picked one up and piggy-backed an image,
> With Roland in the lead—Apollo was his piggy!—
> Then dropped them on the Moors wherever they were the thickest!
> Duke Ogier hugged Margot—but not for long—he ditched him,
> Then Olivier alike duped Tervagant as quickly! (p. 194)

To "piggy-back an image" is already a very colloquial way to say that each Christian hero loaded a statue on his back, even though it does transmit the idea that the knights have no respect for the "pagan" gods and adds another layer of disrespect in alluding to the animal flesh forbidden to Muslims. However, to add that Apollo was Roland's piggy is perhaps taking a bigger liberty than even the humorous intent of the narrator, who is describing how these statues become missiles in the ongoing battle between the besieged Christians and the surrounding

Saracens, can justify; nor, at least to this reviewer's knowledge, is it a common phrasing in English.

Another translation quibble—"amiral" is usually correctly translated as "emir," but in one instance on page 9 it is translated as "admiral," probably because it is translated as "emir" in the previous line and English style tends to demand avoidance of repetition of nouns. However, "admiral" in modern English always implies a sea commander, so the translation would have been better served by another variant like "commander" or simply "lord." Overall the text is well proofed with only one error noted by this reviewer where "fiancee" appears instead of "fiancé" (p. 140), even though it clearly refers to Guy and not to Floripas.

One last criticism: to emphasize the unity of the two texts, the translator has chosen not only to create one continuous text, he has also divided the text into four divisions called "Gestes" (p. xxxi) which follow what he sees as the four stages of Fierabras's "long personal journey to a state of grace," namely *Vanity*, *Submission*, *Desires*, *Deserts* (p. xix). He sees Floripas's conversion in similar terms (pp. xxi-xxii). While it might make sense simply to organize the text into logical chapters for the ease of modern readers, I find somewhat artificial and extraneous the imposition of such a thematic schema on a text which is in many ways polymorphic, indeed a motley of storylines concerning not only the adventures of Fierabras and Floripas, but also Charlemagne, Oliver, Roland, Guy de Bourgogne, Naimon, and others. It does not add to our understanding of the text or to the quality of what Newth has achieved here: a lively and entertaining rendering of a medieval classic that should please and serve the needs of general readers, students, and scholars alike.

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