

Book Review

La Geste Francor

La Geste Francor. Edition of the Chansons de geste of MS Marc. Fr. XIII (=256), with glossary, introduction and notes by Leslie Zarker Morgan. 2 vols, ACMRS Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 348. Tempe, Arizona: ACMRS-Arizona State University, 2009. Pp. i-xx, 1-1483.

In her opening acknowledgements, Leslie Zarker Morgan thanks those who have followed her work on Franco-Italian texts over a period of more than thirty years. It behoves a reviewer at the outset of a review of this edition even more to thank Zarker Morgan for her unwavering commitment to the study and editing of these texts and for her constant desire to draw to the attention of new generations of students their too-often ignored literary merits and linguistic charms. The journey to the publication of these two volumes has indeed been a labor of love.

At the core of this publication there is the edition of the nine texts that make up Marc. Fr. XIII, commonly known as V¹³: *Enfances Bovo*; *Berta da li pe grant*; *Chevalerie Bovo*; *Karleto*; *Berta e Milone*; *Enfances Ogier le Danois*; *Orlandino*; *Chevalerie Ogier le Danois*; *Macario*. These are seminal texts for the Italian tradition of the *chansons de geste* as it developed into the great genre of *poemi cavallereschi* in *ottava rima*, and equally are significant for their influence on the great prose compilations, such as those of Andrea da Barberino in the early fifteenth century. The story of Bovo remained popular into the Renaissance and indeed was one of the few such texts to spark off a dedicated series of illustrations for printed versions; while the undying enmity of the house of Maganza, which is recounted here from its beginnings in the early history of *Berta da li pe grant* right through to *Macario*, was to become a standard thematic topos of the Italian tradition, reaching its apogee in Luigi Pulci's *Morgante*, in which Gano

di Maganza commands what amounts to an international criminal spy ring designed to disrupt and destroy the paladins.

Hitherto, in particular for students, and especially for those outside Italy, access to these texts in a clear and readable form, and in a single place has been problematic. The most recent, and virtually the only edition of the complete manuscript before Zarker Morgan's, is that of Aldo Rosellini, which appeared in 1986. This is undoubtedly an important predecessor, as Zarker Morgan acknowledges, but it has also a number of defects. In publishing her edition, Zarker Morgan aims to supplement and enhance Rosellini's edition, correcting errors, but also, as she indicates in the preface, drawing on "techniques not available at that time" (i.e., 1986), in particular the opportunities afforded by digitized texts for exhaustive and reliable linguistic statistics and analyses. This approach to linguistic and editorial work valuably informs a number of the sections of the Introduction, in volume 1.

Any discussion of Franco-Italian as a language is fraught with problems, starting with the still unresolved dispute between those scholars who view it as a full language (comparable for example to Provençal), those who view it as a hybrid or koiné (comparable to the linguistic mix of Norman England), and those who view it as an artificial literary construct. The situation is further complicated by the vagaries of orthography and the difficulties of assessing the sounds represented by any one phoneme. In section 2 (I, pp. 17-52) Zarker Morgan reviews the range of theories and approaches. She notes how dependent scholars remain on the philological studies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the problems that arise if one accepts the views of scholars such as Holtus that this is "une langue artificielle stylisée et très littéraire" when in many respects Franco-Italian texts are not very literary (in the accepted sense) at all. Zarker Morgan's discussion here should prompt new research on these linguistic dilemmas.

Working on a digitized text and using computer concordancing, Zarker Morgan has been able to count the phoneme frequencies and to report these by type and token. She has thus not only been able to check

the theories and decisions of previous editors and scholars but naturally also to use the coherent statistical counts yielded to inform the choices made in her own edition of these texts. The conclusions she draws, for example, on the presence/absence of diphthongs are very useful.

The discussion of certain phonological elements continues into the longer section on morphology (I, p. 30 ff.). Given the lack of any apparent standard, the morphology of Franco-Italian texts is especially problematic. Zarker Morgan surveys some of the most important aspects, including noun endings and the difficulties posed by the need to assess whether the writer is tending, in any one case, towards French or towards Italian usage, as well as the problem of judging word accents (and so, for example, verb forms) in texts which do not mark these. Verbs provoke indeed a range of morphological conundrums, given the sheer range of variations possible for the personal endings of the different tenses and the numerous inconsistencies of agreements. Working out the precise meaning and appropriate form constitutes for the editor of these texts a perpetual crux. In addition, verb forms (as continued to be the case into the sixteenth century for Italian) are frequently modified and manipulated to fit the rhyme or assonance ending required. Zarker Morgan has carried out a great deal of analysis on this aspect and reports very useful findings in a series of tables (section 3, I, pp. 53-71). Concluding her discussion of the language of these texts, Zarker Morgan suggests that what emerges above all is the ambiguity inherent in referring to the language of written texts like these as “Franco-Italian” implying phonological and morphological norms which often do not exist even within a single text. This would seem to militate against arguments for Franco-Italian as a literary language since in such a literary language one would expect to find fixed, accepted forms, but Zarker Morgan does not go on to stress here the much more important point, namely that the range of variants, the flexibility and dynamism of the language, are evidence of a vibrant oral tradition and even indeed of performance texts. The manuscript may indeed have been compiled for a princely patron (the Gonzaga), but the texts derive from the traditions of the *giullare* and the *cantastorie*.

The longest section of the Introduction (I, pp. 73-254) deals with the content of the narratives, including, for each individual text, a discussion of the general outline of the story, a presentation of the version found in V¹³, other Italian and other European versions, considerations of similarities and differences, and in some cases tables of names of characters. The chief motive for this format is, as Zarker Morgan states (p. 73): "the chansons in V¹³ belong to European tradition," and the approach taken aims to allow each text to be set in the wider European context and to underline the connections between the individual texts in this cyclic compilation. There is undoubtedly an enormous amount of useful and detailed information in this section on the literary dimensions, but this reviewer nevertheless felt a number of reservations about the incorporation here of so much material, reservations which relate, in part, to placing and format. Firstly, this section 4, "The Literary Contents of V13," is unhappily placed between the linguistic, stylistic, and metrical sections (2 and 3) and the discussion of editing criteria and transcription norms (section 6). This would be less problematic if the section were relatively brief, but its sheer length detracts from and disrupts the more strictly philological and stylistic considerations which surely should form not just the core but the greater part of an introduction to a critical edition. The proportions devoted to these various sections seem out of balance. Secondly, for each text the same subheadings appear, even when there is no information to record. Zarker Morgan justifies this (p. 74) as allowing the reader "to follow a specific line of national interest," but it does lead to rather pointless sections, such as on page 203: "Dutch versions. There are no Dutch versions." Surely a simple statement would have sufficed, in the opening remarks of section 4, to the effect that where no mention is made of, e.g., Dutch versions, the reader should conclude that there are none? The format of always using the same headings smacks too much of the editor's original working notes, which would have been better revised and edited down for publication. The most useful parts in this extended section are the discussion paragraphs which conclude the textual comparisons of each text. These make a

number of good and very interesting observations of a comparative kind, but overall the discussion of the literary aspects of each of the texts would have been stronger if the focus had been only on the closest predecessors and parallels to the nine texts of V¹³, while confining mention of narratives only marginally relevant, either because the narrative content is very distant or because there is no evidence of dependence or influence on them, to the footnotes. This would have allowed a greater prominence to the editor's own critical insights, which here are rather submerged in the preponderance of plot résumés and summaries of the views of previous critics, often on texts of little direct relevance to V¹³. It would also have created space for addressing fundamental questions for the Italian tradition, such as the source texts used by Andrea da Barberino (see p. 111) in compiling his prose versions. Indeed this section on the literary traditions might better have appeared in a companion volume devoted to the full range of literary and critical elements.

Section 4 is followed by the bibliography before we come to the presentation of the editorial norms in section 6. These are very clearly set out and touch again in many cases on the linguistic problems highlighted in the earlier sections. The main emphasis is on transcription norms, and it is perhaps disappointing to find here little reference to editions of other Franco-Italian texts and the solutions proposed in those editions, which might have supported (or indeed challenged) the approaches adopted by Zarker Morgan.

The text of the nine narratives is divided between volumes one and two. After the last of the narratives, there follow the endnotes (footnotes for each text relate only to other readings, especially in other critical editions). The endnotes provide much help and guidance relating to interpretation, and Zarker Morgan is admirably honest about the uncertainties of decipherment and of meaning consequent upon both the state of the manuscript and the complexities of the language. The endnotes also provide an exhaustive comparison of her readings with those of previous editors, but though all of the information is valuable, not all of it is equally useful here, and indeed some would gain greater

prominence in discrete publications. Volume two concludes with an extremely complete glossary and indexes of subjects and of titles.

The placing of the endnotes after all the nine texts brings me to my only really major reservation about this edition, one over which Zarker Morgan herself may have had little or no control, namely the ordering of the material and the issue of ease of use for the reader. For the texts contained in volume one, the ability to see the endnotes (in volume two) simultaneously with the text is a great boon, but this arrangement does not of course extend to the texts contained in volume two. Surely it would have been preferable to gather all the linguistic and critical material, including the glossary in one volume – of support materials – and print all of the texts in the other? The texts run to a total of approximately 630 pages; the support material (introduction, glossary, indices etc.) to approximately 850. Editing down section 4 would have brought the two to close on the same dimensions, and even if this had not been done, two volumes of slightly differing lengths is surely an option. As it stands, the logic of printing 400 pages of text in volume one and 220 in volume two defeats me.

My other practical concern is the sheer size and weight of these volumes. Ideally they should reach students, as suggested above and as, I am sure, Zarker Morgan would wish, but the format and bulk do not seem designed to favour this. It would be a great pity if these volumes only reached the shelves of major libraries and stayed there. Franco-Italian texts, and these in particular, are lively and, with a modicum of familiarity, delightful to read. Zarker Morgan knows how important they are for the serious study of the Italian chivalric tradition and has worked with immense dedication to bring these texts to a wider audience. She has made a major contribution to extending our knowledge of the many fascinating details of these narratives, both literary and linguistic, and her edition will, I sincerely hope, provoke new readings and new research. She is to be congratulated for all this, and for her tenacity in bringing such a complex and vital project to its published conclusion.

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