

## BOOK REVIEWS

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**Ghil, Eliza Miruna. *L'Age de Parage: Essai sur le poétique et le politique en Occitanie au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*. University Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature, 4. New York, Bern, Frankfurt am Main, Paris: Peter Lang, 1989. Pp. 407 + ix.**

Poetic creativity in Occitania in the first half of the thirteenth century has often been viewed as moribund by critics who see in twelfth-century lyric the finest flower of troubadour production: in this view, poetic energy was crushed by the alliance of clerical repression and northern French attack, with the violence of the French anti-heretical crusading (beginning circa 1209), the punitive provisions of the fourth Lateran Council (1215), and the even more odious treaty of Meaux (1229). This book demonstrates that poetic energy, stimulated rather than silenced by attacks on Occitan culture, developed vigorous narrative and poetic strategies to resist and subvert these attacks, and to reaffirm the preeminence of Occitan values. Ambitious in its scope, beginning with a historically detailed panorama of intertwined politics and poetics, and then guiding us through the details of literary protest in each major Occitan genre (epic, lyric, and romance), the book provides a valuable synthesis: it gives us a coherent framework within which to read thirteenth-century Occitan poetry as cultural self-defense.

The first chapter offers a densely textured overview of the activity of multitudinous poets and patrons against the backdrop of political turmoil. French crusaders, allied with the orthodox clergy to eradicate heresy, concentrated particularly on stripping the Count of Toulouse of his domains and power, and in the process devastating the countryside, massacring the inhabitants of major Occitan cities and destroying the suburbs as well. countless aristocratic lords were excommunicated, and with the Lateran Council, the *faiditz* (exiled ones) were officially constituted as a class. Under such conditions, one might expect the number of professional poets to decline. Instead, Ghil points out, the majority of troubadour names come to us from this period. More than half the poets named in the *vidas* and *razos* flourished between 1200 and 1250, as do three-fourths of the women troubadours named there.

Ghil offers specifics about various courts offering patronage to poets in Toulouse, in the small courts of Languedoc, the court of Foix, of Béarn, courts in the Limousin, in Poitou, and in Provence. Numerous poets found refuge in Italy (Ghil lists eighteen) or in Spain (she lists seven) (35-36). Poetry became a defensive weapon of cultural solidarity, of resistance against and orthodoxy imposed by force.

Readers of *Olifant* will perhaps find most interesting Chapters Two and Three, a two-part exploration of "*La Canso de la Crozada* et l'Épicité du Contemporain." The *Chanson de la croisade albigeoise*, as it is known in French, consists of two works, each transforming contemporary events into epic poetry.<sup>1</sup> The first, composed by Guilhem de Tudela (the first 130 or 131 laisses 2 in B.N. fr. 2545), recounts events of the first Albigensian crusade around 1210. Ghil offers a tantalizing comparison with the twelfth-century *Chanson d'Antiocha*, suggesting that both poems may be "oral journals" comparable to those of Romanian traditional epic; this point is not pursued, and a footnote refers us to a conference paper.

Because he apparently supports the eradication of heresy, Guilhem de Tudela's ideological stance has not previously been well understood: critics have alternately labelled him a "partisan de Simon de Montfort" and "un opportuniste qui, tout en n'osant pas se mouiller, était au fond solidaire des Méridionaux" (123). Ghil resituates Guilhem by perceptively monitoring his allocations of praise, blame, and silence, in three kinds of action: sieges (108-12), ambushes (112-16), and movements of troops (116-20). She finds that while Guilhem does lend half-hearted support to the antiheretical ideology (his "miracles" bring destruction to southern cities), he has only praise for the knightly prowess of southern aristocrats. Ghil explains this authorial strategy as an attempt to forge an "alliance cléricalo-chevaleresque" (125): Guilhem's chosen audience was the Occitan nobility. He draws them in by addressing them confidently as "Seigneurs" on several occasions, he praises their exploits lavishly, and he omits all reference to heresy among such seigneurs, even those who were excommunicated. When the Count of Toulouse reads his people a list of demeaning conditions proposed by the prelates, and when they refuse indignantly, Guilhem de Tudela does not comment, and this silence itself offers a sympathetic stance. This was perhaps a germinal episode for the formation of Ghil's thesis, since among the conditions proposed by the church authorities was the destruction of Parage itself: no fancy food, no fancy clothes, no more cities. It was their "lifestyle" and "urbanité" that was

threatened (129-30). It is this attack of Occitan culture that all the literary works considered by Ghil so vigorously resist.

Guilhem de Tudela lacks enthusiasm for righteous carnage; he also makes no attempt to hold the Occitan aristocrats responsible for violence. If he shows approval for the massacre of heretics, he does so only when speaking of the undistinguished inhabitants of towns; even then he criticizes them not of hypocrisy but of stupidity (131-33). Favorable portraits are for the *caste guerrière* (134). Guilhem de Tudela's effort to reconcile the knights and the clergy was short-lived, rendered futile by the Lateran Council of 1215. Ghil's analysis of this poem's strategies and apparent goals attains considerable success in viewing it not as "history" but as a narrative of "current events" as it would have affected its contemporary audience.

The continuation by the "Anonyme Toulousain" seems, through Ghil's reading, a truly fascinating poem. Its subversive strategies tend to reaffirm the beleaguered Occitan "lifestyle" (Ghil's term). Given the pretext of the war, the poet's word-choices in designating opposing groups shift the emphasis from religious right to cultural right: the Northerners are rarely called *crozatz*, and then only pejoratively by their enemies; the term *eretge* appears almost exclusively in debate passages where its applicability is eloquently denied. "Sans croisés et sans hérétiques l'enjeu du conflit sera tout autre" (155). At stake instead is *eretge*, heritage; by reiterating often this term and its derivatives like *deseretar*, the poet insists on the idea of Occitan birthright that takes precedence over clerical decision. As for divine will, the Southerners insist that God's favor is theirs, not the enemy's; when they give thanks to God, it is frequently in connection with a triumph of *paratge* and *pretz*, terms heavy-laden with cultural values promoted by the region's lyric heritage. This is the poet's only unorthodoxy, his only heresy: "Car dans l'univers de notre *Canso* ce n'est pas le Dieu des clerks qui règne en maître; c'est le Dieu du Parage qui récompense de son aide tenace ses 'fizels amans'" (175-76). Radiant *paratge* sheds a mystic light; it shifts miracle from the religious to the secular domain.

Against the backdrop of a cultural community rallying to resist the antiheretical crusades, Ghil's fourth chapter, "Le lyrisme dans le combat," restores immediacy to the political dimension of thirteenth-century lyric poems. Close analyses of the *planh* lamenting the Viscount of Béziers, of a debate between a cat and a *trébuchet*, and of several *sirventes*, show how poets continue to serve—with renewed

intensity—their traditional function as spokesmen for the community. Because it synthesizes in one book both the historical and the literary contexts, this work is a welcome addition to the reading lists of all who tackle thirteenth-century Occitan poetry. No longer need we approach these poems with only a vague impression of contemporary experience of atrocities, of austerity imposed by the inquisitorial "moral police," or with scant help from that peculiarly fragmented history found in an individual poem's critical apparatus. Numerous insightful passages enliven the overview Ghil provides. For example, in a fascinating citation from an inquisitorial deposition given in 1324, one can see in action how Peire Cardenal's "Clergue si fan pastor / e son aucizedor" ("Clerics pretend to be shepherds, and they are killers") was received and transmitted long after its composition. A bourgeois witness, Jean Davy, recalls an incident twenty years past when he was in church with two noblemen, Guillem Saisset and his brother Bertrand. Guillem sang the *cobla*, "Clergues se fan pastor, e son galiadors..."; delighted, Bertrand asked Guillem to teach it to him; he then asked Jean to learn it from Guillem in order to teach it to him (270-71). The orthodox Jean, reluctant to learn it at all, still retained one strophe twenty years later.

The chapter "La Nova de Flamenca ou Quand Lire c'est Faire" could stand on its own as a contribution to our understanding of the "pearl of Occitan poetry," but Ghil's observations make greater impact given the preceding chapters. Subversive ideological effects arise from the romance's "focalisation": its presentation selects noteworthy events from the point of view of Flamenca herself (detailed evidence is discussed on pages 317-21). We return to one of the connotations of *paratge*, a principle of equality between the parties of *fin'amors* (325). Set in an Occitania newly annexed to the Capetian monarchy, its portrayal of French-ness is particularly telling, since Guilhem de Nevers (often identified as the romance's "hero") glamorously boasts a Parisian education (just when professors like his were hired at the newly-founded University of Toulouse expressly to spoil Occitan joy), owns French lands, and gives French gifts. He holds the contradictory title of "clerk-knight," embodying in one person two rival camps. But the poem's apparent admiration of things Parisian is a "textual ruse" (304), and Guilhem's "letters" turn out to be not in a Parisian spirit, not in the spirit of ecclesiastical ideology nor of the patriarchal family, but in the spirit of the native culture of *fin'amors*. Though the *nova* often shows people orally interpreting poetry, the poet gives preference to solitary reading and, in fact, takes the monopoly of "letters" away

from the clergy, restoring them to practical, secular use. This chapter, more than the others, requires the reader, to supply concepts learned in previous chapters in order to maintain the sense of continuity and avoid the impression of disconnected observation

Conclusions are presented in condensed form, with numbered paragraphs. The rich poetic activity of the period was not hampered, but stimulated by the Albigensian Crusade; it managed to articulate a coherent, shared, secular mentality. The dissident culture produced by thirteenth-century Occitania has not pleased critics in promoting conservative values, but their continued reaction only shows the lasting power of thirteenth-century Occitan art to provoke its enemies and assert its own values. Conclusion number four, speculating on how the passage from orality to written transmission (as glimpsed in *Flamenca*) might have contributed to the subsequent decline of troubadour art, does not seem justified by (or consistent with) the body of the work. Indeed, the book overall convincingly demonstrates that troubadour art did *not* decline in the thirteenth century; if we seek its demise, we must look elsewhere, perhaps in the fourteenth or fifteenth century (370).

Given the book's very substantial success, its flaws seem minor and few. It has more exclamation marks than it needs, but this is only one feature of an otherwise pleasantly lively style, appropriate to conveying the vitality of the literature it describes. Some of its terminology, especially of the hyphenated ideologico-poetic and socio-moral type, may irritate readers allergic to jargon—but such terms are not seriously abused, since their use always make intelligent and justifiable sense. In one footnote purporting to explain why the anonymous *Chanson de la Crozada* should not be chosen as one of the "rebel vassal" epics, the author flatly refuses to situate the work in the context of French epic tradition on the grounds that we have an ample Occitan epic tradition in which to situate it (213 n. 94). But surely there was some cross-fertilization across the boundaries: what about, for example, the Franco-Provençal epic *Girart de Roussillon*? (In her chapter on *Flamenca*, Ghil does identify Enide's wedding night as the intertext of Flamenca's.) Rather than declaring the Old French epic content irrelevant, it might have been prudent to admit that her book's scope was already so broad that it must, for practical reasons, limit itself to Occitan precedents. The deficits of *L'Age de Parage* can be counted on one hand, and they vanish in its large contribution. It undertakes the formidable task of giving both detailed and panoramic accounts of three major genres of thirteenth-century Occitan poetry, and

of re-interpreting them as accurately as possible through their cultural and historical context. In this project it is far more successful than what the author owns in the humble disclaimer of the introduction. It paints the detailed portrait of fifty years' turmoil, and of the artistic response: not yielding, but rising to the awful occasion, and announcing the subversive triumph of luminous *paratge* against mean-spirited hypocrites and inquisitors.

#### Notes

1. Eugène Martin-Chabot, *La Chanson de la croisade albigeoise* (3 vols. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1957-61). For Martin-Chabot's text with facing-page translation by Henri Gougaud, preface by Georges Duby, and introduction by Michel Zink, see *La Chanson de la Croisade albigeoise* in the Lettres Gothiques series (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1989).

2. Ghil follows Martin-Chabot in ascribing the first 131 laisses, or 2772 lines, to Guilhem to Tudela, while Zink (op. cit.) gives Guilhem only 130 laisses or 2749 lines, following the argument of Jean-Marie d'Heur ("bur la date, la composition et la destination de la *Chanson de la Croisade albigeoise* de Guillaume de Tudèle," in *Mélanges Charles Rostaing* (Liège: 1974) 1: 231-36. the anonymous continuation, then, would comprise laisses 131-214 (6811 lines).