

BOOK REVIEWS

PATTERSON, Jeanette. 2022. *Making the Bible French: The Bible historiale and the Medieval Lay Reader*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. Pp. 264. ISBN 9781487508883, Hardback \$65. ISBN 9781487539191, eBook \$65.

It is telling that the first biblical scholar Jeannette Patterson mentions is Robert Alter, who has done much to advance the study of the literariness of biblical narratives in their ancient contexts. Beginning by examining the production of a text in its particular historical setting, Patterson makes larger claims about the ways in which the medieval lay reader is created by the literary strategies deployed to craft the text itself. The focal point of this book is not the biblical text *per se*, but rather the literary text created through the acts of compilation, commentary and translation. Not focusing on “essentialist taxonomies of translation” (5), instead Patterson is interested in the relationship between the literariness of the text and the implied audience constructed within it.

The text in question is Guyart des Moulins’ *Bible historiale*, completed in 1295. This is a composite work of Guyart’s French translation of the Latin Vulgate glossed with chapters from Peter Comestor’s twelfth-century biblical paraphrase, the *Historica scholastica*. Patterson identifies the inclusion of Comestor’s work as the means by which Guyart bridges the historical contexts of the biblical narratives and the medieval church norms of his own day. This foregrounds the larger concern of this book, in which the different textual modes, interventions by Guyart as translator and compiler, construct the implied readers of his text. That is to say, Patterson is examining the relationship between translator and compiler and audience through the literariness of the text, which is mediated through Guyart’s dual role as translator and priest. Patterson finds the *Bible historiale*’s alignment with the conventions of manuscript production and with the “larger corpus of French medieval literature” (71) to be the operative element constructing Guyart’s ideology of biblical translation and the French-literate reader of his work. This initial concern for the implied audience expresses the theoretical foundations of the book, and indeed Wolfgang Iser makes several appearances throughout; it is in this sense that the “reader” becomes as important a character to Patterson’s overall project as Guyart himself.

Different textual modes employed by Guyart are addressed through five chapters. The first chapter situates the *Bible historiale* within a wider tradition of vernacular translations of the Bible in medieval Europe. Patterson moves her audience beyond a parochial view in which church authorities were universally opposed to vernacular translations of the Bible of any sort. Key to her project is that Guyart's translation was not only acceptable to church authorities, but also that these translations served an important role in the relationship between church authorities and the laity. The medieval openness to translation, rather than strictly categorizing vernacular bibles as necessarily countercultural, locates Guyart's *Bible historiale* within authoritative norms. The other significant consideration of the opening chapter is that of translation itself. Patterson's detailed understanding of translation-as-mediation provides an elegant backdrop for the subsequent chapters. Mediation occurs through Guyart's translation of the Latin text into French, but even more so in his "presence as the conduit (and, at times, barrier) between the reader and the source text to which the translator grants and controls access" (34). Guyart functions as teacher and gatekeeper both within and behind the *Bible historiale*.

In the subsequent four chapters, Patterson extends the investigation into the ways in which Guyart intervenes in the construction of the *Bible historiale* as a means of structuring the relationship to his lay audience. These chapters situate the *Bible historiale* within wider manuscript and narrative traditions, which introduce the various strategies Guyart adopts "to engage the reader's participation without fully ceding interpretive freedom" (161). Chapters 2 and 3 locate Guyart's interventions relative to medieval and biblical (and apocryphal) literary traditions. In Chapters 4 and 5, Patterson delineates a tension between the norms of those literary traditions of medieval French narrative fiction, namely those related to "engaging their readers' active imaginative participation" (12), and the pedagogical needs of the *Bible historiale* as a tool for the proper theological formation of the lay reader. Guyart's position as a priest naturally looms behind this catechetical concern, but it also serves to introduce Patterson's resistance to the trope of "the pre-Reformation Latin Church as a strict gatekeeper or even a conspiratorial destroyer of knowledge" in terms of access to the biblical text (20). Guyart's translation of the Bible is directed towards the French-speaking laity but carries with it the *imprimatur* of the institutional church. Patterson's argument throughout these chapters maintains a clear grounding in Guyart's text, but also touches on larger issues of translation, authority, and the production and distribution of texts in the medieval world.

It is when she is dealing with these larger theoretical issues that Patterson is at her most lively. Fortunately, these discussions are not reserved for the brief conclusion to her book but are instead thoughtfully integrated into the whole work. As one example, when interrogating Guyart's inclusion of apocryphal texts in the *Bible historiale*, Patterson situates this within larger discussions of literary truth and its relation to medieval catechesis. For Guyart, "truth" is not only true in the sense of "historical accuracy and canonical authenticity" (83) but is operating on the level of a self-conscious translation in which the audience is aware of Guyart's decision making. In addition, truth is operative at a pedagogical level, where "the 'true' translation's main purpose is to reproduce 'truth' in the minds of its readers, bringing their beliefs and actions into consonance with accepted church teachings" (84). If apocryphal stories cannot be considered "true" in a historical or canonical sense, they can still certainly play a role in properly shaping the way the audience receives the biblical text and thus participate in the larger catechetical truth of Guyart's main purpose. In her subsequent discussion of the relationship between historical and fictional truth, Patterson fluently marshals sources from antiquity to modernity, which lends her argument weight beyond the medieval text she is addressing.

Another issue at work throughout the book is the importance of the materiality of the text, especially the decisions related to how the text is formatted. Guyart's interventions are not limited to the narrative but are manifest through the way the *Bible historiale* was produced, in which "Guyart's translation and its successive manuscript reiterations imagine and reimagine the relationship to the biblical text they translate" (44). The inclusion of apocryphal and other non-canonical literature is an example of the accrual of material in the production of the *Bible historiale*.

The most elegant expression of this is found in Patterson's discussion in Chapter 5 of the cultivation of "patience" in the readers of the *Bible historiale*. This concept brings translation, literary style, manuscript production, reading practice, pedagogy and catechesis into a sophisticated unity. Patterson identifies two traditions of translating the Bible in Medieval France, the expansive *Bible historiale* and the more succinct *Bible moralisée*. These represent two poles on a spectrum of "attitudes, approaches and reading practices [which] the two Bible formats (and their combined versions) each exploit to their advantage and to the advantage of their readers" (128). Patterson makes a compelling case for reading "patience" as virtue which Guyart is intentionally attempting to cultivate in his lay audience through the

narratives included in his text as well as through the format of the *Bible historiale* as reproduced in manuscripts in which Guyart's historical and pedagogical commentary is added in columns surrounding the columns of the biblical text. Some of the scribal evidence from these manuscripts may seem, at first glance, to be more anecdotal than systematic; but read alongside the deliberately abbreviated *Bible moralisée*, which “moralizes” the biblical text by selectively editing its narrative down to include only brief references to episodes that lend themselves to moral lessons” (129), Guyart represents the attempt to direct the reader's curiosity toward “productive rather than unsuitable questions” (130). Patterson thus puts Guyart's *Bible historiale* not only on the side of historical truth and the broad inclusion of cognate literature, but also on the side of properly forming the “patience” of its audience. This emphasis on patience is found in the breadth of material included, as well as in Guyart's repeated self-referentiality as the authoritative mediator of the text. The inclusion, throughout the manuscript tradition, of illustrations reinforcing this authoritative relationship adds to Patterson's casting of “patience” as a moral virtue in the readers of the *Bible historiale*, and a virtue which is built on respect of authoritative catechesis.

Patterson's book is thoughtful and should be broadly read by those interested in medieval studies, biblical reception, and narrative theory. The book firmly locates the *Bible historiale* at the locus of scripture and literature and as a product of religious authority and literary technique. Patterson's command of the extensive manuscript tradition of the *Bible historiale* adds substantial depth to her discussions without bogging them down in the minutiae of textual criticism. The book is supported with numerous references to medieval French manuscripts, all of which are helpfully translated in the body of the text. *Making the Bible French* proves to be a fascinating exploration into medieval piety, textuality, and literacy while also making more broadly compelling claims about the reception of biblical narratives and the construction of the relationship of the reader to the text.

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