

Helen Dell, *Desire by Gender and Genre in Trouvère Song*. Gallica Series, Volume 10. General Editor, Sarah Kay. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008. x + 241pp. £ 50 / US \$ 95. ISBN 978-1-84384-164-7.

Helen Dell, a research fellow in Literary Studies in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne, has provided us with the tenth addition to the Gallica series. The Gallica series, published by Boydell and Brewer, has aimed to provide readers with the best possible scholarship on Medieval, and now Renaissance, France with a particular focus on literary studies. Dell's study provides a meticulous look at a very specific element of the *Trouvère* songs, heavily weighed with complex Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, which frames the work.

The author's focus is the gendering of desire in the songs of the *trouvères*. She looks particularly at feminine desire in the songs and uses the Lacanian psychoanalytic theories of signification, sexual difference and unconscious desire in her explorations. Dell notes that this has proved a difficult task for critics as, while many acknowledge the Saussurian understanding that signification is established through difference, the practicality in following this line is difficult to secure.

Dell maintains that within the *trouvère* songs desire may be used as a means to discriminate both gender and genre. She also notes that there is a distinction between lower lust and more high-

minded desire: desire, she says, is restricted to a male voice with a more intricate style while the female voice expressed more often the somehow base sexual lust. Dell distinguishes her work from that of other *trouvère* critics, she claims, by examining desire across all the genres rather than being limited to discussing the courtly register. By examining Lacanian desire, that is, unconscious desire, she has been able to discuss the unspoken desires of the song.

The author spends some time in her introduction attempting to define and clarify the linguistic web she intricately weaves in the rest of the text. She uses Simon Gaunt's definition of desire saying that it is a consequence of the organisation of a text's rhetoric. Dell follows this definition with a brief discussion of desire and the *trouvères*, giving some brief examples. She cleverly establishes the differences and connections between need and desire in her own words as well as through the voice of Lacanian theory. She notes that no critics have attempted a thorough analysis of feminine desire in the songs of the *trouvères*, which prompted her own work on the subject.

The Introduction goes on to illuminate signifying by opposition. The author describes the ways in which she views the *trouvère* corpus, with its wide range of voices with differing gender, style and class, as likened to language in Saussure's terms in that the song genres compose an inter-reliant system in which each genre signifies as a result of the coincident existence and opposition of the

others. The introduction then goes on to discuss a topic familiar to all those interested in medieval literature – the relationship between body and soul and the place of the feminine. This topic has of course grown in popularity over the past few decades and much criticism now exists in the area. Dell quotes Aristotle's *Generation 184*, observing that his definition of what it means to be male or female raises some doubt over masculinity as a characteristic *belonging* to men; she also notes Aristotle's description of gender as a matter of possession.

Aristotle's *De Anima* is used here to illuminate the doubted female soul in the Middle Ages. The female soul becomes shadowed with uncertainty and this ambiguity becomes the most notable attribute of the feminine soul. Femininity in the *trouvère* songs is signified by its opposition to the masculine; however, Dell observes that this definition faces a number of problems. As the masculine voice within the songs changes to suit the genre, the feminine or 'woman' voice cannot be singular or solid and cannot be set up in simple opposition. Rather than the male voice, which is changeable, being weakened, the female voice becomes diluted as it splits to allow for his inconsistent desires. Feminine subjectivity, according to Dell, is always under the threat of declining into 'objectivity'.

Dell writes much about the theoretical implications of choosing Lacan and her reasons for the choice before going on to describe what she calls her 'kaleidoscopic' methodology, which, as a matter of interest, she derives from her understanding of Saussure's belief that within language one can find only differences without affirmative terms. This results in what Dell describes as each chapter following its predecessor on the basis of difference. Dell concludes her introduction by discussing the corpus, noting that for the purposes of her study she has chosen only a selection of genres and subgenres and only some of the songs within those specific genres.

The first chapter, entitled 'The Song System I. An Unmarked Hierarchy: The Unmarked Masculine', examines the diverse array of genres, genders, registers and voices which compose the intricate system of *trouvère* songs as well as the character of the relationships within that system. Dell notes that the desire which she is examining is markedly different depending on where in this system it occurs. She also notes the difficulty which arises when categorising feminine within the system as it is inherently included with low and non-courtly. This chapter addresses the fact that Dell accepts the legitimacy of the terms 'genre' and 'register' for medieval literature, although this is questioned by a number of critics. Dell notes the arguments of a number of critics but adds that her text allows these questionable terms the kind of signifying function in relation to each

other which Lacan affords generally to language. Dell also uses this chapter to discuss the methods of Pierre Bec, Christopher Page and Paul Zumthor in relation to registral distinctions between genres before moving on to examine medieval theorists including Dante Alighieri and Johannes de Grocheio. Finally Dell gives some examples in their original form and in translation.

The second chapter, entitled 'The Song System II. The Ignoble Words of Eve: Femininity in the System', is a close examination of textual 'women' as voices within the song system and the outcomes of their femininity for genre and register. Dell discusses the understanding of femininity evinced in the work of early theorists, such as St Anselm and Aquinas, in light of present-day theories – most effectively those of twentieth-century structuralism and psychoanalysis. It contains explorations much more widely applicable and useful to medieval scholars of other textual genres than Chapter 1. It is also somewhat easier to read as the tight grip of theoretical explanation and theory is somewhat loosened, resulting in better flowing prose and clearer lines of thought. Following a discussion on the feminine register Dell goes on to look at a woman's place within *trouvère* song. The most interesting section of this chapter is entitled 'That Missing Aristotelian Drop: The Soul' in which Dell discusses the unquestionable link between women and 'matter' in the Middle Ages. This chapter also examines speaking in

Paradise, material woman, and the how the fluid woman of *trouvère* song changes and shifts.

The third chapter, 'Desire by Gender and Genre I Low Lusts and High Desires: *Pastourelle* and *Chanson*', sees a shift from the discussion of the system of songs to a more specific area of Dell's study. This chapter looks at the function of desire, within the system outlined in the previous chapters, from the perspective of the 'masculine subject and his objects' (p. 69) in both 'low'- and 'high'-style song. This contrasts with the fourth chapter which does the same from the perspective of the feminine subject and masculine objects. The third chapter discusses the relationship and distinction between need, demand and desire before going on to elaborate on the three distinct grammatical parts of desire within the *trouvère* – subject, verb and object; Dell focuses here on the place of the object. She then goes on to discuss what she calls the 'satisfiable lust' of the *pastourelle* and the 'impossible desires' of the *chanson*.

The rest of Chapter 3 returns to the heavily theoretical style of the first with a discussion of 'two orders of prohibition' represented by *chanson* and *pastourelle*, the negative affect of the attainment of desire in the *chanson* and the 'absent presence' of La Dame also in the *chanson*. As mentioned above, the fourth chapter shifts to examine the perspective of the feminine subject; entitled 'Desire by Gender and Genre II. Ignoble Desires of the Triumphant *Chanson d'Ami*'. Here,

Dell looks particularly at the pleasures of low-style feminine desire in this genre and, within this context, discusses desire and will, words as actions and 'repining' in low style.

The fifth chapter, 'Chronotopes of Desire I Case-Study of a *Malmariée*: Feminine Space-Times', marks another shift in focus. Both this and Chapter 6 examine the location of desire with regard to the concerns of time, space, causation, chance and change, examining the feminine and masculine respectively. The former looks closely at the low-style *chanson de femme* with reference to the *chanson de malmariée* because, Dell says, of the extreme situations represented and the presence of an invidious, explosive and treacherous husband. This chapter examines also the place of the feminine within the narrative noting that it is narrative which allows 'woman' to be examined. Dell also speaks of the active nature of the 'joyous *malmariée*' and the linguistic 'go-future' of this character.

Perhaps most interestingly here the author moves on to discuss the particular form of future indicated when the *malmariée* presents a desire indistinguishable from will. Dell also examines somewhat briefly the form of the songs before returning to Lacan to compare the *malmariée*'s vehemence to that of the theorist's *belle âme*. Chapter 6, 'Chronotopes of Desire II. The Contained and Containing Heart: Masculine Space-Times', discusses the *pastourelle* and the *chanson*, answering some questions about space and time in relation to

masculine desire. Dell discusses the 'other day' in the *pastourelle* and the ways in which the moment of sex is signified by the text before examining the space and time allocated to desire in the *chanson*. She then goes on to discuss the allegorical heart within the *chanson* and finishes with an examination of the fluctuating sense of time within some specific examples.

The final chapter 'Desiring Differently: The Chanson in the Feminine Voice', discusses what Dell calls 'feminine *chansons*'. These songs are examined with a focus on discourse, desire and choronotope – the central themes of the previous chapters, looking specifically at feminine discourse, articulating desire, changes of time and briefly at fathers, mothers and children. This chapter fits well with the others but would benefit from being a little more substantial in parts. Some brief notes are supplied at the end of the text explaining some issues and justifying others. A substantial bibliography and a useful and well executed index conclude the volume.

Overall this book is well written and it is easy to see the level of work which Dell has put into her study. However the usefulness of this book to any wider readership is somewhat questionable. This monograph is a development of Dell's PhD thesis and quite frankly it is very easy to see that. It is necessary to make a number of substantial changes to any thesis before bringing it forward for

publication and it is these changes that produce a text easier to read and follow. Dell's text will be quite helpful to those interested generally in the application of psychoanalytic theory to medieval texts.

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