Gender and Voice in Medieval French Literature and Song (book review)

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This collection, comprised of an introduction by the editors and ten essays, traces the gendered manifestations and meanings of voice in France and Occitania, from the twelfth century until the early sixteenth century. The volume views medieval France as a locus of new trends in travel, trade, and cross-cultural encounters and as a hotspot of artistic ingenuity, including experimentation with French and Occitan (newly valued vernaculars), the productions of learned, Latinate scholars and scribes, the blossoming of troubadour and trouvère lyric, liturgical innovations that responded to changing needs, and the formation of the polyphonic song. Through such utterances—in song, liturgy, romances, letters, treatises, and sermons—medieval people cultivated their performative and political selves, shaping contemporaneous belief systems about gender. Most chapters engage in the important work of recuperating female-voiced genres, restoring female voice and subjectivity to their rightful place in medieval French literature and lyric. In chapter 1, however, Katherine Kong examines the exercise of Lancelot’s masculine voice in Chrétien de Troyes’s Le chevalier de la charrette, not as constitutive of a universal gendered subjectivity but rather to consider how its privileged status overrides abject, liminal, and subjugated performances of voice. In chapter 2, Tamara Bentley Caudill examines how gendered voices operate within conventions of particular troubadour lyric genres like the tenso and canso, while reinforcing and challenging gendered expectations. In chapter 3, Anne Adele Levitsky explores how the troubadour Aimeric de Peguilhan challenges gender binaries in his classification of song genres, by distinguishing grammatical gender from socially constructed notions of song types. In chapter 4, Meghan Quinlan examines two linked trouvère songs and traces their poetic-musical interrelationships. Chapter 5, by Rachel May Golden, focuses on two anonymous trouvère lament songs that develop the voice’s capacity to engage with and reinterpret losses stemming from crusading contexts. In chapter 6, Lydia M. Walker examines how bishop Jacques de Vitry (d. 1240) strategically constructs a preaching voice, developing vivid imagery and vocabulary to persuasively perform sermons in support of the Fifth Crusade. In chapter 7, Lisa Colton demonstrates the distinctive polyphonic construction of the motet as a community of voices in dialogue, one that allowed composers to interact with and comment upon past conventions, create multiple registers of gendered expressivity, and newly negotiate the vocalization of striking and highly personal emotions against ecclesiastic regulations for controlling such utterances. Anna Kathryn Grau, in chapter 8, employs close musico-poetic readings of female voices within motets to uncover nuanced gendered readings. Emily J. Hutchinson, in chapter 9, locates in the textual voice
of Christine de Pizan acts of gendered and political resistance. Finally, chapter 10, by Daisy Delogu, examines the early sixteenth-century court of Queen Claude of France where Anne de Graville, in an act of “voiceover,” boldly adapts the work of Boccaccio, appropriating a male-authored Italian text into her own romance intended for a female patron and public. This expertly researched and crafted collection is highly recommended to all interested in the complex relationships between gender and voice in medieval French culture.

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Kerr’s book explores the notions of “non-belonging” and “statelessness” in non-native twentieth-century Francophone poetry. Acknowledging the emblematic relation that poetry holds with national culture and the role that literature plays as an institution that provides modes of belonging, Kerr’s work unravels how exophonic texts “complicate the relation between poet, national, or majoritarian language and literary system” (1). Throughout his analyses, Kerr engages with Michel Deguy, Jacques Romancière, and Jean-Claude Pinson, who argue for the withdrawal of poetry from political significations. In his study of the four poets—Armenian-born Armen Lubin, Romanian-born Gherasim Luca of Jewish origins, and two French authors with Algerian origins, Edmond Jabès and Michelle Grangaud—the author highlights poetry as a mode of “expression of a personalized lyric subjectivity” (2) that manifests the subject’s crisis of belonging. For the poets who straddle different cultures and affront identity crises caused by the multiplicity of their heritages, poetry functions as a “case vide,” providing an anchoring point. Each of the poets marks the antagonistic relations that exist between their birth origins and the culture they consumed throughout their life outside their original community. In Lubin’s poems and prose, the events of the Armenian genocide are absent in the narrative but resurge in the “border of unsayable” (22). The genocide, exilic statelessness, and the poet’s lifelong illness intertwine in the form of anxiety of explication. He lives in the patient’s conditions marked by detachment and watchfulness, whose suffering manifests itself in his linguistic vigilance. In Jabès’s work, the Jewish state of wandering and homelessness shows itself firstly in the form of a radical estrangement from the writing system (such as referentiality and the principle of coherence) and secondly through words and images accompanied with blanks, fragments, and lapses. He creates a blank space of impropriety for the “Other” to speak, and hence his