

Medieval Academy of America

A Poet at the Fountain: Essays on the Narrative Verse of Guillaume de Machaut by William Calin

Review by: William W. Kibler

Speculum, Vol. 52, No. 3 (Jul., 1977), pp. 633-634

Published by: [Medieval Academy of America](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2854906>

Accessed: 05/02/2014 09:21

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Medieval Academy of America is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Speculum*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Of the private libraries, those of Beatus Rhenanus and Wilibald Pirckheimer are not cited, perhaps because they were too humanist in orientation. Those of their friends Desiderius Erasmus and Hartmann and Hermann Schedel (among others) are mentioned. Schlettstadt (Sélestat) is recorded for receiving a library from Johann von Westhuss in 1429 and another in 1470, but that bequeathed by Beatus Rhenanus, which may still be consulted there, is not noted. Pirckheimer's library remained intact in the family until 1636, when it was sold *en bloc* to Thomas Howard, second Earl of Arundel.

In the bibliography one looks in vain for Rudolf Hirsch's *Printing, Selling and Reading 1450–1550* (1967); the latest edition of Aloys Ruppel's *Johannes Gutenberg* is 1967; and Carl Wehmer's article on *Augsburger Schreiber* is cited but not the magnificent facsimile edition of Leonhard Wagner's *Proba centum scripturarum* which he edited (Leipzig and Frankfurt, 1963).

Apart from such minor criticism as this, Buzás's book is very satisfying, especially in view of the very large field of investigation. It is a handy reference work for the scholar who needs particulars on the nature of the medieval German library.

CURT F. BÜHLER
The Pierpont Morgan Library

WILLIAM CALIN, *A Poet at the Fountain: Essays on the Narrative Verse of Guillaume de Machaut*. (Studies in Romance Languages, 9.) Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974. Pp. 263. \$8.50.

FROM William Calin's first two books, *The Old French Epic of Revolt* (Geneva, Paris, 1962) and *The Epic Quest* (Baltimore, 1966; reviewed in *SPECULUM* 43 [1968], 133–34), we have come to expect a fresh look at material which to many critics appears devoid of literary merit. Nor does his third book disappoint in this regard. Machaut's works, both literary and musical, have profited from generally trustworthy editions, and there have been several excellent biographical and musical studies; yet, with the exception of Poirion's pages on his shorter lyrics (in *Le Poète et le Prince: Evolution du lyrisme courtois de Guillaume de Machaut à Charles d'Orléans* [Paris, 1965]), very little attention has been given to Machaut's literary abilities. Professor Calin's avowed purpose is to help right this imbalance. Following a short introduction, he devotes one chapter to each of the ten major *dits*, followed by a single chapter treating the four shorter *dits* and the *Prologue*. A concluding chapter gives a very brief synthesis of Machaut's narrative verse and evaluates his place in the history of French letters.

Although the division into individual chapters, each treating a single *dit*, could lead to a very segmented study, Professor Calin's principal preoccupations re-echo through the text, and it is possible to see certain trends emerging. A major concern is the structure of the narrative *dit*, which on several occasions he likens to the romance quest-pattern: the Lover or Narrator leaves courtly society and enters an enclosed place (garden, grove, island), where he is aided by a guide and encounters an authority figure (God of Love, Venus, Esperance, the kings of Bohemia or Navarre). Having received a boon — generally that of knowledge — from the authority figure, he is reintegrated into society as a more mature member (see esp. pp. 79–88, 218–19, and 242). This pattern implies growth of the individual, and those poems in which the Lover or Narrator grows in knowledge are singled out for particular praise,

whereas those in which traditional imagery and values triumph are written off as “static literary creations.”

Professor Calin correctly stresses a critical truism too often ignored by students of medieval French literature: that the first-person narrator is not to be conflated with the author. With the exception of the later work, *La Prise d’Alexandrie*, a chronicle of the life of Pierre de Lusignan, king of Cyprus, all of Machaut’s *dits* involve an I-narrator who can be assimilated to a greater or lesser degree with Machaut the poet. However, even in the most ostensibly autobiographical of Machaut’s poems, *Le Voir-Dit (The True Story)*, the central situation is a literary fiction or, at best, fictionalized reality. The I-narrator is generally inept as a lover, garrulous and elderly, and somewhat foolish. To Calin, he is an ideal comic figure, one of Machaut’s greatest creations. Indeed, those poems which receive the highest praise are all shown to be humorous to some extent: *Le Jugement dou Roy de Behaingne*, *Remede de Fortune*, *Le Dit dou Lyon*, *Le Jugement dou Roy de Navarre*, *La Fonteinne amoureuse*, and *Le Voir-Dit*. Nor is it insignificant that those in which no comic element could be discerned are viewed with less favor: *Le Dit dou Vergier*, *Le Dit de l’Alerion*, *Le Confort d’Ami*, and *La Prise d’Alexandrie*.

One of the principal functions of comedy in Machaut’s *dits* is to undermine the courtly ethic. This is illustrated most clearly in *Le Jugement dou Roy de Behaingne*, in which the King of Bohemia decides in favor of Reason over Love, and in *Le Jugement dou Roy de Navarre*, in which the opposite conclusion is reached but subtly undercut by the author, “a master of irony, who pulls the strings and creates a dynamic, believable, richly comic world” (p. 129). By Machaut’s day, *fin’amor* had become no more than a game, played out tirelessly by a society wearied of the harsh realities of war. Machaut, who frequented this society but was not born to it, was in an ideal position to expose its hypocrisy. Yet, in spite of Professor Calin’s penetrating analysis of the irony and humor in his *dits*, one is left to wonder if he really succeeded. Was the humor perceptible to the courtly audience whose mores were being subjected to ridicule? Or is the humor only now apparent because of our special viewpoint? If the medievals had read Machaut as Professor Calin teaches us to do, would he have been granted the esteem he received or would he have been, like Alain Chartier a half-century later, condemned and ostracized? We can see clearly that Machaut was early in the line leading up to Chartier, but we still wonder whether he saw himself so. Like any self-respecting modern critic, Calin evades such questions, preferring to rule out historical speculation, avoid the intentional fallacy, and concentrate on “structure, imagination, world, and tone” (p. 20). His study is richly suggestive, provocative, well documented, and occasionally audacious. His search for permanent artistic values denigrates the strictly allegorical works (*Le Dit de l’Alerion*, *Le Dit de la Harpe*) but gives new life to those poems in which reality and humor blend most successfully (*Remede de Fortune*, *Le Jugement dou Roy de Navarre*, and *Le Voir-Dit*). *A Poet at the Fountain* provides an excellent guide to the fictional world of Machaut. It should spark interest as well as in the poetry of his greatest imitators: Deschamps, Froissart, Christine de Pisan, and Alain Chartier.

WILLIAM W. KIBLER
University of Texas at Austin