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REVIEWS

Molly Lynde-Recchia, *Prose, Verse, and Truth-Telling in the Thirteenth Century: An Essay on Form and Function in Selected Texts, Accompanied by an Edition of the Prose Thèbes as Found in the Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*, The Edward C. Armstrong Monographs on Medieval Literature, vol. 10. (Lexington, KY: French Forum 2000) 206 pp.

Gerald L. Bruns has suggested that, “modernity begins with the discovery that the book of the world is written in prose.”¹⁵ From the Latin *prorsus*, meaning direct or straight, prose emerges from a desire to communicate clearly and plainly. Developing comparatively late in France as a literary form, prose first chronicles “history” prior to its introduction into “fiction”¹⁶ around the fourteenth century. This significant change of register in French texts provides the point of departure for an interesting new monograph by Molly Lynde-Recchia, entitled *Prose, Verse, and Truth-Telling in the Thirteenth Century: An Essay on Form and Function in Selected Texts*. Specifically, its author endeavors to respond to a relative dearth of scholarship addressing the relationship between prose form and truthfulness.

Lynde-Recchia immediately sets the literary-historical stage, critically establishing the transformation from oral to written culture. Her first chapter discusses the increase in both writing and lay literacy observed during the eleventh and twelfth centuries—corresponding to the twelfth-century “Renaissance.” The creation of universities around this time perpetuates the new reliance on writing, which ultimately begins not only to displace but to discredit oral tradition. According to Lynde-Recchia, prose form does not instigate but rather confirms a growing interest in a new vernacular literacy, “enabling those who did not adequately master Latin to view themselves as lettered participants in the tradition of serious, truthful, historical and religious compositions.” Corroborating previous scholarship, Lynde-Recchia links the “denigration of verse” to the new translations of Aristotle’s logical treatises

¹⁵See his introduction to Viktor Shklovsky’s *Theory of Prose* (Elemood Park, IL 1990) ix.

¹⁶The designation of literary forms such as “history” and “romance” or “fiction” is of course problematic since these concepts “were not operative in the twelfth century.” Lynde-Recchia (38) appropriately employs these terms in relation to their reception, rather than their stylistic features.

(around 1158). When considered against Aristotle's dialectic model, verse—indicative of a subjective presence—declines in credibility. Henceforth, and providing the title's second and third components, verse becomes synonymous with exaggeration and distortion, prose with truth.

In an attempt to don the *sapience* of Latin, vernacular prose initially appears in translations of an authoritative (i.e., Latin) version. Chapter 2 considers this case specifically in a detailed textual analysis of the *Roman de Thèbes*, found in the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*. Here, both the subject matter (ancient Greece and Rome) and the original Latin source transfer *auctoritas* to the vernacular prose rendering. Lynde-Recchia investigates the transformations (in content and emphasis) between the model and its reproduction to discover that its rebirth in the medieval vulgate eliminates pagan accouterments to emphasize Christian notions of truth.

The third chapter investigates "Form, Function and Authority" by means of several early thirteenth-century texts.¹⁷ Lynde-Recchia considers the tonal commutation between verse and prose, and then traces how specific authors invest their translation with legitimacy: often delineating the defining characteristics of vernacular prose and vernacular verse, and then presenting their own prose as a correlative to Latin. Remarkably, verse's increasing disrepute as subjective and fallacious gives rise to novel and innovative literary expression. Chapter 4 considers some of these "Discursive Juxtapositions," texts interweaving prose with verse, a common practice in the thirteenth century.¹⁸ In these composite forms, the prose record documents the central narrative while the verse passages create textual space in which the author can reflect (ironically, morally, or otherwise) on the events discussed. The dialectic of these two discourses produces a polyphonic effect, and brings a new tension and epistemological instability into the text.

The final chapter examines narrative digressions in Joinville's *Vie de saint Louis*. Similar to the discursive juxtapositions between prose and verse, changes in narrative focus within this biographical work permit a gloss of the events from several different perspectives, the goal of

¹⁷These texts include *Vie mon seigneur seint Marciau de Limoges*; two *Vie(s) de saint Eustac(h)e*; and again, the prose *Thèbes*.

¹⁸Lynde-Recchia selects several examples of what would now be considered generic juxtapositions, including *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*, *Aucassin et Nicolette*, and *Lai d'Aristote*.

which is to reap a “truer” overall impression. Lynde-Recchia attributes this heteroglossic approach—discredited by earlier scholarship as anecdotal—to the larger quest for truth. She explains, “The digressive explanations ... do present information which does not directly concern [the question at hand], but its inclusion functions to enhance our overall understanding ... at the same time that it enhances our regard for the narrator’s full mastery of all aspects of his subject, thereby increasing his reliability and authoritativeness.”¹⁹

In a sense, likening Joinville’s digressions on the life of Saint Louis to the ostensibly disjointed individual chapters that make up this monograph, the same could be said of Lynde-Recchia’s study. In the latter case, the question at hand becomes not the life of a saint but the very essence of the thirteenth-century French text. The subdivided “digressions”—in the form of diverse textual analyses—ultimately converge, both to demonstrate the reliability and authoritativeness of the author’s findings and to increase the reader’s overall understanding of the material. Including relevant scholarship,²⁰ a thorough bibliography, detailed endnotes, and even an edition of the prose *Thèbes*, this book proves readable and informative for the medieval specialist as well as for the generally inquisitive literary critic. Indeed, its only real shortcoming derives from its brevity. Lynde-Recchia admits from the outset that the “limited number and type of texts selected for treatment in this monograph is not adequate for the development of a definition of thirteenth-century prose aesthetics or of a generalized paradigm of verse-prose contrasts.” The author’s “mastery of all aspects of [her] subject” would lend itself well to such an undertaking.

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¹⁹ See p. 113.

²⁰ Lynde-Recchia includes abbreviated discussions of critical approaches as diverse as Parry and Lord’s oral-formulaic theory, Mikhail Bakhtin’s fourteen-point description of Menippean satire, Eric Auerbach’s paratactic narrative structure, and Hans-Robert Jauss’s genre theory, just to name a few.