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Leimon: Studies Presented to Lennart Rydén on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday (Review)

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Reviews


*Ami et Amile*, a chanson de geste that can be dated c. 1200, is the finest and most important work of literature treating the story of the two identical friends of the title. Among the other versions are the hagiographic *Vita sanctorum Amicii et Amelii carissimorum*, the Anglo-Norman romance *Amis e Amilun*, its Middle English adaptation *Amis and Amiloun*, and the fourteenth-century play *Miracle de Amis et Amille*. The Ami and Amile texts are important to medievalists because of their inherent literary value and also because of the problems they pose: generic (the relations of folklore to high art), genre-related (a series of texts that partake, to varying degrees, of the traits we traditionally assign to epic, romance, and hagiography), and gender-related (the role of woman in what today would be called homosocial narrative). The University of Michigan Press is to be commended for reissuing this English translation of *Ami et Amile*, originally published in 1981 by French Literature Publications (York, S.C.).

Recent decades have witnessed a steadily increasing number of translations of the Old French classics. Basically, three roads are open to the translator of medieval poetry: a verse translation, which either conforms to a standard modern English meter (blank verse) or which adheres to the form of the original (rhyming octosyllabics); a translation into prose; and a translation that follows the line divisions of the original yet does not respect a strict metrical pattern. An excellent practitioner of the first method is Patricia Terry on a wide gamut of French texts; of the second, David Staines on Chrétien de Troyes; of the third, R. Barton Palmer on Guillaume de Machaut. Each of the three approaches has its strengths and, inevitably, its drawbacks. Here, Rosenberg and Danon have chosen elevated prose. Their version is eminently, impeccably accurate. Avoiding incongruous colloquialisms and equally incongruous archaisms, they arrive at a style that conveys a measure of the loftiness and dignity of the original. Their version is, in my opinion, highly successful.

Carried over from the original 1981 edition are some twelve pages of notes (pp. 131–42) and a twenty-seven page introduction (pp. 1–27). Rosenberg and Danon’s introduction is a judicious essay that examines *Ami et Amile* from a number of perspectives, taking into account the chief scholarship devoted to the poem at that time. New to this edition is an “Afterword: Ami, Amile, and the Classical Tradition of Friendship” (pp. 143–56) by David Konstan and a “Bibliography, 1977–1995” (pp. 157–58). The introduction and Konstan’s afterword are serious, insightful, solidly documented articles, which make an important critical and scholarly contribution to Ami and Amile studies. Of course, another way of going about it would have been to revise and expand the original introduction to take into account recent scholarship, Sarah Kay’s feminist reading, for instance.

In sum, this is a well-conceived and well-carried out project, which will be of help to medievalists in a number of disciplines and to all of us in our search for general humanities classroom texts.

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In 1992 a reviewer in this journal good-naturedly complained that the collection of essays he was evaluating “contains apples and oranges.” Lennart Rydén’s scholarly interests have
always gravitated to hagiography, and most of the articles here focus on saints and their lives. But if we equate hagiography with “apples,” this festschrift contains two varieties, plus enough “oranges”—articles on nonhagiographical topics—to make a reviewer’s task interesting. As has been my previous practice, I will focus on those articles that most appealed to me.

One of the two varieties of “apples” is Quellenforschung—scholarship at its most rigorous. In this category is Jan Olof Rosenqvist’s “Text of the Life of St Nikon ‘Metanoeite’ Reconsidered,” which argues for a reversal of the relationship scholars had heretofore assumed between the two main manuscripts of this text. Two other pieces reflect multiculturalism (in the good sense of the word): Frithiof Rundgren’s “From Pancatantra to Stephanites and Ichnelates: Some Notes on the Old Syriac Translation of Kalilah wa-Dimnah” traces the text from India to Christian Syria through careful philological analysis; and Ewa Balika-Witakowska’s “Mamas: A Cappadocian Saint in Ethiopian Tradition” tracks Mamas’s iconography from ninth-century Byzantium through Ethiopia to Renaissance Italy. Perhaps the most intriguing example in this category of studies is Gilbert Dagron’s “Jesus prêtre du Judaïsme: Le demi-succès d’une légende,” analyzing a possibly anti-Semitic Christian legend supposedly dating to the reign of Justinian: A Christian asks a Jewish friend who is learned in the Bible why he does not convert. The Jew replies that he is reluctant to convert because he enjoys a life of luxury as a leader in the Jewish community, much as a patriarch or powerful bishop would among Christians. However, he reveals to his Christian friend a document preserved among the Jews to the effect that Jesus was actually elected to the Temple priesthood and performed liturgical duties. The document also purports to disclose that the Jewish leadership of the time, after questioning eyewitnesses to Jesus’ birth and having Mary examined by midwives, acknowledged the Virgin birth. Dagron traces the legend from the original Greek to Christian Arab and Slavic hagiography.

The second variety of “apple” is the article that uses hagiography as a key to understanding the social and cultural history of Byzantium. Foremost among this group is Alice-Mary Talbot’s “Family Cults in Byzantium: The Case of St Theodora of Thessalonike,” showing how female saints could be used in the ninth and tenth centuries as part of an overall strategy of familial advancement. But one finds oneself wondering if Talbot knows of similar game plans used in Ottonian Germany, also involving canonization of women, about which the late Karl Leyer, among others, wrote.

The “oranges” are few but well selected and include two essays on the literary achievement of Anna Comnena. Jacov Ljubarskij’s “Was the Alexiad a Masterpiece of Byzantine Literature?” argues for the affirmative, citing Anna’s use of Homeric models for characterization and revival of the classical idea of unity of theme. Byzantine literature from Procopius onward, Ljubarskij observes, was often marked by the union of different genres (often plagiarisms from another author) into one work, as though a modern publisher took a detective novel, a historical monograph, an advertisement, and a movie screenplay, then published them together as chapters of a single book. Anna returned to the classical (and modern) ideal of unity of theme.

A bibliography of Rydén’s published works is included in the festschrift. The book conforms to the extraordinarily high production standards of the series—this reviewer was startled to find a small card with a list of corrigenda inserted into the book at the spot where the first correction occurs (p. 225). Other than that, the only misprint I was able to find was “parallel” for “parallel” (p. 105).

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