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# Review of Contest, Translation, and the Chaucerian Text

Elizaveta Strakhov

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Olivia Robinson's superb *Contest, Translation, and the Chaucerian Text* expands our understanding of the complex interconnections between English and French late medieval culture while dismantling ongoing scholarly assumptions about Chaucer, the English canon, translation, and literary exchange that continue to fragment or occlude our understanding of these interconnections. Robinson's investigation tackles two texts that she views as paradigmatic of the scholarly misunderstandings attending fifteenth-century English and Anglo-French culture: namely, the *Romaunt of the Rose*, partly ascribed to Chaucer, and the *Belle Dame Sans Mercy*, the Middle English translation of Alain Chartier's *Belle dame sans mercy* ascribed to Robert Roos. Both works, Robinson notes, have been routinely ignored for their perceived "derivative" status as overly faithful and thus critically uninteresting English translations from French, further problematically associated with Chaucer via ascription (for the *Romaunt*) and manuscript anthologization (for Roos' *Belle Dame*).

Yet these texts, Robinson points out, are not just any English translations of any random texts: they are English translations of the *Roman de la Rose* and Chartier's *Belle dame*. Highly complex in their content, multiple diegetic levels, and narrative plurivocality, the *Rose* and Chartier's *Belle dame* also

constitute the respective cores of two monumentally popular fifteenth-century *querelles*, or literary debates, that further problematize those works by means of detailed and still more plurivocal literary responses to them. Robinson recuperates the long neglected *Romaunt* and Roos' *Belle Dame* as significant contributions, in English, to this Continental French *querelle* tradition, as observable in their content, in their translatorial choices, and in their material presentation in English manuscripts that point to Continental models. In the process, she investigates the gravitational pull exerted by the figure of Chaucer on fifteenth-century scholarship and offers a generative model for acknowledging yet decentering his status.

In her Introduction, which doubles as her first chapter, Robinson begins by querying the automatic dismissal of certain interlingual translations as "unoriginal" and "derivative," especially given the inconsistent application of such judgments. Roos' *Belle Dame*, for example, is considered "derivative" both for being too similar to Chartier's French text and for being too similar to Chaucer's English poetry, a mutually contradictory set of qualities. Robinson also pushes back against the concept of the "Chaucerian" text, a similarly overused moniker that can signal both the authenticity of a text's association with Chaucer's *œuvre* and, paradoxically, the inauthenticity of a text seen to be overly imitative of Chaucer. For Robinson, the term "Chaucerian" amplifies the problems with the term "derivative": both reveal scholarly attitudes overly bound up with our own post-Romantic understandings of originality and creativity that do not usefully apply to the diversity of medieval translation practices.

Instead, Robinson proposes a different approach to late medieval translation altogether. Rather than define it by subjective and overly modern aesthetical categories, she suggests that some medieval interlingual translations are best read as specific types of responses to what she terms "contested texts." Contestation, as Robinson defines it, sees textual traditions arising out of plurivocal responses to intentionally plurivocal and open-ended works. These traditions of textual response are further developed by the material practices of scribal compilation, excerptation, and abridgment, as well as, Robinson proposes, interlingual translation. The *Romaunt* and Roos' *Belle Dame* constitute paradigmatic examples of interlingual translation practices that form contributions to contestation processes.

Robinson's second chapter offers a case study of the contestation process outlined in Chapter 1 by looking at the *Rose*, the *querelle*, and their manuscript presentation. She begins by reading the *Rose*'s infamous midpoint, in which Jean de Meun proleptically introduces himself as the future author of the existing text. For Robinson this moment reifies the *Rose*'s inherently ambiguous treatment of its co-authored status that goes on to play a major role in the *querelle de la Rose*, as Christine de Pizan and Pierre Col and Gontier Col, in particular, argue over Jean de Meun's responsibilities as author to his subject matter. From here, Robinson explores how the *Rose*'s role as contested site provoking debate is further problematized by material context. Specifically, Christine's version of the *querelle*, as presented in her collected-works manuscripts, frames the debate in a one-sided way privileging herself, while another early fifteenth-century extant manuscript offers a more balanced treatment by including many more documents from Christine's opponents. In this way, Robinson outlines a process of textual contestation into which she goes on to place the *Romaunt*.

Robinson begins her discussion of the *Romaunt* in chapter 3 by reassessing the problematic term “fragment” overwhelmingly used by scholars to refer to a tripartite division in the text that suggests the work of three different translators from French to English. This division is, in and of itself, fraught, as scholars have not reached consensus on the perceived relationship between the three parts. More problematically, Robinson suggests, use of the term “fragment” produces the erroneous perception of the *Romaunt* as also a *codicologically* fragmented text. In actuality, its only extant full manuscript, the mid-fifteenth-century Glasgow, University Library, MS Hunter 409 (V.37), while missing 11 leaves, presents the *Romaunt* as a continuous work. Further, because Chaucer’s authorship is always the starting point for any discussion of these “fragments,” the *Romaunt*’s sections (Robinson’s preferred term) are additionally hierarchized in relation to each other as “authentic” or “inauthentic” productions of the English poet.

Robinson proposes a radically alternate reading of the *Romaunt* that considers it in direct relation to the multi-authored, multi-textual Continental *Rose* and *querelle de la Rose* tradition. Noting that some *Rose* manuscripts offer hybrid texts with interpolations, omissions, and corrections from multiple *Rose* manuscript families, Robinson suggests that the Glasgow manuscript is doing something similar, as its hybrid translation of the *Rose* text also contains multiple abridgments and omissions and bears evidence of its translators working with exemplars from different *Rose* families. This is an intriguing idea that I would have loved to see more fleshed out with parallel examples of other English *translations* working with hybrid source-texts (one that comes immediately to mind is *The Secrees of Olde Philisoffres*, ascribed to John Lydgate, and its relationship to the *Secretum Secretorum* tradition). Building on Ardis Butterfield’s work with the Continentalizing material features of Gower and *Troilus* manuscripts, Robinson goes on to show the multiple parallels between the decoration, *mise-en-page*, organization, and *French-language* rubrication of the Glasgow manuscript and features of contemporary Continental *Rose* manuscripts. This section of her chapter offers an especially exciting example of how a late medieval Middle English text’s most perplexing qualities can make startling sense once the sphere of comparison is widened beyond a purely Middle English cultural purview.

Neatly mirroring her second chapter, Robinson’s fourth chapter focuses on the plurivocality and open-endedness embedded by Chartier into his *Belle dame*, extended by the *querelle de Belle dame*, and further underscored by the *querelle*’s complex manuscript tradition that anthologizes Chartier’s text with its multiple responses. In particular, each response from both named and unnamed readers, with subsequent replies from Chartier himself, adds an increasingly metadiegetic level to Chartier’s *Belle dame*. By the end of the *querelle*, Chartier becomes a character on trial for misogyny, with his *Belle dame* functioning as evidence alternately for the defense and the prosecution. Here Robinson especially stresses that Chartier’s text is always presented in manuscript with its various responses and that this manuscript tradition was known in England, rendering the “contested” status of this particular work especially available to English audiences.

In her fifth chapter, Robinson recuperates Roos’ dismissed and neglected *Belle Dame* as a powerful additional response to Chartier that extends many of the preoccupations of the Continental *querelle de Belle dame*. She demonstrates the complexity of Roos’ legalistic lexical choices that extensively develop images in Chartier’s original text; outlines the extradiegetic level introduced by Roos’ *verba translatoris*, with its flurry of intertextual allusions to the *Rose* and Guillaume de Deguileville’s

*Pèlerinage* texts; and traces Roos' own authorial self-modeling on Chaucer through his numerous studied allusions to the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, itself a text notably about Chaucer's English translation of the *Rose*, and to the *Troilus*, whereby Roos sets up Chaucer's Criseyde as an English counterpart to Chartier's lady. Robinson concludes this chapter with a powerful reconsideration of Longleat House, Marquess of Bath, MS Longleat 258, a late fifteenth-century compilation traditionally termed a "Chaucerian" anthology. Noting that the anthology also includes Hoccleve's translation of Christine de Pizan, numerous pieces by Lydgate with Continental French literary connections, Roos' *Belle Dame*, and the only extant English translation of *Le debat du cuer et d'œil* by Michault le Caron, aka Taillevent, Robinson suggests decentering Chaucer--and the whole notion of authorship--from our sense of this compilation's organization. Taken as a whole, this Longleat manuscript reads like an anthology of Anglo-French texts oriented around translation and debate that functions very similarly to Continental *querelle de la Rose* and *de Belle dame* manuscripts. Robinson's generative focus on fifteenth-century English manuscript circulation excitingly challenges Chaucer's monumental centrality--as well as the emphasis on Chaucer's Englishness--to fifteenth-century audiences.

Robinson's concluding chapter, which doubles as her coda, unexpectedly turns its attention to a text unquestioningly translated by Chaucer: *An ABC to the Virgin*, his translation of a Marian poem intercalated into Guillaume de Deguileville's *Pèlerinage de la vie humaine*. Robinson first establishes Deguileville's poem, which exists in two textually complex authorial recensions, as yet another example of a "contested" textual site that self-consciously looks back onto Jean de Meun's portion of the *Rose*. She then explores the material presentation of Chaucer's *An ABC* as a stand-alone poem in manuscripts that also point, like the other manuscripts considered by her in this book, to Continental models. She ends with a fascinating analysis that reads John Lydgate's intercalation of Chaucer's *An ABC* into his English translation of Deguileville's *Pèlerinage* as another English extension of Continental practices of textual contestation. In this way, Robinson continues to underscore the complexity of the ties between Continental French texts and their English translations that have remained sidelined in Middle English scholarship.

My one major criticism of this book might be its occasional over-reliance on secondary scholarship. While these citations clearly function as a kind of short-cut for Robinson to connect the multiple parts of her arguments together, they sometimes have the unfortunate effect of drowning out her voice. Another issue for me was an absence of signposting, particularly early in the book: for example, it took me until Chapter 4 to fully realize what exactly the discussion in Chapter 2 was setting up about textual "contestation," though once the full loop of the argument became clear to me, the rest of the monograph fell into place. That said, I see these as the attendant challenges of any large-scale comparative project that is obliged to work overtime to corral its multiple parts together.

In the end, Robinson's book shines a dazzling light onto some of the more cobwebbed corners of the English fifteenth century. Along with Stephanie Viereck Gibbs Kamath's *Authorship and First-Person Allegory in Late Medieval France and England* (2012), Robinson's book constitutes one of the first book-length studies to fully take up the mantle of Butterfield's magisterial *Familiar Enemy* (2009) in demonstrating what truly comparative scholarship can do to reshape our understanding of late

medieval English literature and its Continental relations. *We all have so much more to do*, I marveled to myself as I finished this book--and that, to me, is the hallmark of a truly great monograph.