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Review of *La Chronique Anonyme Universelle:  
Reading and Writing History in Fifteenth-Century  
France*

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Davis, Lisa Fagin. *La Chronique Anonyme Universelle: Reading and Writing History in Fifteenth-Century France*. Studies in Medieval and Early Renaissance Art History 61. Turnhout: Brepols, 2014. Vi + 439 pp., 97 color illustrations. DVD. €175. ISBN: 978-1-905375-55-4.

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LISA FAGIN DAVIS'S EDITION of the fascinating and little-known *Chronique anonyme universelle* is nothing short of a tour de force. Taking up the daunting challenge of creating a critical edition and translation of a text that combines multiple, overlapping chronicles and genealogies, that is recorded as a parchment roll, and that is found in twenty-eight different manuscripts, Davis delivers an exhaustively researched and meticulously designed final result. This editorial achievement is profound: the *Chronique*, while not unique within the genre of universal chronicles, is remarkable for the number of copies in which it survives, suggesting its importance to the genre. Davis's edition thus joins other recent works bringing much-needed renewed attention to medieval French historiography, an area long championed by Gabrielle M. Spiegel, such as Zrinka Stahuljak's and Noah Guynn's co-edited *Violence and the Writing of History in the Medieval Francophone World* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2013) and Jeanette Beer's *In Their Own Words: Practices of Quotation in Early Medieval History-Writing* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014). Davis's inclusion of a digital facsimile on DVD with

her edition further highlights the exciting possibilities afforded by digital humanities work in studying the parchment roll, a medieval medium particularly well suited for the modern computer or tablet screen.

The *Chronique* was composed circa 1410 in France, though later copyists continue its French chronicle portion through the late fifteenth century in several manuscripts. Consisting entirely of recombined excerpts from other works, the text is divided into several main, often overlapping sections that relate events from the Bible, Greece, Egypt, Troy, Rome, the papacy, the Crusades, the Holy Roman Empire, France, and England. Each section draws on a bevy of earlier textual sources, such as Orosius, Josephus, Isidore, Augustine, the French prose *Brut*, and Outremer chronicles, among many others. The text is laid out in vertical columns that shift, multiply, and merge as the roll progresses, beginning in Genesis with a two- to three-column layout and eventually settling into four columns that, at one point, even split into five. Copied in between and around the columns are multiple genealogical trees—of biblical figures, popes, French royalty, Holy Roman emperors, English royalty, etc. As Davis further points out, certain manuscripts demonstrate evidence of the genealogies having been laid down before the text, while others show genealogies snaking around pre-existing text. It is this kind of careful attention to codicological detail in an already sizeable and visually challenging corpus that makes Davis's edition stand out.

Especially impressive in this regard is Davis's decision to edit the text in a layout that reproduces the manuscripts' multicolumn format and to mirror that same format in her (excellent) facing-page English translation. As a result, the complex *mise-en-page* of this remarkable text is fully preserved, allowing the reader to follow the intertwining historical narratives with ease while comparing the original French text to the English. Davis keeps all the rubrics and identifies the position of the manuscripts' miniatures with boxes, neatly reproducing the visual organization of her base manuscript. Davis is thus able to facilitate the modern reader's textual experience without adding any editorial elements not present in the original manuscripts. Furthermore, Davis's textual apparatus to the translation renders into English any lengthy variants appended to the edition on the left-hand side and offers clarifying historical background on any major figure mentioned in the *Chronique*. The end result is a strikingly legible edition and

translation that manages to reproduce the manuscripts' complexity without simplifying it, despite the necessary visual breakdown of the roll into the codex.

But lest the reader despair that the edition in codex format has destroyed the experience of encountering the original roll, Davis offers a solution that capitalizes on that fortuitous convergence of medieval and modern scrolling technologies: the digital facsimile on DVD, included with the bound edition. (It should be noted that the digital facsimile reproduces a different, more fully illustrated, manuscript from the one used in the critical edition.) This facsimile has three interconnected viewing functions: an index of all figures named in the text, a genealogy view, and a facsimile view. On the left-hand side of the screen, the genealogy view presents a computerized representation of the entire roll with all of its genealogical trees, color-coded into papal, French, biblical, etc., with no surrounding text. The viewer can zoom in on any part of the roll and click on an individual name in a genealogical tree, which will pull up the digital facsimile view of the corresponding section of manuscript alongside, on the right, for easy comparison. The images are high quality and will remain sharp even under considerable magnification. The viewer is further able to click on the manuscript facsimile image to pull up a diplomatic transcription and English translation of that section of the text, which will replace the facsimile image view. Alternatively, the viewer may start with the digital facsimile view in the left viewpane and pull up the transcription and translation of corresponding sections in the right viewpane for easy comparison. Hyperlinks in the transcription will also get the viewer into the name index, in which she can find all instances of an individual's name occurring in the *Chronique* and access those sections of the transcription and translation. This tool does have a few bugs in my experience (particularly in terms of speed and in toggling between genealogy and facsimile views), but it nevertheless affords valuable opportunities for close work with this extraordinary manuscript to any scholar interested either in medieval historiography or in medieval rolls.

It is the rich sense of possibility for further study that really excites here. Davis prefaces the edition and translation with a lengthy introduction in which she describes the text and offers background on the universal chronicle, discusses its sources (both named in the text and unnamed), arranges

its twenty-eight extant manuscripts into a persuasive stemma, exhaustively catalogs the manuscripts' illustrative cycles, and describes all twenty-eight manuscripts with bibliographies of any scholarly works discussing them and permanent URLs for digitized copies. She further adds an appendix with a list of popes; a manuscripts index; an index of all figures mentioned in the text; numerous color plates, which include reproductions of all the miniatures in the manuscript used for the digital facsimile; and a bibliography. Written in a highly accessible yet engaging style, this prefatory material also makes use of numerous tables that greatly facilitate the reader in parsing the complexity of the manuscripts' layout, iconographic programs, and transmission. Throughout, Davis offers tantalizing conclusions, each of which invites further study: as she points out, for example, the French history portion of the *Chronique* represents an abbreviated version of the *Grandes chroniques de France*, a version that also circulates independently in numerous other fifteenth-century manuscripts. Previous scholars have argued that this abbreviated version of the *Grandes chroniques*, circulating independently, is the *Chronique's* source. Davis, however, shows that the version of this text preserved in the *Chronique* is closer to the text of the *Grandes chroniques* than the versions preserved in the other manuscripts. She posits, therefore, that this abbreviation of the *Grandes chroniques* originates with the *Chronique* and, in turn, gives rise to the other independently circulating versions. Similarly, she offers a new numbering system for the manuscripts' miniatures that shows, contrary to previous scholarly claims, that the *Chronique's* illustrative cycles are strikingly consistent across the manuscripts, shedding more light on the *Chronique's* complicated textual transmission. She also notes the manuscripts' fraught negotiations with how to visually render and legitimize the lineage of the Valois kings over that of Edward III when the *Chronique* reaches the extinction of the Capetian dynasty. These and many more such observations will undoubtedly yield rich harvests for future scholars.

My only quibble is that perhaps too much is made of the potential connections of the *Chronique* to the Bourbon library. Davis successfully shows that one of the *Chronique's* sources for the tale of Job matches a version found in Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, MS 5057, a manuscript owned by Jean I, Duke of Bourbon (1381–1434, r. 1410–1434). To this concrete piece

of potential evidence Davis adduces more circumstantial evidence: in particular, that the Bourbon library inventory describes texts similar to the sources used by the *Chronique*'s compiler. However, not only does the Bourbon library inventory date from 1524 and describe its entries vaguely (as Davis admits), but the texts and authors in question that suggest connection with the *Chronique* (Josephus, Vincent of Beauvais, Titus Livius, the *Grandes chroniques de France*, Brut, "histoires d'outremer," etc.) were standard features of royal and ducal libraries and are found in even greater proportion in the collections of Charles V and Charles VI, John of Berry, and the Burgundian dukes. That said, Davis's suggestion that the *Chronique* foregrounds some of the same female figures found in Christine de Pizan's *Cité des dames* (1404–1407), a text that includes, Davis notes, mention of Jean's wife, Marie, Duchess of Bourbon, is extremely intriguing and invites further study. Overall, this is a luxurious and exhaustively detailed critical edition and translation of immense value to scholars of medieval French historiography, particularly of the Hundred Years' War, as well as of the history of the material text and of the medieval reader, especially the female reader.