Reviews


The subject of this polyglot book is ostensibly the Cantigas d’escarnho e maldizer (Songs of Mockery and Insult, according to the author’s translation). It would be unjust, nevertheless, to accept the text’s title without questioning it. This book opens so many doors that, in fact, any title would have fallen short. Calling attention to the logical space of aequivocatio (polysemy, homonymy, analogy, etc.) and its permanent presence in the Cantigas is only a small part of this study. It is simply the starting point upon which Liu develops a much more complex analysis of the language of the cultural problems that arose in the Iberian Peninsula primarily during the twelfth to fifteenth centuries: multilingualism, interfaith clashes and communication, customs and rituals, professions, economic exchanges, the sacred and the profane, etc. For that matter, Liu has opened two main doors. One of them is the sign of our times, the door of theory. Liu explores, drawing on Freud and E. H. Gombrich, joke linguistic expression across discourses and its permanence in language; he also explores the problems of linguistic inversion and dialogism (Mikhail Bakhtin), the complications that arise from discourses on sexuality (Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault), and problematic areas in other domains of language. The other door is doubly archaeological; on one hand, Liu pursues the many problems encompassed by the definition of the Cantigas contained in a fourteenth-century Galician-Portuguese Arte de trovar; on the other hand, Liu rewrites and places the Cantigas amidst the issues of religion, society, law, sacred and profane, functioning in the Iberian Peninsula from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, and that includes a host of social transformations in the contact zone (as a cultural zone, not a geographical one) among Jews, Muslims, and Christians, as well as many written and spoken languages, mainly Arabic, Galician-Portuguese, Castilian, and others, including Occitan, Latin, and French.

The book is divided into an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion, plus a complete bibliography. Liu views the Cantigas as a meeting point (although obviously not the only one) of the expression of the problems of a divided and symbiotic society. In the introduction (pp. 1–16) he establishes the linguistic and sociopolitical foundations of the joke poem, in which, using equivocal devices, authors made criticisms about social and professional groups and particular persons. Chapter 1 (pp. 17–34) deals more specifically with aequivocatio and the escarnho, or mockery, derived from it; Liu explores the logic of aequivocatio from the point of view of Aristotelian categories and their varieties in order to analyze the employment of escarnho in songs in which, for instance, the common name underlying the proper name is used as a means of unveiling the social origins of the mocked subject. The rhetoric of uncertainty and the deliberative capacities of the logic of aequivocatio are the subject of chapter 2 (pp. 35–57), in which Liu examines texts dealing with divination and “allegories of the future.” In all of these texts, the equivocal vocabulary of soothsaying and divination allows the author to explore the limits between the sacred and the profane, which also constitute a central part of chapters 3 (“Pilgrimage and Profit,” pp. 58–67) and 4 (“Obscenity and Transgressions in an Alfonsine Cantiga,” pp. 68–88). In the discourses of divination, pilgrimage, and the liturgical calendar, the escarnho explores the sexual aequivocatio related to prostitution, homosexuality, interfaith relationships, etc. Chapter 5 (pp. 89–111) explores more specifically the dialogue between the mockery texts and the laws on matrimonial and sexual relationships among persons of different religions, in order to examine the “ambiguous realities of cultural mixing in medieval Iberia” (p. 111). Chapter 6, along with the previous one, is the most digressive part of this collection; in this section, which discusses the representation of the dialectics between legitimate Semitic doc-
tors (whether Muslim, Jewish, or Christian) and charlatan Occidental ones, both in literary and legal texts, the Cantigas occupies a rather marginal part. The book ends, or, rather, opens up, by means of the conclusion (pp. 131–45), in which Liu looks for a poetics of laughter by reading the prologues to poetic compilations, from Ibn Quzman to García de Resende; in this poetics of laughter, laughter would be placed as a substitute of emotions and feelings (Freud, Bergson), or, better yet, as a moment in which feelings are placed in parenthesis. Laughter, as Liu likes to recall several times throughout his book, “goes by neighborhoods” (as in the Spanish proverb “La risa va por barrios”), but, equally important, it also functions across them, disclosing, by this means, the problems of the various groups as well as the external relationships among them.

This short description does not do justice to Liu’s complex and rich text. He has a great deal to say about legal discourse and its cultural practice, about the crisis of customs and rituals, and about literary communications in the medieval Iberian Peninsula in general. A careful reader could, of course, be tempted to make some criticisms: the apparent radical separation between a logic and a rhetoric of aequipvocatio (such an excellent Arabist as Liu should have taken into account the Aristotelian Organon according to the Arabic commentaries and its knowledge since the twelfth century throughout Latin Europe); the minimization of some important Provençal traditions dealing with grammar and poetics; and perhaps more importantly, the neglect of the fact that the Partidas was not enforced in the period that Liu studies. None of these observations poses a real problem for Liu’s arguments: even if the Partidas was not enforced during this particular period, it is, nevertheless, true that it represents a legislative intent and, thus, is one of the texts of the discourse of power.

Liu’s is a very enjoyable book, elegantly written, and very deep in its aim and scope. It makes a significant contribution to one of the most interesting and important issues with which medievalists and all inhabitants of our modern world are confronted: how to theorize the contact and communicative zones in a world marked by power, imbalance, and diversity.

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According to Michael Lower, the Barons’ Crusade of 1240, which was in the planning stage for about five years or so, was the first intended to be paid for largely by the redemption of vows. That is to say, everyone who did not have an impediment to doing so was to be encouraged to take the cross but only those who would be excellent, trained fighters would actually be encouraged to go on crusade. The others, the vast majority, would pay as much as they would have paid if they had gone. Redemption was to be calibrated to the status of the redeemer. An aged rich count was expected to pay a lot more than a disabled artisan. Pope Innocent III had laid some of the foundation for this method of financing, but it was really Pope Gregory IX who tried to make it work. And in the end it did not work very well. Though there were many other ways of raising money that were also tried, the emphasis was on redemption of vows. Most of the other ways, by the way, did not work very well either.

A second theme of the book is that Christendom has been conceived by scholars as a great deal more unified behind its religion, particularly in mounting crusades, than is justified. Kings, especially the youngish Henry III of England and the even younger Louis IX of France, were too occupied with other matters to pay much attention to the pope’s