
BOOK REVIEWS

Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet. *The Color of Melancholy: The Uses of Books in the Fourteenth Century*. Trans. Lydia G. Cochrane. Forward by Rogier Chartier. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. 186p.

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Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet's new book engages in a thick description of fourteenth-century literary culture. Her reading of this literature and period flushes out Johan Huizinga's thesis of the "waning" of the Middle Ages in a positive way. Cerquiglini-Toulet focuses on melancholy as a way to lever into the material and cultural conditions that made the decline of the fourteenth century possible. Her investigation becomes a revision of the "massive reduction to unity" (152) operated on the fourteenth century and its scholastic foundations by humanist thinkers. She thus attempts to "reintroduce a degree of distinction into the period that humanists considered and rejected globally in the interests of self-affirmation" (152). The degree of distinction she reintroduces manifests itself as a willingness to take the period on its own terms, and to allow these terms to express the organizing categories of the period's "decline." This approach gives an accute sense of the local and immanent. Such a "degree of distinction" results in a richly varied subject matter. It is the strength of this book.

As the elegant introduction by Roger Chartier puts it, Cerquiglini-Toulet brings to the study of these works "the description of their material forms, and a comprehension of the various meanings invested in them by their authors, their copyists or printers, and their readers" (xvi). Cerquiglini-Toulet enters this realm of material forms through the prism of melancholy, a term which, unfortunately, she never defines. Nonetheless, examples of the term abound. Melancholy is the "painful contradiction" (3) that a literature as young as fourteenth-century French literature could see itself "as the winter of literature" (4). Melancholy is also behind the facade of the Court of Love, formed by Charles VI in 1400: "The act of foundation was thus conceived as a therapy that would permit an entire society in crisis to escape a sentiment—melancholy—that was becoming predominant in both life and aesthetics" (47). It manifests itself at the even more subtle and basic level of genre or compositional technique: "The sentiment of crisis in materials engendered reflection on the very ways in which literary materials were produced and

on the origins of the work of literature” (64). Melancholy is thus a double trope. It is a figure for a material and political world in crisis and it becomes a metaphor for literature’s reflection on and engagement in that crisis. Cerquiglini-Toulet maps the complicated archaeology of the material forms of this crisis “in both life and aesthetics.” Her masterful command of the period and its dense textuality make this book a wealth of information, minute and general.

While the dense engagement with detail is a strength (among many examples, see particularly the section on the writer [31 et passim] and the section on invention [100 et passim]), it can also become a weakness. Cerquiglini-Toulet seems so intent on avoiding the globalizing, reductive view of the period that she decides to withhold from the reader the fine general perspective she must have. The result is that her reintroduction of distinction leaves us somewhat lost in the trees with no sense of the forest. The first chapter is almost aphoristic, and throughout the book I was left eager for a fuller discussion of particular texts (see especially the argument that culminates on 146).

Rather than making a critique of what is here, I am drawing attention to the absence of a larger frame that would help situate these issues amongst more general and theoretical concerns. While the book is rich with examples of fourteenth-century uses of the word “melancholy,” there is no attempt to define the word or to put it in dialogue with the rich modern discussions of it in criticism and psychoanalysis. Likewise, I was surprised to see that Chartier’s forward invokes Foucault’s article “What is an Author?,” and yet in a dense and key moment in her genealogy of the author, Cerquiglini-Toulet cites a surprisingly outdated discussion of authorship by Ernest Kris and Otto Kurz (1934). If she had situated the very compelling issues of melancholy and authorship in their relation to the larger literary tradition and modern scholarship, her readers would be able to move with more confidence into the specificity of the fourteenth century. A more egregious lacuna is felt in relation to the eight-color reproductions of manuscript illuminations. The reproductions are splendid, but short of the identification of text, provenance, and date, the images are neither described nor discussed nor related to the analysis. One cannot help wishing that Cerquiglini-Toulet had shared her sense of their relation to her thesis. These reservations, though important, will surely serve some scholars as stepping stones to further work on the period that Cerquiglini-Toulet has so elegantly opened up.

This is a probing book, deeply engaged in the texts and culture of fourteenth-century France and Europe. Its readings of Machaut, Pizan, and Deschamps are fresh and exciting. Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet has indeed reintroduced us to the many distinctions of this period. ✱