
Sarah Kay. *The Place of Thought: The Complexity of One in Late Medieval French Didactic Poetry*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 236p.

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Sarah Kay assures her readers, in her preface to *The Place of Thought*, that in no way has she intended this work on medieval didactic poetry to be conservative or reactionary in its critical approach. While it is her aim to reassert the aesthetic and intellectual value of the “monologism” prevalent in these texts, with their striving for a single unitary meaning, as compared to the Bakhtinian dialogism generally privileged in current literary criticism, with its emphasis on discursive multiplicity, she insists that her project is nevertheless an antihegemonic one. Her conclusions lead distinctly away from the totalitarian. Indeed, as Kay explores the efforts in her chosen texts toward expressions of unity—of meaning, of representation, of interpretation, of the individual and the universal—we see the true “complexity of one” that is her theme. We see, in fact, a multitude of “ones,” reflecting medieval philosophical concerns with singularity, unity, and the human powers of perception and intellection. Moreover, Kay demonstrates the tensions created by the texts’ efforts at unification in the strained representations of locations, often difficult or impossible to visualize, in which the authors “place” the thoughts they mean to convey.

Kay’s approach to her topic is multifaceted and itself complex, but also consistent and cohesive. She begins in her introduction with a clear and concise discussion of both the relevant Aristotelian discussions of “place” and “thought” that would lead to a medieval didactic impulse to “place” thought, and the predominant medieval philosophical discussions regarding “oneness” in its various forms. (It is Kay’s contention that while these didactic poetic pieces may be products of the vernacular tradition, they nevertheless reflect the strong scholastic currents of the day. If in a diluted form, the problems addressed by such intellectuals as Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham still emerge in the literature.) Kay devotes a chapter to each of the six texts covered in the discussion that follows, drawn from what she designates the “long fourteenth century” in French literature: the *Breviari d’Amor* by Matfre Ermengaud (composed between 1288 and 1292); the *Ovid moralisé* (between 1316 and 1325); the *Pèlerinage de vie humaine* by Guillaume de Deguileville (1330-1331); the *Jugement dou roy de Navarre* by Machaut (1349 or 1350); the *Joli buisson de Jonece* by Froissart (1373); and the *Livre du Chemin de long estude* by Christine de Pizan (1402). Kay also includes a briefer discussion of the sermon of Genius in Jean de Meun’s *Roman de la rose* (1270s) in her conclusion. With each, she begins by delineating the particular location that is intended to serve a unify-

ing and homogenizing function in the text and then moves to an analysis of the work's philosophical situation and particular engagement with the "complexity of one." This complexity in turn reflects on and is reflected in the representation of place. This reader's only regret is that in a text that frequently makes reference to the manuscript illuminations and the roles they play in the effort to visualize these loci, none of these beautiful images are reproduced in color.

The individual places vary considerably in their nature and specificity, from a Porphyrian tree in the *Breviari* to an Edenic landscape in the *Ovid moralisé*, a manor house in the *Navarre*, or the weirdly amorphous floating "merry bush" of the *Jolie buisson*. In the cases of the *Pèlerinage de vie humaine* and the *Chemin de long estude*, where the narrative does not take place in a single location (or, as with the *Ovid moralisé*, a single location—here the garden landscape—cannot be abstracted from the whole), Kay selects images from individual episodes: the Hedge of Penitence in the *Pèlerinage* and the fountain of the Muses in the *Chemin*. Likewise the complexities of oneness vary from text to text: the union of the individual with God through love in the *Breviari*; the establishment of Christian community in the *Ovid moralisé*; the separation and division of the individual in the *Pèlerinage*; the question of a single universal good in the *Navarre*; the function of memory, and the decision between sexual love and union with God in the *Jolie buisson*; and the possibility of metaphysical enlightenment, the fountain as its source, in the *Chemin de long estude*. While Kay's discussion is excellent and interesting in all cases, her treatment of the tensions created by the images of the unwieldy Porphyrian tree in the *Breviari* and the elusive floating bush of the *Jolie buisson*, characterized by its lack of stem or trunk and perforated with gaps, are particularly strong. Her discussion of memory in the chapter on Froissart's *Jolie buisson de Jonece* is further enhanced by a smart incorporation of the "Dream of the Burning Child" as interpreted by Freud and Lacan. Throughout the text, Kay adds another layer to her discussion by making reference to modern theorists—Deleuze and Guattari, Lacan, and Kristeva, among others—when she sees resonances in their work with the items at issue in the medieval texts. She thus demonstrates the enduring challenge and richness of the concepts addressed in these medieval works, as they continue to resonate with modern thought, and further deflects any possible charges of theoretical conservatism.

Kay ends on another challenging note by turning to Jean de Meun's continuation of the *Roman de la rose*—a text that predates all of the others discussed here—in her conclusion. She notes, particularly in regard to the sermon delivered by Genius, that the text reads as a direct parody of these didactic poems and their efforts at "placing" thought. Surely the later poems were influenced by the *Roman de la rose*, and thus it is faintly unsettling that this precursor should appear to comment satirically on

its followers. Kay attributes this to the “uncanny phenomenon in medieval poetry” of “parody that is consubstantive with its model” (184). This is not entirely satisfying, introduced as it is in the final pages of the book, but it is also understandable and not ultimately damaging. Given the stature of the *Roman de la rose*, it is a necessary item to address; neither does it actually detract from Kay’s primary, and concluding, point. Whether, like the sermon of Genius, a text chooses to play with the concept, or, as with these didactic poems that followed, it attempts to negotiate the problem and develop the full potential, intellectual and aesthetic, of a unity of meaning, it is this confrontation with oneness, and the great complexity that results, that matters. Kay contends that the monologism of the medieval didactic texts has placed them in bad standing with the critical tradition that privileges the dialogic, yet she concludes that this monologism may in fact represent a more courageous intellectual and artistic choice than that of indeterminate multiplicity. Meanwhile, her own discussion of these texts, and of the “complexity of one,” is dynamic, eloquent, and exciting. *