

PAOLO CHERCHI, *Andreas and the Ambiguity of Courtly Love*. Toronto Italian Studies. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1994. Pp. xv, 194. ISBN: 0-8020-0577-2. \$50.

This book takes as its subject one of the most hotly debated issues in medieval studies: courtly love. Cherchi's unapologetically formalist critique examines troubadour love poetry in the context of Andreas Capellanus' polemical *De amore*, though his stated goal is to 'get rid of Andreas' (11) whose work he sees as an impediment (rather than a tool) to understanding the dynamics of *fin'amor*. In three long chapters, this author builds a case not only for rejecting Andreas' interpretation of courtly love, but also for rationalizing one of the fundamental paradoxes of the courtly love ethos, that erotic love can lead to moral virtue.

Cherchi begins his study with a survey of the *De amore* designed to show how Andreas relies on such troubadour themes as *obedentia*, *amor purus*, and *probitas* and how his interpretation of these themes can be used as a model for understanding courtly love. He demonstrates that the language of Andreas' courtly lovers is often identical to that used by the troubadours in their poetry. He then outlines Andreas' attack against courtly love in which the chaplain finds the celebration of erotic love as the source of moral beauty specious and wrong.

Having established the nature of Andreas' cavil with the idea of *fin'amor*, Cherchi then sets out to rebut Andreas's critique by clarifying the mentality underlying troubadour love poetry. He suggests that twelfth-century literate culture was intensely attracted to the concept of *honestum*, virtue which is sought for its own sake, of which the chief component is *temperantia*. The court culture of southern France in the twelfth century adapted this virtue to fit its own needs in an inflection known as *mezura*, which equated the conformity to courtliness with virtue. *Mezura* 'is the expression of an internal composure which comes only with the possession of all the courtly virtues' (50); it means 'belonging to the courtly world and living up to its aspirations' (52).

Mezura can render erotic love virtuous, Cherchi argues, because it always keeps desire from being realized. In the poetry of *fin'amor*, passion and temperance 'balance each other in a sort of tense immobility' (54). Paradoxically, then, troubadour poetry is not, at base, about courtly love, but about poetry. The lover's goal is neither erotic satisfaction nor spiritual sublimation but rather the creation of art, a lyric moment designed not to capture the lady but to articulate the poet's courtliness. Seen this way, the poetry of *fin'amor* is less about an actual, identifiable lover and beloved as about a subjective 'I' and the object that inspires poetry, a move which begins to explain much of the conventionality characteristic of the genre. Thus, the conventional impediments—which under Andreas' model would render love impossible—are hardly problematic; indeed, given that the poet's aim is not seduction but the promotion of his own courtly virtue, they enable him to demonstrate his *temperantia*.

The poet places himself in a lyric situation in which desire is always heightened and attenuated but in which there is never a possibility for it to be fulfilled. Thus, paradoxically, the poetry of *fin'amor* is largely narcissistic, quite the opposite of Andreas'

conception of courtly love. But, Cherchi explains, '[e]ven when a troubadour stresses his egoistic and possessive desires, he is paying tribute to *cortezia*; his formalistic exercise is ultimately a tribute to Beauty, the collective ideal of *cortezia*' (71).

The final section of Cherchi's study examines in detail the language that troubadour poets used to express the alternating poles of eros and virtue in their lyrics. The focus is on *adynata*, tropes that express paradox or impossibility. Since it is the impossibility of attaining the Lady that both promotes and contains the poet's desire, *adynaton* is an effective trope for articulating the condition that in turn allows the poet to express his *mezura*. The various types of *adynata*, which Cherchi catalogues at length, are directly related to the almost narcissistic self-referentiality of the speakers in most of the troubadour lyrics. Since *mezura* requires that desire remain unfulfilled, that impossibility of the love must necessarily be expressed as often and as poetically as possible within the lyric. 'Courtliness taught every troubadour to live up to the ideal of the perfect lover with all the sorrows, joys, hopes, and lapses that accompany such a "profession." It was only a question of how to define that ideal' (122).

Although Cherchi did not write this book with Arthurian scholars in mind, his work may provide them with helpful ways to begin thinking about the courtly-love ethos so prevalent in Arthurian literature. Yet many readers will also find the work as a whole unsatisfying. From its title, it appears that Cherchi's monograph is primarily concerned with Andreas Capellanus. But clearly this is not the case; although the author devotes the first chapter to the *De amore*, he mentions Andreas only rarely thereafter. In fact, it is ultimately unclear as to why Andreas figures so prominently in this study. If, as Cherchi asserts, Andreas didn't 'get' the 'true' dynamic underlying *fin'amor*, that he somehow missed out on the way that *mezura* rectifies and recuperates the 'ambiguity' of courtly love, then Cherchi is simply using him as a straw man. But it is one thing for modern critics to be disturbed by the easy way that the troubadours elide erotic love into virtue, and it is quite another for a contemporary reader such as Andreas to have misunderstood it. Cherchi's argument assumes that Andreas based his model solely on the Provençal lyrics. If this is the case, then why did Andreas fail so completely to understand (or at least acknowledge) *mezura*? The 'key to all mythologies' argument is ultimately suspect because it seeks to explain away ambiguity and paradox, fundamental features themselves of troubadour lyric.

The chapters concerned with the troubadours' poetry are the most successful. Cherchi's formalist approach may strike readers as a bit outdated, but his close readings of two poems are thorough and perceptive. His belabored point that the voices behind these poems (the 'lyric I') do not necessarily coincide with that of the author any more than the object of the speaker's love represents a flesh-and-blood twelfth-century lady is overly familiar. If, as he suggests, some readers are still equating poet and speaker, then his corrective is long overdue. Readers will find this monograph most helpful if they bear in mind the (not always recognized) limitations of Cherchi's argument. His thesis is quite credible when confined temporally and geographically. But outside the boundary of his troubadours, it is difficult to reconcile the

contradiction of courtly love. Indeed, even Cherchi remarks that ‘In northern France...courtliness lives through aventure; in the South, it lives through *mezura*’ (47). As such, it may be more correct to see *mezura* as an isolated concept, rather than a misunderstood one.

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