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“Every Valley Shall Be Exalted” by Constance Bouchard

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The Anthology collects works in an under-studied genre by well-known authors and, by putting the works into dialogue (even debate) with one another, shows how they voice opinions on issues like gender politics, literary politics, and the uses and abuses of authority, issues of vital interest to medieval audiences and modern scholars. In addition to the explicit themes of heterosexual relationships and gender roles that impel the debates, the works are connected by their constructions of complicated narrative identities, especially in relation to their patrons. Christine’s narrative persona is particularly interesting. When the three male narrators—the comically inept ones in Guillaume’s and Chaucer’s works and Chartier’s lovelorn one—are compared to Christine’s female narrator, she appears to be surprisingly authoritative. She dares to tell her patron, the duke of Orléans, that, even if the material does not interest him, “it does no harm / To listen to things / On a variety of topics” (ll. 19–21). This anthology, beautifully bound with ample margins, would make an excellent source to introduce these topics in Women’s Studies courses, literature courses, and medieval culture courses.

Constance Brittain


“Every Valley Shall Be Exalted” continues the trend of recent inquiries into a topic which has often gone unremarked-upon by earlier historians: namely, the use of opposing categories in twelfth-century French culture. It was not limited to Scholasticism, but instead permeated all aspects of medieval intellectual culture. Catherine Brown’s work on opposites and dialectic and Sarah Kay’s work on contradictions, both slightly earlier than Bouchard’s book, begin to explore how oppositional thinking was a cornerstone of the intellectual tradition of the High Middle Ages. Bouchard’s book is broader and more holistic, using texts from the genres of literature, philosophy, theology, jurisprudence, and natural philosophy to explore the use of opposing categories in scholastic thought, literature, religious conversion, and abstract sentence in Christine de Pizan’s The Debate of Two Lovers, the translators note, “the long sentence that runs from line 124 to 135 is a common Middle French construction describing what a hypothetical observer would have seen at these festivities” (302, n. 4).

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conflict resolution, and gender. Bouchard contends, persuasively, that opposition was a way of understanding fundamental questions in twelfth-century France. The dialectical method in twelfth-century philosophy, best exemplified in Peter Abelard’s *Sic et Non*, reached a high point in this period, influencing how people thought about conversion, legal disputes, literature, and gender. However, unlike later Scholasticism, in which opposing categories were posited in the service of synthesis and systematization, twelfth-century intellectuals purposefully constructed a reality in which both categories in an opposing pair—such as life and death—remained unresolved. Furthermore, Bouchard argues that twelfth-century writers viewed both values in these opposing sets as co-productive of one another. Categories such as “masculine” were meaningless without the opposite category of “feminine.”

“Every Valley Shall Be Exalted” begins with an inquiry into the philosophical roots of this discourse. The Platonic origin of the construction of opposing categories was expressed partly in Plato’s *Timaeus* as finding harmony in dissonance. This conception was further developed by Aristotle, especially in his dialectical method. This was in turn transmitted to twelfth-century intellectuals via the Bible and patristic authors, especially Augustine. This strand, along with a new approach informed by Martianus Capella and Boethius, eventually flowered into the discourse of opposites in twelfth-century France. Bouchard builds her argument with a multi-disciplinary approach focused on textual analysis. In each chapter, she examines a few key texts in depth and works outwards, sometimes including visual material. The section on early scholasticism examines the glosses on reversals in the New Testament, especially in the *Glosa Ordinaria*, and in Abelard’s *Sic et Non*. From there, the book delves into the tension between love and honor in twelfth-century romance and epic, especially Chrétien de Troyes’ *Lancelot*. Religious conversion, especially entrance into monastic orders, was particularly attended to in this period, as men and women increasingly converted to monks and nuns as adults, rather than being given to an order as child oblates. Thus conversion was seen as a radical change from one status to its polar opposite. In the area of conflict resolution there was not this same shift from one end of the spectrum to the other; rather, quarrels were often resolved by a delicate balance between the opposites, mutually agreeable to both parties, even while both parties continued to hold mutually exclusive positions. Bouchard concludes with a chapter on gender, examining ideas about gender as well as gender roles (including contrary roles within one gender).

It is in the chapter on gender where Bouchard makes her boldest argument; that the discourse of opposites reached its zenith on topics related to gender. She examines twelfth-century ideas of gender in areas of sex difference and misogyny, theology, gender roles, and love. Building her argument mainly from conflict resolution, and gender. Bouchard contends, persuasively, that opposition was a way of understanding fundamental questions in twelfth-century France. The dialectical method in twelfth-century philosophy, best exemplified in Peter Abelard’s *Sic et Non*, reached a high point in this period, influencing how people thought about conversion, legal disputes, literature, and gender. However, unlike later Scholasticism, in which opposing categories were posited in the service of synthesis and systematization, twelfth-century intellectuals purposefully constructed a reality in which opposing categories were posited in the service of synthesis and systematization, twelfth-century intellectuals purposefully constructed a reality in which both categories in an opposing pair—such as life and death—remained unresolved. Furthermore, Bouchard argues that twelfth-century writers viewed both values in these opposing sets as co-productive of one another. Categories such as “masculine” were meaningless without the opposite category of “feminine.”

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harmony differs significantly from
the idea of resolution or concord,
which is often thought to characterize
thirteenth-century thought. Perhaps
the difference lies in the creation of a
new category, the result of synthesis.
Bouchard states more than once
that the twelfth-century intellectual
aim of maintaining a precarious
tension between two opposite ends
of a dichotomy is not related to the
Averroist doctrine of double truth,
but large part because Averroes
was unknown in the twelfth century.
This raises the questions, however, of what
the relationship was between the
twelfth-century discourse of opposites
and Averrosim, and if the twelfth-
century paradigm made it possible for
scholars in the thirteenth century to
engage intellectually with a worldview
composed of binary distinctions.

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The central argument of “Every Valley
Shall Be Exalted” is both provocative
and valuable. It is refreshing to read
scholarship on the twelfth century
that does not present the uses of
contradiction as a step toward unitary
vision. Rather, Bouchard makes it
clear that twelfth-century writers
recognized that both poles of a
continuum required one another and that
these writers valued both poles. Furthermore, she stresses repeatedly
that the endeavor on the part of
these writers to find a way to balance
the tension between two opposites
enabled them to construct a reality
based on this balance. Yet it remains
unclear how this idea of balance or

END NOTE
1. Catherine Brown, Contrary Things:
Exegesis, Dialectic, and the Poetics
of Didacticism (Stanford: Stanford
UP, 1998); Sarah Kay, Courtly
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