Strange as it may sound to non-medievalists, there is no issue in medieval literary study more fascinating or with more profound literary implications than the approach to text editing. In principle that has always been true, but it is, if possible, an even more vital question in recent years, because it involves controversies concerning the very status of the text itself.

As editor, Regina Psaki rejects an interventionist approach, which would, in a sense, yield merely a new redaction of the text. Instead, she offers a ‘diplomatic transcription’ of the Guillaume de Dole—without punctuation, capitalization (except where it occurs in the manuscript), or diacriticals. She also follows the manuscript in its frequent absence of spacing between words but maintains the spaces left by the scribe after the initial letter of each line. Furthermore, she duplicates the manuscript’s line breaks in the lyric insertions (even when they do not correspond to the rhymes). Unable to indicate abbreviations as they stand in the manuscript, she expands them (except in et) within brackets. She has not reproduced columns, glosses, colored initials, and the like.

Thus, as she readily admits, her text only approximates the appearance of the manuscript, and she acknowledges that the result may seem to be an ‘abominable hybrid’ (xxxi). For those who prefer a different approach, she ‘warmly’ recommends Félix Lecoy’s edition. Yet she criticizes traditional critical editions for causing ‘alienation from the material existence of the text when finally we encounter it in manuscript’ (xxix). Leaving aside the fact that very few readers will go from the printed text to the manuscript, we may question whether her edition accomplishes what she hopes. An approximate typographical presentation of the text does comparatively little, I think, to convey its material existence: would it necessarily be less effective simply to point out—though medievalists already know it—that word and letter spacing do not conform to modern usage?

The central question turns on whether an edition should facilitate comprehension. For Psaki, presumably, such assistance would constitute further alienation from the text. I would disagree, but users will judge for themselves. An example, from the beginning of the poem: her l. 17 reads ‘I anuls niert deloir lassez;’ compare Lecoy’s ‘Ja nuls n’iert de l’oïr lassez.’ More strikingly, compare Psaki’s l. 34, ‘ot iadisunemp[er]eor,’ with Lecoy’s ‘ot jadis un emperoer’; or her l. 1338, ‘S orlarestuel delespie sapuia,’ and his ‘Sor l’arestuel de l’espié s’apauia.’

Which is better? The reader who is at home in Old French will have no great difficulty in deciphering Psaki’s text, but the question stands nonetheless. To my mind, since in any case this text does not and cannot present the original exactly, a critical edition would be preferable to her admitted hybrid. Yet it must be emphasized
that Psaki is rigorously faithful to her chosen policy and that she has very competently done what she set out to do. For that, she merits our gratitude.

Turning to her English rendering, she acknowledges that we already have ‘outstanding translations’ (xxxi) of the Roman de la Rose, and she justifies offering yet another one by using it to make the original’s problems and difficulties as visible as possible. That means, for example, that where there are several possible interpretations of a line, she attempts to maintain the ambiguity in the translation. Is this an abdication of the translator’s (and editor’s) duty? Or does it offer the reader a more accurate understanding of the richness of the text? In any event, she is not entirely consistent in this regard, for she does insert subject pronouns and proper names when needed ‘to clarify the subject of a sentence’ (xxxi). Should not these ambiguities stand if others are to do so?

All in all, despite what we may take as an idiosyncratic approach, Psaki’s edition is carefully and scrupulously done. The same is true for the English: if some stylistic sacrifices have been made in order to provide the line-for-line rendering required by the Garland series, it is nevertheless a clear and competent translation that would serve well as an guide to the Old French original.

The volume includes a solid and helpful introduction, a brief bibliography, textual notes, and an appendix of the lyric insertions in the romance.

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