

Jean Bouchet. *Le Jugement poëtic de l'honneur femenin*.

Ed. Adrian Armstrong. Vol. 1 of *Œuvres complètes*. Textes de la Renaissance 101. Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2006. 596 pp. index. append. illus. gloss. bibl. €65. ISBN: 2-7453-1339-8.

This edition of *Le Jugement poëtic de l'honneur femenin* (1538) inaugurates the publication of the complete works of the *rhétoriqueur* Jean Bouchet. Devoted entirely to women — in particular to the mother of King François I and of Marguerite de Navarre, Louise de Savoie, whom Bouchet commemorates after her death in 1531 — this text offers a positive contribution to the contemporary debate on women known as the *querelle des femmes*. This “hybrid text,” in editor Adrian Armstrong’s formulation, combines the specific praise of Louise and the general defense of women within several textual layers (18). Bouchet situates the work in contemporary events — Louise’s death coincided with special regional court sessions, called the Grands Jours de Poitou — while drawing on and manipulating the literary traditions of the dream allegory and the judgment. The work culminates in a long series of *epigrammes*, or epitaphs, of famous women, which contribute to a powerful argument in support of women.

A brief summary of the *Jugement* gives some indication of its complexity. The prose “Apologie” that opens the book provides an initial series of arguments in defense of women. The main text consists of 3,773 ten-syllable verses within an allegorical frame story narrated by the *Traverseur* — the first-person voice associated with Bouchet throughout his career. After presenting his work to François I and haranguing the magistrates of the 1531 Grands Jours, the *Traverseur* receives a visit from a personified Fame, who recounts the death of Louise de Savoie. The dream-vision follows: accompanied by the god Mercury, the *Traverseur* travels from Louise’s tomb to the *Champ de Verité*, where he presents, before three judges, the case for her inclusion in the *Palays des Cleres Dames*. Before hearing their decision, the *Traverseur* visits this architectural haven and transcribes the 126 *epigrammes*. The enumeration of other exceptional women and an invective against those who have mistreated women follow. Ultimately, this elaborate defense of women sets the scene for the *Traverseur*, along with a personified *Honneur*, to introduce Louise de Savoie into the palace.

The female exempla constitute the central part of Bouchet’s text: they include, in order of their appearance in the poem, women from the Old Testament, the Sibyls, women from classical antiquity, and Christian women — from the New Testament as well as from distant, and recent, history. The form — inscriptions ranging in length from twelve to twenty-two lines — limits the details that can be included. In each the exemplary woman herself speaks — this first-person narration creates a strong relationship with the reader. The compilation of famous women was, of course, a popular form in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. The architectural allegory of Bouchet’s *palays* recalls, for example, Christine de Pizan’s *Cité des Dames*, a central text of the *querelle des femmes*. In fact, neither that text, nor those of the other principal figures of that debate — Boccaccio, Martin Le Franc, Agrippa — provide the principal sources

for the *Jugement*. Bouchet's main source is much less well-known: *De plurimis claris selectisque mulieribus* (1497), Jacopo Filippo Foresti's recasting of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*. Armstrong's copious appendix — one of the exceptional features of this edition — meticulously specifies the sources of each epigram.

In addition to the appendix, this edition includes a detailed introduction, an extensive glossary, an index of the proper names in Bouchet's text, a general index, and ample notes, which further examine Bouchet's sources — including his own previous works — and offer additional literary insights. Whereas the choice to retain the original spelling and punctuation results in a text that will certainly challenge many readers, these notes also provide useful linguistic analysis. The superb introduction situates the *Jugement* historically, within Bouchet's career and literary movements of the early sixteenth century, and within recent literary criticism, especially that related to women. Together, this edition's paratexts draw attention to Bouchet's unusual compositional techniques: rather than draw on his own previous works for examples, which would provide thematic continuity, Bouchet turned to new sources, such as Foresti, a process that often created contradictory versions of one exemplum. For the editor, these tensions and contradictions are symptomatic of the larger debate of the *querelle des femmes*. Armstrong's meticulous work on this edition highlights the particular methods of Jean Bouchet and this work's significance in the literary landscape of the early sixteenth century.

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