

The Truth of My Songs: Poems of the Trobairitz. Translated by Claudia Keelan. Richmond, CA: Omnidawn Publishing, 2015. 131pp. \$17.95

Medieval culture, as Lee Patterson put it in 1990, has often been imagined as “an enigma to be solved rather than a living past with claims upon the present.” Teaching and writing about medieval poetry is always difficult, a process of continual negotiation between strangeness and familiarity, distance and connection. Claudia Keelan takes up this problem of historical relation in her new book of translations, *The Truth of My Songs: Poems of the Trobairitz*, which aggressively modernizes the courtly lyrics of southern France’s twelfth-century female troubadours (trobairitz). Keelan understands medieval poetry’s simultaneous familiarity and strangeness as a problem for its contemporary reception, and she anticipates the potentially controversial consequences of her approach to translating it: the prior translations that inspired her, she says, “circulate in the circumstances of the translator’s own writing present, which is, like it or not, the only living place of reception.” This idea—that the life of a translated poem exists in its read present, rather than its originary past—is both a rationale and a problem of its own for Keelan’s new translations. By weaving together “historic and contemporary particulars,” to borrow from Louis Zukofsky, Keelan’s poems breathe new life into the songs of the trobairitz, but through a patchwork of the modern and the archaic that often borders on pastiche.

Keelan’s approach to translation is a complicated one that deserves serious evaluation. She may be right that the texts of the medieval trobairitz songs call for rewriting rather than literal translation. These are lyrics written in highly codified poetic forms and idioms and with a strong self-awareness of a genre that appealed to a very specific social subset. Could there even be a way, then, to translate them literally? Doing so for many of these poems, Keelan argues convincingly, would produce English versions so obscured by idiom as to remain virtually untranslated. (Keelan notes, for example, that a line from one song, translated literally, would read, “One often picks the brooms with which one sweeps oneself.”) Nonetheless, readers would be right to question the license Keelan takes with Ezra Pound’s dictum that “all ages are contemporaneous.” Pound’s statement describes the empathic capacity of language in general and of literature more specifically. But Pound was also reflecting on the wonder that poetic language has the capacity to transcend what is alien between two scenes. So taking his offer of contemporaneity too much at face value runs the risk of losing the productive tension between the alien and the familiar. Poetry can offer readers a window into a world entirely other—historically, nationally, socially, linguistically—

and imposing too much familiarity diminishes that world, dissolving what might otherwise grip the reader as unexpectedly relatable. Keelan's too-frequent transpositions of one idiom into another generates some discomfort, then, by collapsing the distinct historical experiences each one delineates. It may be the case that, in fact, each age has its own or indeed a multitude of specific contemporary vocabularies and attitudes, and that blithely assigning one to another does a disservice to both.

The proof, though, must lie in the poetry. One of Keelan's primary techniques is to remake the diction of the *trobairitz* songs by importing a vocabulary and a tone she borrows mostly from contemporary hip-hop. In its best moments, the insertion of this deliberately youthful voice captures something important about the original poems themselves: their awkwardness, their efforts to express (as Keelan herself notes) teenage passions in a formalized, posed idiom, and their belonging to a system that seems to require integration into very specific social structures. "As I began translating these poems," Keelan explains, "I heard the sound of twelfth-century pop culture, a middle age's version of rap or hip-hop, the rebellious music of the young, whose love exists in a complex of concerns always personal, and yet indelibly set amidst a society seen as oppressive." Indeed, Keelan's own lyric forms involve an element of posturing that can come across as admirably suited to the original songs. In "It Was Raining and It Was Going to Rain," a *tenso* between the *trobairitz* Guillemeta de Rosers and the troubadour Lanfrancs Ciagala, Keelan brings the debate poem close to rap:

So now you're down to justify
a guy who lives to rectify—
His code has zero to do with love;
if his act meant to exemplify
Why so late to her above all?

The vacillation here between a deftly evoked, crisp freestyle ("justify," "rectify," "exemplify") and a classical, vague poetic diction ("Why so late to her above all?") represents an impressive reproduction on Keelan's part of a charming awkwardness of style.

But that awkwardness of style can't exactly be ascribed to Ciagala, the speaker of these lines, himself, so as a feature of the translation it also seems like an incomplete effort to modernize. Here the shortcomings of Keelan's colloquial translations become evident. Take, for instance, Keelan's version of "Amics, en gran cossierier," a *tenso* between Raimbaut D'Aurenga and an "anonymous Domna." An effortfully "cool" teenage sensibility shifts into neo-Victorian courtly archaism and back again:

Dude, I know you make all girls
baggage, target, and or shrine,
though you front a different line
with bros who call us pearls.

The interpellation of a contemporary voice into these lyrics makes the reader wonder about the implications of each line's vocabulary. What does "front" mean here exactly—is it a particularly useful or effective word, or just an identifier for the relevant slang? Elsewhere, the poem's vocabulary accumulates strange archaic traces. Does Keelan mean "baggage" in the twenty-first-century language of self-help, or in the archaic (though not strictly medieval) sense of a disgraced woman? Though it might lend weight to the historical project of the verse for some readers, Keelan's mixing of contemporary and archaic diction can also seem like replaying the postmodern undecidability of the signifier, or overlaying empty signifiers on dead ones. When those are the effects, Keelan's strategy for making the medieval lyric contemporaneous with the songs of our own era erodes the specificity of the historical experience contained in the trobairitz songs.

Since the trobairitz songs are largely about posturing, as Keelan tells us, ironic self-awareness on the part of the speakers she creates would support the intended effect of mixing registers on the level of diction. Keelan explains that "the trobairitz were very aware of the essential fictionality of their subjective position," and an important sign of this self-awareness is the intensity and reflexivity with which they inhabit the formal world and structure of their poems. In Keelan's account, as in the poems themselves, there is a marked continuity between—even a conflation of—the social dictates of the system of *fin' amor* and the formal dictates of poetic structure. The archaic world of courtly love and the contemporary youth culture of hip-hop converge in the compulsion to rhyme: "Dude, if you had a quarter / of my built in dolor / there be virtue in my briar." But Keelan's modern, English-speaking trobairitz do not replicate the ironic awareness she ascribes to "the essential fictionality of their subjective position." Instead, they occupy a kind of third-degree translated space, a register wherein literal and homophonic translations of the original poems ("dolor," "briar") are incompletely supplanted by contemporary slang ("dude," "there be"). Without an ironic awareness from the poems' speakers that would synthesize these coexistent idioms, or play them against each other, Keelan's translations start to break down the critical relationship between poetic and social structure that she locates in the original songs.

Alongside the use of a modern idiom derived largely from contemporary hip-hop, Keelan's other primary technique for updating the trobairitz songs is the insertion of contemporary American referents to make the poems' content more relatable. When Keelan finds closely analogous "contemporary terms"

for what she calls “the tropes in the trobairitz corpus,” her translations achieve an articulate and moving lucidity. In “I Can’t Lie,” a translation of “the oldest work in the trobairitz corpus,” Keelan draws a direct connection between courtly love and the tropes of the modern sentimental ballad, doing away with any need for ironic posturing:

I can’t lie to you, love—
I am so far gone,
since you took me where no one else can;
nor will a time come you won’t be my man
and I will stop craving you each day.

Such unembellished lyrics might be the most effective (and affective) version of Keelan’s goal, a clear-sighted translation that noticeably resembles a contemporary pop song (here, perhaps, more Taylor Swift than Nicki Minaj), with all the clarity and drama that such a genre offers. Many of the poems, though, work so hard to sound modern that this lucidity gets lost, as in “I Grew Hoarse”: “Go, sirventes, to the White House, / to the UN,” writes Keelan, “and exhume our bodies, / history of women, real and image, / while our husbands cowered in the shadows!” This final stanza of a poem in protest of sumptuary laws generates stirring and precise insights for the reader: the exhortation “exhume our bodies” reveals, at the level of syntax, the extent to which those bodies are coeval with a “history of women, real and image.” But these insights are stalled by the reader’s need to stop and sort out what among the poem’s materials is modern, what is historical, and why and how the two are juxtaposed.

In fact, these lines illustrate exactly what is great and what is troubling about this collection. Keelan’s project is a determinedly feminist one. She emphasizes the relevance of these young women’s poems to our own familiar world, where patriarchy continues to reign: “The trobairitz’s concerns are still women’s concerns,” Keelan argues, “even now as the Republican party continually strives to regain control of women’s bodies in the US” amid the “staggering number of violent crimes against women everywhere.” The analogy here is quite right but tries to show familiarity where it can’t quite be made visible. In her eagerness to illustrate how precisely parallel the trobairitz’s straits are to the modern woman’s, Keelan neglects the very real, contemporaneous social problems to which the trobairitz are reacting; in her eagerness to sympathize with these women, she diminishes their specificity and their particular historical experience (as well as, perhaps, the particular and present experience of the contemporary cultures in which hip-hop and rap circulate). The relation between the present and the past has indeed always been a conflicted one for medievalists, but even the strongest proponent of identification would acknowledge that

the determinants of gender and class shaping contemporary lives have other, distinct forms and textures in the literary texts we carry forward from the distant past. Yes, we live—as did the *trobairitz*—in a misogynistic world. But as subversive as the original poems might be, they inhabit their formal and historical world in a way that is troublingly downplayed by Keelan’s collection.

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Tom Pickard, *hoyoot: Collected Poems and Songs*. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2014. 298pp. £19.95

Since his youthful days as the co-organizer of the Morden Tower poetry series in mid-1960s Newcastle, Tom Pickard has made it his project as poet, polemicist, and activist to earn recognition for Northern English working-class culture as a living and legitimate culture. Pickard’s career has seen him expand the scope of this project geographically and historically, documenting working-class struggle from strategic positions beyond his native Tyneside region, while mining the region’s economic and cultural history for the radical traditions that could ground a national and international working-class culture. *hoyoot: Collected Poems and Songs*, the most recent and complete gathering of Pickard’s poetry, captures precisely these far-reaching dimensions of his ongoing career as a poet at once of dissidence and agitation, and of recovery and reclamation.

Divided into three large chronological sections, *hoyoot* highlights three distinct phases of Pickard’s work: his “apprenticeship” as a youth in Newcastle to Basil Bunting and other Objectivist masters, when he applied the *melopoetic* principle of their modernist free verse to capturing the speech and songs of the Northern coal pits and factories (1968–1978); his defiance as an international poet-documentarian to Thatcherism, Reaganism, and their reactionary legacies, when he began using topical and commemorative political poetry to expose the class warfare at the heart of rising neoliberalism (1979–1999); and his return as a master poet in his own right to the landscape and folklore of his ancestral Northumbria, where the ballad traditions of the Anglo-Scottish border have resurfaced in his poetry as both historical material and a living voice of protest. *hoyoot* expands on two previous, slimmer collections of Pickard’s poetry—*Tiepin Eros* (Bloodaxe Books, 1994) and *Hole in the Wall* (Flood Editions, 2004)—adding significant detail to the political poetry of the 1970s and 80s and to the historical, documentary-oriented folk poetry of the past decade.

For its stunning comprehensiveness, the present collection also brings with it a highly concentrated focus on Pickard’s longstanding dual roles as