

Benoît Grévin, Centre national de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), Laboratoire de Médiévistique Occidentale de Paris (LaMOP, UMR 8589), chargé de recherche (admissible au rang de directeur d'études à compter du 15 04 2016), preview of the Phd (Disertační Práce) of Mrs Francesca Battista (dir.: Lucie Doležalová), submitted for a discussion to be held the 10th of May 2016 at the Univerzita Karlova of Prague.

The doctoral work (PhD) of Francesca Battista concerns an important epistolary collection redacted and compiled for her greater part during the years 1270-1285, and closely related to the political and familial activities of Queen Kunhuta of Bohemia (Kunhuta Haličská/Uherská), the second wife of Přemysl Otakar II, famous in the medieval and modern Mitteleuropean historiography as a figure of “bad queen”, and portrayed by the Romantic writers and historians as one of the causes of the fall of the “Bohemian Empire” in 1278. The collection of letters, the greater part of which can be attributed to a mysterious master Bohuslav, has possibly been compiled at the court of Queen Kunhuta, during the last phase of her life (1278-1285). It is contained in an unique manuscript, now conserved at the National Austrian Library (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, n° 526, fol 17-29). The work consists of a commented edition of this collection. That such a work was highly needed is certain. The letter collection has been edited for the greater part during the nineteenth century by F. Palacký, who considered it the true reflection of a correspondence between Queen Kunhuta, her first husband and various institutions and persons, but this old edition, despite of remarkable feats, can no more be considered as scientifically satisfying, and it left apart an array of interesting pieces, considered irrelevant for the history of Bohemia and the Czech countries during the Thirteenth century, such as a remarkable collection of formularies (n° 70-72), and a set of fictional „love letters“ (appendix 10-12), apparently seemed unfit for a diplomatic edition, although some contemporary historians such as Emler were not so drastic in their reject of „semi-fictional“ or „fictional“ material. Furthermore, and as correctly emphasized by F. Battista, the letter collection, although it has suffered from a certain neglect during the twentieth century, remains at the center of a diplomatic/literary controversy, which needs to be reexamined: at the beginning of the twentieth century, J. B. Novák discussed in an important paper the „authenticity“ of the letters, and took the opposite view concerning the status of the collection, since he chose to consider the greater part of these letters as a fictional work. Since then, the status of the collection has been debated by the concerned scholars, but no definitive conclusion has been reached. The old question authenticity/un-authenticity is here complicated by the fact that the letter collection of Kunhuta is one of the first important examples of „acculturation“ of the south-Italian fashion of *ars dictaminis*, imported in Bohemia by Henry of Isernia, by local *clerici*. Since the activities of Henry of Isernia and his personality are still the object of fierce debates (one or two Henry, fictional or real letters ?), it is this entire stratum of Latin texts – sometimes very significant sources for the cultural history of Bohemia during the late Thirteenth century (it is sufficient to call to mind the famous Kunhuta letters on the endangered „lingua slavica“ and their place at the center of the debate on the emergence of a Czech proto-nationalism) that still suffers from a lack of contextualization and interpretation. The commentary of Mrs. F. Battista is partly centered on these problems, and she tries to propose new, alternative ways to define these letters, in pace with the new theories developed by certain specialists of letter writing like F. Stella or W. Ysebaert, theories that insist on the necessity of transcending the old frontier between fiction and non-fiction. Apart from this aspect, the commentary (p. 1-93) is dedicated to the analysis of diverse aspects of the collection. It does not neglect the analysis of the political and institutional context, but it includes a number of pages on the problem of the literary aspect of the „gendered voice“ and the rhetoric of affection/love. Certainly, this aspect of this correspondence is not to be neglected, since organized collections of queens are not exactly a common feature of the epistolary world during the thirteenth century.

The work of Francesca Battista is certainly worth an academic discussion. Since her beginnings on the subject (elaboration between 2011-2013 and publication of the paper „Il formulario della Regina Kunhuta e la retorica epistolare in Boemia nel XIII secolo,” in *Le Dictamen dans tous ses états: Perspectives de recherche sur la théorie et la pratique de l'ars dictaminis (XI<sup>e</sup>-XV<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, 257-283, edited by Benoît Grévin, Anne Marie Turcan-Verkerk, Bibliothèque d'histoire culturelle du Moyen Âge 16. Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), she has achieved remarkable progress in their understanding of the world of medieval epistolary writing. Many a point of the discussion concerning the status of the epistles shows a deep understanding of the characteristics of these peculiar medieval sources. I would preliminary assess the qualities and the limits of the work as following:

### **Form of the commentary:**

The work was written by an Italian scholar/student who was obliged to acquire a reading efficiency in Czech as well as in German in order to master the bibliography on her subject. Apart from English, Italian and French, all languages read without difficulty by F. Francesca, this strain is certainly worth the mention, since few southwestern and western European students make the effort to learn central Europe Slavonic languages. Without being too difficult, the Latin of the discussed sources is also sometimes far from simple. That being said, the stylistic level of the commentary (and of a lot of English notes of the edition) is not satisfying. There are too many spelling mistakes, grammatical absurdities, italianisms (e. g. „obstacolate“), and generally speaking, too many recurring confusions („tought“ for „though, through“ for „through“, „contemporaneous“ for „contemporaries“). The work needs a general linguistic upgrade. It could not be published in such a state.

### **Substance of the commentary:**

I can express a far better approval as concerns the substance of the commentary, although not without some reservations. The historiographical discussion of the life and deeds of the Queen seems valuable: it is a good exercise in deconstruction of a traditional image, and a correct prosopographical study of a courtly milieu, even if some of the preceding bibliography has perhaps been interpreted too literally (reference to the „joyful widow“ p. 35, that doesn't seem to grasp the pun of the expression, from the operetta of Lehar : *Die lustige Witwe*). The analysis of the letter collection would certainly prove a lot more controversial to many an historian: Francesca Battista takes drastically the new approach of considering the old criterion authentic/diplomatic/historical document versus fictional/literary/non historical document. She uses it to disqualify the preceding attempts to judge the exact status of the „letters of Kunhuta. On the whole, she is certainly not wrong, when she insists that such a bipolarization leads nowhere, when we are confronted with the analysis of an entire array of multifaceted letters, some of which are clearly more „fictional“, meanwhile some others have every possibility to have been redacted at the court of the Queen for real political uses, before inclusion in the collection. There is certainly an intermediate mass of letters that are very difficult to classify definitely. F. Battista makes good use of her knowledge of the new tendencies in the field of letter-collections studies, and she is perfectly right to read the structure, the writing and compilation processes and the peculiarities of the Kunhuta collection at the light of the new studies (Delle Donne, Turcan-Verkerk...) on the *summae dictaminis* and other pedagogical/chancery letter-collections. She doesn't exaggerate in her hypothesis on the *auctor* of the collection, the mysterious master Bohuslas, and his possible links with the Henry of Isernia-milieu. Nevertheless, it seems to me that every way should be explored, and that she has deliberately closed a door that was worth keeping open, when she refuses to continue the discussion on the single letters according to the criterion of ‚authenticity‘. The fact that the letters were probably partially reworked and rewritten in order to be included in the collection doesn't nullify the problem of their original status: some letters are clearly real fictions (a fiancée from Troy discusses fate with her

lover), some others, most probably, letters that were really sent to institutions by the Queen. A new, better grasp of the multiplicity of possible levels of analysis of these documents doesn't relegate the old problems in a limbo of textual critic. It helps better contextualize them. To me, a lot of characteristic of the correspondence between Kunhuta and Otakar seems intriguingly plain, old common rhetoric of a royal family, and I cannot but think that if this entire set were a forgery, the forger has not made a lot of this subject, in other words, that the rhetorical level of the letters is too plain to suppose a good literary forgery for at least a part of the letters. The forged (or modified) papal letters of Riccardo da Pofi, to take a contemporary example, are far more spectacular if we consider the level of their „rhetoricization“. There are a lot of things in favor of an „80% authenticity,, theory to be said, and if F. Battista has a peculiar opinion on the degree of authenticity of these letters, she should perhaps have also searched for old fashioned arguments *pro* or *contra*, even if she did well relativizing their importance.

The last section of the commentary is a gendered one, and was certainly necessary. *Ars dictaminis* is a masculine universe, with masculine redactors (as is the case with our collection) and an overwhelmingly masculine echo: but it has a feminine dimension (parodic, offensive, or alternative, literate, from monastery feminine writing to princely voice through alternative sexual parodic letters, such as letters from prostitutes to students), and this dimension, an important object in the scientific goals of F. Battista, is totally underestimated by the current research, who often concentrates on the expression of womanhood using only vernacular sources. To that extent, the work of F. Battista is also very welcome. The idea of F. Battista to examine the role of the epistolary Queen as “gendered” political intermediate is also perfectly valid. The impulse to compare the Latin rhetoric of the „affective/love letters“ of Kunhuta and of the feminine entourage of her collection to other forms of feminine expression („often also through masculine voices“) of the thirteenth century is also interesting (Minnesänger), and the experience of studying the epistles in the literary „longue durée“ of the „amorous letter“ (not amoureuse, as spelled in the PhD) can lead to some pertinent conclusions. One is nevertheless not able to escape the impression that, somewhere, the idea that every letter from Kunhuta to Otakar II could be interpreted as a „love letter“, to be compared with more literary, fictional love letters between lover and beloved, has been a little overexploited, or more precisely, that only a little part of the „rhetoric of affectivity“ present in these epistles has been considered relevant. To me, a lot of this „love rhetoric“ is similar to the royal, imperial or papal rhetoric of love and affection, directed to their *familiares*, their subjects, and/or their family, presented for example in the consolation letters of Frederick II, or of the popes of the Thirteenth century, as well as in much of royal and ecclesiastical correspondences. In particular, the *Litterae consolationes* are a very interesting field to investigate the subtle differences between the various degrees of codified affection expressed accordingly to the codes of *ars dictaminis* in royal court, and the subject has been well introduced (see the works of Peter von Moos and Fulvio Delle Donne) : there is a *litterae consolationis* in our Kunhuta collection, and it was worth the comparison. That is not to say that the view of Francescas Battista is false, on the contrary. I rather think that the subject of „affectus/amor“ in the *dictamen*-culture is underexamined, and that more could be done to integrate the very interesting testimony of the Kunhuta collection in this broader field, not only through “love letters”, but through royal and ecclesiastical “affection letters” in general.

### **Form of the edition:**

The edition represents certainly a progress and a valuable basis for further studies in these epistles. The method chosen by F. Battista is classical, and intrinsically not bad. F. Battista is right when she says that the manuscript transmission of the collection (unique manuscript) gives but one choice: that of one edition that would follow the spelling of the text, without too much alteration. But the general incompetence of the copyist makes numerous interventions from the modern editors unavoidable. Not all problems are exactly resolved, but a majority of letters has received a correct treatment, and certain

significant progresses have been made. Some very interesting quotes have been discovered, and these quotes reveal a familiarity of the bohemian *dictatores* with the great culture of the Italian *ars* and the cultural conceptions of *dictamen* prevalent in Thirteenth century Italy and France (commonplace quotes of the *Disticha Catonis*, but also more refined quotes from the Middle-Latin „Tragedies“, political quotes of Ovid similar to its use by Petrus de Vineia, etc...). The treatment of some unedited or partially edited letters shows nonetheless that it is easier to correct the old Czech masters of the nineteenth century (these true pioneers of the medieval research!), than to handle totally unedited texts. See for example the Love letter of the Appendix 10, *Non potest-propositum redeundi*, where the neologism „*hamari*“ (probably „to harpoon“) is misread, despite the fact that Palacky had read it correctly when he transcribed the first line (without been interested by the following), and where the impossible form *callvaria* (l. 2 : *tanta callvaria curarum habundat*) has not led to a better guess (the correct reading would probably be *tanta colluvie curarum habundat*). Despite of these limitations, this work would form already a good basis, if it two defects were corrected. 1) The punctuation is very often frankly erratic, with entire periods illogically reduced to fragments separated by too frequent points. That point (so to speak...) must be corrected. 2) The search for Biblical, poetic or other quotes has not been pushed to its limits: in a superficial, preliminary reading that didn't take more than two hours, I had already found more or less ten new Biblical quotes, and I am quite sure that a better research could more than double the number of quotes (so far firm a meager thirty, for more than hundred letters : not all letters are a potential mine for quotes, but some of them are sufficiently literary to contain a potentially good number of them).

### Conclusion:

The work of F. Battista offers certainly a good basis to reevaluate the interest and the coherence of the so-called collection of letter of Queen Kunhuta. Although it is written in an English that must be revised, and although it is perhaps a little disappointing that the faith in the new philological tools of „transfictionality“ led F. Battista to neglect some interesting old approaches (one could relativize the bipolarization fictionality/authenticity without discrediting the necessity of questioning the origins of the text), it offers a good array of new roads to question and study these texts. Accordingly, the edition, although in need of a solid revision for certain aspects, is nevertheless a progress compared to the old collections, and opens very interesting perspectives. **I recommend the dissertation for public defense**, even if it will need a strong revision in order to be published.

Benoît Grévin

