

# Leeds Studies in English

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New Series XL

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Edited by

Alaric Hall

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### *Reviews*

Copies of books for review should be sent to the Editor, *Leeds Studies in English*, School of English, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, United Kingdom.

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## Reviews

To be fair to Steen, these were not necessarily issues that she set out to address in *Verse and Virtuosity*; it is, perhaps, a testimony to the strength of her scholarship that it raises so many further questions. Overall, the detailed readings offered by Steen make this book a valuable contribution to an under-researched subject and also an important platform from which other scholars in the field might launch their own investigations.

BEN SNOOK

KING'S COLLEGE LONDON

Laura Ashe, Ivana Djordjević and Judith Weiss, eds, *The Exploitations of Medieval Romance*. Studies in Medieval Romance 12. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010. x + 191 pp. ISBN 9781843842125. £55

This volume of essays arises from the 2006 conference on Romance in Medieval Britain at the University of York. The titular 'exploitations' involve not only the expected sense of the exploitation of romance for political and social ends, but also the ways in which romance writers exploit existing motifs, genres and sources, as well as the exploitative actions and conventions that romance narrates, knowingly or unknowingly, from magic to class politics to the objectification of women. This range makes for a pleasingly diverse collection, and most of the contributions are lively, informative and likely to stimulate further readings and research.

Neil Cartlidge's opening essay argues that the fabliau *Le Chevalier qui fist les cons parler* exposes the commodification of sex and interest in material wealth latent in *Lanval*, which Marie de France's romance stylings tend to obscure. Corinne Saunders delineates the uses of magic in Middle English romance: often for love, mostly involving illusion, never altogether good. Arlyn Diamond's essay on gardens in popular romance repositions the garden away from its conventional interpretation as an aesthetic ideal of paradise and pleasure to reveal its social function as a feature of the aristocratic household. She observes that the aristocratic garden was designed to reveal wealth and status, but shows that in romance it in fact facilitates encounters between the wealthy, high-status lady of the house and the poor, low status man who seeks solitude in the garden by her window.

Judith Weiss and Anna Caughey both reveal an amusing incongruence in their chosen romances — *Gui de Warewic* and *The Buik of Kyng Alexander the Conquerour* — where in each case the hero's portrayal towards the end of his life is out of step with his earlier actions. Weiss sees Gui as appropriating the roles of both saint (despite not being very saintly) and pilgrim (which gives him an outsider's freedom to speak) from existing literary traditions. But she shows that the earlier part of the romance does not give him enough reason to plausibly repent at the end. Caughey demonstrates that the *Buik* falls into four generically distinct sections: first, Alexander's youth is written as mirror for princes focused on the military; next, a section on courtliness and love, from which Alexander stands aloof, follows, swiftly succeeded by the author's real focus, Alexander's travels and conquests involving a multitude of Wonders of the East. But all that has gone before is undercut by the final section, Alexander's tragic fall, which the author presents as the inevitable consequence of Alexander's many character flaws, none of which he has made obvious to the reader before this point, and which would logically seem to render Alexander inadequate for the exemplary role in which the author first placed him.

Rosalind Field and Melissa Furrow consider the relation between romance in England and France. Field presents an invaluable survey of the fourteenth-century Middle English romances derived from French sources, and shows that most came from readily available

Anglo-Norman texts — only when it came to meeting a new demand for Arthurian material did romance-writers seek out Continental French texts. She also raises the interesting, if unanswerable, question of why almost no new romances were written in England for nearly a hundred years before the early fourteenth century. Furrow suggests that the *chanson de geste*, which stood in opposition to romance in France, was not understood as a separate genre at all in England, but was instead central to the development of insular romance with its typically heroic ethos.

Conversely, Laura Ashe analyses late medieval chivalry as it appears in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as an economically driven ideology distinct from the heroic warrior ethos that preceded it. Designed to produce ransoms and preserve the knightly class, it was fundamentally opposed to death in combat. This allows her to read the beheading game as a test that finds chivalry empty of value, with nothing in it worth dying for. I found this approach engaging and insightful; I would also have been interested to see the argument extended to incorporate *trawþe* into its ideological scheme somewhere between Ashe's two poles of valuable, fit for purpose Christianity and empty, valueless chivalry.

One minor quibble with this volume is that there is rather an lack of cross-referencing between the chapters. Thus two essays treat *Gui de Warewic* substantively, and two more in passing, but there is no sense of their having been informed by one another, which feels like a missed opportunity. Ivana Djordjevi's argument that Gui is represented as a crusader through specific toponyms could have been enriched by a consideration of what Weiss had to say about Gui as pilgrim and saint.

Finally, Diane Vincent's interesting proposition that the Christian-Saracen debate in *Turpines Story* was not a catechesis but a scholarly disputation intended to recall Lollard heresies left me somewhat unconvinced. As Vincent acknowledges, nothing debated in the text is a hot Lollard topic; question-and-answer dialogues continued to be read in pastorally oriented texts such as the *Elicudarius* throughout the fifteenth century, and the mid-century date of the text surely makes it less likely that Lollards were a 'pressing public concern' (p. 106).

But overall, this collection is both useful and enjoyable, providing a range of insights into the functions of romance and its own exploitations of its cultural hinterland.

CATHY HUME

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Massimiliano Bampi and Fulvio Ferrari, eds, *Lärdomber oc skämptan: Medieval Swedish Literature Reconsidered*. Samlingar utgivna av Svenska fornskriftsällskapet, serie 3: Smärre texter och undersökningar 5. Uppsala: Svenska fornskriftsällskapet, 2008. 118 pp. ISBN 978-91-976118-2-4. SEK 100.

In their introduction to this volume, the editors explain that they aimed to create

a collection of critical essays in English, in order to inform scholars who are not specialized in Old Swedish about the richness of medieval Swedish culture. This could be of great interest not only to scholars and students in the field of Old Norse studies, but also to medievalists in general.

This aim is absolutely to be applauded, and the potential for a broad scholarly audience real. It has to be said that the collection achieves its goal more by affording *any* critical literature in English on Old Swedish than by tailoring its material to students and scholars unfamiliar with the area. Still, it is tightly focused and, for those who can actually work out how to buy a copy (a subject on which the Svenska fornskriftsällskapet's website is remarkably unforthcoming),