

# Leeds Studies in English

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# Leeds Studies in English

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Edited by

Alaric Hall

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*Leeds Studies in English* is an international, refereed journal based in the School of English, University of Leeds. *Leeds Studies in English* publishes articles on Old and Middle English literature, Old Icelandic language and literature, and the historical study of the English language. After a two-year embargo, past copies are made available, free access; they can be accessed via <<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>>.

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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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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.

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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),

inexpensive.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the texts discussed in this volume were copied, and in some cases composed, at Vadstena Abbey — unsurprisingly, given its enormous importance in late medieval Swedish literary culture. Jonas Carlquist's contribution, 'Vernacular Devotional Literature: The Use of Pious Literature at Vadstena Abbey, Sweden', gives writing at Vadstena a deserved prominence in the book. It is actually a summary of his monograph *Vadstenasystrarnas textvärld: Studier i systrarnas skriftbrukskompetens, lärdom och textförståelse* ('The textual world of Vadstena's nuns: studies in the sisters' literacy, learning and text-comprehension'). Condensing a book into article form seems to have been tricky: we generally hear more about contexts and methods than findings. Meanwhile, conclusions like 'the ordinary nun knew as much Latin as was needed for her daily duties' (p. 45) are not very revealing without a clear sense of what those duties were; the information that Vadstena manuscripts reveal that '31 nuns had literate skills' (p. 41) is only meaningful if we are told how many nuns lived in the convent during the period studied. Nevertheless, the article will be a valuable point of access to Carlqvist's study for those not conversant with Scandinavian languages.

The collection actually opens with 'In Praise of the Copy: *Karl Magnus* in 15th-Century Sweden', an exploratory piece by Massimiliano Bampi. This will be of immediate interest to students of West Norse romance since it concerns a Swedish verse translation of the influential Norwegian *Karlamagnús saga ok kappa hans*. Bampi examines the four fifteenth-century manuscripts in which the saga survives to reconstruct the contexts in which the poem was read. He argues, rightly, that it is not enough for scholars to say that texts like *Karl Magnus* were merely meant for entertainment, which is often as far as the literary criticism and cultural history of medieval Scandinavian romance goes. What is entertaining is culturally determined, and therefore culturally revealing. Bampi's methods for seeking cultural meaning — reading romances as mirrors for princes and models for morality — are pretty traditional, and one eagerly awaits further research connecting more deeply with critical theory and the burgeoning study of European popular romance. However, Bampi's approach remains worthwhile, and moreover indicates the richness of the Old Swedish corpus. For the present reviewer — who stands as an example of the Old Norse scholar who knows less about medieval Sweden than he should — it was striking that two of the *Karl Magnus* manuscripts are from nunneries, and two were owned by noblewomen, which contrasts with late medieval Icelandic romance, which is often marked by a strong misogynistic streak and is generally assumed to have been written primary by men, for men.

The best known Old Swedish text — the closest thing Old Swedish has to a member of the literary canon — is represented by Fulvio Ferrari, in his 'Literature as a performative act: *Erikskrönikan* and the making of a nation'. Taking us through a series of different perspectives on the text, he offers arguments for reading the text as a narrative promoting solidarity among Swedish and German aristocrats — while nonetheless accepting that 'politics has hard rules, and someone has to loose [sic]' — and constructing this solidarity in opposition to heathens. These new perspectives on a key historical text will be welcome.

But the greatest success in connecting medieval Swedish material to wider currents in European literature and thought is achieved by William Layher's 'Elephants in the Garden. On Wild Beasts and *Wlwalla* in the Old Swedish *Dikten om kung Albrecht*' and Stephen A.

<sup>2</sup> Prospective buyers should in fact contact the society's secretary, whose contact details are available via <<http://svenskafornskiftsallskapet.se>>.

## Reviews

Mitchell's 'Spirituality and Alchemy in *Den vises sten* (1379)'. Both introduce their little-read texts deftly and analyse them in relation to wider literary contexts. The *Dikten om kung Albrecht* ('Poem on King Albrecht') uses the allegory of wild animals in a garden to expound on the rapacious reign of Albrecht III of Mecklenburg, King of Sweden 1364–89, and Layher contextualises the poem in relation to the (prose) religious garden allegories popular in the fourteenth-century German-speaking world. Foremost among the invading animals is an *Wlwalla*, which in a well turned philological exploration Layher convincingly argues to be an elephant, an animal associated in his reading with foreignness and exoticism — like Albrecht III himself. *Den vises sten* ('The philosopher's stone') is also an allegory, this time for God's love and the prospect of salvation it can bring. However, Mitchell argues that it demonstrates fourteenth-century Sweden's up-to-date engagement with Continental trends not only in Christian mystic literature but also in alchemical writing. In another passing eye-catcher for scholars of West Norse, he also suggests that 'the poem seems to allude to pagan mythological and heroic motifs (i.e. the stories of Ask, Embla, and Brynhildr)' (p. 105). Mitchell's tentativeness here is appropriate: stanza 1 describes how the stone gives a dead man senses and faculties, which is reminiscent of the gods granting these to the first humans, Ask and Embla, in Icelandic mythography; stanza 4 describes how the stone is hidden in a tower surrounded by a steel wall and a ring of fire, which is reminiscent of Brynhildr's prison in *Völsunga saga*.<sup>3</sup> The similarities could be coincidental, but if there is a connection, it is of enormous interest both for its late date and its appearance in a region where so little mythological and legendary literature now survives.

There is, in different ways, a tentative tone to all the pieces in the volume: for example, Layher and Mitchell's contributions are short, serving primarily to whet the appetite for studying the poems that they address, while Ferrari's different angles on *Erikskrönikan* sometimes feel bitty. But this nicely conveys the sense that a world of new possibilities awaits. Readers unfamiliar with Old Swedish literature will have to work fairly hard to make the most of this volume. Indeed, it will not be obvious to all that the title means 'learning and entertainment'. But those who make the effort will be rewarded with plenty of both.

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<sup>3</sup> *Den vises sten: En hittills okänd rimdikt från 1300-talet, efter en uppsalahandskrift från år 1379*, ed. by Robert Geete, Småstycken på forn svenska, andra serien (Stockholm: Svenska fornskriftsällskapet, 1900), can now be found at <<http://www.septentrionalia.net>>.