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Alaric Hall



Reviews editor
N. Kivilcim Yavuz

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Reviews

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REVIEWS

Geraldine Barnes, *The Bookish Riddarasögur: Writing Romance in Late Mediaeval Iceland*. The Viking Collection 21. Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2014. 211 pp. ISBN 978-87-7674-791-6.

A new English-language monograph on the literary merits of medieval Icelandic romance is long overdue. It is not since Marianne Kalinke's *Bridal-Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland* (1990) that a substantial group of these texts has been discussed at length. Now, eighty years after the publication of Margaret Schlauch's pioneering study *Romance in Iceland* (1934), this new book by Geraldine Barnes is a welcome addition to the still small — but growing — body of work on the genre. Promising to provide 'readings of a group of *riddarasögur* which, in their debts to encyclopaedic writings and historical thought can [...] be called "bookish" ' (27–28), the monograph focuses on the romances written in medieval Iceland for Icelanders — the so-called indigenous *riddarasögur*, in contrast to those translated from other medieval European languages. The book's introduction offers a brief historiography of these non-translated *riddarasögur* as a whole, and alerts the reader to the various types of learned material that the romance authors drew on in their composition, from the early encyclopaedic work of Isidore of Seville, to the Old Testament history written in *Stjórn*, to the widely disseminated *Speculum Historiale* of Vincent de Beauvais.

Barnes's study comprises five chapters, which discuss a group of *riddarasögur*, each text in its turn, from different thematic perspectives. The first of these, 'Mapping and Measuring the World', considers *Nitida saga*, *Victors saga ok Blávus*, and *Vilhjálm's saga sjóðs*, and reveals ways in which these three romances draw on encyclopaedic material to demonstrate different understandings of world geography. The three medieval continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe, and the four cardinal directions, feature as organising principles in these romances, but the way in which each manifests this is different. Barnes shows how *Nitida saga* takes the conventional medieval understanding of the three parts of the world and upends it into a 'counter cosmography' (p. 35) that makes the author's northern homeland central, and likewise, how in *Victors saga ok Blávus* the three regions of the world represented by the romance's three main characters — Victor (Europe), Blávus (Africa), and the maiden-knight Fulgida (Asia) — are used in a text that ultimately comprises 'a northern framework and a northern centre', playing on the popular *translatio studii et imperii* topos (p. 45). In the chapter's final section, the fastidious and chiefly geographical facts and measurements described throughout *Vilhjálm's saga sjóðs* are shown to form an important part of its dual

framework of learned material and other *riddarasögur*; the text arguably assumes that its audience is ‘well positioned to appreciate [its] comic intertextuality’ (p. 52).

Chapter 2, ‘The Boundaries of Knowledge’, takes *Dínus saga drambláta*, *Kirialax saga*, and *Clári saga* as its focus, showcasing discussion of the use and abuse of learning and knowledge in each case. Barnes shows how in *Dínus saga drambláta* a guide for the appropriate use of worldly knowledge and curiosity, rooted in patristic theology (p. 58), is ignored by the rival protagonists Dínus and Philotemia, who in their desire to outwit each other suffer the unfavourable consequences of what is depicted as unnatural curiosity and prideful vanity. Contrasting with this are then discussions of *Kirialax saga*, which takes a licit desire for knowledge and understanding of creation as the basis for the protagonist’s quest (pp. 66ff.), and *Clári saga*, which, while showing its characters to be learned yet curious, does not make this a feature of the romance (p. 75). Barnes reads *Dínus saga drambláta* and *Clári saga* (notable as one of the earliest *riddarasögur*) against each other in particular, and argues that they may ‘be considered in the context of the development of late medieval Icelandic romance as two ends of a broad compositional spectrum — from relatively straightforward exemplum in [*Clári saga* ...], to the structural and ethical complexity’ on display in *Dínus saga drambláta* (p. 76).

Chapter 3, ‘The March of History’, centres on *Saulus saga ok Nikanors*, *Ectors saga*, *Vilhjálmss saga sjóðs*, and *Adonias saga* to show how both an awareness of and a concern for world history and written historical sources is evident in many Icelandic romances. Barnes begins by discussing how some *riddarasögur* use the motif of inscriptions, especially on walls, as an important means of transmitting history, as a notable feature among the romances that claim such ancient inscriptions as verifiable sources for the stories they tell. Similarly, we are shown in a brief section called ‘ekphrasis and memory’ how the legend of Troy also features prominently in many *riddarasögur*, as a part of this desire to acknowledge and build upon the past. In the individual discussions of the four romances featured in this chapter we see the role that Troy plays in each, as part of the ‘images of the past, as both word and picture, [which] serve as inspiration for the present’ authors and readers in medieval Iceland (p. 111).

Chapter 4, ‘Defending Christendom’, looks at five romances: *Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns*, *Kirialax saga*, *Saulus saga ok Nikanors*, *Sigurðar saga þogla*, and *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*. The chapter considers how images of crusading, the Christian knight, and conversion appear in many *riddarasögur*, and particular attention is paid to *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*, in which, Barnes shows, ‘a model of crusader knighthood is explicitly articulated’ (p. 145). We see how this longest of all *riddarasögur* draws on an array of learned material and other sources not only incidentally to enhance the story it tells (as some other romances seem to do), but to present a detailed picture of a Christian understanding of the world and the place of the questing crusader knight within it. Discussions of the other four texts in this chapter similarly illuminate the different ways in which each romance incorporates religious aspects into its setting, characters, and plot: we see how *Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns* and *Saulus saga ok Nikanors* can be seen as a pair with similar themes, and how an episode in *Kirialax saga* draws on a ‘typical [...] Christian-heathen engagement [from the genre of the] *chanson de geste*’ (p. 124).

Chapter 5, ‘Sailing to Byzantium’, focuses on six romances, three of which were not already discussed in earlier chapters: *Dámusta saga*, *Bærings saga*, and *Sigrarðs saga ok Valbrands*. Barnes discusses the history of the negative understanding of Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire in western European medieval romance due largely to the schism of

1054, failed crusades, and the sack of Constantinople in 1204 (pp. 147–51); contrasting with this, we are then shown the largely positive understanding of the same people and places in medieval Scandinavian thought, through earlier Old Norse sagas and historical or encyclopaedic works (pp. 151–58). In the section ‘Constantinople in the *riddarasögur*’ Barnes draws on examples from a range of late medieval Icelandic romances to show how they ‘serve the common purpose of extolling the magnificence of Constantinople’ (p. 158). The chapter ends with separate sections dedicated to *Sigrarðs saga ok Valbrands* (pp. 171–76) and *Kirialax saga* (pp. 176–81), which both provide particularly illuminating and celebratory depictions of the Byzantine Empire.

The book ends with a brief conclusion, ‘Profiling the Audience’, which considers the afterlife of the *riddarasögur* through the genre’s (chiefly post-Reformation) manuscript tradition. Beginning with an overview of the types of medieval audiences that may have enjoyed these romances at the time of their composition, Barnes argues that the authors of the late medieval Icelandic romances may have been ‘a coterie of writers, familiar with each other’s work and likely to be writing as much for their peers as for their anonymous patrons’ (p. 183). Barnes then considers post-Reformation audiences, for which there is far more evidence due to the continued tradition of manuscript production. The manuscript evidence of *Dínus saga drambláta* with its three redactions is considered, as a largely representative case study on the audiences and enduring popularity of an Icelandic romance into the centuries after the end of the Middle Ages. The bibliography, separated into editions, translations, and dictionaries on the one hand, and secondary sources on the other, covers most of the bases, though Barnes modestly omits references to any of her own work, of which there is much relevant material. The volume unfortunately lacks an index; however, a listing of sagas in each chapter title, along with running headings indicating the saga under discussion on each page, attempt to compensate for this shortcoming. Overall, this is an important new work that can provide the basis for many future discussions of medieval Icelandic romance. The range of *riddarasögur* covered is impressive, although this does sometimes leave the reader wanting more in the way of discussion and analysis at the end of certain sections on individual texts. While in some cases the depth of analysis may have been sacrificed for its breadth, this leaves the book an excellent starting point for more detailed work by others; indeed, Barnes gladly acknowledges that she has here ‘barely touched the surface of a group of sagas only just beginning to come under close scrutiny as individual works of literary narrative’ (p. 191). Particularly as a study in English, *The Bookish Riddarasögur: Writing Romance in Late Mediaeval Iceland* opens up the genre to a wide audience, and perhaps especially to students, and experts from related fields, who may not be able to read these still largely untranslated romances for themselves.

SHERYL McDONALD
WERRONEN

UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN

Carolyn P. Collette, *Rethinking Chaucer’s ‘Legend of Good Women’*. York: York Medieval Press, 2014. 184 pp. ISBN 9781903153499.

In *Rethinking Chaucer’s ‘Legend of Good Women’*, Carolyn Collette, Emeritus Professor of English Language and Literature at Mount Holyoke College and a research associate at the University of York’s Centre for Medieval Studies, considers how to approach a poem that has