

**Helen Cooper 2004: *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press. xiii+542 pp.**

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Throughout the past century the interest of scholars in medieval romance was centred on providing a definition that could be applicable to the entire English corpus. But the romance genre has proved elusive since, in spite of numerous attempts, no single description has been deemed fully satisfactory. One of the most successful definitions was suggested by Derek Pearsall, who describes a romance as “a narrative intended primarily for entertainment, in verse or prose, and presented in terms of chivalric life” (1976: 57). Despite its vagueness, Pearsall’s definition encapsulates the short-sightedness and prejudice against romance of critics who deny romance texts any role or concern beyond the merely recreational. As Nicola McDonald has recently argued, medieval popular romance has not received the serious critical attention it deserves because it “makes explicit its commitment to its audience’s pleasure and because it is structured to gratify that pleasure” (2004: 11). Obviously, this ludic element was to its contemporary audience’s liking, but it does not follow that romance fails to reveal the ideologies of its cultural context and to provide us with insights into the literary environment in which it circulated. Conscious of the neglect that has marginalized medieval romance from mainstream criticism for decades, in *The English Romance in Time* Helen Cooper has performed the tour de force of examining both the evolution and transformation of the romance genre from Geoffrey of Monmouth to Shakespeare, and the impact it has had upon English literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The significance of the evidence provided by this book makes clear that, without a serious consideration of the themes, conventions, and motifs of romance, it will be impossible to articulate a literary history representative of the five hundred years covered by this study. Cooper’s project is therefore ambitious, and not only because of its chronological scope, but also because the adjective English in the title is used in a geographical sense and alludes to texts produced in England, in Latin and Anglo-Norman as well as in English. The author is likewise aware of the wider European context to which English romance belongs and thus also discusses its relations mainly with French (Chrétien de Troyes’s oeuvre and *The Romance of the Rose*) and Italian texts (by Boccaccio and Petrarch), but also with Catalan (Ramon Llull’s works, *Tirant lo Blanch*) and Spanish material (*Don Quixote*).

While other recent book-length studies have already contributed to examining the nuanced currency of romance texts and themes in the early modern period (cf. Davis 2003; King 2000), the monograph under review has a more ambitious intention, namely, “to restore to modern readers the ‘literary competence’ ... that Renaissance and medieval readers brought as a matter of course to their reading or watching of romances” (2). That is to say, Cooper aims at restoring the horizon of romance expectations shared between authors and readers, and at tracing its evolution over the half millennium of literary history discussed in this book (cf. 22). In order to identify and describe the changes in meaning of the relevant romance motifs, Cooper adopts from genetic terminology the concept of *meme*, “an idea that behaves like a gene in its

ability to replicate faithfully and abundantly, but also on occasion to adapt, mutate, and therefore survive in different forms and cultures” (3). The malleability suggested by this concept reflects the protean nature of romance, thus overcoming the semantic constraints of the word *motif*. Nevertheless, the alien quality of this word does not always facilitate the discussion in hand, and it remains to be seen whether this neologism will gain any acceptance among scholars.

The book is structured around central romance motifs/*memes* and the study of their diachronic mutation, with each chapter devoted to explaining one of them. A lengthy introduction (1–44) comes before the analysis of individual motifs, aimed mainly at meeting the needs of Renaissance scholars unfamiliar with the romance tradition and with the literary production of the medieval period. While medievalists will find useful both Cooper’s fresh summary of the history of romance in England (22–40) and her identification of the genre’s ability to recycle familiar conventions as one of the reasons for its longevity (14–21), this introduction betrays the fact that the intended audience is made up of early modernists, from whom the author demands greater attention to the medieval period. This initial impression is confirmed by the extended interpretive summaries of great critical value supplied for medieval romances that contrast with the limited explanation given for most Elizabethan and Tudor texts.

The *memes* chosen by Cooper are easily recognized from the repertoire of motifs with relevance for the romance tradition. The first chapter offers a thorough discussion of the quest, a romance feature that when present acts as the driving force of the text and determines not only the work’s plot but also its linear development. The knights who embark on a quest, whatever their goal, always encounter a personal dimension to their geographical wanderings. Thus, regardless of how the outcome of the adventure is judged, the knight who returns to the starting point is notably different from the one who departed in the beginning, as Sir Gawain exemplifies after his return from the Green Chapel. Although the construction of the knight’s identity is not the stated goal of the chivalric quest, it is always one of the results of the romance and is usually achieved by means of an inner journey that acquires a spiritual side with the romances of atonement (e.g. *Sir Isumbras* and *Guy of Warwick*). Cooper argues that this motif is developed clearly in Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, for instance, where the quest adopts the penitential form of a pilgrimage, and in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, whose allegorical quests evince their debt to the medieval romances. The chapter “Fairy Monarchs, Fairy Mistresses” concerns itself with the otherworldly figures who populate medieval romance, such as Morgan le Fay and Merlin, and who also leave their mark on creations by Spenser (Gloriana) and Shakespeare, (Titiana and Oberon). Here Cooper explains how romance negotiates the fairy in a way that transcends its folkloric roots to become a trademark of the genre. Characterized by their arbitrariness and beauty, the fairy creatures usually play a significant narrative role due to their supernatural powers, which on many occasions turn them into arbiters among mortals not only in matters of justice, for instance the Damsel of the Lake in Malory, but also in matters of love (cf. *Amadas et Ydoine*). The consideration in this chapter of one such power with fairy associations, namely prophecy, is particularly revealing of the Renaissance writers’ indebtedness to their medieval forebears and shows how the supernatural discourse of prophecies, such as the fourteenth-century *Romance and Prophecies of Thomas of Erceldoune*, acquired different political overtones in new historical circumstances.

Contrary to the stereotype of the medieval woman as passive and submissive, in “Desirable Desire” Cooper contends that both Anglo-Norman and English romances endorse an ideological discourse that, removed from the misogyny of continental texts, attributes a more active role to women and acknowledges the narrative force of female desire. Thus, the main female character in the insular romances tends to be a young heiress who takes the responsibility of choosing her husband without or against parental consent. As Cooper argues, “English-language romance makes the actively desiring heiress its central model throughout the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance” (223), a view that is well supported by her discussion of how Spenser and Shakespeare employ this *meme*. “Women on Trial” engages with the set of motifs produced by the romances telling the story of an individual woman who finds herself accused of unchastity, usually by a rejected suitor. The recourse to secular justice always produces support for the accusations; only by providential intervention is the innocence of the woman reinstated and the unfounded and calumnious nature of the accusation revealed. This theme, widespread in medieval romance, retained its popularity during the sixteenth century, most notably with Robert Greene’s *Pandosto* and in several plays by Shakespeare including *Othello*, *The Winter’s Tale*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*; additionally, some romances of calumny continued to be available in print, for instance *Sir Tryamour* and *Valentine and Orson*. Besides analyzing the variations of this motif and assessing its continuity since the late Middle Ages, this chapter also tackles the adultery issue and confutes C. S. Lewis’s widely circulated thesis that defended adultery as the main component of courtly love. Not only does Cooper confirm the broad reluctance of the Middle English romances to figure adultery, but she also maintains that “English Renaissance romance is even less hospitable towards adultery” (320).

The question of dynastic continuity remained one of the main concerns of medieval romance and is discussed in this book under the heading “Restoring the Rightful Heir.” First, Cooper analyzes the motif of the Fair Unknown, in which a young man is ignorant of both his name and his family identity. It appears for the first time in Chrétien de Troyes’s *Perceval*, and figures in various Middle English texts —most notably in *Lybeaus Desconus*— and in the characterization of Spenser’s Redcrosse. Next, the author examines the motif of the dispossessed heir who regains his kingship after numerous tribulations. Having discussed the presence of this theme in Middle English romances such as *Havelok* and its various incarnations in Tudor England (343), Cooper explains how this *meme* acquires a political dimension in texts that interact with their cultural context. For instance, *Blanchardyn and Eglantine* invites a comparison with the circumstances of Henry VI, whose accession to the throne is interpreted as the restoration of the rightful heir. On the other hand, Queen Elizabeth’s virginity posed an internal threat to the line of succession and provided narrative matter for Spenser and Shakespeare.

While the aforementioned chapters duly deliver the promises of the book, namely, to trace the evolution of romance motifs from their appearance in the Middle Ages down to the early seventeenth century, the other two clearly fall short of that promise. “Providence and the Sea” provides a comprehensive study of the romance motif of the rudderless boat, with a discussion of its mythic origin, its historical and legal dimension, and its use in romance narratives; however, this chapter fails to address the

impact of this motif in Renaissance literature. Cooper also considers the theme of the magic ship controlled by a powerful woman and its currency in medieval romance, without assessing its post-medieval fortunes, and concludes by stating that “Spenser finds the motif unusable” (135). “Magic that Doesn’t Work” likewise focuses on the narrative effects of failing magic in medieval romance, whilst this motif’s presence in Renaissance literature receives marginal attention limited to an episode in *Othello*. Considering the stated purpose of this monograph, it seems that these two chapters could have benefited from redirection of the argument to justify their inclusion in this already lengthy study.

After the aptly structured concluding chapter “Unhappy Endings,” the book closes with a most useful appendix (409–29): under the rubric “Medieval Romance in English after 1500” Cooper lists the romance texts composed in English before 1400 and with circulation after 1500. Here Cooper includes reference to the printed versions published in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to the adaptations and dramatizations that those romances underwent, and to some significant allusions in addition to providing standard information —such as the romances’ main critical editions, textual source, and manuscript history. The appendix puts such a wealth of information within easy reach that it is certain to become a reference tool for scholars interested in the post-medieval life of romance, superseding more limited previous lists (cf. Crane 1919: 30–48; Meale 1992: 285 n. 8), and will encourage a renewed interest in the printed history of medieval romance.

*The English Romance in Time*, written by a scholar who is equally comfortable with the medieval and the early modern period, exudes erudition. With rigour and accuracy, Cooper displays her familiarity with the primary texts from the two periods, and refers to them frequently to support her argument. Despite the fact that the printed originals are readily available to the author in the libraries of Cambridge and Oxford, Cooper admits that “Early English Books Online has transformed the accessibility of early prints” (viii). It follows that, by making this electronic resource available to Spanish scholars, we should be able to overcome the obvious inadequacy of our libraries in primary printed materials of the period. However, it is disturbing to confirm that only a handful of Spanish university libraries subscribe to this database, thus preventing both lecturers and students from using a formidable research and teaching tool. Ways need to be found to make this and other similar resources easily available to scholars in our country.

The profusion of references to primary sources, however, contrasts with a more limited engagement with the secondary literature, maybe as a result of this volume’s size or of the project’s scope, that on occasion could have improved the study or helped a reader interested in opening up new avenues. For instance, the chapter “Women on Trial” could have profited from the recent book by Nancy B. Black (2003), and the analysis of gazing (234–39) could have also introduced ideas from John Burrow’s monograph (2002; esp. ch. 3). It seems more surprising that Cooper recommends “Gaston Paris’s account of the relationship between the various versions [of *Floris and Blancheflour*] in *Romania* 28 (1890 [*recte* 1899]),” since “later discussions have not always improved on that” (463 n. 41), when a thorough and dependable monograph was devoted to this topic only a few years ago by Patricia E. Grieve (1997).

While the amount of information may slow down the reading, this book is gracefully written with clarity and precision and has been carefully edited. Nonetheless, the work contains some factual errors and minor inaccuracies. Cooper states that “by 1529 ... Richard Hyrd was translating Vives’ *Instruction of a Christen Woman*” (37), when in fact Hyrd died in 1528 (cf. Fantazzi 2000: 31–32) and it is thought that his translation appeared in 1529 (*STC* 24856, 24856.5). To Vives’s list of popular romances from Spain, France, and Flanders, Hyrd adds a selection of texts from England, some of which have not been preserved in printed editions. Although scholars tend to take the inclusion in Hyrd’s list as a clear indication that a romance must have been printed (cf. Meale 1992: 286 n. 10), it cannot be given as a positive fact as Cooper seems to do when mentioning *Lybeaus Desconus* among “fourteenth-century metrical romances ... available in print” (38; but cf. 464 n. 56). In addition, the author suggests hesitantly the possibility of “the first edition [of *The Lyfe of Ipomydon*] perhaps dating from 1505” (440 n. 71), a conjecture that is utterly unfounded since for his edition Wynkyn de Worde borrowed the manuscript copy, now BL Harley 2252, from John Colyns, who had purchased it only in 1517 (cf. Meale 1982). Helen Cooper also mentions that *Sir Isumbras* survives “in fragments of five printed editions” (88; cf. 421), when only four are recorded in *STC*, and that the three printed editions known to us of *King Ponthus* were published from ca. 1509 to 1511 (439 n. 66) when they appeared from 1501? to 1511 (cf. *STC* 20107). I have also noticed the following inaccuracies in quotes: “fairnisse” (16) is given instead of “fairnise,” “thefore” (81) for “therfor,” “femynyntee” (295) for “femynyntee,” “adventurers” (320) for “adventures,” “advoutres” (loc. cit.) for “advoutrers,” “n’ie” (435 n. 29) for “n’i,” “le” (loc. cit.) for “li,” and “tan” (478 n. 51) for “tant.” Besides on two occasions the quoted passages have been misreferenced: the lines cited from Hue de Rotelande’s *Ipomedon* on page 11 are 10559–61, not 10557–59, and the text from Malory on page 86 is from Book XIII chapter 16, not from XIII.17. Finally, in a book that has provided translations or glosses for many Middle English quotations, it seems inappropriate to find a passage from Gottfried von Strassburg’s *Tristan* untranslated (233).

All in all, though, these quibbles and objections amount to minor points and they should not detract from a book that has been broadly successful in proving its key argument that “whilst romance motifs remain superficially the same ... the usage and understanding of them changes over time” (4). The book is especially valuable for the close analyses of many romance episodes that are treated with the critical respect they deserve, for its ability to establish direct relations among texts across period boundaries, and for its expertise in setting the literary texts under scrutiny in their cultural context. Though readers will certainly find the book demanding, they will be generously rewarded with issues raised by the author that will demand further scholarly attention. For all these reasons, *The English Romance in Time* is a major contribution that will have long-lasting influence and probably become a reference book for both medieval and Renaissance scholars with some interest in romance. Despite its exorbitant price (\$125), this book deserves a place in our libraries.<sup>1</sup>

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- STC = *A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland and Ireland, and of English Books Printed Abroad, 1475-1640*, first compiled by A. W. Pollard and G. R. Redgrave, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. rev. and enlarged, begun by W. A. Jackson and F. S. Ferguson, completed by Katharine F. Pantzer, with a chronological index by Philip R. Rider. London: Bibliographical Society, 1976-91. 3 vols.