

Raluca L. Radulescu and Cory James Rushton, eds. 2009: *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance*. Studies in Medieval Romance 10. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer. xiv + 209 pp. ISBN 9781843841920

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For the better part of the twentieth century the literary corpus formed by the Middle English verse romances did not receive as much scholarly attention as other medieval genres.¹ While these texts remained of interest to historical linguists and textual scholars alike, they suffered general neglect from literary critics, with the notable exception of the more refined *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Such bias, however, was gradually corrected during the last quarter of the century, through studies such as those by Mehl (1968) and Wittig (1978), and notably, through the publication of selected papers from the conferences on Romance in Medieval Britain organized biennially since 1988. In addition to the momentum provided by these volumes, three other collections of essays have promoted the interest of literary scholars in this medieval genre, namely, the books edited by Aertsen and MacDonald (1990), Putter and Gilbert (2000) and McDonald (2004). More recently we find volumes devoted to individual romances, as in the case of *Bevis of Hampton* (Fellows and Djordjevic 2008) and *Guy of Warwick* (Wiggins and Field 2007). Thus, more than twenty years since the first meeting of the Romance Conference at the University of Wales in 1988, it seems that popular romances have finally come of age for literary studies, as attested by the large body of scholarship they have given rise to. In order to identify fruitful approaches to and discourses around the English romances, the Companion under review is organized in chapters “intended as comprehensive reviews of the state of play in the field, as well as pointers to areas that need further attention” (9).

The first chapter, ‘Popular Romance: The Material and the Problems’, is authored by Rosalind Field and examines the following aspects illustrating the underlying complexities of the genre: “assumptions about popularity, the procedures of the long romance and the critical search for meaning and contexts in the romance of the family and the romance of the popular hero” (11). The Anglo-Norman *Boeve de Hauntoun* demonstrates characteristics most commonly identified with the popular romances, yet it was associated

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with and appealed to the higher classes in post-Conquest England, thus challenging, on the one hand, “the unexamined class-based assumption according to which aristocrats . . . have refined literary tastes” (12), and, on the other, the supposed exclusiveness of the Anglo-Norman vernacular. One of the assumed impediments to popular access to the Anglo-Norman romances was their length, a disadvantage that Field argues was offset by the episodic organization of narratives such as *Gui de Warewic*. The remainder of the chapter presents problematized readings of two Breton lays (*Sir Orfeo* and *Emaré*), a divided family romance (*Octavian*), a courtship romance (*Floris and Blancheflour*), and two heroic romances (*Havelok* and *Gamelyn*). In fact, the main difficulty —and main virtue too— seems to lie in the genre’s elusiveness, in spite of all the conventionalisms that sustain it, and all the unconventional solutions adopted: “We find something of a kaleidoscopic effect by which each work throws a new light and different perspective onto the others . . . ; the very size and categoric slipperiness . . . become part of its [i.e., the genre’s] particular quality” (28).

Raluca Radulescu addresses the definition of the genre in chapter two by offering an historical and thematic reassessment of the term *romance*, although there is no conclusive evidence for the use of such a descriptor for our textual corpus in medieval times. What is more, “a broad range of narratives modern critics consider to be under the umbrella of romance were seen by medieval authors and scribes as ‘lives,’ ‘histories,’ ‘treatises’ or ‘jests’” (33). The diversity of alternative models and descriptors is attributable to the genre’s protean nature, with texts that are permeable, elastic and capable of adapting to the thematic exigencies of various manuscript contexts. Radulescu suggests that Middle English romances’ resistance to any kind of definition and categorization goes back to their French antecedents, which are themselves derived from different genres. Consequently, critics such as Laura Hibbard (Loomis) in 1924 and Dieter Mehl in 1967 chose to compare the French models and the English translations, and systematically analyze their metrical and thematic features. All attempts to identify characteristics common to the entire corpus, in fact, seem to obscure the object of study, since they overlook that “a distinct feature of popular romances appears to be the deliberate difference or deviation from the norm” (39). In view of this, Radulescu discusses three significant romance features that in various ways shape these texts’ generic identity. First, one of the differences between some Middle English romances and their French sources lies in the adoption of hagiographic discourse in order to address social concerns relevant to the contemporary audience, as in the case of *Sir Gowther*, *Sir Isumbras* and *Amis and Amiloun*. The second characteristic has to do with the presence of powerful, independent female characters who clearly influence the development of the hero, as the Fere does in the case of *Ipomadon A*. Lastly, Radulescu refers to the romance’s narrative self-consciousness, understood as a desire to explore the limits of the genre by assessing chivalric values (e.g., *Sir Amadace*) and courtly ones (e.g., *The King of Tars*).

The third chapter considers ‘The Manuscripts of Popular Romance’ and is divided into two sections: in the first Maldwyn Mills deals with medieval manuscripts, while

in the second Gillian Rogers examines the famous Percy Folio manuscript (BL MS Additional 27879). Mills has a tough assignment to carry out, since he has only eight pages to present a conspectus of the morphology of the over 90 manuscripts containing Middle English romances (cf. Guddat-Figge 1976). He decides to investigate how various meanings of the word *popular* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* apply to medieval romance manuscripts so that the reader becomes aware of the variety of codicological presentations of the genre. For her part, Rogers presents a useful analysis of the Percy Folio, with a codicological description and a discussion of the reception of its contents by one particular reader, namely, the manuscript's compiler himself. Transcribed ca. 1640-50, the Percy manuscript is an eclectic compilation combining an antiquarian interest in the past with a concern over contemporary affairs. Although no overall principles of organization occur, a few thematic clusters are discernible, like the seven Robin Hood ballads and the grouping of Arthurian texts that come immediately after. Regarding the romance material in particular, the Percy Folio contains six texts derived directly from medieval sources with manuscript and/or print antecedents. Note, however, that *Valentine and Orson* was published by Wynkyn de Worde not in 1502, as Rogers states (63), but ca. 1510 (cf. *STC* 24571.3).

The next chapter treats the 'Printed Romance in the Sixteenth Century', a topic too large to be done justice in only twelve pages. Aware that only a partial overview is possible, its author, Jennifer Fellows, has narrowed the article to "a textual characterization of the post-medieval [print] versions of the five romances in Cambridge University Library, MS Ff.2.38" (67), namely, *Eglamour*, *Tryamour*, *Bevis*, *Guy* and *Degaré*. In Fellows' opinion, Wynkyn de Worde and William Copland were "[t]he giants among the sixteenth-century printers of romance" (68), although this statement may give an incorrect impression about their involvement in the publication of romance texts. While De Worde was a romance pioneer who produced the first edition of at least eight such texts, Copland's work was notoriously derivative since he simply reproduced "the most chronologically adjacent edition for his text" (Edwards 2002: 142). Deserving of greater recognition is Richard Pynson, who probably from 1497 fought against De Worde for the market niche of the printed romances and up until 1510 produced the first edition of four —or maybe five— romance titles.² Fellows analyzes the textual tradition of the printed versions of each one of the romances in the CUL manuscript. In the case of *Eglamour*, Fellows states, "There are no substantial narrative differences between the manuscript and the printed versions" (69), contrary to what happens with *Bevis* (73), whereas in the case of *Guy* she mentions the indiscriminate abridgement of the printed version. About *Tryamour* we learn that the "two manuscripts are closer to each other than either is to the prints" (71), and Fellows finds the stability of *Degaré*'s

² According to the *BMC* (90, 97), De Worde and Pynson printed separate editions of *Guy of Warwick* probably in 1497. If we accept this date, we can no longer maintain, as Fellows does, that De Worde was "the first to print 'popular' romances" (68).

printed tradition remarkable (76). In discussing the illustrations of the romances, the chapter contains one material inaccuracy when Fellows states that the woodcut used by De Worde in *Degaré* “on sig. Bi^r is identical to that on sig. Kii^r of Richard Pynson’s edition (c. 1503) of *Bevis*” (76), when in fact both these illustrations are extremely similar but different.³

In the next chapter Thomas H. Crofts and Robert A. Rouse explore how the Middle English romances were used to articulate the nationalist discourse of Englishness. Crofts and Rouse point out that English identity in the late Middle Ages was not homogeneous, but was instead “complicated by ties between England and the continent, regionalisms within England itself, and even worrying similarities with the Saracen Other” (82), as they demonstrate in their perceptive discussion of *Guy* and *Bevis*. Then they consider whether this nationalist sentiment translated into hostility against all things French in the Charlemagne romances, as one would expect. This anti-French sentiment, however, is conspicuous by its absence, a fact traditionally explained by the “Christian militancy shared by England and France” (87). Yet, the authors of the article offer an alternative explanation, namely, the value of chivalry as a shaping force of aristocratic identity, of greater significance than the supposed national differences and religious loyalties previously adduced.

In ‘Gender Identity in the Popular Romance’, Joanne Charbonneau and Désirée Cromwell focus on two issues: how the domestic sphere affects gender, and how masculine identity is constructed outside the family environment. It is common in romance narratives to find female characters that are defined “in relation to men or as objects of exchange between men” (100), although Charbonneau and Cromwell argue that there is not one stable model of ideal female behaviour. The absence of such an identifiable archetype makes it possible for female characters to play the gamut of roles “from the pious and innocent to stereotypes from the misogynistic tradition” (100–101). Thus, the English romances offer the image of women not necessarily submissive to men’s wishes, but instead as agents that have an impact on the narrative and are, therefore, perceived as a potential threat to the established norm. This situation is best illustrated by *Bone Florence of Rome*, *Guy* and *Ipomadon A*, where women determine the identity of their male counterparts, in addition to influencing the narrative course of events. The masculinity of those male characters is shaped in topographies other than domesticity and is realized in the figure of the chivalric knight. Knights are often prevented from achieving the supposed ideal of masculinity because they all have their faults, including excess of liberality, violence against women and failure of trust. Yet, the chivalric knight is not the only model of masculinity available, as on other occasions they opt for spiritual values —*Robert of Cisyle*— or standards of conduct outside sanctioned gendered roles, like the male bonding in *Amis and Amiloun*. As the chapter aptly concludes, the romance genre “defies generalities and allows multiplicities of vision and conflicting perspectives on gender” (110).

³ For facsimile reproductions of these images, see figs. 6 and 14 in Sánchez-Martí (2011: 93, 96).

Ad Putter, in ‘The Metres and Stanza Forms of Popular Romance’, tackles a topic that, as he admits, is seen as technical and arid by literary scholars. Yet Putter insists on the literary relevance of correctly interpreting a text’s metrical features, since they reveal “the poet’s sense of belonging —his ideas about the kind of work he was writing and the performance he envisaged” (111), in addition to helping establish the text’s date of composition and provenance. Prior to discussing the metrical forms of the English romances, Putter refers to the genre’s resistance to abandon verse as a means of expression, as English romances in prose appeared only towards the middle of the fifteenth century, that is, more than two centuries later than in the case of the French romances. One decisive factor that explains the change to prose has to do precisely with the genre’s protracted use of verse, as a result of which “the traditional forms of versification . . . had come to seem outmoded and lowbrow in the eyes of a growing audience of readers” (112). Putter starts his metrical overview with couplets, a form popularized in post-Conquest England in imitation of the French octosyllabic rhyming couplet. The couplet readily met the needs of romance narratives, as shown for the first time by the poet of *Havelok*, one of the earliest romances, although with a certain degree of Anglicization. Next, Putter approaches the stanzaic arrangement in *Sir Tristrem*, composed by an octave in alternating rhyme followed by a bob and wheel, the latter familiar for its use in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Just from the verse form we learn that *Sir Tristrem* was produced in the north of England, rather than in Scotland, and was meant to be performed with a musical instrument. The tail-rhyme stanza, the form most commonly associated with the popular romances, has its origins in the liturgical sequence and the septenary, and was used initially for lyrical compositions and later for narrative purposes. Romancers were partial to this stanza because it was suitable for singing, while “[t]he direct line of descent from saints’ lives to tail-rhyme also . . . explains the close thematic connections between the two genres” (123). Although tail-lines have been neglected because of their poor narrative relevance, Putter argues that we cannot overlook their phatic function of inviting the audience’s engagement. The chapter closes with a discussion on rhyme and makes a brief comment about three other verse forms, namely, the *abababab* stanza, the sixteen-line tail-rhyme stanza and the rhymed alliterative tradition. Putter’s is a masterly contribution that contrives to highlight the importance of understanding the literary implications of any given romance verse form. As he states, “[t]he subject is much too important to be left to the metrists” (131).

In ‘Orality and Performance’, Karl Reichl foregrounds that romancers envisaged primarily an oral/aural delivery for their texts without ruling out other forms of reception, such as reading in private from a manuscript either silently or aloud. In any event, the Middle English romances were suitable for public performances by a minstrel with or without musical accompaniment, although we do not know whether they were sung or not. But what evidence do we have for the oral transmission of these texts? For a long while it was thought that the so-called *holster books*, like Bodleian MS Ashmole 61, were meant for professional entertainers, their compact size providing for

easy handling and transportation. Reichl, however, admits: “[i]t is difficult to prove the use of a manuscript by an English minstrel” (143). The other source of evidence comes from the romances themselves, whose oral-memorial transmission has resulted in textual variations not attributable to scribal practices, as in the case of *Sir Degarre*. Nonetheless, here Reichl takes an extremely positivist stance when stating, “it is difficult to point to an incontestable instance of memorial transmission . . . [which] must remain hypothetical, though perhaps in some cases the best hypothesis for accounting for textual variation” (144). Finally Reichl addresses the issue of composition and contends that in spite of the prevalence of formulaic diction, there is no evidence suggesting that the romances were composed orally. In contrast, the existence of French antecedents for the majority of popular romances is the best indication that they were composed in writing, thus placing the genre in “a literate/oral tradition” (149).

In chapter 9, Phillipa Hardman builds a case in favour of considering young readers “among the potential target audience of Middle English romance” (152) and regrets that youngsters have not received scholarly attention comparable to that afforded to the female audience of romance. This situation, in Hardman’s opinion, should be redressed “in view of the fact that not only are many Middle English romances concerned with families . . . but that a large number have a child protagonist” (152). Her suggestion, however, is not without problems. That a text concerns family issues or that it relates events in the protagonist’s childhood does not necessarily mean that it was composed with a young readership in mind. Likewise, that a romance appears in a household miscellany is no indication that it was intended for the younger readers of the family, as Hardman suggests in the case of the Auchinleck MS. Neither is it convincing to argue that the English translation of Anglo-Norman romances was part of “a programme of making available to younger readers the traditionally valued narratives of their cultural heritage” (155). It seems reasonable to consider that the topics of romance were of interest to the younger generation, and Hardman offers numerous examples. It seems equally reasonable to assume that children and young people were part of the genre’s audience, mainly in public performances but also —although more rarely— in some manuscript contexts, as for instance in the Heege MS. But Hardman provides no textual or historical evidence that a given romance was composed for an implied or intended audience made up of young readers.⁴

The volume closes with the chapter ‘Modern and Academic Reception of the Popular Romance’, by Cory J. Rushton. He argues that although the genre has survived mainly in academic contexts, its influence has extended to other modern and popular cultural expressions, such as films and video games “based on the idea of the quest in which an individual leaves civilization, encountering the strange and marvellous on the way, and often returns with a firmer sense of his or her own identity” (167).

⁴ For the concepts of *implied* and *intended audience*, see Strohm (1983).

In the introduction to the companion the editors state that it “aims to provide a much needed guide to issues pertinent to the student and researcher of popular romance” (2). Since most chapters provide an overview of various scholarly discourses and approaches, it seems that the book will prove more valuable to students and researchers who are new to the field. In any event, this volume is a welcome contribution to, as well as testimony of, the scholarly conversation around the English popular romance.

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