
Neil Cartlidge (ed.). *Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Medieval Romance*. Studies in Medieval Romance. Woodbridge: Brewer, 2012, ix + 247 pp., £ 50.00.

Heroes are familiar fixtures in medieval romance – anti-heroes less so, and the reader may indeed wonder whether the editor has unwittingly and ahistorically projected a modern concept onto texts that show little indication of producing ‘round characters’. The editor, Neil Cartlidge, is, of course, aware of his ‘ahistorical’ and somewhat provocative use of the term. The concept of the anti-hero *per se* is, however, not completely unknown to the Middle Ages and, as the contributions to the volume show, can be encountered in many of the medieval romances.

The collection comprises fourteen essays, ten on individual characters such as Hengist, Gawain, and Turnus, and four on character-types such as ‘Saracens’ or ‘Sons of Devils’. It is one of the virtues of this volume that it does not differentiate between romances in (Anglo-)French and Middle English, but considers them of equal relevance (though on different levels) for the literary scene in medieval England. The first contribution by Penny Eley (9–25) is a case in point. In a cogently argued analysis of the Old French *Eneas* she shows how the author has systematically blackened the figure of Turnus so that Aeneas be-

comes, by implicit contrast, a saviour figure. The poet has thus re-written Virgil's account with a contemporary audience in mind, integrating new elements such as courtly love and subjecting the story to a political interpretation. David Ashurst's paper (27–41) focuses on the depiction of Alexander the Great in Walter of Châtillon's *Alexandreis* and shows that Walter has an ambiguous attitude towards his hero. Alexander is, on the one hand, criticised for his insatiable hunger for power, yet on the other he is praised as the greatest conqueror of all times. This ambiguity towards Alexander is found in numerous other texts and has its origin in the fact that he was a man whom "the Christian God appointed to achieve more than any Christian king" (41), yet who, at the same time, was a pagan. Ashurst's essay provides many stimulating ideas, yet the temporal constraints under which the author had to work make themselves felt in the somewhat meandering form of the argument. While Penny Eley focuses on the founding father of the Roman Empire and his counterpart, it is the "founding father of the English nation" who is the subject of Margaret Lamont's fine essay on Hengist (43–57). Her application of the modern Mexican concept of *mestisaje* to a medieval protagonist may strike the reader at first as somewhat strange. However, it proves a fortuitous move since such a conceptual transposition makes Hengist not only more accessible to the modern (and in particular the American) reader, but it also introduces a theoretical framework and the concomitant terminology to deal with a phenomenon that has fascinated and often baffled chroniclers: what does it mean to be English, i.e. to be related to both the conquered and the conquerors who, in turn, were to be conquered once more a few centuries later.

While Hengist could be seen as the founding father and thus ancestor of the Anglo-Saxon royal house (though he was, strictly historically speaking, most probably a Jute and certainly no 'king' in the later medieval sense of the word), Harold II Godwinson was the last Anglo-Saxon king on the throne of England. Harold's tragic figure has inspired both medieval and modern authors (for the latter category see e.g. Edward Bulwer-Lytton and Julian Rathbone). Laura Ashe (59–80) traces Harold's role in a variety of post-Conquest texts that, depending on their political sympathies or national(istic) points of view, present him either as an usurper of the throne, a man suffering the divine punishment for the sins of his subjects, or as a just though in the end unfortunate ruler. The *Vita Haroldi*, a pseudo-hagiographical Latin prose text claiming that Harold survived the Battle of Hastings and finally died as a hermit in Chester, is more conciliatory: it transforms the potentially disruptive figure of the disinherited king into a man who has left behind all worldly ties and attained the kingdom of Heaven.

So far the contributions have focused on (semi-)historical figures, such as Alexander, Hengist, or Harold. The ensuing three papers all centre around fig-

ures from the Arthurian legend: Mordred, Merlin, and Gawain. Mordred, who is destined to become “an archetype for other literary traitors” (98), starts out as a figure that is often depicted positively – as, for example, in the Welsh tradition. It seems mostly due to Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace that the focus is later on the (enlarged) negative aspects. Judith Weiss (81–98) further shows that even after Geoffrey and Wace there is no unified or simplistic condemnation of Mordred but that there are always texts which move the reader to “deplore his actions but understand its origins, and [the readers’] understanding entails a modicum of sympathy for a character in so many other respects the very personification of an anti-hero” (98). The next ‘Arthurian figure’ is less diverse in its reception, but of no less importance: Merlin. Gareth Griffin (99–114) explores the ambiguous nature of Arthur’s counsellor who, since Geoffrey’s account, had been believed to be the product of an unholy union of the (or a) devil with a virginal nun. Yet in spite of this, Merlin uses his supernatural powers mostly to support the reigning king and links the supernatural with the political. Griffin also discusses the danger that such a powerful and, due to its innate ambiguity, independent element poses to other figures and how the various authors deal with Merlin’s “departure”. While Merlin’s ambiguity is motivated by his semi-demonic ancestry, that of the third Arthurian character under discussion, Gawain, has no such clear explanation. Kate McClune (115–128) gives a comprehensive overview (with a certain bias towards the Scottish tradition) of the numerous works featuring Gawain as their main protagonist. The great number of texts and the sometimes widely diverging assessment of Gawain make it clear that we are probably no longer dealing merely with “ambiguity”, but with a much more radical phenomenon: the instability of a literary figure across centuries and across texts. McClune’s more traditional approach is therefore not really satisfactory, and though her discussion gives a good overview, the phenomenon of the “unstable literary figure” calls for the development of a new theoretical framework.

With Nancy Mason Bradbury’s discussion of *Gamelyn* (129–144) we leave the sphere of chivalric romance protagonists proper and enter the domain of popular romances. Bradbury succeeds in establishing an interpretative framework that shows how the otherwise rather disturbing violence in the tale is part and parcel of the main protagonist’s anti-clerical, mildly anti-chivalric and especially anti-authoritarian heroic persona. Gamelyn thus becomes a role model for those “ordinary men” who are disappointed by the self-indulgent clergy and the ineffectual chivalric order, and who long for a just community. Similarly, Ad Putter (145–158) analyses *The Tale of Ralph the Collier*, whose protagonist seems at first sight to defy all standards of courtliness. Yet, as he shows, Ralph’s churlishness is motivated by his desire to follow a larger ideal of court-

liness, so that his final acceptance into the chivalric order is justified. Stephanie Viereck Gibbs Kamath (159–169) discusses René of Anjou's unique French work *Livre du Cuer d'Amours Espris* (*Book of the Love-smitten Heart*) and its problematising of the concept of the hero. In the *Livre* the heroic narrative is not about the achievement of control and power, but, as Viereck Gibbs Kamath shows, “the loss of power to the force of love is the essential identifying act of a hero” (166). This idea not only upsets the traditional notion of what constitutes a hero, but it also “break[s] down distinctions between historical opponents as heroes and anti-heroes” (167).

The final four essays comprising the second part of the volume broaden the view from a discussion of a particular character to that of character types such as ‘Saracens’, ‘Ungallant Knights’, ‘Sons of Devils’, or ‘Crusaders’. The latter is the subject of Robert Allen Rouse's contribution (173–183), which discusses post-1291 Middle English narratives such as *Richard Coer de Lyon*, *Guy of Warwick*, *Bevis of Hampton* and others. He interprets these texts as appeals to direct the aggressive and violent potential inherent in chivalric society outside of Christendom and sees them as assigning the blame for the loss of the city of Acre and the Holy Land to the internal strife among the Christian leaders. The critique of Christianity, or more specifically of the Christian knight, is the theme of Siobhain Bly Calkin's fine chapter on the Saracen knight (185–200). Both the Saracens who are converted and those who remain pagans are used in a number of *chanson de geste*-derived Middle English texts in order to contrast their exemplary behaviour with the not-always-so-exemplary behaviour of their Christian counterparts – or they are, as outside observers, used to voice explicit criticism of the Christian heroes' lack of discipline or weak faith. Thus, “Saracen characters who might seem to be mere opportunities for the demonstration of Christian martial prowess actually offer intriguing perspectives on the hero's heroism” (200). James Wade, in the penultimate contribution to the volume, discusses the influence of the manuscript context on the possible interpretation of the romances and their protagonists (201–218). While the greater part of the romance protagonists behave in an exemplary way, we also encounter “ungallant romance hero[es]” (218). Wade argues that morally minded readers would find it of interest to see how the protagonists' “moral messiness expos[es] the tensions between the chivalric ideal and the complexities of lived experience, the kind of tensions that make romances worth reading” (218). The last essay of the collection (219–235) provides an insightful discussion of the theological implications of semi-demonic figures such as Gowther or Robert in the eponymous romances (*Sir Gowther*, *Robert le Diable*). Neil Cartlidge explores the complexities and tensions inherent in these ‘sons of devils’ and shows that the romances' sensationalism does not necessarily detract from the fact that they of-

fer, in the end, “what amounts to a finely balanced recapitulation of the position that most medieval theologians took – i.e. that heredity can be a powerful influence, [...] but that its influence is in any case always balanced by every human’s capacity for virtue, so that sin itself is therefore not essentially heritable” (234).

Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Medieval Romance is a carefully edited volume that, relying on a minimalistic overall theoretical framework, offers an innovative approach to one of the most popular medieval genres. It is to be hoped that these essays will not only be read as studies in the development of literary characters, but will also provide the basis for further explorations of the “unstable literary protagonist” and a more extensive theorizing of the phenomenon and its concomitant questions.

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