



Chivalric literature. edited by Larry D. Benson and John Leyerle. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980. pp. xvi+176.

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BOOK REVIEWS

CHIVALRIC LITERATURE. Edited by Larry D. Benson and John Leyerle. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980. Pp. xvi+176.

This book consists of three pages of a Foreword, ten essays of eleven to twenty-four pages in length, and twenty-eight pages of notes. As the editors demonstrate in the Foreword, these essays are presented as explorations into the relations between life and literature in the western Europe of the late Middle Ages.

The general assumption of the contributors is that chivalry flourished in the late Middle Ages, from the beginning of the twelfth century through the beginning of the sixteenth century, as ceremonial activities of the aristocratic society. This society fostered a genre of literature generally called chivalric literature. Chivalric literature of the period covers a wide range of writings, from chivalric romance to manuals of courtesy. The popularity of this kind of literature and the contemporary records of actual chivalric activities show that chivalric literature provided the aristocracy with ideal models of the exemplary way of life.

Chivalric literature took its motif from actual activities of knights, and the knights' activities, in their turn, were modeled after the fictionalized treatment of chivalry. This interchange between chivalric literature and life became more and more complex as literature came to have wider and deeper influences upon the mode of life of the aristocracy. The book is an attempt to elucidate several aspects of this complex interchange for the better understanding of the rise, zenith,

and the evening light of the ideas and practice of chivalry.

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In the first essay, "The Tournament in the Romances of Chrétien de Troyes and *L'Histoire de Guillaume le Marechal*," Larry D. Benson shows the actual origin of chivalry by examining the first stages in the history of tournaments. He compares the earliest descriptions of fictional tournaments in Chrétien's romances with the earliest descriptions of actual tournaments in *L'Histoire*, the first of the chivalric biographies. In the twelfth century a tournament was a crude and bloody military game, fought in a *mêlée*, each participant searching eagerly for booty. It was far from aristocratic. When Chrétien transformed the actual tournaments into fictional accounts, he idealized, purified, and changed the tournaments from mere rough sport into admirably chivalric activity, with the splendid trappings that we usually associate with the medieval tournaments. Benson remarks that this fictionalized tournament had the potentiality of affecting his audience's attitude toward the real tournaments. Thus, after Chrétien the medieval tournaments gradually changed in the direction defined by Chrétien's romances.

In the second essay, "Chronicle, Chivalric Biography, and Family Tradition in Fourteenth-Century England," Sumner Ferris shows how the accounts of chronicles and biographies were influenced by the ideas of chivalry. He takes up three biographical accounts: those of Henry Grosmont, Thomas Beauchamp, and Edward of Woodstock, the Black Prince. From more objective evidence it is certain that the writers embellished historical events so that they might endow their subjects with such chivalric qualities as bravery, honor, piety, and good breeding. Since these accounts were preferred and chosen by their contemporaries and close relatives, the fame of the knights depended more on the zeal of their descendants and their family tradition than on their

personal prowess in life.

More complex interplay between literature and life is given consideration by Anthony W. Annunziata in "The *Pas d'Armes* and Its Occurrences in Malory." The *pas d'armes*, or the passage of arms, was a ceremonial combat based on literary precedents. By the end of the fourteenth century it became a highly stylized social affair with special significance for the knightly class. Malory drew his accounts of the *pas d'armes* in his *Morte Darthur* from his literary sources and from the actual practices of his time. In the realistic descriptions of his fictionalized knightly encounters, Malory endowed the *pas d'armes* with all the authority of Arthurian tradition, and thus, in his turn, provided his contemporaries with a chivalric norm of aristocratic life.

The way literature was influenced by life is observed from another viewpoint by Henry L. Harder in his "Feasting in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*." By examining the record of actual banquets contemporary with the poem, Harder finds that the poem is fully provided with realistic details from the feasts of the time. The function of the feast in the poem is the same as that of a feast in contemporary aristocratic society—to maintain "worship" by the display of splendid courtly life. In describing three different feasts along with Arthur's military activities, the poet demonstrates Arthur's gradual decline from justice and honor in a way that contemporary audience would be convinced. Although it takes its characters from legendary knights, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* is a product of a new court culture.

Even an essentially religious work was not immune to the influence of aristocratic tastes. Elizabeth B. Keiser, in her essay, "The Festive Decorum of *Cleanness*," argues that the courtly idealism of the late medieval society strongly affected the poet's concept of a religious mode of life. Heavenly "clannesse" and "honeste" in the poem would carry

rich aesthetic nuances agreeable to the tastes of the contemporary audience as well as ethical significance. Even the "play of paramoreꝝ," the romantic idealization of sexuality, is portrayed as an aspect of the natural order of God who stresses the intrinsic aesthetic value of love. Thus the poet closely connects medieval social decorum and the divine service of God, and this connection is a reminder that heavenly excellence is attainable by those who approach its splendor through the honorable forms of social decorum.

Loretta Wasserman's essay, "Honor and Shame in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," is an attempt to apply an honor/shame code which is examined by present-day social anthropologists to late medieval poetry. In an honor/shame society a claim to honor does not rest on self-estimation of worth, but must be transacted, put into effect in daily life. Moreover, since a knight fights to maintain the reputation of the society to which he belongs as well as his own reputation, honor to him has dual significance, both social and individual. On the other hand, in a shame-oriented society aristocratic women were allowed to enjoy a considerable measure of sexual freedom. Against these value patterns of an honor/shame society, Wasserman analyses Gawain's psychological dilemma at the lady's repeated temptations. She concludes that the poet finally praises the young knight who learns that it is not outwardly proclaimed success, but stainless true nobility which is the ultimate determiner of honor.

In the essay, "Fidelity, Suffering, and Humor in *Paris and Vienne*," William T. Cotton studies the presentation of an ideal female character. In Caxton's translation of *Paris and Vienne*, the heroine, Vienne, in order to maintain fidelity to her betrothed Paris, suffers a prolonged imprisonment enforced on her by her family. Cotton points out that Vienne's suffering for love, her relatively active role, her strong emotions

in love, and her distinct individuality, clearly demonstrate that the work represents a tendency in fifteenth-century romance to offer a truly secular heroine. The sense of humor implied in the story enables the heroine to be fitted into a scheme of Christian morality which is perfectly acceptable to the taste of Caxton's audience.

If *Paris and Vienne* presents the ideal of the late medieval heroine, Malory's "Tale of Sir Gareth" presents the epitome of late medieval chivalry. In his essay, "Malory's Gareth and Fifteenth-Century Chivalry," Joseph R. Ruff shows how Malory's tale reflects, directly or indirectly, the ideal image of knighthood typically presented in the chivalric biography of Richard Beauchamp, thirteenth earl of Warwick. The chivalric life stylized in Malory's "Tale of Gareth" was highly admired by real knights as well as by authors of chivalric romance.

The end of the chivalric military tradition and the beginning of a new military age was marked at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Dean Loganbill, in his essay "The Contrast between the Chevalier Bayard, a Chivalric Knight, and Giovanni de' Medici, a Pragmatic Captain," sketches the contrast between two different types of military heroes. Bayard is recorded to have been one of the most perfect chivalric heroes of the late Middle Ages, his life being the last exemplary model of the highest ideals of warlike chivalry at the close of the Middle Ages. Bayard's contemporary, Giovanni, on the other hand, was an empirically-minded military captain, whose practical thought and tactical skill, based on Machiavelli's new concept of warfare, mark a new spirit of empiricism that was pragmatic in its approach to life. Loganbill concludes that the death of Bayard in 1524 ended the tradition of the ideal *chevalier*, the single knight on horseback, if not of chivalry as ideal or standard of behavior.

In the last essay, "Conclusion: the Major Themes of *Chivalric*

Literature," John Leyerle re-emphasizes the major theme of the volume—the close connections in the late Middle Ages between life in aristocratic society and the chivalric literature which that society fostered. Central to those close connections, Leyerle states, is the genre of the chivalric biographies on which the aristocratic society tended to pattern its chivalric conduct. After reviewing the preceding essays, Leyerle goes on to refute the prevailing view on chivalry that chivalry was declining from Arthur's time down to the Middle Ages. He demonstrates that such a view is a form of common literary *topos*, and concludes that frequent statements about, and strong concern for, the contemporary decay of chivalry in contrast to "the golden age of the past" precisely indicate that the late years of the Middle Ages were the period when interest in chivalry was at its height, when chivalry in fact enjoyed its golden age.

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In studying the relations between life and literature in the late Middle Ages, one inescapable problem arises—how to understand the life of the people of the remote past. As Benson and Ferris make clear, in the Middle Ages the distinction between supposedly factual chronicles, or biographies, and fictional romances was still obscure. For this reason a student cannot be too careful to extract authenticated historical facts from any documents we have from the Middle Ages.

Although Ferris demonstrates how much embellished Warwick's *Pageant* is, Ruff is tempted to take the fictionalized accounts for real when he shows the similarities between the feats of Gareth and the chivalric career of Richard Beauchamp. In the same manner Loganbill draws Bayard's life from his chivalric biography, and, describing Giovanni's life, he often relies on accounts of Giovanni compiled in the twentieth century, without critical scrutiny into their credibility.

Wasserman, too, falls into the same kind of fallacy when she tries to define the mode of life of the fourteenth-century audience by results of field-work done by twentieth-century social anthropologists. It is highly doubtful whether the social values of an Andalucian or Algerian minority can be readily applicable to the standards of behavior of courtly society in the late Middle Ages.

On the other hand, Cotton's essay on Caxton's *Paris and Vienne* exhibits another kind of fallacy—lack of close examination of the literary text. Caxton's translation is based on the French text completed some forty to fifty years before the publication of his English edition in 1485, and this French edition has its original in Old Provançal. Since retelling of a foreign text was often done during the process of translation in Caxton's time, details of the text might have been more than slightly altered. Therefore, Cotton should first have gone through intensive textual criticism of Caxton's work to see if he can ascribe credit for aspects of the tale either to the Provançal originator or to Caxton himself.

Despite these major problems and some other minor difficulties about documentation and authority, each of the ten essays in *Chivalric Literature* succeeds, each in its own way, in exploring the new interdisciplinary subject. The present volume will be a stimulating guide for scholarly young knights-errant to terrain unknown yet promising.

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