Reviews

HEATHER BLURTON AND DWIGHT F. REYNOLDS, eds., *Bestsellers and Masterpieces: The Changing Medieval Canon.* Manchester Medieval Literature and Culture. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022. Pp. 288. ISBN: 978–1–5261–4748–6. $130.

This collection of nine essays plus introduction has at its core a 'paradox in the modern study of medieval European and Arabic literature' (p. 1). On the one hand, many of the works that are most widely studied and taught survive today in a single copy, which suggests that they were not widely transmitted during the Middle Ages. On the other hand, many texts that survive in numerous manuscripts and have been translated to multiple languages are largely absent from undergraduate syllabi, anthologies of medieval literature, and academic scholarship.

Heather Blurton and Dwight F. Reynolds' detailed introduction lays the foundation for the studies that will follow. They provide several examples of works that fit into either side of the paradox and offer possible explanations for why such works have either been hailed as masterpieces or relegated to the margins of scholarship. They recognize modern literary preferences and acknowledge that texts that enjoyed wide dissemination and translation present challenges to those seeking an authoritative version. Similarly, those 'wandering texts' (p. 7) are difficult to attribute to a particular national literature, which is still the overarching framework that most often determines which texts are taught in literature courses.

After a thorough presentation of the issue at hand, the editors divide the collection into two sections. The first, 'Hanging by a Thread: Unique Manuscripts and Their Place in the "Modern" Medieval Canon,' addresses texts that exist in single manuscripts yet have a significant presence in modern scholarship and classrooms. Paul M. Cobb gives a detailed history of the life of Usāma ibn Munqidh's *Book of Contemplation* from 1880 on, noting that Usāma was an author whose persona modern scholars could reinterpret according to their own cultural contexts. Daniel C. Remein and Erica Weaver address *Beowulf*'s journey in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, noting the more well-known history of 'Oxford dons seeking to legitimate English as a serious scholarly discipline' (p. 55), but centering their attention on the lesser-known critical history of *Beowulf*. Specifically, they bring to light the important role that scholars from elite women's colleges and historically Black colleges and universities in the United States have had in *Beowulf*'s transmission. In his essay on *Tawq al-hamāma* (*The Neck-Ring of the Dove*), Boris Liebrenz briefly addresses the work's rediscovery in the early twentieth century and then turns to the first three centuries of the manuscript's life, tracing the text's journey using notes left by owners

on the first and last pages of the codex. Ryan D. Giles' contribution on the *Poema de mio Cid* details the anti-Jewish imagery of the text and highlights the role that late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholarship had in downplaying such imagery in the quest to elevate the *Poema* to the status of national epic and its eponymous protagonist to an 'internal model of Spain's essential values and transhistorical identity' (p. 128). To conclude the chapter on *unica* manuscripts, Sharon Kinoshita examines the transmission of Roland's deeds, considering first the unique *Chanson de Roland* in relation to the vast medieval *Roncevaux* tradition as well as the notable preoccupation with the transmission of Roland's deeds that is found in the *Chanson* itself. She then addresses the manuscript's rediscovery in the nineteenth century and the subsequent appropriation of the poem as a symbol of French nationalism and, lastly, the *Chanson*'s more recent role in studies on race.

The second section, 'Medieval Bestsellers: Reading the "Medieval Canon?"' addresses texts that enjoyed wide dissemination in the Middle Ages yet have little presence in scholarship and undergraduate syllabi. In the first half of Daniel L. Selden's essay on the *Life of Ahīqar*, he expounds on the concept of distributed authorship and modern notions of world literature, which he then ties directly to the *Life of Ahīqar* and links to its limited modern dissemination. Shamma Boyarin considers the Alexander Romance, specifically the Hebrew exemplars. He argues for their literary and aesthetic merit and highlights specific cases in which the translators' unique cultural contexts are reflected in the texts, suggesting that each translation is, in effect, its own work that survives in a *unicum* manuscript. In her essay on wisdom literature, Karla Mallette offers a comparative study of four widely transmitted and translated narrative traditions: Kalilah and Dimnah, the Seven Sages of Rome, the Book of Secundus, and Barlaam and Josaphat. She highlights elements that the traditions have in common and offers reasons for their decline in popularity, including their complicated histories of transmission. She notes that representing such histories through genealogical trees reduces the traditions' complexities and undermines the individual reworkings and translations, each of which embodies its own context. The collection concludes with Christine Chism's essay on the tale of Tawaddud/Theodor. She explains the appeal that encyclopedism and riddles had to pre-modern audiences and suggests that it was precisely those two characteristics that have limited the tale's post-medieval transmission. Furthermore, she notes the difficulty with which this tale, and especially its Philippine, Brazilian, and Mayan manifestations, fits in increasingly decolonized curricula, 'which often privilege recovery of authentic pre-colonial traditions' (p. 255). However, she—and therefore the collection—concludes on an optimistic note, suggesting that current 'more associative epistemological spaces' (p. 255) will allow for a nuanced return to Tawaddud's tale.

In their essay on *Beowulf*, Remein and Weaver state outright the question around which many of the articles revolve: how might this 'unusual dyad' (in their case *Bede's Death Song* and *Beowulf*) help us rethink what constitutes a canonical [medieval] poem (p. 50)? The essays found in *Bestsellers and Masterpieces: The Changing Medieval Canon* do just this: they invite the reader to consider the pre-modern and modern cultural milieu that led to specific works' genesis and, centuries later, privileged position in the canon and to consider a place for once widely-transmitted works

that have since been marginalized—two intellectual ventures that will undoubtedly enhance scholarship and undergraduate curricula.

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ANDREW BREEZE, *The Historical Arthur and The Gawain Poet: Studies on Arthurian and Other Traditions*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023. Pp. x, 153. ISBN: 978–1–66692–954–6. $95.

Andrew Breeze's *The Historical Arthur and the Gawain Poet* is really two discrete studies in one volume, each of them amplifications of Breeze's earlier published work. In the first (pp. 3–37), he makes the case for Geoffrey of Monmouth's epithet, *dux bellorum*, being the equivalent of the Welsh term *pentuleu,* 'captain of the bodyguard, chief of the royal host,' and referring to a historical Arthur who operated in the Strathclyde area in the 530s. Since I'm not qualified to judge these claims, this review will concern itself only with the second, and longer, section (pp. 41–136), which deals mainly with the authorship and date of the Middle English poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and with three poems in the same tradition.

Many years ago, Morton W. Bloomfield wrote of the implications of the single-author theory of the poems in the MS Cotton Nero A.x that 'the mathematical probability of an hypothesis based on an hypothesis is very slight' ['*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: An Appraisal,' *PMLA,* 76 (1961): 9–10], and while Breeze is certainly not the first scholar of the poem lured into such hypothesizing, his central argument makes it particularly prominent. Since Breeze's dating of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* depends in part on his identification of its author, his first hypothetical claim must make his second doubly so. What, then, is the evidence for Breeze's first hypothesis: that the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was Sir John Stanley of Storeton in Cheshire?

Breeze offers us a convenient fourteen-point summary of his case (p. 62). Some of these points are evidently founded upon a rather naïve view of medieval society—'A chaplain would not know much about flirting or the chase' (p. 51); Stanley would not 'have been granted authority over forests if he had never felled a tree' (p. 58)—but far more serious are the logical flaws they display. Reduced to a syllogism, the main argument runs:

> The *Gawain*-poet was a Cheshireman/layman/courtier/conservative/ French-speaker.

> Sir John Stanley was a Cheshireman/layman /courtier /conservative/ French-speaker.

> Therefore, Sir John Stanley was the *Gawain*-poet. QED.

Even those prepared to admit the validity of some, or all, of Breeze's series of major premises must concede that there are several possible alternatives to Sir John Stanley

in the minor ones. This is, in other words, the fallacy of the undistributed middle. Other points employ the argument from ignorance: 'There is no evidence for the poems as the work of a professional clerk or scribe,' for instance. As an instance of a succession of self-reinforcing, but unprovable, hypotheses, Point Eleven stands out: '*Pearl* is *most simply* read as a father's elegy for a daughter who died before her second birthday. References therein to spots "rashes, blemishes" *may indicate* the cause as bubonic plague, of which there was an epidemic from 1390 to 1393. Marrying in 1385, the Stanleys *might be expected* to have had a daughter by them [*sic*]' (my italics). On the surface, two of Breeze's points appear somewhat more plausible, that *Sir Gawain* mentions the Wirral, Sir John Stanley's home territory, and that 'words characteristic of MS Cotton Nero poems,' appear in a letter of Stanley's from 1405. However, the poet's actual statement, that the Wirral was home to few 'that auther God other gome wyth goud hert lovied' (l.702), seems rather to count against Stanley's authorship than for it, and a quick check of the *MED* reveals that poet's supposedly distinctive vocabulary is really just a list of common Middle English words: it gives 271 examples of *joie*, 204 of *honor*, 130 of *comfort*, 99 of *gracious*, and so on.

With so problematic a first hypothesis, Bloomfield would no doubt have calculated the mathematical probability of Breeze's second, that *Sir Gawain* was written in 1387, at zero. His argument depends on the 'facts' that since Robert de Vere, Earl of Oxford is alluded to in line 866 ('The ver by his [Gawain's] uisage veraly hit semed'), and his 1386 creation as Duke of Ireland, in line 678 ('And have dight yonder dere [Gawain] a duk to have worthed'), the poem must belong to the year 1387, when de Vere spent the Summer at Chester Castle with Sir John Stanley (p. 77).

The three final chapters date *Pearl* later than *Sir Gawain*, attribute the authorship of *St Erkenwald* to Sir William Stanley (apparently on the grounds that poetry is often written by brothers), and discuss the date of *The Awntyrs off Arthure* and some of its place names.

The Historical Arthur and the Gawain Poet is repetitious—the line, 'And have dight yonder dere a duk to have worthed' is quoted five times in the space of fewer than forty pages (pp. 67, 72, 76, 91, and 105); it is prone to error—Dieulacres is given as 'Dielacres' (p. 45), for instance, John Bowers as 'John Bowyers' (p. 55), and 1386 as '1368' (p. 76); it is marred by remarks about earlier scholars that are 'disobliging,' to use Breeze's own term for Derek Pearsall (p. 60), and by unjustified hyperbole: 'Now a surprise' (p. 88), 'Then a bombshell' (p. 91), 'Now for some dynamite' (p. 103); finally, its index is frankly impressionistic.

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TARA HERNANDEZ AND DAMON LINDELOF, creators, *Mrs. Davis*, an eight-part Warner Brothers television mini-series, 20 April–18 May 2023, steaming on Peacock.

Tara Hernandez and Damon Lindelof's 2023 series *Mrs. Davis* reimagines the Grail, 'that most clichéd and overused McGuffin,' in an adventure as loony as anything the Pythons might have concocted. In this generic mashup, users worldwide have

become addicted to Mrs. Davis, an algorithm that promises them peace, prosperity, and purpose. But not all are convinced of the algorithm's benevolence; the series follows the exploits of Sister Simone (Betty Gilpin), an indomitable skort-wearing nun intent on destroying Mrs. Davis and all her works. Aided by a former boyfriend (Wiley, played by Jake McDorman) and his 'band of brothers,' a group of muscular Kens, Simone takes on the task of extirpating the sinister software, which has promised her that, if she finds and destroys the Holy Grail, the algorithm will self-destruct. The series updates the Holy Grail for the age of ChatGPT.

Sister Simone's quest, played out over eight episodes, delivers a zany mashup of film clichés, both generic and formulaic, wrapped in parodies of cinematic medievalism, westerns, horror films, sci-fi, and commercials, as well as heist, espionage, Nazi, and magician movies. Its many film references include *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, Star Wars, Fight Club, The DaVinci Code,* and *The Sound of Music.* The series offers up a dizzying and entertaining array of tropes and characters, including a failed stage magician, bronco busting, a Middle-Ages-themed endurance competition (think 'Hands on a Hardbody'), a fake Pope, British Knights sneakers, a Lady of the Lake, a hermit guide named Schrödinger (Ben Chaplin) and his cat, a high-tech heist, an exploding head, a Hercules laser, a Lazarus Shroud (the former a real device, the latter made up), a mysterious pyramid, and a belligerent whale of Biblical proportions. And it all works. It's funny, it's intriguing, and it arrives at a satisfying conclusion in which Sister Simone and Wiley ride off into the sunset on a white horse, with Simone clearly in charge, Wiley the sidekick, and no heteronormative ending in sight (she's a nun).

And it's particularly satisfying for a medievalist. Indeed, what holds this absurd cinematic romp together is its surprisingly complex medievalism and the suggestion that, in the end, medieval romance provides its own narrative algorithm, a formula for generating the series' multiple generic twists. *Mrs. Davis* opens with a piece of medievalism dramatizing the 1307 massacre of the Knights Templar and Grail Maidens, whose last survivor is charged with taking the Grail to 'our sisters across the sea.' The lighting, *mise-en-scène,* and choreography are all consistent with recent medieval action films: dark shots obscured by fog, sepia tones, and extreme violence and bloodshed. This sequence sets up the series' first medievalism, the Grail Quest. At the end of the episode, the algorithm passes the Quest on to Sister Simone, setting in motion a standard set of Grail clichés—interlaced adventures, a Chosen One, mystical visions, tests, promises of plentitude, hermit guides, and a final apotheosis.

In this version of the Grail narrative, Mrs. Davis replaces the Divine as the initiator of the quest; in fact, Mrs. Davis functions primarily in this world as a provider of quests, setting tasks to provide her users with purpose. Simone, however, will have no truck with the algorithm, which stifles creativity, making impossible careers that require lying, such as magic (represented by Simone's father, played by David Arquette) and gambling (represented by JQR, hilariously played by Chris Diamantopoules). There is a reason Simone's home is Reno. Since Mrs. Davis cannot directly communicate a quest to her, she speaks to the recalcitrant nun through individuals who are jacked into the algorithm, which is accessed through an earpiece. They 'proxy' her. The series' second medievalism further explains Simone's resistance to the algorithm. While most users find meaning and purpose in Mrs. Davis, Simone has found both in her marriage to Jay (Andy McQueen). She rendezvouses with her husband in visions that

literalize the Bride of Christ metaphor contained in the erotic visions described by medieval women mystics such as Julian of Norwich, who refers to Christ as 'Father, Brother, and Spouse.' Closing her eyes, Simone is translated to an abandoned diner where Jay feeds her falafel, beds her, and provides her with quests.

Because a Grail romance requires movements back and forth between the fellowship of the Round Table and lonely quests, the series' third medievalism gives us two takes on the Arthurian Round Table in two competing secret organizations: the hi-tech hypermasculine 'BroHive' led by ex-boyfriend Wiley, and an occult society of women, the 'Sisters of the Coin,' tasked with guarding and preserving the Grail (which they call 'The Asset'). The one indulges in mindless repetitions of pointless male contests; the other in a mindless repetition of empty quasi-religious rituals. In fact, Round Tables abound. Mrs. Davis' logo, which appears before each episode, is a visual quotation of the Winchester Round Table. Wiley's resistance fellowship is frequently shown arranged in a kind of circle, suggestive of a Round Table, while the Sisters of the Coin meet in a conference room with a round table at the center and concentric circles of seating all around.

A question we had is why would Mrs. Davis need the Grail destroyed? What is the connection between Mrs. Davis, Jay, and the Grail? (If, at this point, you haven't figured out that Jay is Jesus, it's the one spoiler which we'll give you.) All three promise to make the world a better place by inspiring their followers to perform altruistic tasks. In exchange they offer plentitude and satisfaction, achieved by giving people what they want (feeding them, nurturing them, and providing them with direction). Mrs. Davis promises both 'complete customer satisfaction,' and 'wings' users can earn by completing assigned tasks—though, in episode three, we learn that individuals can also get automatic wings, something akin to Catholic indulgences, without completing tasks, but with 'a hell of a balloon payment.' Those who stumble into Jay's diner both get a delicious meal and can become brides of Christ. And what else is the Grail, but a set of wings? All three are functions of a maternal dream of resorption. *Mrs. Davis* offers a veritable cornucopia of mothers—good mothers, bad mothers, smothering mothers, withholding mothers, digital mothers, mother gods, and even a mother whale—testifying to the uncanny maternal, which expresses the desire for plentitude and apotheosis. There is, however, neither—only destruction. In the end, Sister Simone may be the Chosen One destined to achieve the one and only Holy Grail and, by destroying it, eradicate the algorithm, or her quest may simply be one more task imposed by Mrs. Davis in the race to achieve wings, and her Grail just one of many Grails, each tailored to its recipient's needs and desires.

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CAROLYNE LARRINGTON, *The Norse Myths That Shape the Way We Think*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2023. Pp. 304. ISBN: 978–0500252345. $34.95.

Near the beginning of this well-written, expansive, and inviting book, Carolyne Larrington observes, 'It might seem that, as journalists like to say, Old Norse myths are currently "having a moment"' (p. 8). But as the book shows, this moment has been happening almost since the Viking age itself, informing multiple media across the centuries with myths that assume context specific shapes and always suggest an intensity of response shared by no other mythic tradition. It may be, Larrington notes, that 'Old Norse myths and legends . . . offer ways of thinking about the world, about time, history and fate, that we do not find in the more culturally central Greek and Roman myths' (p. 8). And their continued moment also may be rooted in, as she stresses throughout the book, the intensity and familiarity of the human qualities they display: folly, wisdom, hatred, love, envy, vengeance, fallibility. Reasonably enough, Larrington focuses on the Anglophone tradition, but, perhaps because of these familiar qualities, the Norse moment has spanned continents, peoples, and language traditions, making the recent film *Thor: Love and Thunder* a worldwide box office hit.

Two qualities distinguish *The Norse Myths That Shape the Way We Think* and will make the book of interest to a wide audience, particularly one of non-specialists. The first is the clarity of its organization, which is no small accomplishment given the scope and discordant nature of primary Norse documents like poems, sagas, and rune stones. Put another way, there is not (and almost certainly never was) a coherent, synoptic mythos but rather scattered riffs on recurrent themes, stories, and characters. Accordingly, the book is arranged around what might be called umbrella topics that will be familiar to (say) viewers of recent medieval Norse film: *Valhöll*, *Óðinn*, *Þórr*, *Loki*, *Vikings and Bererkers*, *Sigurðr the Dragon-Slayer*, *Ragnarr Shaggy-Breeches*, *Vinland*, and the *Ragna rök*. Particular novels, poems, or films might appear in each chapter, but in this arrangement, they are treated not as free-standing works but as participants in larger traditions. The reader thus gets a sense of how Þórr and the rest have been reimagined across time—of the continuities as well as inconsistencies.

The book's second distinguishing quality is its breadth. Focusing on the past two centuries, *The Norse Myths* explores a range of poems, musical adaptations, novels, and (of late) films that take their inspiration from Viking-age stories. Some of these adaptations, such as Longfellow's 'The Skeleton in Armor' or the novels of George Martin, are familiar but many are not; I at least did not know of the seventeenth-century Dane Thomas Barthol, who wrote three books in Latin about the character of his historical forebearers. Some titles and individuals figure prominently throughout: Richard Wagner, Neil Gaiman, and *Game of Thrones*, for example. Other modern scholars and popularizers have written about the transformation of Norse materials into contemporary stories, but I know of no other book that has the range this one does. Larrington thus provides a kind of compendium of Norse riffs and thereby a shortcut into primary materials for anyone interested in pursuing the topics further.

Perhaps for a general book directed at a general audience, it would be inappropriate for *The Norse Myths* to engage fully with the continued political and social ramifications of the appropriation of the Norse material. Not only in the past two centuries but since the early modern period, when English historiographers in a sense discovered

the Norse past, Óðinn and the Viking temperament have played crucial roles in the formation of ethnicity and cultural identity. Someone like William Morris might seem a long way from Richard Wagner, but they shared the notion that the Viking past could be remade in ways to justify an often exclusionary present. These are the same approaches that lead to thinking that is implicitly white supremacist already in the nineteenth century andf explicitly so in the past few decades. The book nods in this direction throughout, and at the end observes of such thinking: 'Those of us who love and study the myths must counter this by reminding those coming to them afresh that the myths are historically contingent. They mean largely what they are made to mean at different times, and we can never know how they signified in the distant era when they took shape' (p. 288). But for this very reason, for some readers today as well as in the past hundred years, the Norse myths do carry with them indelible cultural markers. The myths are grand, but it is perhaps not just inevitable but necessary that they be read in light of what has been done with them.

Lots of guides to Norse mythology have appeared in the past decade or so, but *The Norse Myths* strikes me as by far the best of the group. Its copious illustrations, elegant retellings, and panoptic approach will make it a resource for many readers new to the myths and a reminder for those more familiar. The book stands as a testament to the remarkable popularity Norse myths continue to have.

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TIM WILLIAM MACHAN, *English Begins at Jamestown*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. xi, 259. ISBN: 978–0–19–884636–9. $35.

The course in the History of the English Language—often assigned to medievalists like myself to teach—has long been a requirement for majors in English and English Education, and one of the foundational textbooks for the course, Albert C. Baugh's 1935 *A History of the English Language*, is still in print in a sixth edition, revised by Thomas Cable in 2012. Baugh and other standard textbooks seek to answer a basic question: what is English? Tim Machan thinks that this question is indeed an important question, but that it needs to be linked to a second equally important question: who speaks English?

English Begins at Jamestown is a fascinating, but challenging, reflection on the various ways that we have traditionally thought about and taught the history of the English Language. Machan acknowledges that there is no one way to teach the course, and that saying that one approach is wrong and that another is right leads us nowhere. As he notes, the standard pedagogical approach to the course, regardless of textbook used, invariably follows a common chronology of cause and effect—external history influences the internal history of English. Thus, the Saxons conquer the Celtic peoples of England, and Celtic languages are suppressed in favor of what we call Old English. Invading Vikings have an impact on Old English, which eventually loses pride of place in 1066. By Chaucer's time, what we call Middle English is more or less firmly in place, though language as always changes. So, there is the Great Vowel Shift, and

the development of early Modern English, coincidental with the introduction of the printing press, and so on.

Instead of this multi-stage generative approach to the history of the English language, Machan offers a user-based narrative, the key event in which occurs in May of 1607 when 104 boys and men in three ships arrived in what is now Virginia and established a settlement called Jamestown on what they would name the James River. Prior to 1607, no permanent settlement of Anglophone speakers existed outside of the British Isles. Significantly for the subsequent development of English, the Jamestown speech community was regionally and socially diverse. The community also had linguistic contact with speakers of European, African, and Indigenous languages, all of whom in turn had contact with both L1 and L2 English speakers. The descendants of these speakers of contact languages would over time themselves switch to using English. 'In the process, these L2 speakers inevitably impacted the grammatical structure of the English then used in Virginia, which would become a regional variety of American English, itself a regional variety of English in general' (p. 205). More importantly, what went on linguistically in Jamestown in terms of 'speakers, domains, and usages, as well as grammatical structure' (p. 206) established the blueprint for the way that English functions and changes in the world today.

One of the effects of what happened to English after Jamestown has been heated and repeated discussion of who has proprietary rights to claim English as their language. Nationality, ethnicity, race, and class all factor in here. English may remain the L1 language of speakers in Britain and America, but it has also, since the mid-nineteenth century, been the L2 language of people across the globe who at times passed only English on to their children, leaving multiple heritage languages on the verge of extinction. And in America, as settlers moved west and as waves of immigrants arrived from different parts of the world, suspicion and exclusion became a reality faced by even larger groups of L2 speakers. 'The differences between pre- and post-Jamestown English certainly are structural, then, but even more so they are pragmatic: who uses which forms of the language under what circumstances for what purpose' (p. 221). If we are used to a generative narrative of English's history starting with the arrival of the Saxons and their fellow invaders, then a pragmatic narrative would begin with Jamestown.

Machan has already written extensively about how we approach the history of English. His *Language Anxiety, Conflict and Change in the History of English* (2009) argued that historically, among speakers of different forms of English, anxiety over language masked anxiety over greater social, historical, and cultural issues. In *What Is English? And Why Should We Care?* (2016), Machan focused on the power English now exerts as a linguistic gatekeeper denying and allowing access to powerful institutions and important aspects of everyday life. How English achieved such a position and what will happen to English in the future bookended Machan's central discussion of English's unrivaled modern linguistic importance. *English Begins at Jamestown* continues the discussion found in both earlier studies. Machan concludes that there is no one correct way to tell the story of English, but that there are ways which lead to decidedly different linguistic narratives, because of the choices that individual narrators of English's history make. Machan is interested in uncovering the choices that English's previous historians have made and teasing out the consequences of those

choices in how a history of English is constructed to include or to exclude dynamic interactions among its multiple speakers. Machan's approach is to focus on the roles speakers of English themselves have played in transforming their language, and he looks to Jamestown as the first chapter in establishing a user-based history for the English that is spoken in all its wonderfully infinite varieties around the world today.

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JOHN MATTHEWS, *The Great Book of King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table: A New Morte D'Arthur*. Foreword by Neil Gaiman. Illustrated by John Howe. New York: Harper Design, 2022. Pp. xxi, 406. ISBN: 978–0–06–324312–5. $32.50.

The tales in John Matthews' *The Great Book of King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table* are retellings (based on pre-existing translations) of thirty-two Arthurian tales not found in Malory's *Morte*. The collection, which Matthews calls 'A New *Morte D'Arthur*,' tells the story of Camelot from a perspective different from Malory's. Some of these tales Matthews has made available before, several of them more than once, in his earlier collections of Arthurian stories. It is helpful that he offers a section of 'Notes and Sources' that indicates what translations and editions he has consulted in preparing his retellings (though, it should be noted, this section does not always include all the translations and editions, and sometimes not the most recent ones).

In his comments on 'The Adventures of Eagle-Boy,' Matthews writes that this is the first time the story has been 'retold for a popular audience.' This statement is the key to his intentions: he is retelling tales for general readers, not a scholarly audience, much as the numerous retellings of Malory's *Morte* do. As a result, he changes his source texts to make his material more readable. Sometimes he merges two or more narratives into one. He tells us, for example, that 'The Tale of Palomides and the Questing Beast' combines elements from five different sources. He tells some tales in full; others he abbreviates, as when he retells only the first half of Ulrich von Zatzikhoven's *Lanzelet*. He 'slightly' amends (p. 377) the ending of 'The Adventure of Meriadoc' and adds a coda to 'The Adventures of Melora and Orlando,' a story about Arthur's daughter Melora, to suggest that 'Merlin's part in the story was less negative than it appeared' (p. 382). He also occasionally assigns names to characters unnamed in his sources and adds authorial comments to his texts. All of this is fair game and often makes the stories even more appealing to his audience. The striking images by John Howe enhance the volume and the reader's experience.

Matthews tells the tales well, and the tales he has altered most can be the most enjoyable or interesting, as, for example, when he achieves the difficult task of blending the *Elucidation* with the better known story of Perceval and the Grail. And readers will find stories that are not easily accessed elsewhere, including several Irish Arthurian tales (Matthews is partial to Celtic material and motifs, especially fairy figures); a rendition of *The Knight of the Parrot*, a rare romance that depicts Arthur as a knight errant on a quest; and retellings of the Dutch romance *Morien*, the Occitan romance *Jaufre*, and others.

Matthews claims to have woven the diverse material he presents into an 'epic' and a 'coherent narrative' which forms a new *Morte D'Arthur* 'not too far off the quality' of Malory's (pp. xx, 404). Here he overreaches. There is neither an overall unity nor a coherence to the book. The stories do not always fit together smoothly. Nor do they gain in resonance as we read through the book, as the parts of the *Morte* do. In the first 'Book,' for example, there are three stories about Merlin. Though each involves his prophetic ability and each is interesting and well told, his use of the Merlin figures of Celtic lore, of chronicle, and of romance does not suggest an attempt to develop a consistent character. And occasional references to Merlin in later stories have no connection to these earlier ones. The tales of the various knights do not echo and enhance the depiction of Gawain, the chief knight of the book, or of each other; nor do they explore the meaning of chivalry or put it into conflict with other codes, as Malory does with his tales of Lancelot and his fellow knights. Similarly, the three very different Grail tales do not form a coherent narrative; nor do they grow out of the ways characters have been presented earlier. Even details can work against the coherence of the volume. For example, Guinglain is said to be Gawain's son by the daughter of the Carl of Carlisle (p. 382) and also to be his son by Ragnall (p. 304).

This volume is far from a 'new *Morte D'Arthur*.' And yet it should be welcomed by Arthurian enthusiasts, to whom I would recommend it as an anthology that retells thirty-two diverse tales, many of which most readers are not likely to encounter elsewhere. And it tells them in a style that modern readers will find accessible and engaging.

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CHARLIE SAMUELSON, *Courtly and Queer: Deconstruction, Desire, and Medieval French Literature*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2022. Pp. 240. ISBN: 978–0–8142–1498–5. $99.95.

Charlie Samuelson's monograph *Courtly and Queer* is a tremendous contribution to medieval French studies, to queer studies, and to narratological theory. In just over 200 pages, Samuelson challenges, productively collapses, and reanimates the spaces between courtly romance and the *dits*, queering assumptions about generic separateness by penetrating interstitial spaces. The explicit project of the book is 1) to 'explor[e] how returning to a particular emphasis on language and poetics can mark not a turn away from careful analysis of medieval sexual politics but another radical way of engaging with—or returning to—them'; and 2) to 'emphasiz[e] an insufficiently articulated but unflagging queerness that is inseparable from poetic indeterminacy and inhabits—and infests—the core of a literary tradition that has generally . . . been understood as predominantly at the service of patriarchy' (p. 23). The implicit project of the book relates, I think, to Samuelson's initial observations about queerness, which he defines as 'all that resists the notion that courtly literature seeks to present gender and sexuality as coherent and/or normative' (p. 1).

Samuelson's work puts medieval texts in dialogue with modern theory, sometimes in explicit conversation and sometimes leaving them merely adjacent. Sustained engagement with Judith Butler, Paul de Man, and Lee Edelman not only broadens the ken of theories to which medieval texts can make productive contributions, but also serves as an important reminder that modern theory must reconsider its askew orientation to the premodern. Throughout his study, Samuelson weaves conversation with other medievalists and almost every page offers citations not only of other scholars, but of textual passages, a richness that sometimes becomes a distraction.

After an introduction, there are four chapters which focus sequentially on subjectivity (Chapter One), metalepsis (Chapter Two), insertion (Chapter Three), and irony (Chapter Four). In Chapter One, Samuelson argues that texts by Chrétien de Troyes, Machaut, and Christine de Pizan 'probe the indeterminacy of—and incoherencies in—the notion of the subject' (p. 29). With sophisticated readings and an engaging scholarly voice, Samuelson hits his stride as he pairs Alain de Libera's *Archéologie du sujet,* Judith Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power,* and medieval texts to explore how voice and subjectivity entwine in ways that bend generic assumptions and invite scholarly attention to 'what the distinction of first- to third-person pronouns portends' (p. 27). His choice to focus initially on Christine's complicated voice in *Le Duc des vrais amants* is a forceful introduction to the kinds of work he will do throughout the study. Here, he deploys close readings, critical reception and context, and theoretically innovative moves to render Christine more complex, a more nuanced and difficult narrator, poet, and subject of her own work through a '*je*' that is multifaceted, ambiguously gendered and emplaced. Samuelson reads Machaut's subjectivity as similarly multifaceted, rendering the subject as always in production, but always already reflexive (p. 48).

In Chapter Two, 'Medieval Metalepsis,' Samuelson focuses on another kind of intrusion—this time by metalepsis—which he argues invites deconstructive reading (p. 72). In texts as diverse as *Partenopeu de Blois*, *Silence*, and *La Prison amoureuse*, Samuelson returns to the unstable '*je*' from Chapter One to focus on how metalepsis upends the singularity of a narrator who constantly interrupts his own tale to bemoan his own unsuccessful love affair, resulting in a text that 'profoundly mobilizes narrative poetics to destabilize binaries fundamental to the workings of patriarchy' (p. 87), a move he sees repeated in the refusal to delineate interior and exterior in *Silence*. In the final section of the chapter, he turns to Jean Froissart's *dit*, the *Prison amoureuse*, and he concludes that 'almost paradoxically, narrative poetics in these verse romances and *dits* are effectively antinarrative' (p. 109).

Chapter Three, 'On Sameness, Difference, and Textualizing Desire,' engages substantially with the theoretical work of Lee Edelman's *Homographesis* to claim that 'the technique of lyric insertion . . . functions deconstructively,' (p. 113). For Samuelson, lyrics like those inserted into Renart's *Roman de la rose* function performatively, inaugurating a lyrical moment of deconstruction: 'the formal movement within the lyric seems . . . potentially correlated to the threat of the *lozengiers*; the song may even be producing the threat that it must combat' (p. 120). Here, Samuelson contends that the indeterminacy of literary language renders generic separation non-linear, and pointedly, not straight.

Chapter Four, 'Queer Irony in Chrétien de Troyes and Guillaume de Machaut' is Samuelson's most forceful. Here, his interest lies with exploring how 'deconstructive irony and the deviance of desire intersect' (p. 161), and he reads *Erec et Enide* as 'queer because it reflects the force of immoderate, antisocial desire' (p. 172). But does queer have to equate with immoderation, or antisocial *anything*? Samuelson sidesteps that question and launches into a compelling reading of Machaut, where he attends not to the author function, but rather to irony's relation to desire. In the coda to the book, 'Slashes,' Samuelson offers essential queries for those wishing to move forward—for example the provocative assertion that 'a queerness, which is inextricable from poetic indeterminacy, lurks at the (perverse) heart of—or drives—the tradition of courtly verse narrative from the High and Late Middle Ages' (p. 210).

Courtly and Queer is a must read for those working in queer studies and subjectivity, whether poetic, authorial, or even theoretical. Whose voices penetrate whose narratives? Whose theories make or bridge the medieval/modern divide? Whose insertions are literature, and whose are dismissed as a poetic interlude? *Courtly and Queer* raises so many wonderful, engaging questions about how we think storytelling comes together and whose identities can be produced and emerge from these rich, interpenetrative encounters.

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Lists embedded in ancient, medieval, or early modern narratives are often regarded as the fly-over bits, artless filler, or unwelcome interruptions of narrative sequence. In other contexts—like indices or standalone groupings of disparate items—lists may be perused more for their practical function than for the logic of their arrangement or their hermeneutic possibilities. *Enlistment* takes up the practice of listing to regard lists as 'form[s] or way[s] of thinking' (p. 8). Lists can include or exclude; they can give the sense that a knowledge set is complete and circumscribed, or (on the contrary) limitless and expansive; they may suggest dispassionate transparency while at the same time obscuring the politics of the compiler's project. As the chapters in this volume show, scrutiny of enumerative or sequential patterns (which is how the term 'list' is regarded in its broadest sense in this collection) reveals how lists *en*list readers in the process of making sense of them.

In the Introduction, the editors briefly survey prior scholarship on lists, with emphasis on medieval English literary contexts, and deploy theoretical models from other contexts to suggest how lists can be studied in terms of their 'affordances' and as *Denkformen* (forms or ways of thinking). The following chapters are then introduced according to how they participate in four conceptual (and not strictly binary) pairings: in/completeness, dis/ordering knowledge, un/familiarity, and boredom/play.

Alexis Kellner Becker studies the extensive list of things a reeve should know in the Old English *Gerefa*, a guide for a reeve of an estate. *Gerefa*, 'a pre-Conquest text, imagining and preserving a pre-feudal reeve, redacted into and preserved in a post-Conquest legal manuscript' (p. 17), is self-consciously framed by an author who admits ignorance of the reeve's body of knowledge but who nevertheless presents it to his post-Conquest reader. Andrew James Johnston (Chapter Two) then discusses the presentation of the Old English *Widsith* as three consecutive lists of rulers and peoples. Johnston finds the concept of 'global modernism' to be a fruitful way to understand how the poet-narrator brings disparate temporalities, cultures, and 'antiquities' into conversation or even competition.

In Chapter Three, Kathryn Mogk Wagner examines Christian lists of God's names as responses to the impossibility of naming the unnameable. Such lists could be rhythmic and incantatory, and the words themselves, coming from several languages and traditions, could be distorted beyond understanding. Their ancient and convoluted transmission also gave rise to variance and accretion, and the list form conveyed a fitting sense of inexhaustibility. Suzanne Conklin Akbari (Chapter Four) treats the Middle English *Benjamin Minor*, a contemplative text that uses a diagrammatic structure to allegorize the list of Jacob's children in Gen. 35:23-26. The result is an elaborate genealogical list as well as a contemplative treatise that 'organize[s] knowledge and [. . .] facilitate[s] the process of the reader's intellectual and spiritual growth' (p. 77).

Martha Rust turns to the history of listing the four rivers of Paradise (Chapter Five). In this highly associative study, the rivers may come to represent the virtues or serve as a heuristic for thinking about Christ's wounds. Epic catalogues in Middle English literature are next taken up by Eva von Contzen (Chapter Six). Her survey of lists of authorities on the Trojan War in Middle English poetry reveals a skepticism toward these authorities that appears to increase over time. In Chapter Seven, Wolfram R. Keller regards Gavin Douglas' *Palice of Honour* as a response to the disharmony of Chaucer's dream poetry, particularly in the *House of Fame*. Keller offers highly schematic readings of both *The House of Fame* and *Palice of Honour*, discussing both in terms of medieval cognitive theory and the management of courtly households. In constructing his *Palice*, Douglas enumerates a series of lists characterized by balance but ultimately questions the ability of faculty allegory to give rise to harmony.

Ingo Berensmeyer (Chapter Eight) studies the epic tree catalogue in Chaucer, Spenser, and Sidney. The comparative approach helpfully shows how poets, through their manipulations of the tree catalogue, refer to and comment on a wider poetic tradition in which they also position themselves. Alex Davis (Chapter Nine) explores how lists participate in processes of historical change in the sixteenth century. At a time of increasing regulation, Erasmus' *De Copia* reveals the possibility of creativity within a context of systematic instruction. Cromwell's lists of 'remembrances' record quite literally how Henry VIII's chief minister worked to shape a nation. And John Bale's *King Johan* presents litanies of religious orders or relics to convey a sense not of bureaucratic order, but of the chaos of the Catholic Church. James Simpson (Chapter Ten) examines the 'challenge of cultural road cleaning' that revolutionary moments face (p. 197). With particular attention to John Bale's *Image of Both Churches*, Simpson shows how lengthy lists of items placed in apposition produce piles of refuse from

the *ancien régime* that are fit for disposal. Lumped together, items that once had numinous significance are degraded through itemization, along with the order of which they formed a part.

This fascinating volume rightly pauses over the important literary and broadly cultural work of listing. Its focus is on literary and formal considerations primarily, though clearly its approaches have application to compilatory practices more broadly, including cataloguing, collecting, and the secondary uses to which lists are put. There is only so much that a volume on an already vast subject can take on, but one might desire some additional attention to lists designed for non-sequential use. Sets of distinctions are mentioned, and yet these and other lists—like indices and alphabetized finding-aids—are not usually designed for sequential reading; their 'affordances' are different than those that appear in most of the literary contexts studied here. The editors' broad association of lists with sequence and enumeration certainly accounts for a substantial subset of the practice of enlistment, but some justification for the restrictive definition might be in order. This comment really points to where else the conversation might go. This rich and engaging volume has more than started that discussion.

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