
The book opens with an apt quotation from Berners’s treatise on hawking, illustrating the keenly felt gradations of late medieval society. Michael Johnston offers a new focus on the gentry: the newly emergent middle classes of country-dwelling landowners, whose concerns are discerned in a group of nine romances, dated 1350–1450. (The preface on terminology adopts Susan M. Wright’s classic definition of ‘gentry’; the problematic term ‘aristocracy’ is superfluous.) The twin contentions of the book are that romance gave the gentry a vehicle to explore their own socio-economic identity, and that the manuscript compilations in which the ‘gentry romances’ are found are distinctively local productions, rooted in and expressing the cultural practices of their owners and readers.

The corpus of ‘gentry romances’ – *Amadace, Cleges, Degrevant, Eglamour, Isumbras, Lawulf, Octavian, Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle, The Avoewing of Arthur* – is marked by five ‘primary motifs’. Johnston points to the provincial manorial setting identifying Amadace, Degrevant, and Isumbras as ‘independent gentry heroes’; reinterprets the well-known romance themes of spendthrift knights and separated families to focus on anxieties about loss of gentry status and providing for younger sons; and extends D. Vance Smith’s insight on the £40 distraint-for-knighthood threshold in *Octavian* and *Amadace*. The fifth motif, about gentry challenges to courtly aristocratic exclusivity, is deduced from the two Arthurian texts, and here the arguments are less convincing: the nine-yard-tall Carl with his nine-gallon cup hardly resembles a ‘landowning knight such as Degrevant’; while ‘Baldwin of Bretan’ is nowhere identified in the text as non-noble: his difference from the rest of the court is philosophical, not social.

Johnston expertly marshals much recent work on gentry identity and culture and on the codicology of fifteenth-century miscellany manuscripts to identify nine locally produced elite household books containing gentry-centric romances (four others were excluded from the study: see p. 92 n. 7). The four which lack known provenance are briefly analysed (MS Ashmole 61 is a non-gentry exception), and investigation is focused on the Findern, Heege, Ireland, and Lincoln Thornton manuscripts. Johnston’s extensive archival research provides detailed accounts of land transactions and other records of the families associated with these four manuscripts, building credible pictures of the precise social position within or on the verge of the gentry that he finds in each case and sees reflected in their choice of ‘gentry romances’. This is particularly successful for the Thornton and Findern manuscripts: both contain a copy of *Degrevant*, with its ‘most complete synthesis of gentry motifs’, and the histories of both families include evidence of land disputes for which the romance would offer a ‘fantastic solution’. Johnston sheds light on local court records in the Ireland manuscript which document
the ‘material realities of gentry economic existence’ and pointedly juxtapose the ideal performance of largesse in *Amadace*. In the Heege manuscript, which belonged from the sixteenth century to a sub-gentry family, *Amadace* is differently interpreted as ‘a fantasy of social advancement’; but what if the family had acquired the manuscript along with ‘property’, as Johnston hypothesizes, ‘through an advantageous marriage’? That would be another story.

The book’s repetition of its material, sometimes verbatim, is occasionally obtrusive, and Johnston’s interpretations of the ‘gentry romances’ can seem somewhat forced (as in the insistence that gentry heroes achieve economic independence by exertion of will), but the focus on gentry ownership is a welcome contribution to discussion of the production and reception of this important genre.

Oxford

PHILLIPA HARDMAN


Megan Leitch’s study of mid- to late fifteenth-century romances in *Romancing Treason* looks at a wide range of texts influenced by the political landscape of the Wars of the Roses, arguing for the existence of a literary culture preoccupied with anxieties over treason. Leitch’s ambitious work seeks to address the importance of understudied prose romances of the period, as well as illuminate the way Malory’s *Morte Darthur* engages with treason and resonates with contemporary secular literature. The book’s re-examination of this undervalued literary period contributes to late medieval scholarly research by establishing the characteristics of a late fifteenth-century literary culture beyond Malory.

Following an introductory chapter which situates the book’s argument within current scholarship, the second chapter helpfully lays a basis for Leitch’s analysis of treason in Wars of the Roses romances by considering contemporary correspondence, chronicles, and political verses, revealing the ever-present fear of social instability and treason in the discourse of late fifteenth-century English society. She begins by displaying the importance of horizontal treason in these non-literary texts and finishes the chapter by convincingly showing how the texts were used to control how accusations of treason were issued and enforced. The subsequent chapters look at representations of treason in late fifteenth-century romances. Chapter 3 establishes the ways in which overlooked romances of the period – *Siege of Thebes*, *Siege of Troy*, and the prose *Melusine* romances – concentrate on treason more didactically than their fourteenth-century forebears. The chapter skilfully shows how these prose romances focus more on treachery