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Neidorf, Leonard, ed. 2021. *Epic and Romance: A Guide to Medieval European Literature*. Nanjing: Nanjing University Press. Pp. 444. ISBN 9787305251276.

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Epic and Romance: A Guide to Medieval European Literature, edited by Leonard Neidorf is a substantial volume, which "originated in part in a conference held at Nanjing University on June 16 to 18, 2017" (2). As the introduction by Neidorf and Yang Liu explains, this volume is a reconsideration of the topics and questions raised by W. P. Ker in his seminal volume *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature*, first published in 1897 and again in a revised edition in 1908. At the heart of the volume is the consideration that the broad themes, topics and texts discussed by Ker from a philological and comparative basis still hold relevance today and indeed should be studied more carefully to supplement the highly specialised research currently widespread in medieval studies.

The twenty-two contributions cover a wide range of works from across medieval Europe, although as in Ker's original volume, there is a strong focus on the literatures of Britain, Iceland, and France. But there are also considerations of what it means to apply Ker's foci and theories on Celtic and less studied texts from the Germanic and Romance-language areas.

Opening the volume is a broad survey of the history of scholarship on the genres closest to Ker's heart. In "Epic, Romance, Lay and Ballad", Tom Shippey considers the role Ker played in the development the study of these genres experienced throughout the late nineteenth and the twentieth century. He points to the nationalistic tendencies emerging with Romantic Nationalism and later hardened by the wars of the twentieth century, which underpin the change towards narrower focus. The philological and comparative approach championed by Ker and others at the turn of the century loses ground as a consequence, though it never quite disappeared, as Shippey concludes. And there is hope, he says, for a renewed interest in these broader areas of medieval studies, in the new "open frontiers" such as metrics and archaeology, as well as in comparative studies, which never quite disappeared but are now experiencing new interest.

The second essay by Geoffrey Russom also takes a more general approach to the topic, asking "What Can We Learn from Epics and Romances?" He begins by highlighting the gender- (and, to a degree, class-) based opposition of the genres of epic and romance so prominently promoted by Ker and then discusses how Ker's biases can obscure his still valuable insights. In particular, Russom focuses on how the supposed feminine "turn" of the romances was in fact due to an influx of patriarchal ideas while the mythical and "romantic" plots owe more to Celtic tradition.

In "Epic and Romance in Welsh and Irish", Andrew Breeze considers what Ker's thoughts might have been on the Irish and Welsh tradition, and what effect this can have

on scholarly analysis of these texts, in particularly concerning dating works such as the *Mabinogion*. In fact, dating (and misdating) of texts is the main focus of Breeze's essay as he runs us through numerous editors and editions of the main texts extant, and it becomes somewhat tedious as he repeatedly dismisses or lauds editors for their respective opinions regarding the dating of the texts under discussion, depending on whether they agree or disagree with his own deductions. In conclusion, he suggests that analysis of material culture and historical place names will prove Ker's judgements on epic and romance correct.

Catherine M. Jones asks whether the distinction between the genres as stipulated by Ker needs to be absolute in her essay "The Hybrid *Chansons de geste*: An Epic-Romance Compromise?" She suggests that, in fact, far from the "simplicity" of the epic being replaced by the "degenerate" and "decadent" romance, these "two text-types coexisted and competed throughout the Middle Ages" (68). She observes and shows at length that the two traditions interacted and that influences of the romance tradition in particular can be shown to have affected and been integrated into *chansons de geste* throughout the supposed heyday of the romance.

In his essay "Beginnings and Endings in the Elegiac Poetry of the Early Medieval North", Joseph Harris goes beyond generic boundaries to consider the underlying "literary unity" of elegiac expression in Germanic poetry, and Old Norse in particular. Focusing on both verbal and thematic links, he shows that there are clear connections between texts belonging to the same elegiac group, with elements of "pastness" and the "common End" (be it "Ragnarök or Christian eschatology", 104) emerging as defining features.

In "The Icelandic Family Sagas: W. P. Ker and Interpreting the Historical Elements, a Post-Colonial Struggle", Jesse L. Byock makes the argument that it is worth reviving Ker's view of the family sagas as important sources with their "historical elements", which have been all but ignored due to the specific circumstances of postcolonial Iceland in the twentieth century. Looking at the sagas with fresh eyes, Byock finds them to be "a social ethnography" worth studying and makes the plea to study them again with Ker's insights about the genre in mind.

Helen Fulton investigates concepts of geography and the concepts of town and town walls and their meanings for epic and romance in "The Dialogic Town in the Arthurian Romances of Chrétien de Troyes". She points out the social systems that are specific to towns within medieval society and discusses how the "feminine" sphere of the town is used effectively in chivalric literature and deployed as a "strategy in [the feudal nobility's] power struggle with the monarchy" (154).

"Middle English Romance: The Strange Tale of the English Axemen and the Norman Knights" by Yin Liu takes issue with the rather curious fact that Ker, in his discussion of epic and romance, used English literature for the former but then, while disparaging the detrimental effect of "the Norman knights" (158), continues his discussion of the latter with focus on French romances while largely ignoring the substantial corpus of Middle English romances. Liu's essay attempts to amend this oversight by making a very good case for a less clear opposition within English literary history than posited by Ker, concluding "I suspect that what really concerned the makers and readers of Middle English romance was [...] simply the desire for a rattling good story" (170).

Jonathan B. Himes also discusses geographical issues in "The Epic Scale of Heroic Geographies: *Beowulf*, *Waldere*, and *Waltharius*", but in epic poetry predominantly, particularly the Old English texts of *Beowulf* and *Waldere*. Himes's focus is on the landscape in the three epic poems he discusses, and how the descriptions of the surroundings affect both their moods and their "affinities as epic poems" (175). While he notes differences in the overall trajectory of the two main texts, he concludes that "Romantic landscapes, scenery, and mood can be legitimate [...] elements of Epic literature" (189).

In "The Queens of *Beowulf*: Gender, Violence and Community," Andrea Nagy looks at the question of whether Ker's perceived "lack of unity" in *Beowulf* is justified criticism and suggests that in fact there is a through line of questions of "community" and their fragility throughout the epic that belies Ker's judgement (190).

The question of whether Eddic poetry ever achieved the fullest expression of the epic form is at the heart of Brittany Schorn's essay "'Mythology Within Bounds': Heroic Narrative in Eddic Poetry." She suggests that it is time to "reconsider the cultural terms in which [Old Norse poetry] is framed" (202) and proposes that while Ker's account is "ambitious [...] in scope", it is primarily a "reminder [...] of what eddic poetry is not" (215). The challenge then is, Schorn suggests, to "explain what it is, and why" (215).

"The Narrative Plan of *Njál's Saga*" by George Clark is a detailed overview and play by play summary of this saga which Ker judged to be "the greatest of all sagas" (quoted by Clark 2021, 220). The focus lies in recounting the order of events as presented in the saga and pointing out how the narrative mode changes throughout the text.

In "The *Nibelungenlied*, *Kudrun*, *Biterolf und Dietleib*: Some Observations on the Concept of the Heroic and the 'Genre' of Medieval German Heroic Epic," Winder McConnell discusses generic terminology and whether it makes sense to "lump together" the works mentioned in the title. In particular, McConnell focuses on the "Held", the hero of these epics, and discusses at length the similarities and differences between their manifestations in the texts. He concludes that the *Nibelungenlied* is indeed a class apart and suggests filing it as "the sole medieval German 'tragic heroic epic' or 'heroic epic tragedy'" (259).

Looking at the future of German medieval studies, Albrecht Classen suggests in "The *Nibelungenlied* and W. P. Ker: Older Philology and the Future of Medieval Studies" that the time has come to return to "Ker's insights and to consider them within the broader context of the Nibelungenlied" as the field has turned towards "more global perspectives, emphasizing strongly comparative approaches" (267) much like those pursued by Ker and his contemporaries.

The question of what effect "[t]he arrival of medieval romance literature in the North" (270) had is pursued by Claudia Bornholdt in "The Persistence of the Heroic Ideal in Post-Heroic Age Scandinavian Romance Literature". Looking at chivalric texts produced in Iceland and Norway at the start of the thirteenth century, Bornholdt comes to the conclusion that, far from being mere translations which completely replace "the indigenous Germanic epic tradition," romances in Scandinavia are unique in their "genre fluidity and boundary crossing and [their] cultural adaptation" (285), so that they prove to be a link between the old and the new for the entertainment of their audiences.

The lone contribution to the volume dealing with explicitly Mediterranean texts of the non-French tradition, "Mediterranean Border Epics: Frontier Ethos in *Cantar de*

Mio Cid and *Digenes Akrites*" by Alberto Montaner & Ganna Goncharova focuses on the topic of liminal spaces and the particular subgenre of the border or frontier epic. The emphasis is on the conception of the border not as a delimiting space but as an area of contact and freedom, something the authors call "frontier ethos" and which is particularly common in Eastern Mediterranean epics.

Huiyi Bao takes a closer look at "Representing the Sensorium in Medieval Romance: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Other Texts". While the human senses have long had a negative reputation in Christian doctrine, they also represent one of outstanding "features or advantages of medieval romance" (314). The essay by Bao shows that in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the sensorium is "constantly engaging with the ideology of Christian chivalry" (314) and that touch, widely regarded as the lowest in the hierarchy of the senses, "can be the pathway leading to and deviating from faith" in equal measure (330).

In "Mixture and Mischief in a Medieval Irish Heroic Tale", Joseph Falaky Nagy picks out an example from Irish medieval literature to examine whether there might be something in it to redeem it from Ker's judgement as "chronically addicted to 'romance and fantasy'" (334). The chosen text, *Mesca Ulad*, is discussed in detail with focus on elements of realism and "the pragmatic world-view, ethos and aesthetics that Ker considered necessary" (334) and in discussing the texts and the historical reality it is based on, the author provides a cohesive argument for a reconsideration of these works from a Kersian perspective.

The following essay by Matthieu Boyd looks at the "Celtic Influence on French Romance." Starting from Bodel's famous quote about the "three subjects that matter: Britain, Rome, and France" (346), Boyd suggests that Britain, that is, Celtic matter, had far more influence on French romance than has been given credit. This is tied to the interconnections between Norman and British territories alongside the diverging trajectories of Anglo-Norman and continental French traditions. The turning point is clearly Chrétien de Troyes, but there are traces before and after, which the author suggests may be worthy of closer attention beyond the scope of this essay.

Turning towards a detailed study of a specific motif across the dominant genres, Mario Martín Botero García pays close attention to heroes "Fighting the Giant in French Epic and Romance." Ranging from the middle of the twelfth to the first half of the thirteenth century, the giants under discussion show a wide variety of traits and behaviours, which contribute to establishing this motif as "one of the knight's most important achievements", which confirms his status as "civilizing hero" (374). As the analysis shows, "[f]rom epic to romance [...] there is little change in the hero's treatment [...] as a giant killer" (395).

An interesting look at two of the major protagonists from epic and romance in French literature is "Arthur Meets Charlemagne: Echoes of *chansons de geste* in French verse romances from *Chrétien de Troyes* to *Escanor*" by Michelle Szkilnik. While each of these heroes is considered as the outstanding hero of the respective genres, Szkilnik shows that interestingly, whereas Arthur does occasionally warrant mention in the epic *chansons de geste*, the reverse cannot be shown. This suggests that while Arthur may have had some cachet within historical genres, epic characters had no place in the company of Arthurian ones.

In the final essay, Jennifer Goodman Wollock gives us "A View from the Printshop: Malory, Caxton, and Medieval Narrative Form". Looking at the medieval texts printed by Caxton during the early days of printing in England, she shows the "hybridization" at work "within and between the works on Caxton's list" (433). At the same time, the major English authors of the medieval period retain their clear distinction from the later works and translations charting the future of literature with their hybrid character. In Caxton's printshop, they coexist and intermingle to "capture the flavor of Caxton's moment, the fluidity of medieval narrative form on the move" (434).

Overall, the collection gathers together a broad variety of pieces on the topics of epic and romance, which show the breadth and depth of medieval studies on these genres while inviting for more research to be done in the spirit of Ker.

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