

UCLA

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies

Title

Arthurian Narrative in the Latin Tradition (review)

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/96m6r91g>

Journal

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 31(1)

ISSN

0069-6412

Author

Over, Kristen Lee

Publication Date

2000-10-01

Peer reviewed

REVIEWS

Siân Echard, *Arthurian Narrative in the Latin Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998) 256 pp.

Identifying a trend of “new Latin” court literature innovated by university-trained *magisters* of Henry II’s twelfth-century Angevin court, Siân Echard brings to light several little-known Latin Arthurian texts. The texts examined in *Arthurian Narrative in the Latin Tradition* share a political concern for just kingship and a playful taste for wit and cleverness, and as such they have all of the innovative and potentially subversive traits of the later vernacular texts studied by Susan Crane and Gabrielle Spiegel.²⁴ But whereas Crane and Spiegel linked literary innovation and pointed political commentary to the rise of the vernacular, Echard insists that Latin Arthurian tales of the Angevin period similarly subvert the norm of Latin narrative tradition (25). According to Echard, the inventiveness of the vernacular is in fact borrowed from Latin Arthurian narrative and its blending of “serious themes” with “narrative experimentation” (38).²⁵

Echard explores ten texts and offers brief commentary on several others, introducing her analyses with a synopsis of the text or episode in question. Far from the distant “figurehead” of vernacular romance, Arthur often plays an active role here, as tyrant more often than as hero. Latin and an Arthurian theme provide the only coherence to her disparate selection of historiography, chronicle, hagiography, and romance. Yet she describes the collection as part of a “new genre” and as a “strain of Latin writing” that weds commentary and a concern for actuality with the marvelous and the fantastic (26)—a formula that she links to the tastes of the Angevin court (Introduction, 1–30; Conclusion, 232–239).²⁶ In this Echard does much to dispel the myth that Latin court literature, in marked contrast to vernacular court production, reproduced a static and homogenous ecclesiastic conservatism, and a strength of her study is its role in lessening the perceived ideological gap between Latin “history” and vernacular “fiction.”

Opening with a “best-seller” and concluding with the little-circulated *Vita Merlini*, Echard frames her study with chapters on Geoffrey of Monmouth.²⁷ There may seem to be little new analysis in her discussion of the *Historia*, but it provides a familiar starting-off point for chapters on lesser known material.

²⁴Susan Crane, *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith, and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* (Berkeley 1986); Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *Romancing the Past: The Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France* (Berkeley 1993).

²⁵Echard opens her book with citations not from a Latin text but from *La Queste del Saint Graal* and *La Mort le Roi Artu*, reminding the reader that the material and indeed much of the style of the later vernacular Arthurian “explosion” was influenced by the Latin work of courtier-clerics (1–2).

²⁶England, like Wales on the fringes of Latin culture, converted a peripheral and ambivalent stance toward Latin into literary innovation (22–25).

²⁷To the some 200 extant manuscript copies of Geoffrey’s *Historia regum Britannie* compare the single copy of *Vita Merlini*. Echard suggests that the prophecies were intended for a much smaller scholastic audience.

Reprising Robert Hanning, Echard emphasizes Geoffrey's dark, pessimistic—even "nihilistic"—and "radically" secular version of history.²⁸ But it is not his departure from providential history so much as his "subversive" use of Latin for fictional narrative and "fantasies" that sparked the (fairly limited) contemporary backlash against the *Historia*. Geoffrey uses Latin to "take a break from [the] truth" of doomed British kingship, and Echard points to the "ludic" possibilities of language in general and of Arthur's temporary supremacy in particular—to that "fictional factuality" which Spiegel reserved for the vernacular (33, 32). Thus the reader can pause to revel in the greatness and promise of Arthur's reign despite the overall gloom of the *Historia*. The buzzwords of this opening chapter as of the introduction insist on the "experimental," "innovative," "subversive," "radical" newness of Geoffrey's melding of pessimism and playfulness, "history" and "fantasy," and in the following chapters Echard proves the singular influence Geoffrey had on subsequent Latin narrative.

As discussed in chapter two, it is precisely Geoffrey's fantastic history—the kind of "deceitful fables" derided by William of Malmesbury (69)—that earns him the scorn of the more serious historians Gerald of Wales and William of Newburgh (73–78). Other Latin writers, however, "step[ped] wholeheartedly into the world of romance" to develop Geoffrey's Arthurian material (79). Echard discusses the brief and anonymous *Vera Historia de Morte Arthuri*, intended as an uplifting "ludus" for its ecclesiastic patron (81–85). She next examines the adoption of the Arthurian fantastic in a pro-Angevin account of Henry II's 1167 campaign in Brittany. Etienne de Rouen's *Draco Normannicus* mocks the "once and future" legend, enlivening his chronicle with an exchange of letters between Henry II and a bombastic, boastful Arthur, now King of the Antipodes (85–93).²⁹ The third chapter considers three texts in which both Arthur and his court are peripheral: a Gawain-episode in Johannes de Hauvilla's *Architrenius*; the sparrow-hawk episode of Andreas Capellanus's *De Amore*; and an episode from the latest text in this study, John of Glastonbury's fourteenth-century *Cronica sive Antiquitates Glastoniensis Ecclesie*. Chapters four and five focus on the blending of fantasy and verisimilitude in two works by the same anonymous author, the *De Ortu Waluuanii* [The Rise of Gawain, Nephew of Arthur] and the *Historia Meriadoci* [The Story of Meriadoc, King of Cambria]. Both "explode conventional form" to highlight a thematic of false appearances, and the disjunction between "sober veracity" and "fantasy" cloaks Arthur's imperfection "under the cover of *facetia*" (184). "The dress of romance" here "sweeten[s] the pill of the *exemplum*," and so do both texts subtly

²⁸Geoffrey's "cynical" "attack on medieval historiography" subverts belief in providential history, and ambiguity about fate and evil "raises an unsettling and radical possibility about God and His attitude toward His creation" (66, 41). Hanning made a similar point in 1966: "[The *Historia*] is the first national history removed from its traditional context of a Christian history of salvation, marking distinct change in the representation of history." Robert Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain: From Gildas to Geoffrey of Monmouth* (New York 1966) 12–172.

²⁹The *Vera Historia* offers an alternate ending to Geoffrey's *Historia*, telling of the mysterious disappearance of Arthur's dead body. Neither the *Vera Historia* nor the *Draco Normannicus* are translated into English, and they are neglected in Arthurian anthologies.

deliver a message about flawed and imperfect kingship (191).

In her sixth and final chapter, Echard returns to Geoffrey by way of what she terms a “Celtic” context influenced by Welsh tradition (193). Here she very briefly mentions the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, Welsh Latin saints’ lives, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, and *Breudwyt Rhonabwy* [The Dream of Rhonabwy] (193–205).³⁰ It is above all the parodic elements of the anonymous werewolf story *Arthur and Gorlagon* that suggest a Welsh provenance (204–205). As in the case of *Breudwyt Rhonabwy*, Echard emphasizes the parody in this text, and her lively discussion of Arthur’s ill-kept oath and an “overused” eating motif entertains as much as it persuades.³¹ Recalling *Bisclavret*, the werewolf lay of Marie of France—unmentioned by Echard—as well as Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, *Arthur and Gorlagon* appears to go to great comic lengths to prove that an understanding of women in general and of his queen in particular is inaccessible to Arthur. In the end Arthur remains “little the wiser,” and in Echard’s view his quest itself becomes subordinate to its recounting: “the text draws attention to itself, to *how* it is telling, or not telling, its story” (210–211). Still, the sub-tale of a wife’s violent infidelity and her husband’s subsequent loss of humanity does offer insight into the nature of women, no matter how misogynist or parodic that insight might seem.³² *Gorlagon* seems clearly to poke fun at Arthur and his failure to learn—I would agree—yet his queen’s wrath as well as the werewolf tale contribute as much to the criticism of his kingship as do the parody of oath taking and an exaggerated eating motif. It is after all through just such a combination of trenchant commentary and *facetia* that Echard binds together the texts in this study.

As an introduction to little known Arthurian texts, Echard’s book provides a valuable resource and starting point for further study. Moreover, she tackles several “givens,” demonstrating that fantasy and the marvelous are not exclusive to the vernacular, that “*ludus, jocus, and facetia*” can dominate courtly Latin narrative, and that there is no hard and fast ideological disjunction between works in the vernacular and those in Latin (237, 195). This book also does much to emphasize the diversity of the literary figure of Arthur, a diversity that is largely unappreciated in discussions of Geoffrey’s *Historia* and the later Arthurian vernacular romances. These texts defy the “once and future” legend, presenting an Arthur who is more often a flawed king than a hero—the bombastic Underworld conqueror of the *Draco Normannicus*, the inhospitable uncle of *De Ortu Waluuanii*, the imperfect judge of *Historia Meriadoci*, the lusty tyrant of the Welsh Latin saints’ lives, the parodied quester of *Arthur and*

³⁰The rich complexity of these Welsh tales rests outside the scope of Echard’s study. Yet there is more to *Breudwyt Rhonabwy* than “full-blown, literary parody,” and its self-conscious melding of near-contemporary Welsh political history with the Arthurian marvelous merits a better description than “a text which is all style and no action” (202–203).

³¹Accused by his queen of knowing nothing about the nature of women, Arthur vows not to eat until he finds the answer. He then eats at his first stop, and so begins a narrative obsession with food and eating. “Largely ignored” by scholars, *Arthur and Gorlagon* is not translated into English.

³²To Echard this aspect of the tale is facile: “*Arthur and Gorlagon* seems an elaborate construction for the rather simple task, for a medieval author, of proving that women are untrustworthy” (213).

Gorlagon (238).

KRISTEN LEE OVER, Comparative Literature, UCLA