

Review Essay

In *St Katherine of Alexandria: The Late Middle English Prose Legend in Southwell Minster MS 7*, Professors Saara Nevanlinna and Irma Taavitsainen have produced an almost flawless model for editors of hagiographical material. With the exception of an initial, somewhat disjointed commentary on Katherine's cult, the *Legenda aurea*, and the vast topic of "Saints' Lives in Medieval Literature," the introduction provides a thorough and eminently readable survey of English versions of the St Katherine story, emphasizing other late Middle English prose texts and focussing especially on that in Southwell Ms 7. A concluding twelve-page description of the manuscript clearly merits the label "tour de force." This carefully edited text is surrounded by helpful explanatory notes, glossary, bibliography, index of proper names, and index of words and forms with their frequencies.

That Katherine's name was removed from the official register of Saints in 1969—largely because there is no evidence that she ever existed—seems unfortunate in light of the spellbinding literary qualities of the combined *vita* and *passio* in the Southwell Ms. Her legend, told there according to "eyewitness" St Athanasius, contains all the elements necessary for instruction in the Christian faith, probably accounting for her veneration from the eighth century in the eastern Mediterranean and her even greater notoriety in mediaeval Britain. As the story unfolds, the beautiful, eighteen-year-old Katherine, a convert to Christianity and a true visionary, joyously celebrates a mystical marriage with Christ. Her wisdom and virtue are tested, however, by the cruel, somewhat cultured Emperor Maxentius, when he orders all the inhabitants of Alexandria to sacrifice to idols. Katherine refuses and successfully defends her faith against the fifty wise men assembled by the Emperor to dispute with her. (They, incidentally, are burned alive for their failure.) Imprisoned, she steadfastly rebuffs Maxentius's advances, exuding an irresistibly sweet and holy influence that converts her jailors and even the Empress. At Katherine's prayerful request, the spiked wheels constructed to torture and kill her are destroyed by an angel, thus provoking her actual martyrdom by beheading and her eventual burial on Mount Sinai.

The vivid, late Middle English Katherine narrative readily illustrates how saints' lives gripped their audiences. On a secular level, the dramatically highlighted aspects of the legends easily involved readers/hearers in their exaggerated, emotional details, creating a kind of romantic entertainment. Yet, at the same time, these stirring tales reinforced core Christian virtues, modelling submission to God's will and the practice of prayer. As this fine edition demonstrates, hagiography's synthesis of *utile et dulce* in the best mediaeval tradition can fascinate both scholars of that period and any thoughtful reader.

Arthurian Literature XII, under the editorship of James P. Carley and Felicity Riddy, can stand proudly next to the other volumes in this collection. Once again, the editorial protocol of featuring only lengthy articles of up to 20,000 words (relegating items under 5,000 words to "Notes") has been rigorously applied. The resultant publication, which could easily have assumed the irrelevance of many *Festschriften*, is rather a fine illustration of and contribution to Arthurian scholarship.

The series' focus on "All aspects — literary, historical and artistic — of the Arthurian legend in Europe in the medieval and early modern periods" is well specified in six substantial studies. Artistry is given fairly short shrift, appearing as a peripheral concern in M.N. Davis's intriguing "Gawain's Rationalist Pentangle," which examines that figure in light of "iconic" mathematics and of the analysis of virtue set forth in Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*. The decidedly philosophical caste of this article nuances the reader's vision of Gawain, making him "the bearer of a generally admirable rationalist ethics, while drawing attention to the paradoxes involved in any attempt to set human life in thoroughly reasoned order" (39). Literary and historical interests are more fully illustrated in M.B. Shichtman and L.A. Finke's "Profiting from the Past: History as Symbolic Capital in the *Historia Regum Britanniae*," H. Phillips's "The *Awntyrs off Arthure*: Structure and Meaning. A Reassessment," F. Riddy's "John Hardyng's Chronicle and the War of the Roses," B. Wheeler's "Romance and Parataxis and Malory: The case of Sir Gawain's Reputation," and R. Barber's "Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* and Court Culture under Edward IV."

I found myself equally engaged by the "notes," all at least six pages in length and amply documented. Particularly arresting is J.C. Parson's assessment of the significance of "The Second Exhumation of King Arthur's Remains at Glastonbury, 19 April 1278." Other topics treated include "Sidonius and

Riothamus” (J. Adams), “Arthur in Ireland” (A. Dooley), and “A Fifteenth-Century Revision of the Glastonbury Epitaph to King Arthur” (M. Brown and J. Carley).

The Style Sheet that closes the volume gives promise of many more. Another project well done by D.S. Brewer Publications.

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