

PREFACE

The American-Canadian Branch of the Société Rencensvals held its conference, “Romance Epic in the Americas,” on the campus of Towson University in Baltimore on October 5-6, 2001, under the joint sponsorship of Towson University, Loyola College in Maryland, and The Johns Hopkins University. The conference had been scheduled and planned for a year and a half beforehand, principally by Leslie Zarker Morgan of Loyola, Stephen G. Nichols of Hopkins, and myself. When American jetliners were hijacked and crashed less than four weeks before the planned opening of the conference, there was some discussion as to whether or not to proceed. Obviously, travel had become infinitely more complicated than before the disastrous and traumatic attacks, and indeed several conference participants were forced by either logistical or psychological exigencies to cancel their trips. More importantly, the mood of those first few weeks after the highjackings was one which seemed to make academic ruminations pointless or even frivolous. There was a peculiar historical lull as there appeared to be a chance for a moderate response to the crisis based on statecraft, international aid, and diplomacy. The sense of national mourning within the United States was not yet shadowed with violent reprisal.

We decided to proceed with the conference as planned. Let me be the first to admit that this decision was based at least in large part on the natural tendency to continue robotically with routine in times of upheaval and on the reluctance to see plans laid so far in advance go for nothing. Yet there emerged as well a sense that the theme of the conference held meaning for the present crisis. Indeed, much against the will of most of the mild academic community, we found ourselves living in epic times, when cultures clashed and warriors inspired themselves to acts of mass destruction through fervent belief and undivided conviction.

The conference as it occurred during those last stunned days of uneasy peace was both curtailed and enriched by the peculiar historical moment. The conference was marked by both an enhanced sense of urgency and an improvisational informality. Everyone present sensed the

uniqueness of the event. Yet, lest I fall into the jingoist bathos of too many “September 11” reminiscences, I should also say that the conference would have been unusually pleasant and productive under any circumstances. The easy congeniality which typifies the Société Rencesvals at its best was thrown into even higher relief by the particular circumstances of the season, and the papers themselves were consistently thoughtful, scholarly, and pertinent. The two keynote speakers, Sarah Kay and Peter Haidu, not only presented very thought-provoking addresses (which appear in the following pages) but also then provided a model of collegiality in their attendance and participation at the papers of others. The scope of the conference was especially free-ranging, spanning epic, *chanson de geste*, and romance, with citations of sources and analogues from non-European cultures and non-canonical media. Further, many of the panelists and their listeners seemed emboldened to make unusually speculative connections between the academic content of the conference and such contemporary polemics as terrorism, nationalism, violence in the media, and gender. For all these reasons, I have encouraged the authors of the papers that follow to preserve as much as possible of their spoken text.

Although the papers in this volume all speak for themselves, I will take the editor’s privilege of highlighting certain connections which I believe recall the special dynamics of this conference. Sarah Kay’s opening address not only specifically compared varying genres but also limned terms for examining the darker aspects of medieval literature; at the same time, Kay displayed an unusual tact, canniness, and clarity in the use of Freudian, Derridian, and other contemporary literary and psychological theory to illuminate historically remote texts. Likewise, Peter Haidu’s frighteningly relevant study of violence, relying in part on textual and critical work by Sarah Kay, is informed by theoretical meditations on language (Derrida, Peirce, Saussure) and by a contemporary alertness to problematics of gender and paternity. The dialogue on spectrality between these two extended essays resonated throughout the conference.

Most of the other papers also managed to bring the medieval and/or Renaissance past into sharp colloquy with our own troubled centuries.

Ed Heinemann's wry presentation of his computer-assisted investigations into French epic and Matthew Bailey's deft linkage between Spanish sources and Hollywood analogues were in some sense typical of the conference's breadth of pondering. In a paper congenial to my own research interests, Ita Mac Carthy looked at ambiguities in the gendering of a controversial sixteenth-century heroine, Ariosto's Olimpia, a remote but recognizable descendent of the medieval epic damsels and stateswomen. Gloria Allaire's paper on beasts and combat in *Guerrino meschino* was not only thorough and incisive, but laced with references to real-life experience with real-life animals in the here and now. Pierre Kunstmann evoked Antiquity in his exploration of the complications in the process by which medieval French epic authors adapted Classical historical sources. Mary Jane Schenck's paper, which closes this volume, made the most explicit and poignant reference to contemporary events while maintaining full critical clarity and acumen in reading the *Chanson de Roland*.

One of the great pleasures of this conference was the harmonious collaboration of the three sponsoring institutions, which have not always managed the two-mile journey up and down Charles Street with the grace shown during these days. Deans and department chairs at all three schools (among whom I must personally thank Salvatore M. Zumbo, chair of my own department) dug deep into institutional pockets to make the conference possible. The opening ceremonies for the conference were enlivened by the participation of key administrators from all three schools: Stephen Nichols of Hopkins, one of the conference planners; Beverly Leetch, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Towson; and David Haddad, Academic Vice President of Loyola. Florence Newman and George McCool of Towson, Diane Chaffee-Sorace and André P. Colombat of Loyola, and Walter Stephens of Hopkins contributed by ably chairing sessions. I would normally not think it necessary to name all of these contributors, but in a conference devoted to discussion of literary and historical conflict, the friendly participation of three neighboring schools provided an edifying and consoling note. It would be quite wrong of me not to mention here what was said often at the conference: that, while each of us worked hard to make the conference a success, Leslie Morgan of Loyola was the moving force and *sine qua non*

from first to last, managing a daunting array of details with consistent efficiency, tact, professionalism, and good humor. A private pleasure fell to me as editor in working with three conscientious, prompt, attentive, and scholarly readers in reviewing the many excellent manuscripts submitted by the conference speakers for publication in this volume: Françoise Denis of Macalester College, Philip E. Bennett of the University of Edinburgh, and Catherine M. Jones of the University of Georgia were all model collaborators for a project of this kind, and I thank each of them for their superb work. Finally, I would like to thank Philip E. Bennett (again) and Hillary Doerr Engelhart, editors of *Olifant*, and William Kibler as president of the North American Branch of the Société Rencensvals for their work in the preparation of this issue.

I hope that this issue of *Olifant* may stand as a document of an extraordinary moment in the history of the Société and of the academy.

John C. McLucas

Towson University