

Book Review

Catherine Hanley. *War and Combat, 1150-1270. The Evidence from Old French Literature.* Woodbridge: Brewer, 2003. Pp. 261.

In her introduction to *War and Combat*, Catherine Hanley explains why the subject of warfare in Old French literature has been so neglected by scholars. In part, it is because the battle scenes are lengthy and seem repetitive rhetorically to a modern audience and because they have acquired the reputation of not being accurate, but the overriding reason is one that plagues the study of the past in any period. There is a distinct distaste for war and violence among modern scholars. Such is the extent of this loathing for what does not agree with our more “enlightened” tastes that the most recent edition of Benoît de Sainte-Maure’s *Roman de Troie* defies all intellectual standards of editorial scholarship by omitting battle scenes from the frankly truncated edition. It is a curious development in these modern times—in which we laud diversity as the ultimate civilized value and stress the need to respect “the other”—that we should seek to suppress what does not agree with us.

Hanley seeks to redress this neglect by studying warfare as it is presented in a corpus of Old French chronicles, epics, and romances written between 1150 (the beginning of Old French romance) and 1270 (the death of Louis IX, the last active crusading king). The book is divided into two unequal parts. Part One focuses on the reality of war as found in historical works of the period and includes a shorter chapter on the ideals and concepts of war. Part Two has three chapters respectively on the Old French chronicles, the epic, and the romance. The text is preceded by a chronological table including significant events and publications between 1139 (the Second Lateran Council, prohibition of tournaments) and 1270. The text is provided with an ample

bibliography and a usable index. Hanley offers helpful notes and they are printed conveniently for the reader at the bottom of the page.

Hanley prefaces her study with an important premise that undergirds her point of view throughout the study: the medieval audience was so aware of the nature of combat, its strategies, and equipment that the author could omit certain elements and take for granted the reality of warfare precisely because his audience was so informed. Moreover, because the audience had firsthand experience in these matters, the author could take advantage of their knowledge for literary effect. In this way an author's gross exaggeration of the number of combatants or knights engaged—often dismissed as unrealistic—would have been accepted by the audience, Hanley writes, as a literary exaggeration designed to glorify the hero's accomplishments. Likewise, the prominence given to knights, even in siege operations, would have been understood by his aristocratic audience as a literary emphasis that highlighted the role of his knightly heroes and appealed to the interests of his listeners. The same may be said of heroic deeds—for example cutting a knight and horse in half with one stroke—that the knightly audience knew from experience to be an heroic exaggeration. This is important because Hanley argues that much of the warfare in place and activity is realistic except for these intended exaggerated features.

In Part One, Hanley provides a survey of what is known about medieval fighting techniques, equipment, tactics and attitudes, quality of weapons, armor, war horses, and siege machinery such as battering implements and projectile weapons. One can find particularly good descriptions of the *trebuchet* and Greek Fire and the changes in protective armor during the one hundred years between 1150 and 1270.

As Hanley notes, the word *chevalier* in Old French texts has no connotation of chivalry but refers to a man on horseback who is a professional fighter. Nor does the word convey the idea of class or social order. Indeed, the conduct of the *chevalier* in historical accounts has little to do with the ideal presented in the romances. Warfare was usually conducted for gain, and the normal way of attacking the enemy

was to waste and pillage the economic resources of the enemy. Peasants were often killed because they were a burden to keep and brought no ransom, whereas members of the landed aristocracy were captured precisely to extort ransom and thus weaken the opponent's resources. In the literary presentations, these features of real warfare are diminished. The dangerous and violent tournaments of the twelfth century—a kind of practice warfare in which booty and ransom were common—become a sanitized competition in the romances where the heroes emerge with honor. Hanley notes that the romances manifest a distinct didactic, civilizing message which she links to the fact that the men who wrote such works were probably clerics. In my view this is an aspect of all Old French literature. For too long, scholars have divided Old French literature into a secular and clerical strain. The prose romances of the early thirteenth century are often charged with converting twelfth-century works into religiously didactic works that change the meaning of the earlier, secular poetic narrative. None of the writers of the twelfth century would have been educated outside the teachings of the clerics. Moreover, it is clear from the histories and chronicles that the Church's influence and mission were to civilize the people of the Church. It was the clerics in the eighth and ninth centuries who tried to restrict the Germanic aristocracy to one legitimate wife, and it was the Church that tried to establish peace within the warring territories a century later. As Hanley points out, this civilizing tendency makes its strong appearance in the romance where Gawain is found as the ideal knight of courtesy in the twelfth-century romances. I would add a word of caution here: Gawain's role as the ideal knight is already undercut in the works of Chrétien where the values of the worldly, courtly ideal are shown to be superficial when compared with the deeper, spiritualized versions of these values espoused by Chrétien's heroes. Hanley also notes that the commonly accepted idea that the romance is characterized by the knight as an individual is a rather modern notion of the knight finding himself. Rather, she says, the romance

is a narrative which features the individual as a knight, a concept more appropriate for the age.

In the epics, Hanley points out, sieges are portrayed, but the emphasis is on the knight's exploits and not on the daily activity of the normal siege in which the lower classes played a prominent role. In these works knights often play the leading role in open pitched battles. Although pitched battles were decisive and brought an end to the conflict, such battles were actually rare in medieval warfare because of the enormous risk of total defeat. In her comments on the portrayal of women, Hanley notes that they often participated in sieges in ways that were appropriate to their physical capacities, but when they overstepped their limits, such as the countess of Leicester who donned armor and went out to fight heavier, larger men, the author, Jordan Fantosme, charged her with "grant folie."

Hanley's book, a revised dissertation, shows signs of its origin in its repetitive structure and in her tendency to cite more examples than are necessary, but it is well organized and treats a neglected and important aspect of these Old French writings. The juxtaposition with information concerning the historical practice of warfare makes it a useful study of late twelfth-century Old French works.

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