Book Review

Kibler, William W., and Leslie Zarker Morgan, eds. *Approaches to Teaching the Song of Roland*. New York: MLA, 2006. Pp. x + 317 + CD.

In this volume the editors have sought to provide reliable information about the primary and secondary materials available for the teaching of the *Song of Roland* and a broad sampling of the diverse interpretations that have emerged about the epic since the first modern edition based on Digby 23 appeared some two hundred years ago. Short, concise articles by thirty of the most accomplished scholars of the *Roland* teaching in the anglophone world today lay out in comprehensible terms almost all of the critical issues that can be translated into the modern undergraduate classroom. As a consequence, most of the book reads like an *état présent* of current scholarship on the epic. It is to the great credit of the editors and the contributors to have condensed such a vast critical bibliography into one modest-sized volume for nonspecialists. To have done so without critical bias is a great service to the profession. One finds in this fine assemblage readings informed by feminist, postcolonial, structuralist, semiotic, historical, and reader-reception models alongside more traditional approaches to the text. The nonspecialist can mine this volume with confidence for more than enough material to round out the three to four class sessions normally allocated to the *Song of Roland* in undergraduate survey courses. This is not to say, however, that in condensing this material the contributors have simplified it. As a nonspecialist in epic who has taught the *Roland* to undergraduates repeatedly over the last two decades, I found myself learning much from the contributions that will serve to nuance my own teaching for years to come.

Of primary interest for the nonspecialist—particularly for the instructor who is going to teach the *Roland* for the first time—is contextual information that would otherwise take an inordinate amount of advance

preparation to gather and distill. There is much to be admired in the volume in this category. Allow me to recommend in particular Joel Rosenthal's description of the historical Charlemagne (pp. 47-52); William Kibler's synthesis of source materials that relate various versions of the battle fought by Charlemagne's forces in the Pyrenees in the spring of 778 (pp. 53-56); Kelly DeVries's overview of medieval military technology (pp. 73-76); Philip Bennett's situating of the *Roland* within the larger tradition of medieval French epic (pp. 53-56); Joseph Duggan's description of the relationship between the Digby *Roland* and other subsequent versions of the poem (pp. 66-72); Mark Burde's fascinating summary of the ideological uses of the *Roland* by nineteenth-century critics (pp. 124-32); and Sharon Kinoshita's subtle admonitions concerning the temptation to oversimplify the *Roland* when one is presenting it from a post-colonial perspective (pp. 269-80). An extensive bibliography found at the end of the volume provides ample background material for any novice seeking to read further in the critical and historical literature.

To portray this volume simply as a repository of cultural information would be a mischaracterization. Even in the essays that summarize various interpretations of the work, much attention is paid to the pedagogical challenges faced by instructors of the *Roland* in a twenty-first century classroom. Most of the commentary on this matter assumes that the greatest impediment to teaching the *Roland* lies in the cultural divide that makes it difficult for modern students to understand or relate to a medieval or feudal mentality. If any criticism is to be leveled at this excellent collection at all, it is that some of the contributors seem to have overestimated the reading abilities of the modern undergraduate. Even at an institution with such talented students as Amherst College, students come to the classroom not only with a lack of knowledge about the Middle Ages, but also unable, and sometimes even strangely unwilling, to read texts critically. The causes of this cultural phenomenon are subject to debate. Whatever they might be, a consequence of these circumstances is that it is no longer enough to present students with reliable cultural information and a coherent reading or diversity of readings of the text.

Ideally students should be coaxed into synthesizing cultural information and reading techniques through exercises that give them the tools to leave the classroom at the end of the semester equipped to read critically on their own. Some of the most useful contributions to this volume seek to remedy such pedagogical obstacles by supplying reading guides, study questions, exercises, and approaches to the classroom presentation—rather than simply to the reading—of the text. Among these the contribution of Catherine M. Jones, who has won teaching awards at the University of Georgia, stands out as a student-centered approach that provides the framework for an analysis of the strange dialogs between Roland and Oliver, and, more generally speaking, a model of excellent pedagogy (pp. 201-06). Sharon Kinoshita and Mark Burde have both provided generous study guides and discussion questions that could prove to be of great value to any instructor of the *Roland*. Eugene Vance's comparison of the three epic swords belonging to Roland, Charlemagne, and Thierry could be converted into an effective writing assignment or the point of departure for an interesting classroom discussion (pp. 246-52). Emanuel Mickel's treatment of Ganelon's trial provides a model of close reading for students and a wealth of information about medieval law and legal procedure. His comparison of the trial scene with a *Psychomachia* would prove particularly valuable in a survey course that needed to segue from the *Roland* into a medieval allegorical text that figured next on the syllabus (pp. 220-31).

I must confess that my own preference in the critical literature leans heavily towards the work of Robert Cook, whose contribution to this volume is a very condensed version of his perceptions on the *Roland* (pp. 238-45). This preference is not based on his critical model but rather on the fact that his book, *The Sense of the "Song of Roland"*, provides a line-by-line analysis that assesses the arguments of most of his predecessors as the analysis proceeds. Published in 1987, it might be considered by some to be out-of-date. But I still find it to provide the best introduction to previous scholarship available and an excellent tool that could be used by the new instructor to organize his or her own thoughts about the

Roland for classroom presentation. I would recommend to anyone teaching the epic for the first time to have *The Sense of the "Song of Roland"* to be her or his second stop after the collection of essays reviewed here.

Touching on the question of the place of the *Roland* in the curriculum of a given institution, Michelle Warren's contribution demonstrates that she clearly understands the concerns and backgrounds of current American undergraduates (pp. 165-70). She suggests a variety of ways to integrate the *Roland* into courses of diverse thematic orientations. Mary Jane Schenck provides convincing arguments for the inclusion of the Baligant episode on the undergraduate syllabus (pp. 213-19). Alice Colby-Hall provides oral readings of extensive passages from the *Roland* recorded on the accompanying CD, which allows the instructor to respond to the inevitable, but potentially embarrassing, request from students to improvise a recitation of the epic for those who have never heard Old French before. The volume also includes helpful assessments of all of the available editions and translations of the epic. My only surprise was to see no contributor mention Hollywood's representation of the Mafia as an effective introduction to feudal family values. This volume is highly recommended for all instructors of undergraduates and could prove very helpful for nonspecialists in graduate programs who are called upon to teach the *Song of Roland*. The profession is indebted to Kibler and Morgan for having assembled such a fine volume.

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