
Marginalia Reviews

The Virgin of Chartres: Making History through Liturgy and the Arts

Margot E. Fassler

(London: Yale University Press, 2010)

ISBN: 978-0-300-11088-3 (Hardcover); 624 pages

£30.00

The Virgin of Chartres is an ambitious work: not only does it offer a thorough and up-to-date history of Chartres, its rulers and religious life in the high Middle Ages, but it is also a pioneering attempt at interdisciplinary research on the part of one scholar, engaging history, literature, musicology, the visual arts and liturgy in an holistic endeavour which is at times a compelling read. It is perhaps not surprising that such a study should come from the pen of Margot Fassler, whose previous work is richly varied in its interests, and whose monograph *Gothic Song* (about the sequence repertory of the Parisian Abbey of St Victor) remains one of the most important books on twelfth-century music culture. Like that book, *Virgin of Chartres* is in large part institutional history, centring on the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Chartres and the history of its cult of the Virgin emanating from the relic *La Sainte Chasse*, reputed to be the birthing-garment of Mary. Unlike *Gothic Song*, *Virgin of Chartres* is not primarily musicological: rather, Fassler's subject is the ways in which liturgical music, ritual and the visual arts were made and re-made over the course of the period under study, especially during the twelfth- and thirteenth-century building campaigns. Central to the entire project is the conviction that the religious and civic life of Chartres were very closely interdependent, and that the Cathedral Canons spared no pains in promoting their cult of the Virgin, resulting in a veritable *Gesamtkunstwerk* of art and liturgy assembled and interpreted over generations.

Fassler begins her account with a new history of the history of Chartres. Woven through this narrative and in preparation for the closer studies later in the book is the theme of how the relic of the Virgin's chemise and the surrounding cult grew in importance for Chartrian religious and political identity. Liturgical creativity is never far away, and Fassler's discussion of Fulbert of Chartres' sermons is one of the more revealing parts of the book, as is the careful account of the peculiarities of Chartrian Marian liturgy – no mean feat considering the difficulty of such study after the loss of most of liturgical sources in various fires through the centuries (including the devastation of World War II). Indeed, one of the most remarkable aspects of the study as a whole is the attention to detail which Fassler displays on many occasions, in particular the ability to reveal shades of peculiarly Chartrian meaning imparted to apparently commonplace liturgical items within the complex of devotional and liturgical practice at the Cathedral. Thus her chapter describing the creation and performance of the Advent liturgy at Chartres manages to show how the cathedral's liturgy was in many ways typical but in certain ways special, and why that may have been.

If the first two parts of the book are concerned with the more abstract aspects of Chartrian Medieval history-making – the writing of chronicles and ser-

mons and the compilation and creation of liturgies – the second two become more concrete, as Fassler begins to focus on the fabric of the cathedral, beginning with the various building campaigns and finally engaging in close analysis of the stained-glass and sculpture. The account of the campaigns is integrated with discussion of the Dedication liturgies as well as the larger theoretical discourse of twelfth-century reform ideals and new ideas about vision and pious fervour, both ‘popular’ and institutional. Through this holistic approach which considers neither institutional, nor technical, nor functional concerns in isolation from one another, the liturgical and political life of the cathedral becomes vivid. When Fassler finally begins to closely read the stained-glass and sculpture of Notre Dame, then, it is within a broad and lively context of human activity and interest, rather than in splendid isolation. As with the discussion of the Advent liturgy, Fassler manages to identify and explain the ways in which the community at Chartres received and adapted common motifs and narratives creatively, reflecting upon and shaping its own history through the body of the cathedral, which was often itself figured analogously with the body of the Virgin. In this way the selection of scenes from the life of Christ in the portal capital friezes and the arrangement of the rather anonymous figures on the jamb statues take on meanings possible only at Chartres.

Fassler’s interpretative technique largely relies on Medieval memorative practices, by which visual and aural cues were woven into networks of meaning through repeated exposition (and exposure) and were cultivated in ruminative and meditative cognition; thus her exegesis of the artwork of the cathedral is precisely detailed at the same time as allowing for a certain amount of speculation, as when she compares the portal sculpture with the lancet windows and suggests that ‘the vibrant colors of the glass were surely matched at one time by the painted robes and jeweled ornaments of the sculptural program’, going on to add (perhaps rather wistfully), ‘but those can no longer be compared for correspondences’ (p.328).

It is in this understanding and acceptance of Medieval memorative practices and their possible applications that both the strength and the weakness of *Virgin of Chartres* lies. More often than not Fassler’s encyclopedic knowledge of Chartrian history and liturgy is deployed with such a sure hand that this book is not only an essential compendium of all things Chartrian but also provides many compelling insights into Medieval culture more generally. However, at times the assumption that all aspects of cathedral and civic life were consciously inter-related, made and received as such in the period under study feels a little strained. Even if much of Fassler’s material has been studied before in some depth, *Virgin of Chartres* is nevertheless a tour-de-force of academic synthesis; students of all Medieval disciplines will find material of use here, and perhaps more importantly they will find an example of the ways in which our subjects can fruitfully be related and employed together to make compelling history.

Matthew Ward, *St. John’s College, Cambridge*

The Homiletic Writings of Archbishop Wulfstan
 Joyce Tally Lionarons
 Anglo-Saxon Studies
 (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010)
 ISBN: 978-1-843-84256-9 (Hardcover); 194 pages
 RRP £60 (\$99)

At a period when interest in the career and writings of Archbishop Wulfstan (d. 1023) are at a higher level than at any time since the 1950s, Joyce Tally Lionarons has produced a volume that offers both a much needed recapitulation of the scholarship of the last several decades and a valuable new contribution to the field. In the interest of providing an up-to-date critical study of Wulfstan's homilies (something that the field has not enjoyed since Karl Jost's *Wulfstanstudien*, published in 1950), Lionarons sets out to establish clearer connections, on the one hand, between Wulfstan and the manuscripts of his works and, on the other hand, between the existing editions of his homiletic works and these same manuscripts. Accordingly, the first two chapters of the book address, respectively, manuscripts containing Wulfstan's works (or otherwise associated with the archbishop) and the establishment of the canon of Wulfstan's works. The former is organized not by manuscript siglum or shelfmark, but instead, in the order of importance, according to Lionarons, as sources of homiletic, legal, or other texts associated with Wulfstan. There is a certain logic in such an arrangement, but it does make it more difficult for the reader to access information about any given Wulfstanian manuscript.

The second chapter establishes the structural pattern that holds throughout the rest of the book: After a brief discussion of the issues at stake (in this case, a very insightful discussion of both the original and the more recent criticisms of the editions of the homilies), Lionarons then deals with each homily or fragment whose attribution has only recently been established. After a chapter exploring Wulfstan's thoughts on eschatology, the balance of the book is made up of chapters that each address a different type of homily: homilies teaching basic principles of Christian faith, those arising from Wulfstan's role as a bishop and archbishop, homilies that treat sacraments of the Church, the famous *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, and finally, homilies related to legal texts or the *Institutes of Polity*. A judicious use of subheadings in some of the later chapters would have made it easier for the reader to keep track of which homilies are the direct focus of a given chapter and which are merely tangentially related to the discussion, but this does not stand in the way of the valuable contributions made by Lionarons to our understanding of Wulfstan's thoughts on eschatology and on the role of his preaching in society.

In chapters 3 and 4, Lionarons is able to demonstrate that some of the distinctive preoccupations of certain Wulfstanian homilies are in fact more pervasive in his canon than has been recognized in the past. Although Wulfstan's treatment of eschatological themes is best known from a set of early homilies, Lionarons notes the appearance of Antichrist in some later homilies by Wulfstan. Similarly, while tracing Wulfstan's adaptation of Ælfric's homily *De initio creaturae* (*Catholic Homilies*, First Series, 1), Lionarons sees evidence that Wulfstan was already beginning to think through the mingling of Old Testament and

New Testament paradigms so skillfully deployed in the later *Sermo Lupi*. The discussion of Wulfstan's archiepiscopal and sacramental sermons in chapters 5 and 6, respectively, demonstrates Wulfstan's emphasis on the practical, active nature of true adherence to the principals of Christian faith and for the growth of the 'holy society' he advocated.

One of the most long-standing and contentious of the questions at issue in Wulfstan studies is that of the relationship between and composition of the three versions of Wulfstan's most famous homily, the *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*. Picking up on Simon Keynes's 2007 argument that the *Sermo Lupi* was composed first in 1009-1012, with a definitive version composed in 1014 and a variety of other revisions made later, Lionarons simplifies and tightens the proposed sequence of events, thus providing a plausible but still comprehensible theory of the composition of this famous homily. In Lionarons's theory, we would be left with three major stages of composition, moving from something resembling the medium-length homily to the longer version and finally to the short version.

If this book has a weakness, it is in the failure to fully delineate a larger structure for its conclusions. There is no concluding section, as such, merely a brief, final chapter that considers a very specific topic (homilies based on legal codes or Wulfstan's own *Institutes of Polity*) with a final paragraph that nods to the larger purposes of Wulfstan's work. To select another example from the book, the chapter on eschatology, though useful for tracing the history of medieval ideas about the Antichrist and for spotlighting six early eschatological homilies by Wulfstan, never offers an overarching framework through which to understand Wulfstan's treatment of eschatological themes. Even with these omissions, this volume goes a long way towards filling a gaping hole in Wulfstan studies, and the time is ripe for such a study because, as Lionarons herself notes, in spite of the recent surge of interest in Wulfstan, we have hitherto been left with only scattered (or simply outdated) scholarship on Wulfstan's homiletic prose, and a pair of editions that not only conflict with each other, but also possess their own internal problems. *The Homiletic Writings of Archbishop Wulfstan*, while unlikely to find a use in the classroom, provides an excellent picture of the current state of Wulfstan studies, and it will be an invaluable resource for the researcher trying to maintain a grasp on recent work or to extend the field in any way.

Emily Butler, *John Carroll University*

Alastair Minnis
Translations of Authority in Medieval English Literature:
Valuing the Vernacular
 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)
 ISBN 978-0-521-51594-8 (Hardcover); 288 pages
 RRP £53

Alastair Minnis's most recent monograph begins with the idea of *translation*, not only between languages but across them: a *translatio auctoritatis*, 'a translation of authoritative discourse and methodology into the "vulgar" tongue' (p. x). Simi-

larly, Minnis's definition of the term *vernacular* 'goes far beyond the category of language, to encompass popular cultural beliefs and practices which engaged in complex relationships with those authorized by church and state institutions' (p. xi). This book is as much about authority and exchange as it is about language, although vernacularity, broadly conceptualised, is the context in which ideological and institutional authorities are contested.

Minnis's stature as a scholar of hermeneutics, scholasticism, the commentary tradition and medieval literature qualifies him, as Vincent Gillespie attests on the back cover of this volume, as a 'master exegete of his generation'. In many ways, this book lives up to such praise: it is an ambitious and authoritative survey of Middle English vernacular hermeneutics, addressing the peculiar ideological insecurities attaching to the idea of the vernacular in England especially, and returning to many of the familiar themes that have dominated Minnis's recent work. The book is also something of a compilation. The first four of its six chapters have been published previously as separate articles: the new material consists of a discussion of Margery Kempe, female authority and allegories of marriage, and an opening of the book again on Chaucer's Pardoner's posited homosexuality and his 'relics'. The chapters remain very much discrete discussions, albeit united by a general theme. Overall, the book offers a series of complementary insights, rather than a sustained and developing thesis, not aided by the absence of a unifying conclusion.

The introduction begins by comparing the strident affirmations of their respective vernaculars of Nicholas Oresme and Alighieri Dante; and asking the pertinent question of why 'there is nothing in the corpus of Middle English texts which corresponds to either of Dante's literary-theoretical treatises or Oresme's commentated translations'; why 'neither King Richard II of England nor his Lancastrian successors attempted to emulate the "state hermeneutics" cultivated by the Valois dynasty' (p. 3). Chapter One, entitled 'Absent glosses: the trouble with Middle English hermeneutics', offers a bold and speculative answer, locating the lacuna in the English commentary tradition in the suspicion that attached to vernacular theology in the wake of Arundel's *Constitutions*, which fostered 'a culture of control and repression'. As Minnis observes, 'much Middle English Biblical exegesis produced in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries was of Wycliffite origin' (p. 25), and in a climate in which the Archbishop self-styling himself as the 'hammer of heretics' (p. 27) frowned upon vernacular theology, it was safer for English commentators to conduct their exegesis within the safe boundaries of Latin. Anne Hudson criticises Minnis for being too ready, with Harry Bailly, to 'smelle a Lollere in the wynd' (see her review in *Medium Ævum*, 2010); and the idea of a 'climate of fear' attending on vernacular theology (p. 32), may be felt by some to be an association too far. Nonetheless, Minnis argues persuasively for the identification of Lollardy with the vernacular, emphasised both by Lollards and their opponents; in which English was implicated in risky, demotic theology, in a way not paralleled by the continental vernaculars.

Chapter Two, entitled 'Looking for a sign: the quest for Nominalism in Ricardian poetry', continues this analysis of absences. Discussing Walter Hilton, Robert Holcot, Ralph Strode, Langland's Trajan and Chaucer's Cambyuskan, Minnis concludes that, on the question of the fate of virtuous pagans, 'the signs

are there but they are all too ambiguous' (p. 65): it was a question safely pondered, but only dangerously answered. Chapter Three stays with Langland, to discuss 'Piers's protean pardon': the legalistic questions attending on indulgences, the extent of their efficacy and the relationship between the spiritual object and the state of the penitent; and the significance of the impossible pardon that Treuthe gives to Piers '*a pena et a culpa*' and 'for everemoore after' (B VII. 3-5), which of course he tears in two. As with earlier chapters, Minnis's tendency is always ultimately to find in favour of the orthodoxy of his texts, although allowing for an orthodoxy that sails close to the wind; a tendency that sometimes reduces the paradigm to a binary axis of orthodoxy or heterodoxy, which may not be the most interesting or productive angle of approach. Chapter Four, 'Making bodies', focuses on the trial of Walter Brut, and analyses the connection between confection and conception – the making of Christ's Body in the mass, and in the womb of the Virgin – and its implications for the permissibility of the involvement of women in the sacrament. Minnis draws a fascinating analogy in this chapter between sacraments and language, both as systems in which the relationship between signifier and signified is a fraught one, and in which authority is contested. Continuing the theme of women, language and authority, Chapter Five turns to the hot topic of Margery Kempe's latinity, female exegesis and heterodoxy, discussing her navigation of 'the Scylla of [...] Lollard elevation of marriage over chastity' and 'the Charybdis of Cathar misogamy' (p. 123). Not surprisingly, Minnis concludes with Margery that 'I am non heretyke, ne ye schal non preve me' (p. 129). The sixth and last chapter discusses another spiritual sign transplanted into a decidedly vernacular context: Chaucer's Pardoner's spurious 'relikes', or rather, Harry Bailly's simile for them – his 'coillons'. The connection with language, via the analogy of the signifier and the signified, is made through the *ad placitum* relationship of words and objects offered to Amant by Dame Raison in the *Roman de la Rose*, when she asserts that the word *reliques* could as easily signify *coilles* and vice versa, if convention so decreed. This leads into a discussion of real *coillons* as relics, in the Priapic shrines of St Valery and St Uncumber, and an attempt to reach 'a better understanding of the comic discourse surrounding Chaucer's Pardoner and his ridiculous relics', and to 'measure the extent to which they were ridiculous' (p. 162).

Ultimately this discussion does that, its methodology proceeding, as the last paragraph declares, 'from the bottom up' (p. 162). Its survey of vernacular religion, its frameworks of authority, and its engagement with formal hermeneutics and linguistic power structures, is a rich, nuanced and diverting one; and I doubt if anyone was better equipped to write it.

Dr. Joanna Bellis, *Pembroke College, Cambridge*

The York Mystery Plays: Performance in the City
Ed. by Margaret Rogerson
(York: York Medieval Press, Boydell & Brewer, 2011)
ISBN: 978-1-903-15335-2 (Hardcover); 248 pages.
RRP £50.00 (\$90).

This unusual and stimulating collection of essays grew out of a conference hosted by the Guilds of York in July 2007, 'Performing the Mystery Plays'. The conference gathered together local mystery play practitioners, including many who were involved in the guild-organized wagon plays of 2006, other early drama enthusiasts from around the United Kingdom and academics of medieval theatre. The resulting book not only contains many interesting insights into the York plays resulting from this collaboration between practitioners and scholars, but also reflects the warmth and enthusiasm that seem to have imbued the entire proceedings. It is not often that a book of essays makes you wish you had attended the original conference.

The editor, Margaret Rogerson, has organized the essays into three well-chosen sections. The first section contains a series of academic essays that consider the York Plays in relation to their medieval communities. Probably the most important of these contributions is Richard Beadle's analysis of the circumstances that spurred the civic authorities to require the compilation of the Register of the York Corpus Christi Play (London, British Library, Additional MS 35290). The Register is usually dated to the period between 1463 and 1477 but Professor Beadle makes a persuasive case for its compilation in 1476, also the year in which the civic authorities called for a formal vetting of the plays and their players. During this period, Richard of Gloucester (Richard III) was very involved in the affairs of York and this essay argues convincingly that he might also have been influential in these moves by the authorities to control the 'production values' of the plays. The idea that the late civic management of the plays could be, in part, a Ricardian project is a fascinating one, which will surely inspire others to revisit the plays. Other essays in this section include Sheila K. Christie's discussion of the Masons' involvement with the plays; Mike Tyler's analysis of group dynamics in the presentation of Noah's family in *The Flood* pageant; and Jill Stevenson's interesting application of cognitive theory to discuss audiences' experience of both the original medieval plays and the 'embodied medievalism' produced by the 2006 performances (although this last piece was slightly weakened by its concluding argument, which focussed on the undoubted ability of the plays' to continue to enchant audiences, but also accepted uncritically earlier ideas that enchantment is typically associated with the Middle Ages and that modern times are inherently disenchanted - neither of which is particularly convincing).

The second section contains edited transcripts of papers delivered at the conference by those who produced the 2006 plays. From tips for licensing outdoor performance sites to the debate over traditional metal-rimmed wooden vs modern rubber wagon wheels, this part of the book will be a treasure-trove for anyone planning to stage the plays. The descriptions and frank assessments of the effectiveness, both artistically and logistically, of various wagon set designs are particularly strong. This section is, however, much more than a practical

guide to staging the plays. Many contributors describe how their careful readings of the plays governed their design, costuming, music and direction – often with innovating and insightful interpretations – for example the description by Tony Wright, from the Company of Butchers, of the wagon design for the *Crucifixion*, with its end-on orientation to the audience and pulley mechanism for raising the cross, is an ingenuous interpretation of the comic banter of the soldiers and the accompanying pathos of the silent Christ's torture. There is also a short and moving piece by Linda Ali from Heslington Church, who performed *The Resurrection – Christ's Appearance to Mary Magdalene*, reminding us of the powerful effect that the plays retain for people of faith.

The final section of the book consists of essays that study modern performances of medieval drama and other cultural and religious festivals. This section proves the point made elsewhere in the book that combining scholarly investigations with the practical experience of performance can provide useful insights into medieval drama. Performances discussed include the York cycle performances in Toronto, the *Crucifixion* play performed by the Theatre Department at Tel Aviv University, the Siena *Palio* and the Stations of the Cross performed at the Catholic World Youth Day in Sydney 2008.

The book is well presented with a useful index and a reasonably full bibliography. The glossary of Middle English words could be more extensive to assist non-specialist readers as this eclectic, thought-provoking and often amusing book deserves a wide readership. Many of the contributions prove that exchanges between the academic and theatrical community can be extremely fruitful and that questions about medieval performance, reception and interpretation can be explored through theatrical experiment and participation as well as through traditional academic research. It is also a wonderful advertisement for the next conference organized by the York Guilds and Companies to be held on 9th July 2011.

Joni Henry, *St. John's College, Cambridge*

Fairies in Medieval Romance

James Wade

(New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)

ISBN: 978-0-230-11020-5 (Hardcover); 212 pages

RRP £52.00 (\$85.00)

It is nearly fifty years since C. S. Lewis's essay "The Anthropological Approach" more or less put paid to the source-hunting that had occupied scholars of medieval literature for much of the early life of the discipline. Lewis argued for a closer attention to the 'literary' qualities of medieval works and a greater respect for the craftsmanship of medieval writers. This probing critique laid the path open for more explicitly literary approaches to the sorts of 'folkloric' motifs – loathly ladies, witches, taboos, mysterious countries, fairies – that had been the primary subjects of this anthropological criticism. Despite this, it is only in the last decade or so that the exploration of such motifs has been taken up again by literary scholars. The pre-eminent example is Helen Cooper's *The English Ro-*

mance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), which placed such motifs at the heart of an exploration of the medieval romance tradition. A particularly surprising subject of neglect was one of the most archetypal of medieval romance motifs: the fairy. Few scholars had undertaken a specific and extended analysis of the role of fairies in romance before Cooper included a chapter on "Fairy Monarchs and Fairy Mistresses" in her book. More recently, Corinne Saunders also addressed the topic in *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010; reviewed in *Marginalia*11). James Wade's *Fairies in Medieval Romance* is, however, the first full length study of the role of fairies in the genre.

The key contention of Wade's book is that fairies are 'complex and cleverly designed narrative devices that become ideologically central to the concerns of romance throughout the Middle Ages' (p. 149). In four chapters that primarily focus on romances written in England, this book illustrates the usefulness of fairies as 'unmotivated' figures whose actions facilitate narrative progression and whose ambiguous nature allows for the interrogation of range of significant issues. In placing the narrative operations of fairies at the heart of his analysis, Wade proposes what he terms a 'new intentionality'. Eschewing 'historicist constructions of biography' or 'questions of "what the author really meant"', Wade argues for an approach to authorial invention that is 'narratologically focused' and centred on what the author does and how s/he does it (p. 7). This book makes a compelling argument for the sophistication of medieval authors' use of supernatural motifs. The supernatural is rarely taken seriously by modern literary criticism and Wade deserves credit for developing a toolbox of critical approaches that gets under the skin of romances that make ample use of fantastical motifs.

In taking fairies seriously, a whole range of neglected texts – *Generides*, *Melusine*, *Sir Degarré*, *Eger and Grime* – emerge from this book as rather more interesting works than is usually acknowledged. Of course, there are familiar texts too: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Malory's *Morte* and *Sir Orfeo* feature prominently. *Sir Orfeo* stands to benefit particularly well from this and other recent attempts to take supernatural motifs seriously. The romance's numerous ambiguities begin to look entirely artful when they are thoroughly and systematically analysed, rather than put down to the influence of ill-digested 'Celtic' sources, as has so often been the case. *Fairies* also draws on works written in a more historical mode, such as the output of Gerald of Wales, Gervase of Tilbury and Thomas Walsingham. The neglected subject matter of this book provides ample opportunities for new perspectives on, and new comparisons between, texts of very different periods, languages and poetic quality.

After a brief, and largely theoretical, introduction, the first chapter of *Fairies* focuses on Morgan le Fay and maps the shifts in her character throughout the Middle Ages. The second chapter explores the role of Avalon in the medieval literary tradition. Despite being one of the best-known elements of the medieval Arthurian legend, accounts of Avalon have received little concerted study. Wade's discussion provides a valuable and wide-ranging account of the various treatments of this realm, both within and beyond the Arthurian tradition. Chapter Three, "Beyond Orthodoxy: Tests and Quests", discusses the role of fairies in

testing and proving the orthodoxies of the 'real' world. The final chapter, "Fairy Mistresses: Gifts and Taboos", takes a group of motifs that had provided particular grist to the anthropological critics' mill and re-evaluates them in light of more recent narratological ways of thinking. After a brief conclusion, the book features 39 pages of notes and references, a full bibliography, and a good index.

The *New Middle Ages* series has made publishing theory-centred approaches to medieval writing something of a speciality. As such, it is a natural home for a work like this which proclaims its theoretical credentials from the beginning. Wade draws on 'possible worlds' theory, a relatively obscure strand of criticism that 'posits that the range of narrative possibilities within each text reflects a centripetal organisation that makes their intra-narrative worlds autonomous – that is, ontologically and structurally distinct' (p. 2). The concept is certainly a good fit for the narratives under consideration here with their constantly shifting horizons of expectations, what Wade terms each text's 'internal folklore'. Some readers may be slightly put off by being pitched into a complex discussion of this field within the first few pages of *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, but even those who are completely uninterested in theoretical models of this sort will find much to admire in this book. Wade's analysis of his material is strong and he utilises theory in the service of his texts, rather than vice versa. Indeed, the use of 'possible worlds' theory in *Fairies* is something the reader may take or leave according to his/her own tastes – Wade's articulate arguments and close readings stand up readily without the support of this template.

'Internal folklore' is Wade's own coining, and perhaps the most useful theoretical concept introduced in this book since it allows him to deal with apparent narrative inconsistencies in relatively neutral terms. Where other critics might have called the fluctuations in Laudine's character in Chrétien's *Yvain* an artistic defect, Wade merely observes that 'the author does not construct a coherent or complete internal folklore' and goes on to suggest that such incoherence and incompleteness may serve a whole range of narrative functions (pp. 26-27). There is much to be said for this approach, since chalking a lack of narrative logic up to authorial incompetence tends to shut the door to further serious exploration of the work in question. Wade's way of reading these cruxes allows a lot more space for giving authors the benefit of the doubt and for acknowledging that modern measures of narrative cohesion and logic may not be as universal a standard as we might like to think. Given how little we can reconstruct of medieval ideas of poetic and aesthetic excellence, an approach like Wade's may be as close as we can come to dealing with some of the 'literary' qualities of these texts on their own terms.

The ambiguities and complexities of the fairies of medieval romance present challenges for the scholar, yet Wade has produced a clearly written, concise and, above all, tightly-structured work. The only general quibble I have with *Fairies* arises from this very virtue: the book feels a little too concise. The depth of Wade's analysis ensures that *Fairies* raises a whole range of questions about this body of material. However, in what is a relatively short academic book (149 pages of text, excluding the notes), there is no space for these to be fully explored; for instance, although the role of the author is given detailed consideration, the sort of reader reception these texts might have provoked is largely un-commented upon. However, if the principal criticism one can muster of a book

is that it leaves the reader wanting more, then the book in question must have a lot going for it.

Fairies in Medieval Romance is a book that is long overdue. James Wade has done much to make fairies interesting for medievalists once again and this book will, no doubt, become a fixture on reading lists and in bibliographies.

Dr. Aisling Byrne, *Merton College, Oxford*

***Fiery Shapes: Celestial Portents and Astrology in
Ireland and Wales, 700-1700***

Mark Williams

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)

ISBN: 978-0-19-957184-0 (Hardcover); 256 pages

RRP £60.00

Mark Williams' first book 'Fiery Shapes' explores the literary and practical uses of astrology and astrological figures in Irish and Welsh literature over the course of a millennia. Williams states that the work is not intended as a contribution to the history of science, but a literary analysis of celestial portents, which only on a few occasions can be scientifically assigned a historic basis. Neither does it offer a developmental model of astrology or astrological literature in Ireland and Wales; rather, it is concerned with the particular details of key texts, and the interpretative frameworks they place on the literary invocation of astrological phenomena. Williams' field of enquiry ranges from canonical texts such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's 'Prophetiae Merlini' to poems such as Dafydd Nanmor's fifteenth-century 'Cywydd to God and the planet Saturn', outside the common scope of literary criticism in the field. Although building on the research of scholars such as Marged Haycock and her invaluable work on the Book of Taliesin, and D. McCarthy and A. Breen's study of astronomical observations in the Irish annals, Williams' study takes him into uncharted waters.

Taking his title from the claim of Shakespeare's famous Welshman Owain Glyndŵr, Williams sets out to explore the persistent association of the Welsh with specifically celestial prophecy and superstition, alongside the modern phenomena of Celtic astrology (xiii-xiv,xxv-xxvii). The first necessary task of the work is the de-bunking of myths, dispelling the romanticised view of Celtic mantic literature, and the figure of the druid at its centre. The groundwork for this is laid by the first two chapters' discussion of Irish sources. Chapter 1 details early Irish annalistic observations of celestial phenomena, and compares the interpretative schema applied to the interpretation of comets by Bede and by astrologers at the Carolingian court. In the case of the latter Williams finds politically-centred interpretations, the comet portends the downfall of kings and the division of kingdoms; whereas the early medieval Irish material integrates astrological figures in apocalyptic narratives which are distinctively local in character. Particularly intriguing is Williams' analysis of a 1054 entry in the Annals of Tigernach, where we see an astrological portent brought into line with Antichrist legends, themselves governed by an innovative process of assimilation, fusing the apocalyptic interpretation of celestial phenomena with Irish

mythological material such as the Morrigan. Williams is concerned with local strategies of adaptation; and remains sensitive to the possibility of international lines of transmission, noting the place of Irish astrologers at the Carolingian court, although he can in this instance find no process of feedback to Ireland itself, as he locates in the movement of astrological material from England to Wales in Chapter 4.

The second chapter tackles the question of the Irish druids head-on. Literary depictions of the druids and their study of the skies, Williams argues, owe much to high medieval representations, conceived in a period long after the disappearance of the influence of druids from Ireland. He explores the semantic slippage between the Magi of the New Testament and the magi, astrologers and diviners denounced by Isidore of Seville, in double-edged retrospective application to astrologer-druids as symbols of the pagan past. In this sense a medieval invention, the literary druids under discussion exist in a Christian framework, representing the demonic power of an old order ultimately defeated by Christianity, as in the sagas; or, as the druid of the mid-seventh-century *Life of St Bridget* who witnesses the comet which, like the star of Bethlehem, marks the saint's nativity, are integrated into its network of positive Christian signifiers.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 mark a division in Williams' material as we move from early Irish to later Welsh material. Williams is not suggesting the movement of astrological figures and concepts between the two localities (which in terms of extant material appears unsustainable), but rather holds the situation of both, on the western edge of the British Isles, to be analogous in their reception of astrological material and its integration in localised frameworks of meaning. Chapter 3 discusses the influence of Geoffrey of Monmouth, and the astrological apocalypse which concludes the 'Prophetiae Merlini' on Welsh conceptions of astrological portents. As Williams notes, the major problem with assessing the Welsh material is that extant manuscripts containing prophetic and astrologically-inflected material are all later than the twelfth century. The model he constructs is essentially the alignment of Welsh interest with cultural influence transmitted from England to Wales through the influence of the 'Prophetiae', although he does allow room for Geoffrey's manipulation of Welsh traditions which assign an astrological interest to the prophet Taliesin. The exact direction of influence between Geoffrey and Welsh sources remains, however, problematic, and although Williams offers a well-evidenced hypothesis, it remains a significant unknown.

In Chapter 4 we are on firmer ground: an assessment of astrological material in late medieval Wales, in the astrological poems of Dafydd Nanmor, and an assessment of the role of practical astrology practiced by Welsh scholars at Oxford and the English court. This suggestive material relating to the interpenetration of Welsh practice and Anglo-Welsh politics is concluded by poetic observations of the 1402 comet associated with revolt of Owain Glyndŵr, and anticipation of the 'mab darogan', the son of prophecy, the restorer of Welsh sovereignty; and a Welsh verse nativity of Arthur, the son of Henry Tudor, cast also as the 'mab darogan'. This chapter makes available, and brings together, a great body of evidence otherwise largely unavailable to non-Welsh speakers, and should prove an invaluable resource to students of astrology, prophecy, and Anglo-Welsh literary and political relations alike. However, Williams' analysis

reveals a principally one-way transmission, of Welsh assimilation of an English discourse. Although this is a subject particularly germane, given the pregnant terms of Welsh political prophecy applied to the early Tudors, for discussion of two-way transmission, it may well be that we simply do not have the evidence to sustain such a discussion in the realm of astrology alone.

The final chapter moves to the seventeenth century to discuss the astrological poetry of the Welsh Puritan Morgan Llwyd, as a 'self-cancelling' application of natural astrology (183). The central conceit of the poems is that fallen man is subject to the influence of the stars, a predisposition to particular sins and sin in general, which can be overcome by unwavering faith in God. Williams places Llwyd in the context of earlier and contemporary ideas, including the translation of astrological medical treatises from English to Welsh, and the movement of this material from educated Welsh men living in England across the border. Again, this is a well-evidenced and compelling argument, but it remains that the pattern Williams observes in his final three chapters appears to be the alignment of Welsh traditions with a dominant English culture. Although he suggests the complexity of the situation, given the broad scope of the work there is simply not the space to open up the question of the movement of material across national lines in both directions, any further. Although the breadth of the work's ambition is also in this respect its limitation, the wealth of material it covers, and its crucial de-mythicisation of Welsh and Irish astrology and associated literary practices, forms an important contribution to an under-studied, and often marginalised, area of literary-historical study.

Victoria Flood, *University of Swansea*