

ROGER PENSON, *Reading Béroul's Tristan; A Poetic Narrative and the Anthropology of its Reception*. Berne: Peter Lang, 1995. Pp. 116. ISBN: 3-906753-49-2. \$29.95.

Roger Pensom's short study of Béroul's *Tristan* attempts to address two problems inherent in reading this text: 'firstly, the problem of the text's aesthetic unity and secondly, that of the implied set of relations which tie the text into the world of which it is part' (7). Through structuralist and semiotic strategies, Pensom explores the 'doubleness' of Béroul's main characters—the conflicting roles in which they find themselves because of their marital, feudal, and blood relationships. He argues that these roles arise from contradictory cultural influences, the intermixing of Germanic and Roman social structures with Celtic structures which predate these layers. Pensom concludes that by representing a world in transition between the Celtic and later influences, Béroul produced a text whose aesthetic and structural power survives despite the text's fragmentary nature.

In arguing his case, Pensom focuses particularly on scenes which portray the main characters caught between the conflicting expectations which arise from the different cultural layers present in the text. For example, 'Mark is both a feudal king and a proponent of non-patrilinear succession,' Iseut is 'simultaneously a *cètmuinter* and an object of homosocial exchange, and Tristan as a hero is astride two cultures' (110). He devotes special attention to the scenes of the 'rendez-vous épié,' Marc's discovery of the lovers in the forest of Morois, Marc's attempt to have Iseut burned at the stake, and Iseut's ambiguous oath concerning her adultery. Pensom's last chapter pulls together these threads of his approach, underscoring Béroul's skill in building episodes whose larger structural features link them when particular details make them seem dissimilar, whether because they come from different episodes or because lost material prevents us from seeing continuity.

Though Pensom's thesis seems reasonable enough, he presents his ideas in ways which discourage readers from trying to understand the discussion. For example, Pensom's reliance on the special vocabulary of structuralism and semiotics limits his audience somewhat. Similarly, most readers attracted to this volume would expect to find quotes in Old French, but Pensom could have treated his readers much more considerately by providing translations, at least of the non-French quotes (Middle High German and Latin), if not of all the non-English material. More importantly, despite chapter sub-headings and occasional sentences in which Pensom overtly articulates his design, the organization of the discussion is often unclear. This lack of clarity also characterizes the prose in general. His jargon-laden and syntactically cumbersome sentences require an experienced and indulgent reader, and I believe that by retaining such stylistic weaknesses, Pensom risks offending as well as confusing us. Unfortunately the discussion regularly includes sentences such as, 'The defining attribute of the "psychological" is the importance it attaches to causality as a guarantor of the intelligibility of textual meanings and of the decidability of ambiguities' (35).

Pensom's study reminds us that literature, even when fragmentary, can suggest anthropological information in the absence of formal cultural artifacts from the period portrayed. His discussion draws out structural and lexical, as well as cultural,

information which enhances our literary appreciation of the text. If he wrote more precisely and directly, his book would be much more engaging and probably more widely read.

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