

Reviews

NEIL THOMAS, *Wirnt von Gravenberg's Wigalois: Intertextuality and Interpretation*. Arthurian Studies LXII. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005. Pp. viii, 167. ISBN:1-84384-038-3. \$80.

From the time of its composition in the early thirteenth century, *Wirnt von Gravenberg's Wigalois* enjoyed nearly unparalleled popularity and, through numerous adaptations, saw an unbroken line of transmission for the better part of seven centuries. Beginning in the nineteenth century, however, positivistic criticism tended to regard *Wigalois* as a second-rate epigone of the 'classic' medieval German Arthurian romances, most notably of Wolfram's *Parzival*.

In his new study, Neil Thomas soundly rejects this 'rise and fall' school of literary historiography and offers a comparative, diachronic critical re-reading that provides fresh and persuasive evidence that *Wigalois* is no pale pastiche, but rather a 'creative confrontation with the thought-world of his more famous predecessor' Wolfram.

In the first chapter, Thomas deftly incorporates numerous examples from other Middle High German and Old French works of various genres and convincingly demonstrates that medieval authors often saw their work as an obligation to engage in critical dialogue with their literary forbears. More specifically, Thomas lays the groundwork for the crucial role that the father-son relationship between Gawein and Gwigalois plays in *Wirnt's* romance, thereby complicating *Wigalois's* place in the Fair Unknown tradition.

Chapter two argues that the symbols of Fortuna with which the hero so closely associates himself are no longer indicative of his being Fortune's unique protégé, but have instead become symbols that reinforce Gwigalois's familial ties to Gawein and thus establish a paternal legacy, so much so that, as Thomas argues, a more fitting cognomen for the hero might be 'Gawein's Son' and not 'The Knight of Fortune's Wheel.' Because of Gawein's moral legacy, however—his behavior toward women is particularly problematic throughout Arthurian tradition—Thomas is careful to note that the lessons passed from father to son are primarily chivalric and not moral or ethical. *Wirnt's* moral rehabilitation of Gawein is discussed in chapter three, as well as the Christological aspects of Gwigalois's career; especially convincing here is Thomas's discussion of the successful integration of the hero's chivalric method and quasi-messianic purpose.

In the final two chapters, Thomas arrives at the real point of his study: that as a critical response to the ethereal conclusion of Wolfram's *Parzival*, *Wirnt* fluently

allows the genres of courtly romance and *chanson de geste* to coalesce, thereby giving the final segments of *Wigalois* a more firm grounding in the political realities of good statecraft and Christian governance. Thomas claims that by assiduously avoiding the Grail theme and all its attendant ambiguities, Wirnt offers his audience a 'homiletic romance' and a considerably more practicable model of the ideal kingship, pleasing to God and the world alike.

Thomas devotes almost as much time to his discussion of Gawein's and Gwigois's father-son legacy as he does to his thesis that Wirnt is an innovator and not an imitator; one wishes in places that these two critical threads had been woven together more tightly, or that he had devoted more space to each. There is in fact arguably enough material in this interesting and provocative study for Thomas, who has probably dedicated more scholarly energy to *Wigalois* than anyone else in the English-speaking world, to have successfully written two books.

Time and again, scholars have found that at the levels of narrative structure and thematic content, trying to place *Wigalois* into a neatly packaged critical category is a frustratingly elusive task. Thus, *Wigalois* consistently needs to be 'rescued' for the literary canon. Thomas's new work is one of the more convincing of these endeavors. It takes thought-provoking, well-argued steps toward explaining Wirnt's poetic rationale and toward finding a place for the romance in German literary history more commensurate with its well-attested popularity among its earliest audiences. Thomas does much to dislodge some of the all-too-entrenched notions about the 'classical' and 'post-classical' Middle High German Arthurian romance. This book is a must-read for *Wigalois* scholars—an admittedly rare species—yet it also offers numerous insights into the Gawein tradition from which Arthurian comparatists working in English, French or German would surely profit. Like the subject it treats, Thomas's work is itself a 'creative confrontation' with previous *Wigalois* scholarship, a confrontation that ought to prompt a fresh and better informed approach to the romance in the future.

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