The Grail, the Quest and the World of Arthur, éd. Norris J. Lacy

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RÉFÉRENCE


The world of Arthur in this volume is wide indeed, for its geography includes not only France and England, but Occitania, the Netherlands and Iceland, while its disciplinary interests extend beyond literature to embrace iconography, codicology, history and film; temporally, it makes forays beyond the middle ages into the sixteenth century, with a final contribution (by Richard Barber) charting directions for future research.

Martine Meuwese provides a masterful survey of the extant representations of the Grail in French, Italian and German manuscript sources, confronting them with the verbal descriptions in the texts they illustrate. For other areas, she adduces such scant evidence as can be found (including the Valencia Grail and Genoa’s Sacro Catino). The fifty color illustrations that accompany the article constitute a virtually exhaustive catalogue.

The historical chapters are quite varied. Antonio Furtado seeks a model for Chrétien de Troyes’ Perceval in the life and career of its patron, Philip of Flanders. In the same vein, he traces other elements of the story (the scene at the Grail castle, the leper king, the fisher king, the lance and the Grail itself) to people and objects found in the twelfth-century kingdom of Jerusalem. Although by no means conclusive, the study is certainly suggestive. James Carley’s chapter deals less with the Grail than its bearer, Joseph of Arimathea. He traces the association between Joseph and the abbey of Glastonbury through the sixteenth century, showing how aspects of the legend were exploited for a variety of political purposes.
The literary studies cover a wide territory. In reflecting on Wolfram von Eschenbach’s German Grail quest, Will Hasty sees analogies between the romance and the broader cultural and military expansion of Western Europe. After surveying the English treatments of the Grail (Malory, Hardyng and Sir Percyvell) Phillip Boardman concludes that it did not greatly interest their audiences, who were nevertheless intrigued by quests and adventures. This piece is complemented by P.J.C. Field’s detailed analysis of the Malory’s presentation of the Grail in the different parts of the Morte Darthur.

In four studies, the Grail is conspicuous by its absence. The first of these deals with the Icelandic Saga of Tristram ok Ísodd, and Marianne Kalinke studies instead the quest motif, specifically the quest of Tristan’s mother for a spouse worthy of her, and argues that this modification of the Tristan legend was due to the influence of indigenous Icelandic literature. There was a similar lack of interest in the Grail in Occitania, and Richard Trachsler argues that the quest of the Grail was supplanted in this region by the quest for Love. In addition to commenting on the sole allusion to the Grail (canso III of Rigaut de Barbezieux), he provides an edition and translation of Rigaut’s vida, the razo of his poem, and a sixteenth-century life of the poet. Confronting the dearth of Grail quests in fourteenth-century English literature, Caroline Eckhardt proposes that it was not compatible with the historiographical Arthur dominant in England. In contrast, the Queeste vanden Graal in the Middle Dutch Lancelot Compilation is a faithful rendering of its French source, and David Johnson compares it briefly to Malory’s tale of the Sankgreal before concentrating on the ‘quest’ to find meaning in the compilation as a whole.

The studies are complemented by two reference contributions that will be enormously useful. Kevin Harty’s comprehensive ‘The Grail on Film’ gives a summary, reviews and bibliography of twenty-eight films ranging from adaptations of medieval texts (Peceval li Gallois) to contemporary thrillers (Da Vinci Code). At the end of the book, Richard Barber’s fold-out diagram analyzing the Grail scenes in all the French, English, German, Norwegian, Italian, Dutch and Spanish texts, will facilitate comparisons.

This volume is essential for Arthurian scholars, but will also be of interest to anyone who teaches Arthurian material on any level.