

SAUNDERS, Corinne 2010: *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*. [Studies in Medieval Romance 13]. Cambridge, D. S. Brewer. pp. viii+304. ISBN: 978-1-84384-2217. \$95.00/£50.00.



PROFESSOR SAUNDERS OF DURHAM, WHO IN 2001 PUBLISHED a volume on rape, now turns to another sensational theme: magic. Her study (in seven chapters) is imposing, at least in its plan. We begin with magic in Greece, Rome, and the Bible, and then go on to early medieval attitudes, including the warnings of St Augustine, and the penalties of Church councils and canon law. Chapter three concerns white magic (used for healing, inducing love, and so on), in which gemstones were thought to be effective. After that comes black magic: evil arts, shape-shifting, Medea the witch, alchemy. Chapter five discusses the Other World, with fairy mistresses, enchanters, knights, and “the world of Faery.” Then we have Christianity as regards miracles, ghosts, and demons, followed by Sir Thomas Malory on sorcery, marvels, and the Grail. A brief epilogue gestures towards Shakespeare (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Tempest*) and the Renaissance.

Magic in early romance means consideration of standard works: *Beves of Hampton*, Chaucer’s tales of the Franklin, Squire, and Wife of Bath, Gower’s *Confessio*, *Lybeaus Desconus*, *Sir Degarré*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Orfeo*, and so on. Nevertheless, there seem two major problems. First is the question of focus. Paranormal activities of all kinds are here assembled with what some might find to be a lack of cohesion. There appears to be a failure to bring together real magic (amulets, curses, voluntary confessions) with literary treatment of magic (as with Gower and the legend of Medea). The two are presented side by side, without the contacts between them that might be expected.

Second is the treatment. Despite the attractions of her subject, Professor Saunders is not the most exciting of writers. More serious than that are actual inaccuracies, as in an account of Welsh

literature (pp. 180–181). It tells us that Celtic narratives of the Other World “tend to unfold” in “dream-like” ways. We disagree. In, for example, the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, the supernatural characters behave like ordinary humans, their extraordinary experiences being told in the most straightforward way possible, as Kenneth Jackson noted in his *A Celtic Miscellany*. The Book of Taliesin is dated to the “thirteenth century” (it is of the early fourteenth). An edition by B. F. Roberts of the Black Book of Carmarthen is cited from the Idris Foster festschrift of 1978, when no such edition by Dr Roberts exists. The *Mabinogi* hero Pwyll is called “lord” of Dyfed, when he is its prince; a significant point, because the precision of these tales on matters of status suggests composition by an author of exalted rank. Professor Saunders refers on the White Book of Rhydderch to discussion by R. M. Jones in *Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch*, a title she gives inaccurately, with no mention of the better study by Daniel Huws (1991). *Mabinogion* tales are cited from Jeffrey Gantz’s Penguin version of 1976, not Sioned Davies’s improved World’s Classics translation of 2007. The tales are elsewhere misrepresented (p. 202) as “folk stories,” disregarding the universality of narrative in early culture and the evident familiarity of some of them with life at court. Here we may again cite Kenneth Jackson for a classic definition of the former in his *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition*, a volume with comments on stories and the supernatural that have permanent value.

It is true that *Magic and the Supernatural in Medieval English Romance* avoids pretentiousness. It refrains from dropping the names of fashionable critics who might be praised less and read more. Yet some might conclude that the book not only fails to advance its subject as one might expect, but in some aspects will confuse or mislead its readers. It appears that a really penetrating study of magic in the Middle English romance, which co-ordinates medieval dealings in the occult with the literary texts, and which

shows full understanding of the oral and other traditions behind them, is still to be written.

Andrew BREEZE
University of Navarre, Pamplona

REFERENCES

- Bromwich, R. & R. B. Jones eds. 1978: *Astudiaethau ar yr Hengerdd: Studies in Old Welsh Poetry*. Caerdydd, Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru.
- Davies, S. ed. 2007: *The Mabinogion*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Evans, J. G. ed. 1973: *Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch: Y Chwedlau a'r Rhamantau*. [*The White Book of Rhydderch: the Tales and Romances*]. Caerdydd, Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru.
- Gantz, J. ed. 1976: *The Mabinogion*. Harmondsworth, Penguin.
- Huws, D. 1991: Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch. *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 21: 1-37.
- Jackson, K. H. 1961: *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition*. Cardiff, University of Wales Press.
- Jackson, K. H. 1971: *A Celtic Miscellany: Translations from the Celtic Literatures*. 2nd ed. Harmondsworth, Penguin.

