

Ensley, Mimi. 2023. *Difficult Pasts. Post-Reformation Memory and the Medieval Romance*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. Pp. 242. ISBN 9781526157898.

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For medieval readers, knightly romances offered not only narrative entertainment but a variety of templates for behaviour: “Doo after the good and leve the evyl, and it shal brynge you to good fame and renomnee,” as Caxton recommended in the preface to his 1485 edition of Thomas Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur*. By the 1560s attitudes had changed. Post-Reformation writers were quick to dismiss the worth of these tales in creaky old-fashioned forms that (still worse) featured what had become distasteful elements of Catholic belief and practice. Roger Ascham, former tutor of the future Elizabeth I, was just one of many commentators ready to condemn the modes and content of these old stories, writing in *The Scholemaster* of their promotion of “open mans slaughter, and bold bawdrye,” and taking little account of any more positive aspects. Mimi Ensley’s *Difficult Pasts* investigates the range of views taken by post-Reformation readers to these old stories. She cites plenty of examples of the varieties of later opprobrium heaped on medieval romance, looking to what motivated these critiques. But, conscious of how the pervasiveness of such critiques must indicate a continuing appetite for romance tales, she is more centrally concerned with remediations of the genre by and for postmedieval readers, and with the views of history, including the immediate English past, that these remediations encode.

The generic boundaries of romance are notoriously fuzzy, and some ground has to be cleared at the start of the book as the scope of its arguments is outlined. Various attempts to define the genre of medieval romance are reviewed, with a preference expressed in the end for the model developed by Helen Cooper that is based on the recurrence of romance traits termed memes, and for Yin Liu’s identification of prototypical romance features—those found in works that are compiled or listed together in Middle English sources. Ensley limits her coverage to English verse romances with relatively long histories evident in their manuscript transmission, some of which would also appear in late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century printed editions. She excludes late prose romances and prose translations from continental printed editions on the grounds that their transmission has been explored in recent scholarship, and because they are unlikely to have communicated the same aura of the past to post-Reformation readers as earlier romances probably did. In this introductory chapter Ensley also confronts recent analyses of mid sixteenth-century culture that stress only cataclysm and fracture, arguing instead for a wider spectrum of responses to change, and for multivocal ways of remembering. The method of this book is to investigate a variety of responses to the romance past, contextualizing arguments along the way with reference to recent literary and historical scholarship, and deploying with a light touch theory derived from cultural memory studies.

The organization of the book's content around individual case studies is one of its strengths, and produces a series of chapters that generously illustrate the variety of ways in which post-medieval readers and authors viewed the past. Anchoring these views in the material remains present in manuscripts and printed books is a deft move that gives substance and coherence to Ensley's arguments. The notion of the palimpsest, a form of overwriting the past that can serve both to preserve and to obscure it, serves as a starting point for consideration of other possible containers of pastness: those which serve Ensley's purposes most readily are the catalogue, the collage, the monument, and the museum.

The review of cataloguing activities in Chapter 1 starts with John Leland's lists of the books preserved in cathedral libraries and other repositories, and John Bale's extension of this in the lists of British works and writers that he published in 1557 and 1559. Because their appeal and accessibility can misleadingly invite identification only with forms of popular culture, romances are among works likely to escape catalogues of this kind, so Ensley looks to other sources, most less readily perceptible as lists, to see how romances were preserved in sixteenth-century memory. Relevant to this search are the many warnings about the perils of romances as reading matter for the young, in works such as Ascham's *Scholemaster*; a good selection of such works is covered in the discussion and supporting footnotes. The practices of printers in relation to the romances that continued to appear in their lists also turn out to be revealing. William Copland's mid-sixteenth-century reprinting of medieval romances involved the removal of outdated or potentially offensive elements of illustration, and the development of features of design that effectively widened the brand so that romances had the same look as fables and jests. The famous list of books in the library of the Coventry mason Captain Cox, recorded in Robert Langham's letter about the entertainment of Elizabeth I at Kenilworth Castle in 1575, is seen to dissolve romances into a larger body of "unreformed" works that retained a live appeal. The contents of a tract collection or *Sammelband* now in the Bodleian Library (S. Seld.d.45), and possibly compiled post-1605 by the antiquarian scholar John Selden, partly confirms the view of Cox's collection as "transcending time," in Ensley's phrase. To romances and jests printed between the 1520s and 1580 it adds some sixteenth-century editions of short works by Chaucer and Lydgate, nuancing the flavour of the literary past that it preserves as a form of material sampler.

From these different forms of list, catalogue, collection and assemblage that grow from the impulse to gather together works from the past, Chapter 2 moves to activities described under the umbrella term of collage, a form distinguished from the catalogue or list in that it allows for simultaneous "destruction and continuity, erasure and recycling." The case study here centres on Edward Banister, a well-connected Hampshire Catholic, who made and illustrated two manuscript compilations (now Bodleian Library MS Douce 261 and British Library MS Egerton 3132) that include a total of five medieval English romances. Far from simply transcribing what he found in the printed exemplars he probably used, Banister introduced original material in the form of Christograms and new, updated illustrations, some of which are reproduced here. In copying, he also made good seeming errors or deficiencies in his exemplars, a process that Ensley illustrates with examples from *Sir Eglamour*. Collage is a useful overall term to accommodate the variety of Banister's textual and codicological practices, and it accurately conveys the conflation of temporalities present in his manuscripts, where old texts and old beliefs

remain perceptible even if partly dressed in new fashions. Stretching the idea of collage to include Banister's other activities as a book collector and member of a network of Catholic readers seems something of a strain, but the concluding section of the chapter makes some sense of the effort by drawing on modern art-historical definitions of collage and stressing their focus on recombinations of the old and the new, and on integrations of the past into the contemporary.

While the majority of Middle English romances are anonymous, some authors' names are discernible, especially in relation to what might be thought of as higher-end narratives constructed with more obvious signs of literary craftsmanship. Chapters 3 and 4 turn to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century lives of romance narratives by Chaucer and Lydgate, works whose reputations were partly shaped by the developing sense of an English literary tradition with its own cast of laureate poets. The importance of Chaucer's works to this tradition is developed in a series of arguments in chapter 3 about textual monuments and the significance of history to Edmund Spenser and the more obscure seventeenth-century poet John Lane. Spenser's interests in the past—in ruins, in the operations of memory, and in the revivifying capacities of poetry—are considered in relation to the encounter with Chaucer's spirit that he includes in *The Faerie Queene*, and to his deployment of Chaucer's unfinished "Squire's Tale" to celebrate poetry's access to the unknowable. Prompted by a rather different historical consciousness, Lane directed his efforts to continuing the "Squire's Tale," a work he described as Chaucer's "translucent pillare," producing one version in 1616 (Bodleian MS Douce 170) and a greatly extended revision in 1630 (Bodleian MS Ashmole 53). Lane is an intriguing figure, and Ensley draws on his extensive oeuvre to illustrate his belief in the preservative potential of his poetry. This chapter as a whole ranges widely over the tendencies of early modern memorializing, referencing Philip Sidney and William Camden, as well as Spenser and Lane, to tease out the variously historical and exemplary forms of inspiration that romance narratives might supply.

Lane's writings provide a bridge to Chapter 4 and an exploration of the afterlives of some of the sites and material artefacts featured in romances. His retelling of *Guy of Warwick*, licensed for printing but surviving only in manuscript (BL Harley 5243), mentions the early seventeenth-century renovations at Warwick Castle and some items significant to Guy's story apparently still preserved in various locations: his sword, his armour, a shield, and the axe of his giant opponent Colbrond. Ensley's concern in this chapter, entitled "Museums," is with the curation of these material objects, both found and reconstituted, and with the variety of contexts in which they were preserved and displayed. John Lydgate's *Guy of Warwick*, a notably penitential handling of this protean narrative, supplies matter for discussion and keeps alive the interest in "laureate" handlings of romance. The patronage context of Lydgate's poem, in the form of its association with one of the daughters of the fifteenth-century Richard Beauchamp, earl of Warwick, ties it to a sequence of instances of baronial propaganda that resonated over several centuries. The physical objects important to the story—sword, armour and axe—are read in Lydgate's handling as relics with a religious significance transcending time.

Since the tendency of many post-Reformation readers would have been to ignore or deride such significance, romance sites and preserved artefacts came to have new meanings, these often connected with national history or antiquarian concerns. Ensley turns here to the verse rewriting of *Guy of Warwick* by Samuel Rowlands, first printed

around 1609, which depicts King Athelstan retrieving Guy's sword, his armour, and other accoutrements for display at Warwick Castle, thus creating a virtual museum, with its own long history, that would parallel a real collection by this time on view at Warwick (later seventeenth-century accounts would extend the display to include still more objects, and a tomb for Guy). A comparison is drawn here with Arthurian relics such as the round table, Lancelot's sword, and Arthur's seal, which while enthusiastically preserved for view before the Dissolution, seem to have disappeared in the course of the sixteenth century. The much longer life of artefacts associated with the heroic Guy, still attracting visitors in the nineteenth century, as Ensley notes, seems importantly connected not only with national history but with their connection to a specific geographical location.

As the book opened with discussion of palimpsests, so it returns to the notion in its conclusion, emphasising that the various rehandlings and rewritings of romance that it has surveyed contrive to generate "layered and multiple temporalities" (218) rather than effecting erasure. A heavily annotated British Library copy of *Robert the Devil* in what was once a *Sammelband* serves to illustrate how this romance remained continuously meaningful for readers across the charged decades of the sixteenth century, and still later became an object to be preserved as it passed through the hands of a succession of antiquarians into the library of David Garrick. The foregrounding of one final material volume serves as a reminder of Ensley's method throughout this book, and allows her to draw together the strands of argument about romance as a dynamic and multivocal site of memory that have been advanced in its chapters.

Difficult Pasts as a whole is an impressive feat of construction, managing as it does to balance critical and cultural analysis, to sort its selection of texts into deftly differentiated ways of accommodating the past, and to offer succinct but detailed accounts of the manuscripts and printed books with which it is concerned. The care that has gone into its construction extends also to the referencing—although the lack of an overall bibliography, presumably a feature dictated by the publisher, is an occasional irritant. The book is a notably agreeable read, jargon-free, precise in its formulation of ideas and analysis, and able effectively to meld the different discourses, from book history to cultural theory, on which it draws. Although it is not long, its breadth of reference, and its ability to speak to a number of different interests, make it satisfyingly varied and thought-provoking. Its exploration of the post-medieval life of medieval romances as they were copied, printed, and variously adapted, offers insights into the attractions of these narratives, with plenty of quotation from and illustration of particular features that contributed to their long lives. It engages productively with the individuals involved—William Copland, Captain Cox, Edward Banister, John Lane, and a number of others—and in the specifics of their encounters with material books, as both consumers and producers of text. And in selecting romances as a pivot, and attending to a genre which itself deals with histories, idealized or actual, it profitably extends the scope of its multi-layered account of post-Reformation attitudes to the past.

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