

Houlik-Ritchey, Emily. 2023. *Imagining Iberia in English and Castilian Medieval Romance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. Pp. xi + 237. ISBN 9780472133352.

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Emily Houlik-Ritchey's *Imagining Iberia* makes an important methodological intervention, bringing together two literary traditions rarely considered alongside one another to show the insights that can emerge from comparative readings that operate on the basis of neighborly analysis rather than the more traditional paradigm of source studies. Three main chapters each analyze a distinct cluster of story-matter shared across English and Iberian narratives: that of Fierabras, Floris and Blanchefleur, and Constance. Across the book, Houlik-Ritchey builds persuasive arguments for the imaginative significance of Iberia to medieval romance, the implications of topographical specificity or abstraction, and the need for scholars of medieval English to engage far more extensively with work on medieval Iberian studies.

This is a timely volume, building on a number of interests emerging at the forefront of medieval studies. It engages issues of race and religion,¹ space and place, transnational literary studies, and Mediterranean studies.² A strong interest in affect also emerges throughout the book. Houlik-Ritchey cleverly integrates micro and macro perspectives, using individual portrayals of characters or particular scenes to reflect on wider geopolitical implications. Her framework repeatedly emphasizes the ambivalence of the neighbor, using the neighbor as a model both for the type of comparative readings that she centers (privileging texts that are disparately related but might nonetheless throw into relief each other's interpretative choices) and as a theoretical framework through which to interpret particular characters (such as Fierabras). This dual model lends a compelling logic and underlying consistency to the book.

The introduction starts from the intriguing coincidence that Geoffrey Chaucer erases references to Iberia in "The Man of Law's Tale," while Juan de Cuenca omits any reference to England in his Castilian version of the same story. Houlik-Ritchey uses this point of affinity and difference to raise some of the key questions of her study: What are the stakes of how a particular region or nation is—or is not—named? How are Iberia's geopolitical complexities represented or elided in Middle English and Iberian literature? And what light can comparisons between distant analogues shed on these and other interpretative choices? From there, the introduction explores how the book develops and departs from current priorities in romance scholarship, and sets out the comparative and

¹ While the interest in race and religion can be traced back to scholarship by black and brown women in the 1990s (Dharmaraj 1991; de Weever 1998; see further Rambaran-Olm and Wade 2020 and Kim 2019), it has recently been reinvigorated, particularly in light of Heng (2018). For a bibliography, see Rambaran-Olm and Wade (2020), and Hsy and Orlemanski (2017).

² While it is not possible to give a full bibliography here, see, for example: on space and place Dolmans (2020) and Bateman (2023); on transnational literary studies, Zeldenrust (2020), Byrne and Flood (2019), Edlich-Muth (2018), as well as Edlich-Muth's current DFG- and ERC-funded projects; on Mediterranean studies see Kinoshita (2018) and Catlos and Kinoshita (2017).

specifically neighborly methodology, before providing a short summary of each chapter. The rationale behind the neighborly mode of comparison is clear and well-grounded, setting out the value of lateral comparisons as allowing differences and similarities to come to the fore through the act of comparison itself, rather than in response to preconceived ideas and textual hierarchies. Houlik-Ritchey details the links and tensions between neighborly comparison and Mediterranean studies, setting out her ambition to draw Middle English literature into the orbit of Mediterranean studies, and mediating between the historicism of Mediterranean studies and the decontextualization of Kenneth Reinhard's model of neighborly textuality. One of the vital contributions the introduction makes is to point out that the traditional focus on source study has limited our focus to direct lines of influence, often shaped by and contributing to canon formation, a point that has much wider significance and applicability beyond this book. Houlik-Ritchey's demonstration of the value of other kinds of comparison is one of her book's key takeaway points, urging scholars to look beyond recognized sources to more disconnected points of comparison that nonetheless offer helpful insights.

Chapter 1 focuses on the Fierabras story as represented in the Middle English *Sowdone of Babylone* and the Castilian account in Book 2 of Nicolás de Piemonte's *Hystoria del emperador Carlo Magno*. Houlik-Ritchey argues that Ferumbras/Fierabras's trajectory is mapped onto Iberia's in the different endings of these two versions, allowing her to bring together "portrait and panorama" (38) by exploring the violence with which Ferumbras/Fierabras's and Iberia's identity is rewritten in these Christian texts. This chapter offers the most extensive engagement with theories of the neighbor as an ambiguous figure, as a helpful supplement to the primary focus on neighboring as a mode of textual relation. Houlik-Ritchey draws on Slavoj Žižek, Reinhard, and Sigmund Freud to illuminate the overlap between hostility and hospitality in portrayals of the neighbor—the difficulties this figure poses as neither a friend/family member nor an enemy, but whom we often seek to collapse into one of these categories. Houlik-Ritchey also draws on the injunction to love one's neighbor in Jewish and Christian scriptures and briefly explores a passage in *Piers Plowman* that demonstrates Middle English engagement with the ethical problems posed by the neighbor. Richard Godden's work on the neighbor in relation to medieval romance and disability (2020) might usefully have supplemented this discussion, though Houlik-Ritchey's argument is well-grounded in theory as it stands. Žižek's concept of "gentrification," a process "that renders a strange or ambiguous figure more like the self" (36) is central to the chapter, as Houlik-Ritchey argues that Ferumbras/Fierabras is remade in the image of a Christian knight when he learns to value suffering and pain during his fight with Oliver/Oliveros. At the same time, she argues, this change in Ferumbras/Fierabras also gentrifies Christian violence, redirecting it from the intra-religious strife between Roland/Roldán and Charlemagne/Carlomagno to instead portray violence as self-sacrificial, conversionary, and Christ-like. This focus on the association of Christianity with pain and suffering has long been acknowledged in scholarship on the Fierabras narratives, forming a crucial part of Siobhain Bly Calkin's argument about the vulnerability of the Christian body in *Sir Ferumbras* (2011), as Houlik-Ritchey acknowledges. Here, the focus on "gentrification" and the neighbor adds a new and valuable theoretical lens, but the results of this analysis do not radically change our understanding of the primary texts themselves. Nonetheless, Houlik-Ritchey's comparative reading of Middle English and Castilian accounts highlights a number of key differences in their interpretative choices,

while her deployment of “gentrification” is neatly used to bring together the violence inflicted on Ferumbras/Fierabrás and Iberia, and the threats both pose to Christian identity as its neighbor.

Chapter 2, “Floris and Flores in Circulation: Affective Economies in the *Floire and Blancheflor* Story Cluster,” centers its reading of the Middle English *Floris and Blancheflour* and the Castilian *Crónica de Flores y Blancaflor* upon “affective economies,” drawing on Sara Ahmed’s work as well as scholarship on the history of emotions (such as Barbara Rosenwein’s theory of emotional communities, and Glenn Burger and Holly Crocker’s *Medieval Affect, Feeling, and Emotion*). While Houlik-Ritchey’s main contribution to scholarship on the Middle English *Floris* is modest, augmenting the focus on mercantilism noted by Kathleen Coyne Kelly (1994) to observe that Floris’s love for Blancheflour itself circulates as a commodity, she also makes the important intervention of not assuming that the opening of the Middle English work (lost in all of the extant manuscripts) followed its Old French source. She argues that avoiding this assumption highlights the ways in which the Middle English account might deprioritize the religious violence that opens the story in its French original, aligning it in some respects with the Castilian version. Houlik-Ritchey’s readings of the Castilian *Crónica* offer a more exciting view of the importance of elite male networks that span Dar al-Islam in this work, detailing the many changes made to the French source to reframe Flores and Iberia as embedded in wider Mediterranean and Muslim networks of power. Offering an important counter to the tendency to read this version of the narrative in light of its conversionary ending, Houlik-Ritchey instead attends to the extensive and largely positive portrayal of Muslim communities in the *Crónica*, arguing that this is not erased by its conclusion. While the claim that shared chivalric ideals bridge Christian and Muslim ideas of elite masculinity in this period is again not new, as Houlik-Ritchey acknowledges in references, she puts forward a convincing argument about how this repositions the *Crónica*’s representation of Iberia’s hybrid history and offers a very different picture to other depictions that essentialize and flatten the variety of medieval Muslim cultures.

The final chapter focuses on the Constance story with which the book began, concentrating on John Gower’s version in the *Confessio Amantis* and its translation into Portuguese and Castilian, while drawing also upon Nicholas Trevet’s and Chaucer’s versions. Whereas the previous chapters showcased the rich potential of Iberia in the medieval English and Castilian literary imagination, this chapter turns to a group of narratives that marginalizes Iberia. Houlik-Ritchey draws out previously unnoticed parallels between representations of Iberia and Northumbria in the Constance stories to posit a connection between these two regions, in which Northumbria ultimately takes Iberia’s place in Mediterranean networks of power. This offers an intriguing and valuable addition to current scholarship on this narrative: while previous scholars have focused on why the pagan king of Northumbria is depicted so differently to the Sultan whom Constance is first sent to marry (Heng 2003, 226–37), Houlik-Ritchey turns our attention to the more briefly discussed Iberia in comparison with Northumbria itself. While Iberia plays only a marginal role in these tales, Houlik-Ritchey points out that the Constance group “imagines a world . . . that is connected to Iberia almost in spite of itself” (187). In counterpart to the marginalization of Iberia in the Middle English Constance narratives, the Portuguese *Livro do amante* (translated by Robert Payn) and the Castilian *Confesión del amante* (translated by Juan de Cuenca) erase England from the

tale. Payn removes Gower's references to England that explicitly position Northumbria as a metonymy for the nation to instead focus on Northumbria itself, perhaps motivated by the links between northern England and the Portuguese court via Queen Philippa Lancaster. Cuenca takes this even further, perhaps not recognizing the referent of "Northomberland" in the *Livro* and instead presenting Constance's destination as an indeterminate realm known as "Morchonverlande." This opens up the exciting possibility that Cuenca's narrative fundamentally shifts the geography of the Constance story by never explicitly imagining Constance to leave the Mediterranean. Houlik-Ritchey also explores the Iberian works' reduced focus on religious violence and hatred: they attribute the Sultan's mother's violence to her gender rather than her faith, and offer a more nuanced and specific portrayal of Muslim-ruled lands, transforming Gower's vague reference to "Barbary" to concentrate upon "Berberia," an area of North Africa significant to Iberian history. Perhaps unsurprisingly, but nonetheless excitingly, Houlik-Ritchey shows that the Iberian translations of the Constance story offer much more specific and nuanced engagement with Iberian history than the Middle English accounts.

A short but persuasive conclusion reflects on the urgency and necessity of incorporating greater engagement with Iberian sources and scholarship in mainstream medieval studies traditionally focused on languages such as Middle English, French, or German. Houlik-Ritchey shows the rich geopolitical, historical, religious, and cultural possibilities of portrayals of Iberia as a key contact zone between Christian and Muslim peoples, describing how this filters through to Middle English romances in perhaps more nuanced ways than we might expect—if not so nuanced as in works produced within Iberia itself.

Overall, this book is a persuasive argument for and testimony to the benefits of Houlik-Ritchey's conviction that "neighboring texts issue a call for responsibility to and for representational choices that comparative juxtaposition reveals" (209). Houlik-Ritchey is to be commended for her important and exciting approach, which opens up new vistas in medieval studies. This book makes a key intervention in the kinds of comparisons prioritized in mainstream (particularly anglophone) medieval studies and the limitations they impose. Houlik-Ritchey also repeatedly shines a critical light on several key resources for scholars of Middle English, challenging the *Middle English Dictionary's* simplification of geopolitical terminology and its perpetuation of stereotypes, while also highlighting the restricted view of the Constance narratives offered in the latest version of *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*. Written in clear prose, well-referenced, and convincingly structured and argued, *Imagining Iberia* will be a valuable volume for students, teachers, and researchers of Middle English, medieval romance, Iberian studies, and medieval studies more broadly at all levels. Its availability in Open Access form should allow its important ideas to circulate widely. Methodologically, *Imagining Iberia* is an innovative and important book that should inspire specialists of Middle English, French, and German literature to open their eyes to a wider array of comparative possibilities that can enrich our understanding of medieval narratives.

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(Received 29/02/2024)