

Bonsall, Jane. 2025. *Women and Magic in Medieval Romance: Genre, Intertextuality, and Power*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer. Pp. 254. ISBN 9781843846659.

Reviewed by Kirsty Bolton 
University of Oxford
kirsty.bolton@ell.ox.ac.uk

Much focus is given in the crossover between historical and literary sources to what history can tell us about literary texts. In this insightful volume, Jane Bonsall instead asks what close attention to the connections between texts can tell us about medieval audiences of the romance genre and, therefore, our historical and social understanding of their lives. The volume is written in an engaging and accessible way, inviting romance scholars, broader medievalists, and an informed general public to participate in a literary and historically based textual analysis. From the introduction, “Reading Genre, Reading Gender,” onwards, we are invited to examine medieval romance texts both intra- and intertextually in order to better comprehend how Middle English readers enjoyed and integrated the narratives into their social and cultural outlooks. Bonsall argues that paying attention to genre conventions allows for a deeper and broader reading of romance texts and highlights the genre intelligence of the medieval audience, who would have read individual romance texts with an expectation based on their familiarity with the genre.

Bonsall contends that such reading recontextualises maligned characters, like Morgan le Fay, who can be seen in more nuanced ways when viewed across the corpus of texts in which she features. In turn, this “reveal[s] new insights about a medieval audience’s capacity to countenance ambiguous gendered power” (2), building our understanding as modern scholars of medieval concepts of power and social interaction. The focus on women and magical, or seemingly magical, women is a shrewd choice, as it allows the texts to disrupt social norms without disregarding them completely. These characters are women on the edge of accepted society, cognisant of the rules but with the agency to bend or break them. Factors of class, gender, and power are examined by the “fluid characteristics of magical women” (3) within the romances.

As modern readers, we must be aware of historical contingency and cultural specificities in our interpretations of medieval romance. Yes, romance foregrounds women in a way that most other literary genres did not; but it is essentially conservative, upholding gender and other norms. This means that we must pay particular attention to instances in which texts challenge or disrupt

those norms. We can only understand when such subversion is occurring, and what it might be trying to achieve, if we are familiar with the genre conventions.

In chapter one, “Healing Women in The English Tristan texts: Age, Agency, and Morality,” Bonsall emphasises the connection between women, medicine, and magic in fourteenth-century insular romance: “medical skill is one of the most common types of feminine power associated with magic in Middle English romance” (29). The increasing professionalisation of medicine during the period led to fear and suspicion about women’s involvement in more traditional remedies. Romance reflects these anxieties, disrupts and challenges them, as the genre often does with the concerns of its audience. These texts present three types of female healer; the virgin maiden holy healer, the lover-healer, and the older, maternal healer, each of which performs a slightly different role and is treated differently by other characters, representing, perhaps, social categories familiar to the audience. These healing women are prominent in narratives, and often integral to the heroes’ progress, meaning that anxiety about their power is tempered by their necessity. In this chapter, Bonsall focuses on the queen in *Tristan* as an example of ambiguous female power—she is both poisoner and healer. She instigates Tristan’s narrative by poisoning him and then ensures that the love between the knight and Isolde flourishes. In highlighting the ambiguity of the queen’s role in the romance, Bonsall emphasises the complexity of gendered stereotypes in history and in literature.

The author’s expertise as a scholar of intersectional feminism really comes to the fore in the second chapter, “Foreign Queenship in *Bevis of Hampton*: Pleasure, Peril, and Split Perspectives,” as she navigates issues of race, religion, and gender with sensitivity and nuance. Bonsall argues that romance explores fourteenth-century English anxiety over foreign queenship through trope of the Muslim Princess. Her care and diligence are obvious in her commitment to handling difficult subjects with sensitivity, as can be seen in publications that she has co-edited, such as *Medieval Mobilities: Gendered Bodies, Spaces, and Movements* (Price, Bonsall, and Khoury 2023) and *Reconsidering Consent and Coercion: Power, Vulnerability, and Sexual Violence in Medieval Literature* (Bonsall and Piercy 2025). She situates the genre in the historical context of European queens in England in the fourteenth century, noting that tensions with France and other European nations created anxiety about the influence and power of non-English queens. As scholarship is beginning to acknowledge, Bonsall notes that the East of romance bears little, if any, resemblance to eastern or Muslim identities of the period but is, instead, a way for European romance audiences to explore their own individual and collective identities by defining themselves against an imagined other. With this in mind, Bonsall utilises the capitalised phrase Muslim Princesses to acknowledge the complications of race and imperialism that overshadow this trope in romance texts. The chapter

focuses on Josian in *Bevis of Hampton*, arguing that it is the character's agency in choosing both her lover and her religion that creates her new identity, which in itself is fluid. The author's focus on one character in a single text is a framework for analysing race, religion, and gender in an intersectional, inclusive way.

Unlike Muslim Princesses, who usually validate the heroes' religious and national identities, fairies are well known as queering agents in the world of romance; their liminal existence was used as a means to disrupt gender and social norms. In chapter three, "Reconfiguring Space, Gender, and Authority in the Fairy Mistress Romances," Bonsall continues this analysis of fairy mistresses as disruptive forces in order to examine the patriarchal social constructs that governed both medieval society and the romance literature that reflected it. Her analysis of *Sir Launfal* focuses on the social commentary presented in the relationship between Tryamour and Launfal. Bonsall argues that Tryamour's financial and social freedom raises questions about women's control of wealth, especially in comparison to the patriarchal figures who wielded such freedoms historically. She notes that the romance suggests that "fairy women practice better governance and better care for their vassals than do the kings" (131). The text, however, tempers this damning disruption of gender norms by implying that a situation in which a woman's worth outweighs her lover's can only exist in fantasy. The status quo is always re-established in romance.

This chapter also presents an interesting intersectional analysis of Melior in *Partonope of Blois*, who is presented as a fairy mistress until she is subsequently revealed to be human. Her exoticism, as a Byzantine princess, casts her as otherworldly, making connections back to the previous chapter about how English audiences viewed women from Eastern cultures. As throughout the volume, Bonsall reminds us that an intra- and intertextual reading of romance texts reveals much about the medieval audiences who consumed them. A fourteenth-century audience, well versed in fairy mistresses and Muslim Princesses, would note the crossovers within the texts and might add the othering of Eastern women to the tab that constituted their view of the wider world. Romance does challenge categorisations, but it also reinforces the preconceptions of its audience, supporting their individual and collective English identities through creation of an imagined other.

The volume's fourth chapter, "Monstrous Maternity, *Melusine*, and the Threat of the Mature Female Body," was a particular joy for me, as the *Roman de Melusine* is such a pivotal text in my own research. It is amazing that with so much having been written about Melusine over the last decade, the author finds new insights into her balance between humanity and monstrosity. This chapter brings a fresh perspective on the monstrous mother character that is a welcome addition to the current scholarship. Bonsall draws on, among other research, Angela Florschuetz's work on *Melusine*, maternity, and monstrosity, but adds the

angle of maturity. Women's bodies are under constant scrutiny, in life, in art, and in literature, in the medieval and modern periods, but the focus is usually on the potential and policing of young, fertile female bodies. This chapter brings older women's bodies to the forefront, analysing the anxieties and conflicting emotions associated with them. As Bonsall argues, "Feminine monstrosity both in romance and in medieval culture is bound up with ideas of maturity and maternity to do with anxieties about the aging female body" (146). In advocating for a re-evaluation of the visibility of older women in medieval romance texts, Bonsall brings both medieval and modern ideas of femininity and (proto-)feminism to the fore. Melusine is othered, as the Muslim Princesses and fairy mistresses are othered; yet her indispensability to patriarchal social structures is also highlighted, showing that the text, and the wider romance genre, revel in the tension created by this mix of need and revulsion.

Bonsall also reminds us that, reading as they did intra- and intertextually, the conventions of romance gave the audience foreknowledge about the characters' fates. This in itself creates assumptions about the identities of character types that readers might then apply to how they understand and interact with others. Not many older women in the medieval period actually turned into dragons when their husbands betrayed them (and I am not suggesting that fourteenth-century audiences believed that they did), but such associations could well affect real-life perceptions. It is in this way, following the clues left to us, that we as modern scholars can use literature to gain a deeper understanding of medieval lives.

The final chapter, "Reflection, Reiteration, Distortion: Re-Reading Morgan le Fay," is a deep dive into Morgan le Fay and how the kaleidoscope of representations of her across centuries, countries, and genres has resulted in a complex character, used by different authors to further their own narratorial agendas. Bonsall argues that audiences, from the fourteenth to the twenty-first centuries, cannot simply read the Morgan presented to them in a single text; the character has become an amalgam of all her literary representations, growing and becoming more complex with every iteration. It is from this layered reading of Arthur's sometime sister that we learn that Morgan is different to other fairy women. Knowledge of the trope of fairy mistresses in romance adds to Morgan's characterisation in a variety of texts and shows that she is unique because she acts in her own self-interest rather than to further her knight's progress. Familiarity with the rules of the genre creates a deeper understanding of this character, as readers' expectations are challenged.

The volume concludes with a brief coda, "Feeling Genre, Touching Romance." Bonsall's vision is threaded so beautifully throughout her book that there is no heavy lifting required of this conclusion, which reiterates the call to read romance deeply and broadly, collecting knowledge and experience that strengthens our understandings, as modern readers, of both the corpus of texts and their original

audiences. Women, particularly magical women, are at the centre of this vision: “To read romance’s magical women through expectation and surprise, through allusion and subversion and ambiguity, may therefore allow us to touch the medieval, to feel with medieval readers” (215). Jane Bonsall’s volume brings women in romance into sharp focus, which in turn illuminates much about medieval readers and society.

References

- Price, Basil Arnould, Jane Elizabeth Bonsall, and Meagan Khoury, eds. 2023. *Medieval Mobilities: Gendered Bodies, Spaces, and Movements*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bonsall, Jane, and Hannah Piercy, eds. 2025. *Reconsidering Consent and Coercion: Power, Vulnerability, and Sexual Violence in Medieval Literature*. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers.

(Received 03/10/2025)