

LISA JEFFERSON, *Oaths, Vows and Promises in the first Part of the French Prose Lancelot Romance*. Berne et al: Peter Lang, 1996. Pp. 267. ISBN: 3-906750-62-0. \$40.80.

In the wake of such venerable scholars as Ferdinand Lot, Jean Frappier, Alexandre Micha, and more recently Elspeth Kennedy, Lisa Jefferson offers readers a new-historicist approach to the French *Prose Lancelot* which provides a key to the cohesiveness of what she herself calls the 'labyrinthine splendours' of the romance: an in-depth examination of the profuse word-bonds (oaths, vows, and promises), the socio-cultural system they reflect, and their function as motives of action and delineators of character. Written with remarkable clarity of style and with evidence of exhaustive research in the area of canonical law and other legal texts, the study makes vital structural sense of several extensive interlaced episodes heretofore considered extraneous to the central *matière*.

First presented as her doctoral dissertation at Oxford University, the work contains the expected introductory chapter which summarizes prior scholarship, justifies the project, and carefully defines its limitations. Readers eager to get to the heart of the matter will tend to skim this first chapter; however, the 'Summary and General Introduction' section which concludes chapter one represents some of Jefferson's finest writing, a brilliant overview of the *Prose Lancelot* and its reception in the early thirteenth century.

In subsequent chapters various types of oaths are brought into focus: oaths that bring about conflicting loyalties, including oaths that clash with bonds of kinship (the Pharien episodes), unwise oaths (Lancelot and the *chevalier enferré* episodes), blind oaths (Gauvain's quest oath), oaths that limit or prevent action (Hector's promise to his *amie*)—oaths whose special circumstances would necessarily engender intellectual debate in a society governed by a moral/ethical code based on word-bonds. In each case Jefferson demonstrates how the action is driven by the given word and the character of each protagonist revealed through his/her response to the dilemma created by the word-bond. The twelve-page 'Conclusion' draws together the various hypotheses presented in the preceding chapters and reiterates the author's thesis (of which we are already convinced) that understanding the operation of oaths, vows, and promises in the thirteenth century is necessary to the comprehension of the entire romance.

Intimated in Jefferson's analysis are several interesting topoi which certainly bear exploration in future scholarship. For example, the utopia of the Lady of the Lake and her world 'which operate freely, without bonded necessity, out of altruistic love' (242). Since in her illustrations of this theme, it is consistently women who demonstrate altruistic love and self-sacrifice as well as find intelligent solutions to conflicting word-bonds, Jefferson's study tacitly encourages feminist researchers to look carefully at this romance.

*Oaths, Vows and Promises* seeks literally to apply law and order to a very complex work. It does so with impact. The book has certainly enlightened this reader's approach to oaths, vows, and promises in medieval texts. Colloquial expressions such as 'que Dex ne m'aist se...', 'ge vos demant un don,' 'sairement juroit...' 'li sires octroie sor

sa fiance que...’ and the like now represent a social reality and no longer seem merely formulaic. Unfortunately this potentially influential work will find a somewhat limited audience, since no translations are provided for the many quotations in Latin and Old French. Researchers seeking more detail will find a wealth of material in the footnotes, which constitute a significant percentage of the total text. All readers will appreciate the extensive bibliography conveniently separated into primary sources, literary criticism, major legal and theological texts and secondary historical and legal works.

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