

CLAUDIA SEEBASS-LINGGI, *Lecture d'Erec: Traces épiques et troubadouresques dans le conte de Chrétien de Troyes*. Publications Universitaires Européennes: Série XIII, Langue et littérature françaises 211. Bern: Peter Lang, 1996. Pp. 295. ISBN: 3-906756-09-2. \$52.95.

The point of departure for this study of *Erec* is the author's conviction that important relationships exist between Chrétien's first romance and the chansons de geste and troubadour lyrics. (Owing to space limitations, this review will concentrate largely on the chanson de geste section). By studying those relationships, Seebass-Linggi hopes to demonstrate that Chrétien's conception of his character and of his chivalric exploits is ironic or 'souriant.' In the process, she offers close and careful analyses, frequently calling our attention to unusual uses of particular words and formulas and to narrative details often overlooked by other critics.

Despite the care of her readings, the book is less than entirely satisfactory. Seebass-Linggi considers it important to begin by studying the thirteenth-century Prose *Erec* (a largely unrelated text, though devoted to Erec) in order to provide an interpretive key to its predecessor. Accordingly, noting that the hero of the later romance is 'un chevalier obscur, attaché excessivement au code chevaleresque,' she concludes (19) that the prose author must be magnifying negative characteristics already present, though not necessarily visible, in Chrétien. In both principle and practice, I find it hard to accept the reliability of the later romance as an index to the earlier one. If the idea Seebass-Linggi is seeking is in Chrétien, there is no need to seek confirmation in the later text; if it is *not* there, reading back from the prose romance cannot make it appear.

Even if we concur with her reading, the interpretive ground remains shaky. Evaluating Chrétien's response to the chansons de geste is an exceedingly delicate matter, since he makes only two explicit references to the genre. Seebass-Linggi must therefore deal also with passages in which Chrétien *may* have the epic in mind. Thus, when he emphasizes the extraordinary length of battles or Erec's prodigious prowess, she concludes that he is playing on the characteristics of the epics, retaining their form but distancing himself by dramatizing their *invraisemblance* and thus offering a subtle critique of chivalry.

Elsewhere (66-67), discussing a tournament scene in which Erec is lavishly praised as the equal of Alexander and others, Seebass-Linggi takes the disproportion (*écart*) between that praise and his acts as evidence that Chrétien's passage is ironic. That conclusion may well be correct, but it leads to another, more curious, one: since tournaments in romance imitate epic battles, Chrétien is here distancing himself from the total devotion to heroism so valued in the chanson de geste.

The discussion of Chrétien's two references to chansons de geste is on firmer footing but not entirely persuasive. The second one (ll. 6675-78), for example, compares Arthur's generosity to that of 'all the kings named in *diz* and in chansons de geste.' However, since kings in the epic are noted for valor more than for generosity, she suggests (153) that this reference is faint praise and may actually express reservations about Arthur's generosity. (Elsewhere, we are told that Erec's generosity is questionable

as well, because, having received a gift first, he is simply obeying the dictates of a code that requires giving in return.)

The pages devoted to the lyric consider the reciprocal relationships between Chrétien and the troubadours, and especially the particular references made to Erec by the latter. There are seven such references, although only three of them, the author admits, provide 'pistes' that lead us to an interpretation of *Erec*. That interpretation agrees, we are told, with the contention by Fanni Bogdanow that Chrétien inverted the roles of Erec and Enide, making her the long-suffering 'fin'aman' and him the dominating *dompna* of occitan tradition.

This is clearly a book that Chrétien scholars should know; it is thorough, thoughtful, and well researched, and Seebass-Linggi is less categorical in her pronouncements than a brief review may imply. I share her impression that Chrétien's text is often playful and ironic, and it is certain that he was not unaware of earlier and contemporary literary traditions. But there are more than a few instances in which I find her evidence thin or the conclusions unpersuasive. To my mind, the book is ironically more successful in its close readings of passages from *Erec* itself than in its effort to establish and study connections—some of them solid and obvious, others tenuous or hypothetical—to other genres and texts.

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