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REVIEWS

John W. Baldwin, *Aristocratic Life in Medieval France: The Romances of Jean Renart and Gerbert of Montreuil, 1190–1230* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 2000) 359 pp.

Historians of thirteenth-century France have traditionally based their works on the Latin writings of clerics, whose texts do not reveal much information about the quotidian life of lay aristocrats. In an attempt to gain fresh insight into medieval aristocratic life, renowned historian John Baldwin has written a new book in which he turns his attention from the ecclesiastical Latin sources he knows so well to a relatively new source for medieval historians, twelfth- and thirteenth-century vernacular romances. Commenting on the reluctance of earlier historians to work with these sources, Baldwin writes, “if other historians have hesitated, I do not, and I proposed unabashedly to read vernacular literary texts as historical sources on the activities of the laity hitherto obscured in clerical Latin.” This is a wise objective, and Baldwin must be praised for introducing non-traditional sources into his historical repertoire.

Limiting his study geographically to Northern France and chronologically to the period 1190–1230, Baldwin focuses primarily on four romances: Jean Renart’s *Escoufle* and *Roman de la Rose*, and Gerbert de Montreuil’s *Roman de la violette* and *Continuation* to Chrétien de Troye’s *Conte du graal*. His strategy is to contrast these vernacular authors’ depictions of aristocratic life with material found in writings of various contemporary theologians such as Master Peter the Chanter, Master Robert of Courson, Master Thomas of Chobham, and Master Raoul Ardent, all of whom taught at the cathedral school of Notre Dame and whose work influenced both Innocent III and Philip Augustus.

Baldwin’s book consists of eight chapters: he addresses the issues of authorial intention and audience in three and dedicates each of the remaining five to an aspect of aristocratic life such as love or chivalric prowess. Baldwin begins his study with a chapter on the romance authors and their narrative construction. Using Jaussian terminology, he asks what were the contemporary audience’s “horizons of expectations,” something that can only be known to the modern reader through a careful analysis of the texts themselves. Another chapter concerning

the political inclinations of the contemporary audiences follows in which Baldwin provides ample historical background. The concluding chapter is about the transmission of the texts from the Middle Ages to the present. There was a resurgence in the popularity of these romances at the end of the thirteenth century, when numerous aristocratic patrons commissioned copies, as well as renewed interest in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is in these three methodological chapters that Baldwin addresses important questions about authorial intent and hermeneutics as well as the use of literary sources for historical enquiry. These medieval romances are multi-layered and there are numerous ways to read these texts. Baldwin's approach can best be described as "middle-of-the road," not positivistic, yet not overtly post-structuralist. He admits to profiting from historians and literary critics, but not limiting himself to the methods of either discipline. One problem with this book is that Baldwin saves many important methodological points for his last chapter. For example, in the final chapter, Baldwin explains how he has profited from earlier scholarship, especially that of Rita Lejeune and her followers. This is but one extremely important point that should have come earlier in the book. The book might have been better structured had Baldwin divided it into two parts, the first concerning theory and the second a detailed analysis of the romances.

In between the introductory and concluding theoretical chapters are five chapters in which Baldwin analyzes the romance authors' depictions of noble activities such as fighting, gift exchange, women, food and dress, and worship. Baldwin is careful in his discussion of the romances to give adequate historical background information as well as summaries of the romance plots, making the book accessible to the non-specialist. Someone well-versed in Arthurian literature would not find these descriptive paragraphs to be groundbreaking but would certainly profit from the comparisons to ecclesiastical writings. Baldwin primarily uses Peter the Chanter as his foil, a strategy that is especially effective in the chapter on aristocratic religion and chivalric prowess. This is not surprising since clerics and romance writers had different agendas when writing about activities such as jousting or almsgiving. However, Baldwin uses this comparative method unevenly throughout the book, and some chapters, most notably the one on women, are based almost exclusively on the romances, leaving this reader asking for more.

More and more medieval historians today are turning to non-traditional sources such as hagiography, courtroom testimonies, art historical material, and archeology with promising results. In walking the line between disciplines, it is hard to please every audience. Baldwin is without doubt one of the leading historians of medieval France; he knows the period and place about which he writes intimately. He has written a thorough, informative book that clearly presents scholarship from historical and literary fields to a broad audience. It is a book that can profit both the specialist and non-specialist alike.

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