



PROJECT MUSE®

Before Malory: Reading Arthur in Later Medieval England by
Richard J. Moll (review)

Patricia DeMarco

Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Volume 27, 2005, pp. 339-342 (Review)

Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.2005.0040>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/587228/summary>

comparative study. She draws not only on literary texts but on historical, religious, and medical as well. She employs not only the methods of literary criticism but also the comparative methods of anthropology and religious studies. McCracken's ambition, however, is not limited simply to showing the ways in which quaint medieval ideas about blood grounded antiquated cultural beliefs about gender. Rather, she shows how persistent these ideas have been over time, even as the science and theology that underwrote them have been exploded. The story of Perceval's sister in the thirteenth-century *Queste del saint graal* provides a means of reading Alice Cooper's "Only Women Bleed." Joan of Arc and Ridley Scott's *G.I. Jane* provide remarkably similar commentaries on the anxieties that surround the woman warrior, anxieties as deeply embedded in our cultural consciousness in the wake of the first Gulf War as they were during the Hundred Years' War, when Joan was burned at the stake. (One can hardly resist invoking as further evidence of such anxiety Newt Gingrich's 1995 comment that women are unfit for combat because of their "monthly infections.") The brief analysis of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's 1982 film of Wagner's *Parsifal* might be considered emblematic of McCracken's method: a late "twentieth-century interpretation of a nineteenth-century opera based on a thirteenth-century German romance" (p. 108). However, McCracken never allows her comparative method to become monolithic or essentialist; rather, each text is carefully located in its particular historical time and space; each elucidates the values embedded in the gender system of its own time. But such histories are not viewed as a series of discrete, isolated moments of time. Instead, the earlier texts and the hierarchies for which they are vehicles are shown to be sedimented in later ones, part of the European cultural imaginary that, despite its overvaluation of classical and Enlightenment values, is still surprisingly medieval.

Laurie Finke
Kenyon College

RICHARD J. MOLL. *Before Malory: Reading Arthur in Later Medieval England*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. Pp. ix, 368. \$60.00.

With this wide-ranging study of medieval Arthurian narratives, Richard Moll challenges the "modern supremacy of Malory's narrative," arguing

that it is “less like the inevitable culmination of medieval Arthurian traditions” than a sharp divergence from the Brut tradition, especially in Malory’s willingness to “accept a wide variety of material as authentic” (p. 228). Moll’s main thesis is that chronicle writers before Malory were far more discriminating; they consistently sought to distinguish between the romance character and the historical figure, and were eager to defend the historicity of the Galfredian narrative. Moll excavates chronicles, both well known and obscure, and discovers a sharp awareness of competing narrative traditions and a critical, sophisticated historiographical consciousness that guided these chroniclers through the complexities of disparate textual traditions.

In chapter 1, “The Years of Romance,” Moll surveys chronicles containing Arthurian matter, from universal chronicles such as Jacob van Maerlant’s *Spiegel Historiae* to Wace’s *Roman de Brut* and Mannyng’s *Chronicle*. The thirteenth-century Flemish chronicler, Maerlant, provides the most explicit discussion of competing narrative traditions, criticizing “the silly fictions” of the Grail legend popularized in the French prose Vulgate cycle and casting aspersions on writers who included characters not found “in the Latin.” Chroniclers such as Wace and Mannyng offered less extensive commentary, but they were more influential, and their handling of competing narrative traditions shaped the strategies of subsequent writers. Wace’s particular contribution was twofold. He questioned the veracity of those adventures ascribed to the first period of peace by post-Galfredian storytellers, and this, in turn, encouraged writers to view that peaceful interlude as a potential repository for romance material. In this way, Wace created “a narrative space within the chronicle tradition in which dubious narratives could exist, albeit without any claim to historical veracity” (p. 16). Mannyng followed Wace’s lead but added a further distinction: he located untrustworthy material culled from verse romance in the first period of peace, and he relegated episodes derived from the prose romances to the second period of peace. Subsequent translators and scribes thus inherited a strategy for handling conflicting narrative traditions, and Moll finds in a remarkable range of thirteenth-century chronicles the influence of their conjointure of narrative episode (the periods of peace) and theme (the difficulty of separating fable from truth).

Central to Moll’s thesis is the assertion that chronicle writers before the fifteenth century perceived the French prose Vulgate cycle as an untrustworthy body of fabulous “romance” material. As Moll himself

acknowledges, few writers offer the kind of explicitly disparaging commentary found in Maerlant. This poses a challenge: faced with tantalizing allusions to “magel” tales, how do we ascertain the chronicler’s attitude toward the romance materials he interpolates? Moll often handles the difficulties deftly, as when he examines the Arundel redactor of Robert of Gloucester’s *Metrical Chronicle*. The redactor turns to the Vulgate cycle as his source for the tale of Arthur pulling the sword from the stone. Moll argues provocatively that both the redactor’s aside to his audience at this moment and his act of framing the interpolation with the rubric “Coronacio Arthuri, secundum sent Graal. Nota de historia Galfridus Monemouthe” (p. 204) were intended to set the story off from his historical narrative and mark it as the unreliable “stuff of romance” (p. 205). At other moments, Moll’s method of working by implication is more strained, as when he argues that Mannyng’s “refusal to translate French romance is a tacit rejection of it” (p. 28). Here one might legitimately question the confident assertion that absence implies a strategic rejection of romance material (p. 27).

In addition to treating chronicle accounts of the Arthurian past, Moll devotes several chapters to literary works, discussing the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* in chapter 4 and the romances, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the *Awntyrs off Arthure*, in chapter 5. As his title for chapter 5, “Adventures in History,” emphasizes, Moll believes that all three poems should be contextualized in relation to the Brut tradition. Moll traces the indebtedness of these poems to the Galfredian model, examining their use of the historical pattern of rise and fall, their thematization of mutability, and, in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, the characterization of Arthur as “a king whose primary concern is political expansion and military conquest” (p. 104). The chapters offer insightful and detailed discussions of the imprint of Galfredian themes on each work. One might have hoped for a more careful discussion of the ways in which these texts negotiate the tensions between an assertively secular historiography (pace Hanning’s now-classic treatment of the *Historia*) and the homiletic and penitential strains that critics have long discerned in these works. The problem is not that Moll challenges those who have read the poems as religious in theme, but rather that he never explains how the thematization of the Arthurian court’s sinfulness (as emphasized in his reading of the *Awntyrs*) is consistent with a putative commitment to Geoffrey’s secular, amoral view of history.

Throughout the study, readers will appreciate Moll’s command of the

source texts that medieval chroniclers blended and his ability to build dense readings that do much to explain how writers could both borrow from the romance tradition and maintain their claim to be discriminating historians committed to preserving the integrity of the Galfredian account. The conceptual apparatus is less rich, as in the treatment of the study's key definitional terms, history and romance. Moll begins by remarking, sensibly enough, that we need not impose rigid generic labels on Arthurian narratives, but his alternative conception of distinct traditions defined by their narrative content fails to address or resolve some of the real challenges that have been posed by scholars such as Gabriel Spiegel. Thus when Moll acknowledges that writers such as Wace introduced non-Galfredian material into their narrative (for example, the creation of the Round Table), his original criteria for distinguishing the chronicle tradition has to be jettisoned. What remains uncertain is precisely why the creation of the Round Table was, or should be, perceived as "historical," whereas other extra-Galfredian events are relegated to the status of fable. An implicit sense of what separates the historical from the fabulous is certainly at work here, but it remains inadequately theorized.

Despite some problems in the subsidiary arguments, this study presents a strong and convincing case for rethinking the relationship of chronicle writers and redactors to their sources. Moll's book will certainly enrich our sense of how communities of readers navigated a complex and multifaceted textual tradition. In so doing he offers a valuable contribution to both Malory studies and the increasingly exciting reevaluation of the chronicle tradition now under way.

PATRICIA DEMARCO
Ohio Wesleyan University

THOMAS A. PRENDERGAST. *Chaucer's Dead Body: From Corpse to Corpus*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Pp. vii, 180. \$90.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

Thomas Prendergast's book is both a study and a product of what he describes as "an ongoing historical obsession" with the interlinking of "body, death, corpus, money" in relation to Chaucer and his tomb—