

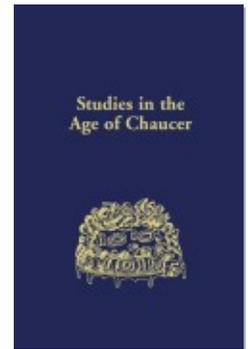


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The Romance of Arthur ed. by James J. Wilhelm, Laila
Zamuelis Gross (review)

Karl Heinz Göller, Jean Ritzke-Rutherford

Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Volume 7, 1985, pp. 267-270 (Review)



Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.1985.0040>

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Given the daunting scholia to the *Troilus*, it is not to be expected that Wetherbee will break new ground with every cut of his spade. Even so, the ratio of truly new ideas to elegant rehash is very high, especially when compared with some other recent studies of the poem. Still, one might wish that more of Wetherbee's opinions were true as well as tried. For instance, he tells us (in a footnote on p. 94) that "the most likely source" of Criseyde's odd allusion to the Elysian fields as the "feld of pite" is *Met.* 11.62. That is what Robinson repeated from Root, who probably repeated it from Kittredge, but the most likely source is actually the *Ovide moralisé* (Witlieb, *N&Q* 16.250), a text nowhere mentioned by Wetherbee despite its demonstrable presence in Chaucer and its prominent presence in Guillaume de Machaut. This minor point illustrates a more major reservation: it seems to me that Wetherbee systematically neglects a large body of pre-Chaucerian adaptations of Ovid and of Latin Ovidiana (especially the *Pamphilus*) that might lend a very different moral implication to the adjective "Ovidian" from the one that seems to be present in his analysis.

The author's attitude toward other scholars and critics is courteous, though he typically prefers benign neglect to any sort of intellectual engagement with other points of view, often giving the impression that if they exist, he knows little of them. Among the names missing from his index are Clogan, Comparetti, Fansler, Hanning, Hoffman, Hollander, Munari, Ruggiers, Shannon, Vance, Wenzel, Wilkinson, Wise, and Wood.

The richness of the book inevitably brings with it many opportunities to pick quarrels, but I could do so only at the expense of misrepresenting both the book and my own final attitude toward it, an attitude that must be one of respect and gratitude. Any student of Chaucer must applaud this strenuous effort by a distinguished medievalist to expand our awareness of the nature and implications of the poet's literary education and to deepen and inform our appreciation of his marvellous uses of the past.

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JAMES J. WILHELM and LAILA ZAMUELIS GROSS, eds. *The Romance of Arthur*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1984. Pp. vii, 314. \$19.95.

The field of Arthurian literature is well endowed with publications of primary sources — let alone secondary literature. And yet this anthology of

exemplary Arthurian texts in modern English translation fills an important need. The selections cover the major stages in the development of the matter of Britain, while the introductions to the several chapters highlight some of the scholarly controversies and problems involved. This is an excellent textbook for a one-semester course on Arthurian literature and for student background reading.

But it is also a useful compilation of basic texts for the steadily growing body of Arthurian scholars all over the world. The reader is led from the early origins of the legend in Welsh tradition to the Latin chronicles, through twelfth-century French poetry to late-medieval English works. Two long alliterative poems from the end of the fourteenth century or the early fifteenth century are presented as exemplary: *Gawain and the Green Knight* which is printed in toto (as is Chrétien's *Lancelot*) and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. The collection closes with the late-fifteenth-century prose *Morte Darthur* of Sir Thomas Malory.

All translations have been freshly commissioned, a wise decision in view of some atrocious translations of Arthurian stories still widely popular today. J. J. Wilhelm took upon himself the tricky task of newly translating *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. He follows the original (Oxford text) rather closely, reducing the alliteration and suppressing one of the rhymes in the wheel. It is easy to see why Wilhelm has abandoned several metrical features of the original version. Some will deplore that the rhythm and therewith the flair have thus been lost in places. This is particularly true of the short bob line, which is one of the most attractive characteristics of the poem. Wilhelm's reasons, however, are clear. His translation is eminently readable; it renders atmosphere, tone, and *sen* of one of the best pieces of medieval literature. The *Alliterative Morte Arthure* passages were reprinted from the recently published translation by Valerie Krishna, who has also published a valuable edition of the text (1976). Krishna's translation deserves special praise. It conveys the rigor and poetic spirit of the original; the selections presented will invite readers to study the whole of her translation, which was published in 1983. The chapters on early Welsh legends and Latin chronicles are composed of text selections interspersed with explanatory comments. In the case of Malory the original syntax was retained, with only minor changes in vocabulary and spellings.

As might be expected, the various translations, introductions and comments differ in quality. The first chapter, by James Wilhelm, is disappointingly positivistic and paraphrastic. Wilhelm recognizes that the historical basis of Arthurian literature is the least important aspect of legend and

myth. And yet he deals with Latin chronicles only under the perspective of Arthur's actual existence. Recent important insights, e. g., on the nature of history versus fiction, the political motivation of chronicles, and the widely differing assessments of Arthur are neglected. Richard M. Loomis gives a short account of both *Culhwch and Olwen* and Geoffrey of Monmouth. His bibliographical note on the *Historia regum britanniae* is all too short, and his list of secondary literature mentions only Tatlock's work *The Legendary History of Britain* (1950) and Roger Sherman Loomis's *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages* (1959), a book which, however valuable, is out of date and in need of revision.

The remaining chapters of the book are, by way of contrast, well documented with up-to-date bibliographical references, however brief. William Kibler's characterization of Chrétien's *Lancelot* neatly summarizes the major points of scholarly interest while at the same time encouraging further reading in the field. From the twelfth-century French *Lancelot* the book leaps to the late fourteenth century. Wace and Lagamon were omitted because of their alleged resistance against anthologizing; and yet the gap is deplorable and unwarranted. It is difficult to perceive why Lagamon should not admit abridgment as readily as Malory does. The chapter on the origin of the Round Table, for instance, would have been an instructive illustration of an important stage in the development of the legend.

One might even question whether *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* should be seen as representative of English tradition. The introduction to *Gawain* ignores this problem, approaching the text as an autonomous literary product largely divorced from context. Most questions connected with the position of this fine medieval romance in the alliterative tradition and the historical context are glossed over. Valerie Krishna's rendering of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, however, is impeccable in summing up the unique character of the poem and its position in the alliterative and Arthurian traditions.

No less informative is Laila Z. Gross's introduction to Sir Thomas Malory. In the extremely compressed space allotted to her, she has managed to capture the fascination and at the same time the difficulty of Malory's *Morte Darthur* and the Arthurian legend as a whole. Her bibliographical notes provide a guideline to current research and are a challenge for student readers to delve further.

In all, this volume is useful for its wide coverage, its easy reading, and its attractive format. It may well become a favorite textbook of lecturers and

students who because of language problems cannot or will not go back to the difficult and at times even forbidding originals. The anthology can particularly be recommended to students who do not specialize in the ever-widening world of Arthur but feel the need for a trustworthy guide to this important body of literature. Moreover, it will be a reliable source of information and inspiration for devotees and fans from particular genres and media such as Arthurian films, musicals, ballets, etc., who feel the need for a more comprehensive view of the whole matter of Britain.

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CHAUNCEY WOOD. *The Elements of Chaucer's Troilus*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1984. Pp. xii, 204. \$35.00.

Chaucer concludes *Troilus and Criseyde* with a request, addressed to “moral Gower” (and “philosophical Strode”): “ther nede is, to correcte” his work. Wood concludes his study by revealing that what he has “asked for—and sometimes attempted”—is a “Gowerian” reading of the poem (pp. 168–69). Gower had later produced his own exemplary versions of the story of Troilus in *Confessio Amantis* (notably at 5.7597–602); but Wood does not discuss that. The spirit that he summons up to “correcte” modern misreadings of Chaucer’s poem assumes the shape of the author of *Vox Clamantis*. Wood argues (pp. 31–37) that “what Chaucer Really Did to *Il Filostrato*” was reshape the story of the besotted Trojan prince so that it might act as a warning to the inhabitants of “New Troy” (i.e., London) in the spirit of *Vox clamantis*, and a scattering of writings by other fourteenth-century moralists, who saw the debilitating power of Venus as a major threat to the realm. So the pagan actors in this “tragedye,” set in the period of antiquity, are treated as if they were parishioners of Chaucer’s Parson, who declares that “fornicacioun, that is bitwixe man and womman that been nat married . . . is deedly synne, and agayns nature” (cf. p. 168). Consequently Criseyde is not so much to blame for her “infidelity” (*sic*) to Troilus, through her “carrying-on” with Diomedes, as for committing herself to an extramarital affair in the first place (p. 140).