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Le Roman de Thèbes (The Story of Thebes) trans. by John Smartt Coley (review)

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I only wish to God that it were night,
 That night would last for ever and a day,
 And all these people here had gone away.

(cf. *MerT* 1762–64). Most often it is hard to see the point of the technique:

A hard-up widow, getting on in age,
 Once on a time lived in a small cottage.

(cf. *NPT* 2821–22). It does not seem possible that one is intended to draw out the second syllable of *cottage* here to bring out the rhyme; but if not, what is achieved by eye rhyme on an unstressed syllable?

I do not want to denigrate this translation, or its author. What has been done has been done conscientiously and worthily: the translations are careful and maintain a high level of accuracy, and there are times, especially in the comic tales, when one can take genuine pleasure in the translator's skill. My argument is simply that translation of Chaucer is not only unnecessary but undesirable, since it does, in the end, a disservice to Chaucer's poetry.

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JOHN SMARTT COLEY, trans. *Le Roman de Thèbes (The Story of Thebes)*. Garland Library of Medieval Literature, vol. 44, Series B. New York and London: Garland, 1986. Pp. xlv, 240. \$40.00.

Along with the *Roman de Troie* and the *Roman d'Enéas*, the twelfth-century French verse narrative known as the *Roman de Thèbes* helped to convey the legends of classical antiquity to the later Middle Ages. *Thèbes* begins with a brief retelling of the story of Oedipus and then focuses upon the dispute between the fated king's sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, who become embattled over the question of which of them should rule Thebes. As one would expect, the poem reflects not only the ancient theme of a feud between brothers, but also various medieval preoccupations, including the nature of feudal loyalty and the conduct of love affairs. Chaucer may well have used *Thèbes* (see, e.g., *Troilus and Criseyde*, II.100) and the poem is important in its own right. Until the book under consideration here, no

modern English translation of the whole of *Thèbes* seems to have been published.

It must be said that Coley's decision to base his translation on the 1890 edition of Léopold Constans (*Le Roman de Thèbes*, Paris: SATF, 2 vols.) is disquieting. Constans, working according to the editorial conventions of his time, produced a reconstructed text that he regarded as capturing the lost "original" form of the poem. As Coley himself describes it, Constans accomplished this goal "by selecting and bringing together (sometimes in different order) various passages and episodes from the various manuscripts and by adding, deleting, correcting, and changing lines on the basis of his conception of the twelfth-century original" (p. xviii). Constans' edition, therefore, is an editorial creation. Modern editors, working nearly a century later and following the conventions of our own time, have shown an increasing preference for establishing a text according to one specific manuscript, achieving by this method an undeniable authority: such an edition is authenticated by its manuscript forebear, despite whatever flaws that forebear might contain. (Even its mistakes are genuine, i.e., medieval, ones.) The Variorum Chaucer project, for instance, exemplifies this principle by choosing the Hengwrt manuscript as its basis for *The Canterbury Tales*, rather than trying to editorially reconstruct an "original" Chaucer text.

Given this evolution of editorial expectations, one regrets Coley's reliance upon Constans—especially in view of the fact that a good modern edition of the oldest complete *Thèbes* manuscript, MS C, was known to Coley (*Le Roman de Thèbes*, ed. Guy Raynaud de Lage, Paris: CFMA, 1966–1967, 2 vols.). A partial edition of this manuscript was also known to him (*A Critical Edition of the "Roman de Thèbes," Lines 1–5394*, ed. Dana Phelps Ripley, Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1960). An explanation of Coley's choice of Constans may perhaps lie in the fact that, as he explains, the first half of his translation had been submitted as part of his Ph.D. requirements in 1965 (p. xlii). This would have taken place just before the edition by Raynaud de Lage appeared.

It is understandable that in 1965 Coley was committed to Constans. However, for publication of the translation in book form some twenty years later, it would have been appropriate to discard Constans for Raynaud de Lage, or even to have turned directly to the manuscripts, which are easily accessible: three of the five extant complete copies are in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, one more is in the British Library in London, and the last is in the Bodmer Library in Geneva. Indeed, Coley states that he examined four of the five copies (p. xx). To have continued to work from Constans has

meant that Coley's translation rests unnecessarily upon a nineteenth-century (rather than a medieval) text. There is a genuine risk that medievalists who do not read Old French—the very audience for whom the book is presumably intended—will rely too much upon the translation and attribute to its version a greater authenticity than it in fact possesses. It would be dangerous, for instance, to use this translation for any close inquiry into Chaucer's relationship to the *Roman de Thèbes*.

Enough said on that matter, or, as Chaucer put it, "That wil not be, mot nede be left" (*Book of the Duchess*, line 42). The translation itself is in general excellent, preserving the meaning of the Constans *Thèbes* very well. Both the sprightly quality of the French couplets and their rhyme pattern are lost, as the translation flattens out into near-prose, but this is a fully acceptable transformation since Coley's intention is to provide a nearly literal, not a "poetic," rendering.

There are occasional rough spots, as when, in the context of a battle scene, the narrator's remark *Tant gentil home ! . . . ! Veissiez morir* (lines 3397, 3399), which clearly means here "So many noble men . . . you could have seen die" on the battlefield, is translated, instead, as "Many noble men . . . You may have seen die." Both "you *could* have seen" and "you *may* have seen" are hypothetical or conditional ways of putting it, rather than the declarative option ("you *did* see") but the first form preserves the fictional perspective (had you been there—but you weren't—you could have seen them die), while the second seems to assume that perhaps in some other circumstance we may indeed have seen many men die, an interpretation which deflects our attention from the carnage at hand. This, however, is a fine point, and my citing it, rather than having a collection of larger lapses to mention, may serve as an affirmation of the general fidelity of Coley's translation.

The essential stylistic simplicity of Constans' French text is well caught at certain moments of high tension. In this version, for example, after Oedipus has torn out his eyes, his two sons crush the ejected eyeballs under their feet, and Oedipus curses them. The poem does not give way to histrionics, however. Oedipus's invective occupies a mere eight lines, during which he calls upon the gods to destroy the violent young men. The narrator then comments, *Tant simplement les apela ! Tot li firent ço qu'il prea* (lines 517–18). Coley translates, "He called on the gods so earnestly / They did for him all that he prayed," a rendering that captures the profoundly ominous and yet wholly restrained tone of the French text.

Though Chaucerians and other specialists should use this translation only with the utmost caution, as indicated above, its readability will make it

welcome as an addition to the range of works available in English. One hopes, however, that the existence of this version will not preclude the eventual publication of another English translation, based on a specific manuscript.

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SUSAN CRANE. *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith, and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1986. Pp. ix, 262. \$30.00.

Insular Romance is a book that should stir a good many scholars of medieval romance to do penance for their sins of omission. It takes what should long ago have been the obvious step of looking at English romance as a phenomenon not of a single language but of a single culture, of England under Angevin rule. The romances in Anglo-Norman and Middle English are considered together, and the results are consistently illuminating. Crane does not deny that differences exist between versions of the same romances in the two languages—her analyses of paired versions are indeed among the many fine things in the book—but she also shows clearly how much all these insular romances have in common that consistently distinguishes them from romances produced on the Continent.

It has for long been a habit among critics of English romances to apologize for their quality in comparison with their French counterparts. Their general lack of irony or ambiguity, their frequent naïveté, and their unresponsiveness to high courtly idealism have all too often been damned as “charming” or explained in terms of their having been designed for popular audiences. Crane’s approach is to look not at what they fail to achieve but at what they do achieve and why. The results are fresh and thought-provoking and often convey to the reader the kind of conviction that comes from recognizing something long half-known but never before formulated.

Her central thesis, argued on several fronts, is that insular romances responded to a specific set of political and feudal conditions that were different from those obtaining elsewhere in Europe. The interests of the barony in England lay more with administration than with militarism, and