

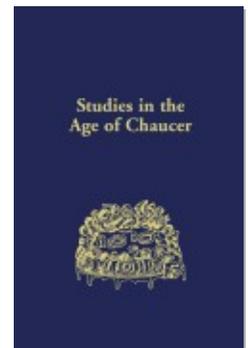


PROJECT MUSE®

*Insular Romance: Politics, Faith, and Culture in
Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* by Susan Crane
(review)

Helen Cooper

Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Volume 9, 1987, pp. 206-208 (Review)



Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.1987.0019>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/658814/summary>

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.

CAROLINE D. ECKHARDT
The Pennsylvania State University

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

they found support for the rights they claimed not through rebellion but through established customs of feudal tenure and judicial process. Romance themes in turn place less emphasis on adventure and the crises that set “private identity and public expectations” at odds, and more on “external, political crises that are met by a fully worthy and capable hero who senses no problematic conflict between his own desires and those of his society.” The hero is self-interested, but in ways that are in harmony with the interests of his family and the larger community:

The romances of English heroes picture baronial claims that rise above the merely legal to the unquestionably just, and join blood lines inextricably to property rights. Political interests become universal goods as the hero’s impulse towards personal achievement supports a broader, impersonal impulse towards social stability. Beyond this wide-ranging harmony are the pagans, usurpers, monsters, and wrong-headed kings who challenge properly established order. [P. 14]

There are many times in the book when one hesitates at the broad historical generalizations that Crane makes, but in terms of the romances the argument is impressively consistent and persuasive. The central thesis makes sense of the poems’ handling of everything from love to language by way of exile and religion: “A persistent confidence in custom, law, and social order infuses their accounts of dispossession and reinstatement” (p. 23). Institutional procedures for ensuring peace and right rest on the

pervasive reliability of language itself. The procedures that the English heroes demand are based in the validity of language in arguments, promises, testimony, depositions, and oaths. And since the language of good people is trustworthy and even the language of deceivers is usually transparent and readily exposed, the heroes’ faith in the capacity of legal pleading is neither misplaced nor disappointed. [Pp. 70–71]

This tells us why attempts to read these texts in narrowly Marxist or Saussurean terms will not work while insisting on their central concern with both politics and language. Their lack of linguistic irony no longer needs apology: it becomes a virtue in its own right. When language breaks down, as happens in *Athelston*, the failure becomes an integral part of the disorder that the structure of the romance must combat.

The lack of irony is also a symptom of a strong impulse toward harmony and reconciliation. The English hero is divided neither against himself nor against fundamental social goods, though he may act in defiance of a

corrupted order. Even secular and religious values are not set at odds; renown is enhanced by piety. In a detailed analysis of what actually happens in the exemplary romances such as *Guy of Warwick* and *Amis and Amiloun*, Crane demonstrates that “even highly moral and pious insular romances sustain the movements toward social integration and earthly apotheosis that are typical of romance and anathema to “hagiography” (p. 103). She has an intriguing analysis of the equivocal oath in *Amis* that works along similar lines, to stress harmony rather than contradiction. Other apparent opposites disappear when the terms are changed: instead of emphasizing how French courtliness was coarsened into English bourgeois values, Crane stresses the way in which insular romances emphasize “the reconciliation possible between ideal models and observed realities of human behavior” (pp. 211–12). By rejecting the elitism and exclusivity of Old French romances, those written in England – and increasingly through the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries – are able to present their ideals as practical and imitable. Their adaptation of ideals toward the socially acceptable (marriage rather than adultery, for instance) both reflects historical conditions and in turn enables romance ideology to be absorbed into patterns of actual behavior. The broadening of the social base of the audience for later romances is in turn connected with the opening out of the class base of the gentry: “Active imitation of literature in life” offered an aristocratic way of behavior for rising mercantile classes and also an endorsement of value to barony whose feudal basis was collapsing.

These last generalizations are harder to prove from the poems than some of the earlier ones, and it is in the close analysis of texts that much of the strength of the book lies. Crane does not defend the indefensible (*Sir Tristrem*, for instance), but when attacks have been made on the wrong grounds, she is quick to counter them; the consistency of revision in the English *Ipomadon*, for instance, works to endorse the ideals treated with irony in its Anglo-Norman source in ways that are in keeping with the tendencies toward harmony perceived elsewhere. Her readiness to dismiss unhelpful categorizations and to look at her texts without the bias of traditional apologia is invariably refreshing. She has found a way to approach these romances that enables their special qualities to show their value, and her book opens up abundant new possibilities for their study.

HELEN COOPER
University College, Oxford