



This Rough Magic

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Medieval English and French Legends: An Anthology of Religious and Secular Narrative.

By R. Barton Palmer. Glen Allen, Virginia: College Publishing, 2006. Pp. xxiv + 377.

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Dr. Palmer frames his introductory remarks for the six legends he has translated and edited for this volume with an historical introduction, an historical and literary chronology, and an overview of the defining features of the medieval legend genre. He structures the introductions that precede each text to respond to these historical and literary frames, to introduce ways that each text is representative of its social and cultural context, and to demonstrate how modern reflections on authorship, such as Michel Foucault's and Roland Barthes', can enrich our thinking about medieval legends. References to modern theories are deftly interwoven and balance the contextual work neatly. The translations are consistently competent and rendered into English accessible to a wide range of readers. The anthology is designed so that readings enrich each other; for example, in the "Religious Legends" section, the French *Life of St. Alexis* is grouped with the Old English *Andreas* and a selection from the French Vulgate Cycle's *Quest of the Holy Grail*. The central figures (St. Alexis, St. Andrew, and Gawain, Galahad

and Lancelot) can readily be compared to show distinctions among cultural concerns and ideas of the hero. The second grouping, "Secular Legends," includes *The Romance of Eneas* (selections), *Dido and Aeneas Moralized*, and Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, and leads readers toward further comparisons both among this grouping and with the preceding one.

Undergraduates, perhaps even advanced ones, might be reached even more readily through brief clarifying footnotes, not so much for the translated texts as for the introductory sections. These footnotes might help readers who are completely new to scholarly approaches to understanding the middle ages. For example, in the historical introduction section, who the Saracens and Magyars were and what the Black Death was might be explained. That said, the prose in the introductory sections is a joy to read; Dr. Palmer, with the clear intent to explain precisely, dignifies his readers' intelligence throughout them. Because many of his word choices and references signal an audience he assumes is as well-read as he is, Dr. Palmer's anthology is highly appropriate for serious general readers, fellow scholars beginning to examine the time period, cultures, and texts, and advanced, well-motivated undergraduate students and graduate students, particularly those interested in English and French medieval cultures, languages and text production. The links with modern theories of authorship also add appeal for those interested in questions of authorship and translation in texts from any period.

Professor R. Barton Palmer has drawn together a fine anthology. He is right to call attention to the importance of legends in the middle ages, and I applaud both his desire to collect a representative sample of works in this genre and his skill in translating and explaining them for readers of modern English. His anthology is a labor of love and long experience finely distilled.