

Megan G. Leitch, *Romancing Treason: The Literature of the Wars of the Roses*

Megan G. Leitch. *Romancing Treason: The Literature of the Wars of the Roses*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. x, 230 p. ISBN: 9780198724599. £ 55.00 (hardcover).

This book is a sophisticated scholarly study of English prose romances “for the most part” in the period 1437-1497, spanning the era of civil war known as the Wars of the Roses. The author argues that in this period the romance genre shifted to manifestation mostly in prose as opposed to poetry. These prose romances were filled with the language and the rhetoric of treason in a way that their sources and predecessors were not, which does not seem surprising in the context of concurrent political events. The same was true of contemporary private correspondence, chronicles, and poetry, as demonstrated here.

In examining the fifteenth-century social anxieties provoked by civil war, this study is quick to emphasize that late medieval society was held together not only by vertical social relationships but also by horizontal ones. And wars and treason were threatening to both, but perhaps most alarming in their effect on horizontal social bonds. The notion that the Wars of the Roses primarily affected the top most vertical levels of English society, because those classes were the main participants in and beneficiaries of the conflict, has been in the historical discourse for a while. Those would also seem to be the classes where horizontal relationships were most vital “or were they? Here the author argues that horizontal social relationships were emphasized during civil war, but not in preceding or succeeding periods. After 1500, for example, the concern returns to treason that upset the vertical hierarchy. Does this sharper focus on the horizontal then mark them as the site of most social anxiety during the Wars of the Roses? One important difference between earlier romances and the war-era ones noted here is that the latter, focused more on treason and its dangers, do not have happy endings, as was more often the case in the previous iteration of the genre.

The book is very well researched and the argument is logical and convincing. It is heavily based in the surviving manuscripts of the prose romances in question as well as the printed versions and an expansive secondary literature. It is also clearly a text for specialists in literary criticism. Quotes are given in Old English, which is their original form, but which is also a language that is not easily decipherable for the non-specialist. Modernizing the quotes in a parallel parenthetical format, as was done for French translations, would make the text much more widely accessible. An appendix includes a brief comparative chronology of political events and publication/circulation of prose romances, although a more detailed political chronology would have been helpful.

While this volume presents an interesting argument that is deeply researched and well constructed, it makes limited contribution to the study of print culture. There is an entire chapter devoted to the romances printed by William Caxton, especially over the decade of the 1480s, but it considers Caxton as translator, author, and editor, more than as printer or publisher. The argument “throughout the book” does engage with the conundrum of who determines the meaning of texts “the reader, the social classes that bought books, the author, the publisher, the translator, or the contemporary political context. Looking at Caxton, the author argues that he was concerned to emphasize the effects of treason and resulting political turmoil on the horizontal relationships of this society that were of primary importance to the merchants and “rising gentry” who purchased most of the books he printed and of which he was a part. But through most of the book, the position is that it was political events that

informed and shaped the prose romances rather than the other way around. The romances offered a morality lesson for socio-political relationships, integral to social cohesion and political success, but the argument here does not consider what impact these romances had on readers. Were contemporaries compelled to act in particular ways socially and politically during the Wars of the Roses because of what they read in these romances?

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