

Geraldine Heng. *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*. Columbia University Press, 2003. pp. xii + 521.

Informed by postcolonial and feminist/gender theory, Geraldine Heng's *Empire of Magic* identifies "patterns of desire [. . .] and economies of pleasure" in medieval English romance and culture. Arising in response to a complex intersection of history, politics, and location, romance narrative constitutes, for Heng, an important element in late medieval England's cultural productions of race and religion, class and gender distinctions, and national and individual identities. In other words, her argument links romance with global, regional/ "national," and local sites of cultural production. The argument is bold, sweeping, and complex; it is made manageable by Heng's choice to focus each chapter on a different representative text, and it is strengthened by prodigious scholarship (including 159 pages of valuable endnotes). Although she explores many connections between romance narrative and historical context, her

argument focuses most intensely on cannibalism, the crusades, Constantinople, encounters between the English and various "monstrous" others, and links between masculinity, family, femininity, and early nation formation.

The first two chapters argue that Geoffrey of Monmouth's Arthurian material in his twelfth-century Latin *Historia Regum Britannie* and the popular, late medieval vernacular romance *Richard Coer de Lyon* arises from repressed, transformed, and recast trauma, traumas of actual cannibalism that occurred during the crusades. Heng acknowledges that *Historia* borrows from folklore, biblical, and classical sources (as do other romances); however, she maintains that Geoffrey's presentation "points well past [. . .] originary contexts, and toward the material reality of recent, disturbing historical events" (21). The tale of flesh-eating giants "issues less from the

pressure of shadowy traditions than from an urgent residue of [traumatic] memory”: namely, crusader cannibalism. Of course, this kind of argument is, in one sense, impossible to establish; how could we ever prove that specific historical events had greater causal influence on one romance narrative than another, or greater causal influence than centuries of oral tradition, folklore, and the written canon? On the other hand, Heng amasses historical data and fine close textual analysis that, together, build compelling, if not indisputable, arguments. Besides trauma recuperation, the *Historia* and *Richard Coer de Lyon* also participate in nation building; Heng’s analysis of the latter exposes the many ways it “performs” England. Here, she writes “is a catachresis so bold that it must infinitely, repeatedly, be defended, managed, argued, explored, and re-performed. That [. . .] [Richard the Lionheart] and his crusade, cannibalism and conquest, war and jokes, Saracens, Jews, sodomy, and the English language and its fictions of class and identity should all be part of the arsenal of defense and argument, explanation and

performance, merely suggests that romance is, in fact, a genre of the nation: a genre *about* the nation and for the nation’s important fictions” (113).

The *Alliterative Morte Arthure* forms the ground for chapter three, “Chivalric/Heroic Romance: Defending Elite Men and Bodies, Warring Against Modernity: Masculinity and Chivalry in Crisis.” Cannibalism is, of course, a major feature of the *Morte*, but Heng interprets the Genoese Giant atop St. Michael’s Mount as “a figure of economic monstrosity” (119). His rapacious sexual violence flays open female victims; his cannibalism is satiated by the roasted bodies of young boys and defeated men; and his actions and grotesque body represent, Heng argues, challenges to a masculinity grounded in elite, chivalric feudal culture. Challenges to and desperate defenses of chivalric masculinity shape the rest of the *Morte* narrative: Arthur’s dreams, his campaigns, militaristic exploits, and defeat are played out on a map of Eastern vs. Western Christianity, Saracens vs. Christians, the unmanned vs.

the manned, the feminine vs. the masculine; the communally-unified world of knights and the battlefield vs. individualism, commerce, fragmentation, social change. Strangely, although Heng does cite Laurie Finke and Martin Shichtman's 1993 article on Geoffrey's *Historia*, her first three chapters ignore more recent Finke-Shichtman collaborations that address concepts quite central to *Empire of Magic*.¹

Heng's text is, throughout, attentive to romance narrative's silences and inscriptions of women, but her most sustained investigation of female presence in romance occurs in chapter four: "Beauty and the East, A Modern Love Story: Women, Children, and Imagined Communities in *The Man of Law's Tale* and its Others." This chapter establishes the many ways women's historical and narrative roles (particularly foregrounded in "family romance") also participate in the cultural fantasy projects of empire, nation, self and other: "There should be little doubt that what Constance accomplishes in her story is the enactment of a successful

crusade, cultural-style, feminine-style" (189). Heng skillfully interrogates the linkages in the Constance sagas between family and nation: "not only do individuals fall in love, touch the mystical, worship God, and become utterly devoted to their children, in that discontinuous continuum known as the imaginary, but nations and communities that require for their collective existence the same experiences of intense identification, relationship and union also play out their necessary mystifications in the same imaginative location" (225). Beyond and within the Constance "family romance" sagas reside powerful fantasies of medieval orientalism, narrative locations where constructions of race and religion exoticize and demonize Middle Eastern and non-Christian others.

"Eye on the World: *Mandeville's* Pleasure Zones; or, Cartography, Anthropology, and Medieval Travel Romance" forms Heng's fifth and final chapter, and it considers the compilations of oddities and others within *Mandeville's Travels* a distant precursor

to modern projects like the Smithsonian or the British Museum. Such projects represent others in collections for a reading and consuming public and do so with inevitable political-cultural agendas. Heng, like other scholars, asserts that “the status of otherness [in the *Travels*] has changed, is different” from earlier Middle English treatments of alterity and difference; but she also acknowledges the rampant anti-semitism that belies any naïve reading: “exceptional as Mandeville’s *Travels* is among romances, the scale model of the world created by and in [its] narrative exists at the nodal intersection of pleasure with power” (258). And part of the pleasure here, Heng claims, lies in the *Travels*’ “deeply stabilizing” mapping of the world. Mandeville’s culturally-reinforcing schemata locates Jerusalem as centerpoint; and within Jerusalem, predictably, the Holy Sepulcher resides as the center of the world qua Christian universe. Likewise, “the desire in the West for Christianity to exist, to proliferate, over the world has a momentum that repeats itself throughout the entire

history of the medieval West” (271). *Empire of Magic* is, without doubt, challenging; its sentences are sometimes thick with evidence, implication, theoretical allegiances, and analysis; and like any ambitious and creative reading of culture, it rewards readers with new insights and fresh interpretations.

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END NOTE

¹For example, see their “Symbolic and Sexual Economies in Arthurian Literature” (1998), and “The Mont St. Michel Giant: Sexual Violence and Imperialism in the Chronicles of Wace and Layamon” (1998).