
H-France Review Vol. 13 (February 2013), No. 29

Thomas Hinton, *The Conte du Graal Cycle: Chrétien de Troyes's Perceval, the Continuations, and French Arthurian Romance*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012. x + 277 pp. Notes, bibliography, index, and index of manuscripts. \$99.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-8434-285-9.

Review by Keith Busby, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

After decades of neglect, despite the availability of exemplary critical editions, the *Continuations* of Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval* (*Le conte du Graal*) have been the object of three books in the last four years, namely those by Matilda Bruckner (2009) and Leah Tether (2012), and the study by Thomas Hinton under review here.[1] When Chrétien de Troyes left his last romance unfinished at over 9,200 lines in about 1180, it was inevitable that others would be tempted to take up the challenge. Only Gerbert de Montreuil tells us, around 1225, that Chrétien died before finishing the *Conte du Graal*, and some have suspected that he left it incomplete on purpose as an open and mischievous gesture. After all, he was well aware of both the competition and his own legacy, and his reputation among his peers and successors was considerable. Whether he could have foreseen the expansion of the verse Grail cycle to some 62,000 lines in the most compendious manuscript is another matter altogether. The complex corpus of redactions and rewritings of the *Continuations* survive in more than a dozen manuscripts and fragments, suggesting a popularity that surpasses that of Chrétien's earlier, non-Grail romances, and the so-called "epigonal" episodic verse romances composed in his wake. The four principal continuations and two posterior prologues were written between the end of the twelfth century and approximately 1230, while the latest of the manuscripts preserving them dates from the second half of the fourteenth.[2]

If the overwhelming critical attention paid to Chrétien's romances was in part responsible for the neglect (as it was for that of the epigonal texts), there were other reasons, not the least of which was the sheer length and complexity of the *Continuations*: four texts in many redactions, with interpolations and omissions, whose very internal limits are not easy to discern within the bounds of the manuscripts. Scholars love a neatly defined text of manageable proportions with a beginning, middle, and end. Unfortunately or otherwise, these features are not always found in medieval literature, and may not even be medieval at all in some respects. They are certainly not characteristic of works that could be considered cyclical, such as many *chansons de geste*, the *Roman de Renart*, and the *Continuations* themselves, to name but three examples. To be sure, neglect of the *Continuations* before 2009 was not total, since a handful of articles were devoted to them. Along with Filippo Salmeri's monograph on Manessier, studies by Guy Vial on the First *Continuation* (both curiously absent from Hinton's bibliography), and by Corin Corley on the Second *Continuation*; mention must also be made of Pierre Gallais's monumental *thèse d'état* on the First *Continuation*, published in four volumes.[3]

Thomas Hinton is able to draw on all of these as well as recent scholarship on the epigonal and, to a lesser degree, the prose romances, in what is probably the most ambitious study of the *Continuations* to date. Bruckner, Tether, and Hinton all to some extent deal with the nature of continuation and cycle, and the relationship of the entire corpus and its authors to Chrétien and his "seed-text." This is Tether's main concern while Bruckner also considers social issues of love, chivalry, and religion. Tether and Hinton both demonstrate a laudable awareness of the importance of manuscript transmission, and

Hinton devotes an entire chapter to it.

Hinton lays out the plan of his book and presents the textual corpus in a substantial introduction. Crucial to his arguments in chapter one and throughout the book in general is his contention that the Second *Continuation* played a crucial and sometimes retroactive role in the development of the cycle. Early versions of the First *Continuation* were rewritten to conform to the aesthetics of the Second, which also provided in part a model for the later texts of Gerbert de Montreuil and Manessier. The quest is seen as a catalyst of narrative, structured by the device of *entrelacement*, which is also a fundamental principle of prose romance. The notion of retroactivity is potentially susceptible of quite wide application to the cyclical texts mentioned above, and others tending to the cyclical, such as the *Roman d'Alexandre*. It is unlikely to work in the case of the *Lancelot-Graal* (Vulgate) prose cycle, but I would not be surprised to see it bear fruit in connection with the Merlin texts, the Prose *Tristan* or *Guiron le Courtois*. Chapter two is devoted to an examination of the way the manuscripts of the *Continuations* articulate the *remaniements* and successive additions to the cycle by means of the various elements of their individual *mise en page* (pen-flourished initials, rubrics, illustrations and their placement). Hinton also traces an evolution of the manuscript from support of a performance text (early copies) to an object valued for its transmission of a text intended for visual reception (later ones). In chapter three, Hinton follows the imagery and thematics of fertility and generation in connection with the anonymity and authorship of the various *Continuations*. This essentially boils down to the issue, treated by Bruckner and others, of how the continuators deal with Chrétien and with each other in successive stages of the process of cyclification. The constant and varying degrees of tension between the different parts of the corpus are reflected in centripetal and centrifugal movements, in the reprise of motifs from, and allusions to, episodes from Chrétien's text, and in the shifting of central protagonists (Gauvain, Guerrehés, Carados, Tristan) before the final and definitive return to Perceval.

It is in chapter four that Hinton tries to "supplement" (p. 164) Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann's influential analysis of the evolution of Arthurian verse romance by arguing that the epigonal verse romances can profitably be re-read in light of the verse Grail corpus of Chrétien and the *Continuations*.^[4] Certainly, the abundance of manuscript evidence supports the view that the epigones were more likely than not to have known the verse cycle, although Schmolke-Hasselmann regarded the former as a largely independent and parallel development of Arthurian romance. Each subsequent romance (including each version of any of the *Continuations*) is capable of modifying the horizon of expectation of the audience, according to Hinton. If this is arguably the most significant chapter in the book, it may be the least convincing. Some of the intertextual readings of the *Continuations* and the Gauvain-romances have been attempted successfully elsewhere by others, albeit in a different perspective, and Hinton's insistence on the importance of the gravitational pull of the Second *Continuation* begins to assume the status of a given. Nonetheless, the chapter does make a convincing case that the *Continuations* should be taken into account in future studies of the development of verse romance. Hinton's conclusion includes some final reflections on the poetics of continuation and the place of the verse cycle in the wider context of French Arthurian romance in general, verse and prose. Appendix one contains narrative summaries of the *Continuations*; appendix two provides details on length and dates of texts discussed; appendix three is a list of manuscripts of the *Continuations*, while appendix four gives the full contents of the same; appendices five and six supply corresponding information for the episodic epigonal verse romances. A full bibliography, an index, and an index of manuscripts round off the volume.

Scholars of Old French can only rejoice in the renewal of critical interest in the *Continuations* of Chrétien's *Perceval*, of which Thomas Hinton's book forms an indispensable part. Taken together with the studies by Matilda Bruckner and Leah Tether mentioned above, it enables us to discern, perhaps for the first time, how the *Continuations* work, how they are organized, and how they relate to Chrétien's romance, to each other, and to other texts of the French Arthurian canon. We are now at a watershed in our understanding of Arthurian romance, particularly as reliable editions of later prose romances such as the *Tristan* are now available, and studies such as those of Sophie Albert, Damien de Carné, and

Patrick Moran begin to reveal their inner workings and structural principles. [5] What is required now—and it would be a major undertaking—is a reassessment of the evolution of the whole genre, to include not only consideration of the *Continuations*, but also an examination of the intertextual relations between verse and prose texts. Such a study would have to be based on first-hand knowledge of the manuscript corpus as well as critical editions of the texts. Who will pick up the gauntlet?

NOTES

[1] Matilda Bruckner, *Chrétien Continued: A Study of the Conte du Graal and its Verse Continuations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Leah Tether, *The Continuations of Chrétien's Perceval: Content and Construction, Extension and Ending* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012).

[2] The corpus of the First, Second, and Manessier texts were edited by William Roach, *The Continuations of the Old French 'Perceval' of Chrétien de Troyes*, 5 vols. (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press/The American Philosophical Society, 1949-1983); Eleanor Roach has recently published a revised and expanded version of vol. I of her father's edition of the Mixed Redaction of the First *Continuation* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 2008). Gerbert de Montreuil's *Continuation* has long been available in 3 volumes, edited by Mary Williams and Marguerite Oswald (Paris: Champion, 1922-1978). The two prologues are edited as follows: the *Elucidation*, by A. W. Thompson (New York: Institute of French Studies, 1931), and the *Bliocadran*, by Lenora D. Wolfgang (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1976).

[3] Filippo Salmeri, *Manessier: modelli, simboli, scrittura* (Catania: University of Catania, 1974); Guy Vial, *Le conte du Graal. sens et unité, la première Continuation, textes et contenu* (Geneva: Droz, 1974); Corin F. V. Corley, *The Second Continuation of the Old French Perceval: A Critical and Lexicographical Study* (London: The Modern Humanities Research Association, 1987); Pierre Gallais, *L'imaginaire d'un romancier français de la fin du XIIIe siècle: description raisonnée, comparée et commentée de la Continuation-Gauvain, première suite du Conte du Graal de Chrétien de Troyes*, 4 vols. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988-89).

[4] Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann. *Der arthurische Versroman von Chrestien bis Froissart: zur Geschichte einer Gattung* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1980). It should be noted in passing that those with no reading knowledge of German had to wait eighteen years for an English translation of Schmolke-Hasselmann's book: *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance: The Verse Tradition from Chrétien to Froissart*, transl. Margaret and Roger Middleton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[5] Sophie Albert, *'Ensemble ou par pièces': Guiron le Courtois (XIIIe-XVe siècles): la cohérence en question* (Paris: Champion, 2010); Damien de Carné, *Sur l'organisation du Tristan en prose* (Paris: Champion, 2010); Patrick Moran, *Lectures cycliques: le réseau inter-romanesque dans les cycles du Graal du XIIIe siècle* (Diss. Paris IV-Sorbonne, 2011).

Keith Busby
University of Wisconsin-Madison
kbusby@wisc.edu

Copyright © 2012 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews

at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172