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Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook, eds. and trans., *Arthurian Archives. French Arthurian Literature V: The Lay of Mantel*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013. 169 pp. Introduction, edited text, facing-page translation, notes, appendices, bibliography, proper-name indices. \$90.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 978-1-84384-338-2.

Review by Matthieu Boyd, Fairleigh Dickinson University.

This book is a scholarly edition of a shortish medieval narrative poem, “The Lay of the (Short) Mantle (≡*Cor*) *Mantel*,” with translation and commentary. In 914 lines, the anonymous poem tells how King Arthur’s court receives a magic mantle that distends or shrinks if worn by an unfaithful woman. The knights use it to test their ladies, and are embarrassed to discover (for much of their knightly prestige is vested in the virtue of the ladies whom they serve) that only one of them passes the test. In appendices we find a separate edition of *Mantel* from one of the manuscripts (Appendix I); the eighteenth-century retelling of the story that introduced it to the general public (Appendix II); and a translation of *Cor*, “The Lay of the Drinking-Horn,” a medieval analogue in which the test is a magic drinking-horn that spills on any man whose lady has been unfaithful to him (Appendix III). In both *Mantel* and *Cor*, the comparatively obscure knight Caradoc and his lady are the only ones to escape the ordeal unscathed.

The form of *Mantel*, the “narrative lay” in octosyllabic rhyming couplets, is one of the classic Old French literary forms, pioneered by Marie de France in her *Lais* (c.1165). Burgess and Brook, distinguished senior scholars of medieval French literature, have been publishing new editions of anonymous Old French lays for over a decade. Their previous work, much of which first appeared in the Liverpool Online Series,[1] includes *Eleven Old French Narrative Lays*[2], *The Old French Lays of Ignaure, Oiselet, and Amours*[3], and, tucked away in a festschrift, “The lay of Espervier”[4]. Their *Eleven Old French Narrative Lays*, and most of the rest, were edited from Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, nouv. acq. fr. 1104, conventionally known as manuscript S. That manuscript is again the base manuscript for this edition of *Mantel*, which survives in a comparatively impressive five different manuscripts. (Appendix I gives the text from Berne, Bibliothèque de Berne ms. 354.)

It would be wonderful if Burgess and Brook could repackage their work into a single volume that has all of the contents of S, in order. (This would include some of the lays of Marie de France, which Burgess has translated with Keith Busby.[5]) The constraints on scholarly publishing being what they are, we should not expect to see that happen, but it is what their approach deserves: the experience of reading something like a medieval book.

The edition and translation are hard to fault, particularly since the Notes (pp. 102-16) discuss where Burgess and Brook differ from the previous editions of Nathaniel Dubin (1974), Philip Bennett (1975), and Nathalie Koble (2005): this puts their readers in a good position to make up their own minds. The commentary is thorough. The introduction (pp. 5-56) begins with the manuscript transmission of the text, and an inventory of previous editions and translations (pp. 5-7), noting how the story was popularized in the eighteenth century by the Comte de Caylus (Appendix II) and others.

The introduction then proceeds through the following topics:

Author and date (pp. 7-8): the author is unknown, the date around 1200, but imprecise (in particular we do not know whether *Mantel* or *Cor* came first).

The title (p. 8), where the question is whether to include qualifiers like *cort*, “short,” or *mautaillé*, “badly cut/tailored,” which appear in some of the manuscripts (Burgess and Brook choose not to).

An outline of the plot (pp. 8-10) and comments on its structure (p. 11), where the editors note that the text is definitely “carefully structured”: it includes five equally-long episodes of failure by the ladies of senior knights framed by three longer episodes involving the presentation of the mantel to the court (invited by the conventional device of Arthur and his court refusing to begin their Pentecostal meal until some new adventure presents itself), the failure of the queen and another lady to wear the mantle, and the final success of Caradoc’s lady.

Comments on the prologue (p. 12) and the epilogue (pp. 12-13), where comparisons are made to the prologues and epilogues of other Old French narrative lays (notably, there is no explicit attribution to “the Bretons” who supposedly originated Marie de France’s lays).

Comparison of manuscripts (pp. 13-15) and remarks on later scribal substitutions in *S* (pp. 15-18), where a major theme is the suppression of salacious references (e.g. to women being mounted like horses).

Sources and analogues (pp. 18-25), a substantial section which surveys other medieval instances of the fidelity test. These include the Tristan legend, where Iseult swears a misleading oath before King Arthur, but most of them involve a mantle or a drinking horn with examples from as far afield as Ulrich von Zatzikhoven’s *Lanzelet*. It is not clear what the immediate sources of *Mantel* may have been, or what precise relationship it has with *Cor*. On the subject of Caradoc, and more specifically the main plot of the *Livre de Caradoc* mentioned on p. 20, a valuable work not cited is Gwennolé Le Menn’s *La Femme au sein d’or*[6], which explores various continuities in Breton/Brittonic Celtic tradition, otherwise mentioned by Burgess and Brook only on p. 24, note 20 and p. 38, note 44. (Burgess, who has published analytical bibliographies on Marie de France and the anonymous narrative lays, has an unparalleled knowledge of the sources in this area and my suggestion should not be understood as a slight.)

Mantel’s characters (pp. 25-41). This section goes through the male characters one by one (pp. 27-39) and notes their contributions to the narrative, usually in the form of defensive or derisive remarks, which grow more cynical as the plot advances. Among the knights, Kay in particular has an important role in managing the mantle test. Surprisingly, his contributions are less acid-tongued than other Arthurian literary works might lead us to expect. Finally, this section discusses how the female characters react to the embarrassing experience of trying on the mantle (pp. 39-41). In the patriarchal setting of the court, the men are implicated in the public shaming of “their” women, but individual shame is short-lived since nearly the entire court has the same cause for embarrassment. As Burgess and Brook point out in the following section, and as Arthur and Kay point out in the text, it is the court as a whole (and as an ideal) that is called into question.

Themes and images (pp. 41-53). This section focuses on the image of the mantle and its configurations as the various ladies try it on; on the familiar framing of the initial encounter with the mantle’s bearer as an *aventure* of otherworld origin (the interesting suggestion that the mantle was sent by Morgan Le Fay out of animosity is buried in a note on p. 26); and on the values of the court, such as *cortoisie* (courtesy; courtliness) and loyalty, which are shown to be a mere facade: “the truth disclosed by the mantle is that courts, and Arthur’s court is sadly no exception, are not places where honour, loyalty and comradeship can be taken for granted” (p. 53), nor can their lack be excused by the norms of *fin’amor* (courtly love). The opposite of *cortoisie* is *vilenie*, and the discussion of both these terms on p. 50 is appropriately nuanced. By contrast, the translation of v. 322 (on p. 75) is misleading. Kay tells the queen that she is no

more faithful (*loiaus, leaus*) than any other, but *mains a en vos vilenie*, translated “There is just less villainy in you.” “Baseness” would seem to be a better match for *vilenie*, here and in general (tellingly, throughout the Introduction it is left untranslated). I don’t think the other ladies are supposed to be more wicked or malicious than the queen, only less refined (in taste, manners, lineage, etc.).

At this point the text has been summarized for us several times, in whole or in part, and Burgess and Brook might be accused of padding their volume. That would be unfair. They are taking their time—an unaccustomed pleasure in an age of “skimming”—and because of it their ruminations on the text grow progressively deeper.

The introduction ends with some remarks on genre (pp. 53-55) and a conclusion (pp. 55-56). Importantly, the designation “narrative lay,” whatever Burgess and Brook seem to say about it, refers to a poetic *form* (short narrative poem in octosyllabic rhyming couplets). As they point out, *Mantel* is much more complicated with respect to genre: it has features of the “Breton lay,” the fabliau, and the romance, with elements of fairy magic, ribald comedy, and serious interrogation of court culture playing off against one another.

This raises some questions about what the medieval author was trying to do: “Was he seeking simply to entertain, fearing no risk to the essential reputation of Arthur’s legendary status, or was he being critical of its self-delusion? Was he, perhaps, merely weary of the idealistic portrayal of courtliness that had taken hold in the late twelfth century? Looking beyond the Arthurian world, was he making a statement about the pretensions and hypocrisies of the court world that he knew and had experienced?” (p. 55) At this point Burgess and Brook quite rightly leave us to confront the text and seek our answers there.

Arthurian enthusiasts should welcome this book as the definitive treatment of a recurring Arthurian episode in its classic form. The verdict for most will be that *Mantel* is an interesting curiosity that represents, at least in some important ways, medieval French attitudes about court culture and gender relations. Yet, there is a broader point to be made about the scholarly enterprise involved in the present publication of this text in 2013. Many non-medievalists don’t understand what critical editions of medieval texts entail, or why there is significant interpretive work involved. Many medievalists themselves feel that the cutting edge of scholarship has somehow moved on. Work like Burgess and Brook have published here is done to the same standard by very few others. The advice that such scholars[7] offer to their younger colleagues is that we desperately need new editions and translations of important texts; that the expertise needed to produce them is hard-won and in short supply; and that one should not undertake such projects without tenure, because they are not always valued in the academy.

In other words, a critical edition like this one is not a glamorous object, but it is vital. If texts are not responsibly established, there is no hope of accurate translation, and without a reliable text and a reading attentive to its linguistic nuances and manuscript variants, literary interpretation falters. Or, if it doesn’t falter it goes along blithely and carelessly. Burgess and Brook deserve our thanks for not resting on their laurels, but for continuing to champion the cause of philology.

NOTES

[1] <http://www.liv.ac.uk/cultures-languages-and-area-studies/research/liverpool-online-series/>

[2] Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook, eds. and trans., *Arthurian Archives. French Arthurian Literature IV: Eleven Old French Narrative Lays* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007).

[3] Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook, eds. and trans., *The Old French Lays of Ignaure, Oiselet, and Amours* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010).

[4] Burgess, "The lay of *Espervier*," in Phyllis Gaffney and Jean-Michel Picard, eds., *The Medieval Imagination. Mirabile Dictu: Essays in Honour of Yolande de Pontfarcy Sexton* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012), pp. 17-46.

[5] Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby, trans., *Marie de France: The Lais* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002).

[6] Gwennoù Le Menn, *La Femme au sein d'or: des chants populaires bretons...aux légendes celtiques* (Saint-Brieuc: Skol/Dastum, 1985).

[7] I am thinking, for example, of the editing workshops offered at the 23rd Congress of the International Arthurian Society in Bristol in 2011.

Matthieu Boyd
Fairleigh Dickinson University
mwboyd@fd.edu

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