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Robert M. Stein, *Reality Fictions: Romance, History, and Governmental Authority, 1025-1180*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006. ix + 294 pp. Abbreviations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$30.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN-13: 978-0-268-04120-3.

Review by Geoffrey Koziol, University of California, Berkeley.

In graduate school, my outside field was legal anthropology. For my required research seminar, I decided to test what I had learned against a dense Cistercian cartulary. During the post-mortem, the professor did a fair job of summarizing my paper's findings but disturbingly evaded the questions most important to me: "Was it good? Did you like it?" Backed into a corner, she finally replied, "I don't know how to answer that. It's not anthropology."

I have often thought about this mismatch. Though as medievalists we prize interdisciplinarity, there is something about the disciplines — principally, I think, the different kinds of questions each has historically posed and the distinctive techniques each has developed to address them—that remains irreducibly different. I also recalled this mismatch while reading Robert Stein's *Reality Fictions*. I very much wanted to like it, since I agree with so many of the author's beliefs. Sometimes I did like it. More often I found it maddening. To be fair, perhaps I was simply threatened by a literary scholar's appropriation of texts and questions normally the defining preserve of my field. Still, having considered the possibility, I don't think so. I think the book itself is maddening. If it is often challenging and profound, it is also often simplistic, not infrequently passing from profound to simplistic within a single paragraph. If I dwell on these problems here, it is not to gratuitously criticize an author who deserves my respect but because, like my failed anthropology paper, the problems illustrate the difficulties of interdisciplinarity.

The meat of *Reality Fictions* consists of long, detailed discussions of a select number of "exemplary" texts (p. 5): the *Gesta episcoporum Cameracensium* (the core written in the 1020s); a variety of chronicles and histories recounting the death (or in late legends, escape from near death) of Harold, the last Anglo-Saxon king, and the rebellion and execution of the earl Waltheof in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest; Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*; Chrétien de Troyes' *Chevalier au lion*, and Marie de France's *Guigemar*; and *Raoul de Cambrai* and *Girart de Roussillon*. Stein's discussions are guided by and illustrate a few principles. Put oversimply, he believes that traditional distinctions between literary texts and historical texts are artificial and hinder our understanding of them. Texts of all genres do not just reflect political processes; they reflect on them, and actively participate in the conjunctures and dilemmas that issued from transformations in the exercise and distribution of power. The implicit, inherited evolutionary schemas that scholars have applied to both political processes and literary genres are a residue of medieval political agendas and modern nationalist ones. We must learn to see power and genres alike as more indeterminate, open-ended, and contested.

Since this is a very dense book in all the good ways, the following summary hardly does justice to it. Stein situates the *Gesta episcoporum Cameracensium* in the context of Bishop Gerard I's battles against the local castellan, who was supported by the count of Flanders. The point of the *Gesta*, then, was to establish a history in which order and hierarchy were always victoriously asserted against forces of disruption. Presented as part of this history, the *Gesta* rooted the bishop's claim to a new kind of political authority in a sacred past that established the unassailable patterns of Christian conversion

itself. History was even more malleable in the cases of Harold and Waltheof. Thus, the story of Waltheof's rebellion and execution (barely mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*) was eventually embroidered to the point that Waltheof was transformed into a quasi-saint who worked miracles, while Harold's Vita makes him into a figure out of a hagiographical romance, one who did not die at Hastings but lived out his life as a hermit named "Christian" who always hid his face in public, suffered at the hands of the very Welsh he had once defeated, but ultimately converted them by dint of his own suffering. Such romance tropes are anticipated in Geoffrey's *Historia regum*. In his book's finest sustained discussion, Stein argues that medieval political theory found it difficult to conceive of unity in other than universal, imperial terms. The twelfth century saw dawning awareness of a contradiction, given the obvious failure of any kind of imperial unity in the face of the real autonomy and growing power of kings. In Stein's very suggestive reading, Geoffrey reflects and gives edge to this awareness when he pits Arthur and Lucius against one another, both of them emperors described in precisely parallel terms, both attended by multi-ethnic armies, neither one with any better right to conquer than the other, each ultimately dying in defeat having accomplished little that would last. Analyzing Chrétien's *Chevalier au lion* (another high point of the book), Stein notes the ways in which violence and illegitimacy underpin every significant event, without resolution, the poem's ending repeating its beginning with scarcely any improvement in the characters' self-knowledge or condition. As for *Raoul de Cambrai* and *Girart de Roussillon*, Stein argues that in our understanding of epics, we have been fooled for too long by their self-representation as oral transmissions running across generations deep into the past. In fact, in the form we have them, epics were a new and quintessentially *written* genre. Contemporary with romances, they dealt with many of the same problems of power as romances, but in a different way—by using a pose of tradition to challenge the innovative pretensions of twelfth-century kingship.

I agree with all of the author's hermeneutic principles and many of his arguments and interpretations. Stein's choice of texts is very smart. Some passages left me shaking my head in wonder: for instance, his description of "the broken world of Chrétien's romance" (p. 151) and his noting the appearance of "a kind of secular morality" in Geoffrey of Monmouth, all that remains after the evacuation of meaning from the idea of history epitomized by the Cambrai *Gesta* (p. 110). Having read Stein, I will *never* teach Geoffrey or Chrétien the same again. Other passages, however, left me shaking my head in a different kind of wonder. With respect to the principles summarized above, for example, unless I have misunderstood something, and speaking only as a historian, Stein is claiming the prize for beating a dying if not dead horse. I thought historians already assumed what he assumes we need to learn. Nevertheless, he makes these points with panache, often eloquence, and it does not hurt to have them repeated. My more serious complaint is that even as he argues for seeing the writing of history as more enmeshed in discourses and projections of power, his sense of history remains oddly objectified. The political conflicts and ideological contestations that confronted Gerard of Cambrai were far more fraught than allowed by Stein, who tends to reduce them to contests of power conceived in a zero-sum fashion. His account of the literary afterlives of Harold and Waltheof does not do justice to the cognitive difficulties created by the success of the Norman Conquest (already quite acute in Orderic Vitalis), nor to the ways Harold and Waltheof ended up standing for a profound and widespread criticism of Norman and Angevin kingship. (Along the same lines, I would suggest that he does not recognize the extent to which Geoffrey's *Historia regum* is already a commentary on the injustice of the Norman Conquest — and therefore on its inevitable failure.) In discussing Wace's Brut and other Angevin histories, Stein does not seem to recognize that the great issue for Henry II was Stephen's anarchy. Though he mentions it, he does so only briefly, as an interjection within an entirely different discussion.

Stein wants to do for the twelfth-century what Gabrielle Spiegel did for early thirteenth-century Flemish histories. But Spiegel knew her history. [1] She knew exactly how contemporary Flemish aristocrats conceived of power, exactly what Philip Augustus was doing that seemed different to them, and therefore exactly what they objected to in Philip's actions. Stein does not have the same depth of knowledge of eleventh- and twelfth-century French and English history. As a result, his descriptions of "power" and political context come across as flat and unconvincing. Thus, he consistently appeals to the

“rise of the administrative state” as if it were a “reality” his texts resist; but apart from a greater use of writing and a greater role of literate secular clerics (hardly unique to royal administrations in any case), he cannot really point to any specific issues in the nature of those transformations that demonstrably upset the nobility. After all, if Geoffrey’s *Historia regum* is a text that problematizes power, why was it dedicated to Robert of Gloucester? I believe that there were such issues; I do not believe Stein has identified them, because his understanding of power in the twelfth-century is (ironically, given his thesis) too traditionally statist, too much a construct.

It does not help that his reading of recent historians does not seem to have been very deep. So far as he cites them at all, the citations are few and disturbingly broad, and none seem have left much discernable mark on his accounts. In his discussion of sacred place, one misses any mention of Amy Remensnyder’s book on monastic legends or Michel Sot’s book on Flodoard’s writing of history.[2] (The latter would have told Stein that the historiographical sacralization of space in the Cambrai *Gesta* is not solely a response to an early eleventh-century conjuncture in the Cambrésis, but a trait that goes back to the early tenth century, and beyond that to Bede.) In his discussion of twelfth-century English administration and kingship, one misses Warren Hollister’s and David Crouch’s important studies of the political interests of the Norman aristocracy, J. E. A. Jolliffe’s provocative book on Angevin power, and above all W. L. Warren’s books on the crises in Henry II’s kingship and his famous criticism of the exaggerated efficiencies of Norman administration.[3] Stein’s discussion of Gerard of Cambrai’s attitude towards order and hierarchy might have cited the present author, as well as studies by J.-F. Lemaignier and R. Bonnaud-Delamare (which would explain how complicated Gerard’s alliances were, and how little they can be reduced to castellans and heretics).[4] His discussion of the romance elements in hagiography would have benefited from Alison Elliott’s wonderful *Roads to Paradise*. [5] The very idea of “reality fictions” would have benefited from any number of German, British, and American historians, or simply from Ruth Morse’s excellent *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages*. [6]

There are many other omissions, and they are not minor. Quite apart from the fact that such works would complicate his model immensely, their authors present arguments that would have made it more difficult for Stein to advance the broad assertions whose historical imprecision violates the basic rule of historical analysis. For Stein’s argument hinges on the idea that texts are written within and against specific historical conjunctures. What happens to this argument if a set of ninth-century histories (the Le Mans Forgeries) was doing the same thing as the eleventh-century *Gesta episcoporum Cameracensium*? [7] Stein often cites Kantorowicz’s *The King’s Two Bodies*, but the traits he borrows from Kantorowicz are those Kantorowicz himself located very precisely in later thirteenth century France, within a conjuncture specific to that period and place (and its Eucharistic theory) that simply does not apply to the twelfth century. [8] Stein’s entire discussion predicated on a twelfth-century king’s representing the entire body politic is therefore impossible. (In fact, his primary source for this statement — John of Salisbury’s *Policraticus* — belies his argument: John has the king representing the head, not the body. [9]) Stein consistently lumps together the Capetian kings of France and the post-Conquest kings of England as a single example of twelfth-century “state-building,” never mind that the Capetians were far less specialized in their administrative apparatus, and that it is hard to find anything in twelfth-century France that can be represented as a power-mongering “state” that threatened the aristocracy. [10] As a result, he seriously misconstrues the mechanisms and foreseeable implications of Philip Augustus’ takeover of the Vermandois territories in the 1180s. [11]

In the end, *Reality Fictions* illustrates an irony that returned me to my anthropology professor’s puzzlement at my effort to write a legal ethnography. Though Stein desires the weakening of disciplinary boundaries, as do we all, when he ventures into history, his contextualizations (and therefore his arguments) are too simplistic to be useful to historians or trustworthy to literary scholars. In contrast, when he is writing most like a literary scholar, teasing out meanings from texts he knows well, he produces exactly the kinds of imaginative and subtle insights historians need and have not been able to produce. *Reality Fictions* is a book well worth reading, but it needs to be read cautiously and

critically.

NOTES

[1] Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *Romancing the Past: The Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[2] Amy Remensnyder, *Remembering Kings Past: Monastic Foundation Legends in Medieval Southern France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); Michel Sot, *Un historien et son église au Xe siècle: Flodoard de Reims* (Paris: Fayard, 1993).

[3] W. L. Warren, "The Myth of Norman Administrative Efficiency," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 34 (1984): 113-32; idem, *Henry II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); idem, *The Governance of Norman and Angevin England, 1086-1272* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1987); C. Warren Hollister, with Amanda Clark Frost, *Henry I* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001); idem, *Monarchy, Magnates, and Institutions in the Anglo-Norman World* (London: Hambledon Press, 1986); David Crouch, *The Beaumont Twins: The Roots and Branches of Power in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1986); J. E. A. Jolliffe, *Angevin Kingship* (London: A. & C. Black, 1963).

[4] Geoffrey Koziol, *Begging Pardon and Favor: Ritual and Political Order in Early Medieval France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992); J.-F. Lemarignier, "Paix et réforme monastique en Flandre et Normandie autour de l'année 1023: quelques observations," in *Droit privé et institutions régionales: Etudes historiques offertes à Jean Yver* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1976), 443-68; Roger Bonnaud-Delamare, "Les institutions de paix dans la province ecclésiastique de Reims au XI^e siècle," *Bulletin philologique et historique du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques* (Paris, 1957):143-200. Though he has read and benefited from Georges Duby, *Les Trois Ordres ou l'imaginaire du féodalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), I do not think that Stein has fully recognized Duby's account of the difficulties Gerard saw in the Peace of God and Cluny and the way these challenges, too, affected his understanding of authority — to say nothing of the fact that imperial authority was, for Gerard, already illusory.

[5] Alison Elliott, *Roads to Paradise: Reading the Lives of the Early Saints* (Hanover, NH: University Press, 1987).

[6] Ruth Morse, *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages: Rhetoric, Representation, and Reality* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[7] Walter Goffart, *The Le Mans Forgeries: A Chapter from the History of Church Property in the 9th Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966); *Geschichte des Bistums Le Mans von der Spätantike bis zur Karolingerzeit: Actus Pontificum Cenomannis in urbe degentium und Gesta Aldrici*, ed. Margarete Weidemann, 3 vols. (Mainz: Verlag des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums in Kommission bei Habelt, 2002).

[8] Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957).

[9] John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, ed. and trans. Cary J. Nederman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), v.1, 6.

[10] Geoffrey Koziol, "Political Culture," in *France in the Central Middle Ages, 900-1200*, ed. Marcus Bull, *The Short Oxford History of France*, gen. ed. William Doyle (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2002), 43-76; idem, "England, France, and the Problem of Sacrality in Twelfth-Century Ritual," in *Cultures of Power: Lordship, Status, and Process in Twelfth-Century Europe*, ed. Thomas N. Bisson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 124-48. For more detail, see *Histoire des institutions françaises au Moyen âge*, ed. Ferdinand Lot and Robert Fawtier (Paris: 1957-62), v. 2, *Institutions royales*; Eric Bournazel, *Le Gouvernement capétien au XIIe siècle, 1108-1180: Structures sociales et mutations institutionnelles* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1975); Marcel Pacaut, *Louis VII et son royaume* (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1964). Many other studies document this.

[11] John W. Baldwin, *The Government of Philip Augustus: Foundations of French Royal Power in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); L.-L. Borrelli de Serres, *La réunion des provinces septentrionales à la couronne par Philippe Auguste: Amiénois, Artois, Vermandois, Valois* (Paris: Picard, 1899).

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See also Robert M. Stein's response to this review.

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