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Patricia Terry and Samuel N. Rosenberg, *Lancelot and the Lord of the Distant Isles or, The Book of Galehaut Retold*. Jaffrey, N. H.: David Godine, 2006. xxvii +228 pp. \$26.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9781567923247.

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It was with real enthusiasm that I agreed to review a book called *Lancelot and the Lord of the Distant Isles or, The Book of Galehaut Retold*. Recent literary scholarship has drawn attention to the intriguing figure of the half-giant but dazzlingly handsome Galehaut (is he in love with Lancelot or is his devotion to the greatest knight in Christendom an intense form of friendship?) whose poignant story has been long overshadowed by the perdurably popular tale of Lancelot and Guenevere. But when the book arrived, I was surprised to realize that what I had assumed to be a scholarly monograph was in fact a work of fiction. Patricia Terry and Samuel N. Rosenberg have taken Galehaut's story, which exists in many different versions scattered throughout the Arthurian corpus, and given it a coherent narrative form. Adjusting my expectations, I dove into a deeply moving story of overlapping relationships, the problematic ethical quality of which had more to do with their prodigious intensity than with whether they were or were not sexual. I emerged with a greater appreciation than ever of the psychological complexities of the thirteenth-century French narratives known as the non-cyclic *Lancelot du Lac* and the *Lancelot* or *Arthurian Vulgate Grail Cycle*, from which Terry and Rosenberg draw their material, as well as an entirely new appreciation for the literary practice of rejuvenating medieval material for a modern audience.

Before discussing the new ways in which the authors make this old and largely forgotten story "speak," it may be useful to situate the figure of Galehaut, first, with respect to medieval Arthurian legend and, second, with recent secondary literature, for he is among the least-known major figures of Arthurian literature. French *romancier* Chrétien de Troyes made Queen Guenevere and Lancelot into lovers for the first time in his late twelfth-century *Chevalier de la Charette*, and the story of their affair has proven irresistible to readers ever since. Subject of countless retellings, the love story receives, I believe, its most emotionally nuanced and certainly its lengthiest recounting in the five-book *Lancelot* or *Arthurian Vulgate Grail Cycle* (ca. 1215-1235), which tells the entire mythic history of Arthur and which casts the affair as a contributing factor to the downfall of the realm. But in this version of the Lancelot story (and in the marginally earlier and closely-related non-cyclic *Lancelot du Lac*) the lovers' adulterous passion is reflected, broadened, problematized or queered— depending on one's perspective—by the desire of the character Galehaut, Lord of the Distant Isles, for Lancelot.

Possessed of vast forces and an insatiable urge to conquer, Galehaut enters into the story when he demands that Arthur cede him his lands. He seems certain to force the king of Logres into submission—until Lancelot, disguised as the Black Knight, and loyal to Arthur because of his love for Guenevere, saves the day. Galehaut, astounded at the Black Knight's valor, forbids his men to attack the knight when he is unhorsed. As darkness interrupts the battle, Galehaut approaches the knight and utters a request that has confounded readers for centuries. That is, he asks Lancelot to spend the night with him. At first Lancelot refuses to stay with an enemy of Arthur. But Galehaut counters with a promise to do anything Lancelot asks, if only he will spend the night. In response, Lancelot makes the outrageous demand that Galehaut repress his territorial ambitions and submit to Arthur. Amazingly, Galehaut

agrees. He then hosts Lancelot in the most magnificent of four beds, and, in the middle of the night, slips in and lies down beside him. Does this mean in the same bed, or in an adjoining one? The preposition governing the pronoun that refers to Lancelot (*delez*) is considered equivocal by some scholars. In any case, throughout the night, Galehaut listens to Lancelot lament, unaware that his tears are for the queen.

So begins a story of a profound male friendship. Or at least the friendship is profound from Galehaut's side; although he feels a sense of responsibility to Galehaut, Lancelot's attachment is much less intense because the lion's share of his emotional life is occupied by his affair with the queen. But throughout the rest of Galehaut's story, which extends through parts two and three of the five-part book of the cyclic *Prose Lancelot*, the half-giant expresses his incommensurate love for the beautiful knight in deed and words, sacrificing his reputation, happiness and ultimately his life to insure his friend's well-being. Most significant for the cycle, he enables the disastrous love affair between Lancelot and Guenevere, even though to do so is against his own sentimental interests. This means that he is at least partially responsible for the downfall of the kingdom.

Several manuscripts bear witness to the importance of his role as go-between, illustrating his participation in the lovers' first kiss as he looms behind the pair, shielding their intimate gesture from the curious eyes of the courtiers. Galehaut's longing for Lancelot is acknowledged by Guenevere, who "gives" Lancelot to Galehaut forever, except for that part of Lancelot which she possesses, another locution that has stymied modern readers. But the precise nature of Galehaut's desire remains thoroughly ambiguous, open to diverse interpretations. True, Guenevere assigns him a lover, the Dame de Malehaut, who persuades the queen that a foursome will appear less odd to the rest of the court than a threesome. But does the Dame de Malehaut guarantee Galehaut's heterosexuality? Not necessarily. "Not to put too fine a point on it, the Dame de Malehaut is a beard, allowing Guenevere to see Lancelot at will and Galehaut to spend his days with Lancelot," as Simon Gaunt has archly described that character's function.[1] Finally, the once invincible Lord of the Distant Isles, powerful enough to have conquered the world before falling victim to love, becomes the very exemplar of self-sacrifice for love, starving himself to death when he hears the false rumor that Lancelot has killed himself. Galehaut's story achieves full closure only at the very end of the last book of the cycle, *La Mort le roi Artu*, when Lancelot dies and is laid to rest in the same tomb as his long-dead friend.

Although the character's ambiguous sexual identity had not gone unnoticed by earlier critics, it is only in the past two decades that it has garnered significant attention. The scholarship falls into identifiable perspectives, one of which deems Galehaut's emotion ennobling and legible according to idealized models of male friendship.[2] However, many scholars disagree. On the surface, it seems appropriate that a work so interested in tracing sexual desire and posing questions about its ethical qualities—the Lancelot and Guenevere affair is only one among many tales of passion, requited and unrequited recounted through the course of the cycle—would offer a possibility for exploring homoeroticism. Why would a work that interrogates virtually every relationship it represents—between king and subjects, between friends and relatives, between men and women—not be interested in teasing out the motivations behind male friendship? Also, the character clearly aroused uneasiness in some medieval readers. His relationship with Lancelot should have entered the literary history as an exemplar of male friendship.

But the gigantic knight's general lack of significance and the absence of sentimental attachment between him and Lancelot in subsequent versions of the Arthurian legend, like Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, suggest that he disturbed readers. Terry and Rosenberg note in their introduction that aside from "political embarrassment" (caused by Arthur's helplessness before Galehaut), moral disapproval may account for the character's modern obscurity, "since the Old French text is wholly sympathetic to the homoerotic relationship" (p. xxii). If it is true that the late thirteenth-century was a period of intensified persecution of homosexual acts, Galehaut must have represented a menace to be excised from the story of Lancelot.

Of the scholars who see Galehaut's sexuality as an issue, some foreground the relationship's homoerotic quality, arguing that whether or not medieval readers imagined the pair to be engaging in a physical love affair, they would have recognized that they were in love.[3] Another perspective is more interested in the effects of the apparently deliberate ambiguity of the character's sexuality, in the ways in which Galehaut's desire "calls subject/object and gender relations into question, and how his presence and crucial agency at key moments in Lancelot and Guenevere's love story (as well as Guenevere's presence in Galehaut's one-sided love affair with Lancelot) means that love is...always marked by *la tiercité*, by the necessity to every relation of a third term which is the agent of the relation...."[4]

Terry and Rosenberg's account of the Lancelot and Galehaut story, which is illustrated with wood-engravings by Judith Jaidinger, correlates with this final critical perspective, aiming to "retell the central love-drama in such a way as to restore its complexity and emotional depth for the modern reader" (p. xxvii). Thus the authors leave intact all the ambiguity of Galehaut's intentions and desires. However, the ambiguity in this retelling is not a function of the narrator's reticence with detail, as it is in the *Prose Lancelot*, but of the character's own psychology as represented in the story. Galehaut seems to lack any clear understanding of what drives him. Unable to grasp the nature of the love he feels for the youthful and spectacularly beautiful Lancelot, he initially registers only his desperate need to keep the young man by his side. When he discerns Lancelot's distress, he instinctively seeks the young man's happiness by seeking to discover what he wants, and, when he realizes that this is Guenevere, he brings her to Lancelot.

Lacking the framework that would allow him to conceive of himself as jealous of Lancelot's intimate relationship with the queen, Galehaut nonetheless understands that the relationship threatens his access to the young man. Therefore he asks Guenevere that in return for his handing Lancelot over to her she protect his friendship with the younger knight. "Let neither your love nor the interest of this kingdom ever drive us apart," he asks (p. 78). The illustration accompanying the story of Galehaut's bringing the two together reveals all. Lancelot, eyes closed in ecstasy, and Guenevere, eyes wide-open, share a kiss, while Galehaut's face, surmounting the lovers' heads, expresses his fathomless but resigned sorrow. As the story progresses a space for Galehaut's personal enlightenment is opened up by the constant dialectic between his inaccessible motivations, which he experiences as mysterious urges and bizarre dreams, and his stabs at self-knowledge. His love for a magnificent and utterly transcendent being is gradually revealed to be sacrificial, the only possible response to a situation that admits of no solution.

Things do not get better for Galehaut. Later in the story, he goes looking for help in interpreting the dreams that plague him; to Master Elias, dream-expert, he reveals another woe. "Some kind of sickness has made its way into my heart," he cries, "and it is destroying me" (p. 151). Master Elias suggests possible causes, one of which is love. He then interprets the ailing Galehaut's dreams for him, explaining that he will die because of Lancelot. Galehaut finally understands the nature of his own illness. However, Master Elias also advises that Galehaut not tell Lancelot: "The truth of one's destiny is not to be shared with others" (p. 161). Galehaut accepts the advice, recalling that he "had been obliged more than once to disguise his true feelings, to keep silent about matters that might disturb his companion.... Now, however, he felt forced into distortions and outright lies, and he detested himself for such weakness" (p. 162). But in withholding his feelings for Lancelot, Galehaut protects his friend. Thus Lancelot enjoys Galehaut's love and protection, only half-conscious of the significance of his older friend's desire and grateful never to be forced to confront it head-on.

Guenevere, for her part, is keenly aware of what is going on, but she remains secure in the knowledge that she possesses the one "bit" of Lancelot that will forever elude Galehaut. To hold up her end of the bargain that she enable the friendship between the two men, she requires Lancelot to commit himself to Galehaut. Tell him that "you are his forever, except insofar as you are mine," she commands Lancelot,

knowing that she has nothing to lose (p. 80). Still, because her love is sexual, the text sometimes wants to fault her for it. Like a great artist, Lancelot is not subject to any ordinary code of ethics, but the same is not true of the queen. On the other hand, the text also presents her capacity to appreciate Lancelot's transcendent superiority as positive. The Lady of the Lake, who, like Galehaut, wants above all to see Lancelot happy, urges the queen to love the young man. "Your love may be sin and madness, but let it be what you live for, since the one you love has no peer" (p. 128).

The story takes Lancelot's astonishing charisma for granted, indicating its presence only through reactions to him. These are extreme: Galehaut dies of sorrow, mistakenly believing that Lancelot is dead, at the end of the penultimate chapter. All of the material after his death, that is, everything contained in the last books of the *Prose Lancelot*, the *Quest for the Holy Grail*, and the *Death of Arthur* is compressed into one short chapter. But the squashing of about half of the cycle into one chapter forces us to remember Galehaut when we get to the end, whereas in the long cycle we forget him. This, in turn, forces us to question the ethical quality of the sacrifice. Galehaut, motivated by all possible good will, ironically, reluctantly, and finally half-knowingly, brings about the downfall of civilization because of his tremendous love for a gorgeous young man. Lancelot's supereminence is never in doubt. But is supereminence a good? Good what?

This final ambivalence is what makes Terry and Rosenberg's version a story for our times, a story of the mysterious power of charisma, in contrast with other mediated or reasoned types of love. Galehaut falls instantly and irrevocably in love with a man whose virtue is written all over his beautiful form. His devotion, excessive, utterly mindless, is absolute. His unmediated love for Lancelot is contrasted with his love for Arthur, which is based upon self-interest. Guenevere's love for Lancelot is mediated, arising in response to his love for her. Charisma is a particularly apt problem for readers living in a world where the quality is regarded as the supreme trait for leaders. But is charisma in fact a magic elixir? Or is the society that responds blindly to charisma doomed?

## NOTES

[1] Simon Gaunt, *Love and Death in Medieval French and Occitan Courtly Literature: Martyrs to Love* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 197.

[2] See Reginald Hyatte's two articles, "Reading Affective Companionship in the *Prose Lancelot*," *Neophilologus* 83 (1999): 19-32, and "Recoding Ideal Male Friendship as *Fine amor* in the *Prose Lancelot*," *Neophilologus* 75 (1991): 505-518.

[3] See Gretchen Mieszkowski, "The Prose Lancelot's Galehot, Malory's Lavain, and the Queering of Late Medieval Literature," *Arthuriana* 5 (1995): 21-51.

[4] Gaunt, *Love and Death?*, p. 193. See also Carol Dover, "Galehot and Lancelot: Matters of the Heart," *The World and its Rival: Essays on the Literary Imagination in Honor of Per Nykrog* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), pp. 119-135.

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