

Emily Houlik-Ritchey. *Imagining Iberia in English and Castilian Medieval Romance*. U of Michigan P, 2023. Pp. 250. \$75. ISBN: 978-0-472-13335-2.

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Emily Houlik-Ritchey has written a book both timely and needed, one that in a sense looks backward to a scholarship launched and then paused, and forward toward a discourse of globally interconnected reading presently shaping itself. Her intent is to bring Iberia—her preferred term for Spain (with various glances toward the Maghreb), since Portugal figures here minimally—into the current conversation about medieval literature having the Mediterranean at its center. In this endeavor she stands out as an heir of sorts to the late Alan Deyermond, who also, and in his day almost uniquely, made it his purpose to draw important connections between works by English and Spanish authors of the later Middle Ages.

Unlike Deyermond, however, who was altogether “old school,” in the manner of a criticism based on source identification and common images indicative of authorial influence, Houlik-Ritchey sets out an original theory of what she terms “neighborly comparison” (3). Drawing particularly on, but not confining herself to, “Neighbor Theory” as advanced by Kenneth Reinhard, George Edmondson (*The Neighboring Text: Chaucer, Boccaccio, Henryson*), and grounded by the ontology of Emmanuel Levinas (*Autrement qu’être ou au delà de l’essence*), hers is a “comparative methodology” (22) melding elements of “Mediterranean Studies” [sic] with “theories of neighborly textuality and ethics” (23). The result is a versatile optic, sufficiently flexible and thus adaptable to the focal matter of her study, the “imagination of Iberia within romance” (23).

Certainly “romance” as a genre demands an approach of such a kind, especially when located within an English/Iberian sphere. As Houlik-Ritchey notes, the word itself had significantly different valences on opposite sides of the Bay of Biscay: invoking ballads in Spain, but in England a congeries of literary models. Thus she presents romance as less a “static category” than a “‘transformative process’ that embraces ‘instability and hybridization’” (17, Houlik-Ritchey quoting Barbara Weissberger). Such definitional fluidity is conceptually essential for *Imagining Iberia*, since the works selected for discussion there require capacious embrace—and also, as Houlik-Ritchey readily admits, some

elasticity of categorization. The book takes as its major goal bringing together “disparate texts to foreground attention to the contrapuntal or uneven dimensions of their relationality, analyzing the dissonance that emerges within their affinities” (29–30).

The endeavor would seem to require a special terminology. “Cluster” is Houlik-Ritchey’s operative choice for associating the works she examines. Thus *Imagining Iberia* devotes its three chapters to the “Fierabras story cluster,” the “*Floire and Blancheflore* story cluster,” and the “Constance story cluster.” In the first, she conjoins the fifteenth-century Middle English *Sowdane of Babylone* with the second Book of Nicolás de Piemonte’s *Hystoria del emperador Carlomagno y delos doze pares de Francia, et de la cruda batalla que uvo Oliveros con Fierabrás, rey de Alexandria, hijo del grande almirante Balán*, utilizing its 1521 Seville iteration as printed by Jacobo Cromberger. Her point of coherence in both texts is the mutual wounding in battle of Ferumbras/Fierabras, and (to a lesser degree) Oliver/Oliveros. She reads their injuries as emblemizations of the mutilated body of the crucified Christ, and the resultant conversion of Fierabras as an outcome akin, *in parvo*, to the divine purpose underlying the incarnation. Thus far, she aligns with Piemonte, whose “romance,” while a literary production, is essentially polemical, and directly promotes that reading. The originality of Houlik-Ritchey’s analysis—also notably political—of these two works, however, lies in her broadening of that conjunction. Expanding upon work by Aranye Fradenburg Joy, Houlik Ritchey argues that “*Sowdone* and *Hystoria* each claim that exemplary Christian identity coheres around . . . a Christlike acceptance of injury and suffering” (63). Such suffering she finds purposive, ultimately offering Christian readers of *Sowdone* and *Hystoria* a pathway to understand the bloodshed and regime change of the Reconquista in acceptable terms: “the violence Christians leverage against themselves, their enemies, and Muslim-ruled Iberia” is to be imagined “through the rose-colored lens of ethical sacrifice” (32).

The focus of the second chapter is political also, albeit in a different way. The “cluster” here consists of two iterations of a narrative familiar from multiple analogues in many languages: a thirteenth-century Middle English version, *Floris and Blancheflour*, alongside the fourteenth-century Castilian *Crónica de Flores y Blancaflor*, both anonymous productions. Building upon what Sarah Ahmed has termed “affective economies,” Houlik-Ritchey reads these two romances as culturally iconic, each revelatory of how love is valued, weighted and assessed in the Christian

and Islamicate Mediterranean. Her analysis follows the “circulation” of Floris and Flores, the former, in a kind of barter, transmuted “emotion and devotion [into] legal tender for information and goods” (32), the latter into “renown and social credit.” The difference is crucial for Houlik-Ritchey’s extrapolation of “affective economies” in so far as the concept adumbrates her larger purpose in *Imagining Iberia*—that is, the simultaneous, “neighborly” presentation of a divided sociocultural geography that was medieval Spain. Superficially in her telling the “tender” accrued by Floris and Flores in their individual quests to free (and of course ultimately possess) Blancheflour/Blancaflor could not be less similar: trade itself in the case of Floris, whose disguise as a merchant is—contrarily—the more revealing of the poem’s message, and renown and prestige for Flores who, active within a prestige culture, maintains his chivalric and aristocratic identity, both qualities that in fact enable his search. Following this thread, Houlik-Ritchey takes modest issue with a prevailing view of the *Crónica de Flores y Blancaflor*, that it supports and justifies “a relentless drive toward Christianity” (132–33), arguing instead that both texts, while varying “wildly” in the “purpose, context, and performance of their circulation” (165), illuminate greater and lesser degrees of commodification.

Chapter three takes up the “Constance cluster,” specifically versions proffered earliest in Anglo-Norman by Nicholas Trevet in *Les Chronicles*, his history of the world. From Trevet John Gower borrowed the tale to include it in the *Confessio Amantis*, Chaucer subsequently produced the “Man of Law’s Tale,” based on both Trevet and Gower, and later on in the peninsula, as part of translations of the *Confessio* made by Robert Payn and Juan de Cuenca, respectively, “Constance” was rendered into Portuguese and Castilian. The key term in the title of this chapter is “De-networking.” As Houlik-Ritchey explains it (169):

This chapter investigates the resemblances between Iberia and Northumbria in three insular British versions of the tale . . . and then turns to the two lesser-known Iberian versions . . . analyzing their transformation of the way the British writers imagine Muslim rule in Iberia, and tracing the process by which these Iberian versions progressively de-network England from Mediterranean alliance, in complementary fashion to the overall tradition’s ostracization of Iberia.

What Houlik-Ritchey has observed and finds fascinating is the way Chaucer and Gower steadily replace Iberia, resulting in a British link to

Roman imperium through the union of a Northumbrian king and Constance, the daughter of the emperor of Rome. Because the *Confessio Amantis* found its way abroad, enabling its translation into peninsular languages, Houlik-Ritchey makes it, in Middle English and in the translations, the center of her argument, offering passing commentary on Chaucer's and Trevelyan's versions. In this chapter her reliance on "neighborly textuality" as iterated by Edmondson—i.e., of "competing claims" devolving from repeated retelling—is most on display. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Houlik-Ritchey finds Spain marginalized and heathenized by Chaucer and (especially) Gower. More striking is her discovery of an opposite vector in the Castilian, and particularly the Portuguese drafting by Payn (207–08), himself an Englishman undoubtedly connected with Philippa, daughter of John of Gaunt and wife of João I of Portugal.

Discoveries detailed in this third chapter thus elide smoothly into Houlik-Ritchey's summative conclusion, wherein she further clarifies the inherent terminology of her title. What her "neighboring" of these Middle English romances, and analogues and translations produced on the peninsula, illustrates, she proposes, is not the insignificance of Spain in the English imagination, but rather the opposite: "All the romances show us, in varying ways, a fantasy of Iberia in the making" (209). Hence "imagining" Iberia—"ultimately a contact zone, where complex cultural and geopolitical transactions at once divide and link Christians and Muslims, Europe and Africa, the peninsula and the larger Mediterranean," a complex geography at once "a war zone . . . trade nexus . . . cultural enclave . . . seat of geopolitical power . . . insular border [and] wide-reaching network" (210).

With *Imagining Iberia*, then, Houlik-Ritchey sounds a challenge to Anglophone and Francophone medievalists to recognize the inextricability of Spain from the literary productions of the authors they study. Its presence, she argues—largely successfully, in her third chapter in particular—was never absent from northern imaginations, even as contemporary writers transmuted, or strove to erase it. Undoubtedly hers is a claim to be heeded.

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