

Filling a gap

Article

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Filling a gap

Europäisches Hochmittelalter¹ is the latest volume in the Neues Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft to appear and its appearance will make many English-speaking medievalists regret that such a series is not readily available in English and that there is no sign of any publisher being tempted to fill the gap. Under the editorship of Henning Krauss, German-speaking scholars have contributed chapters on all the literatures of the period ranging from the Provençal lyric to the Scandinavian literatures, although the main emphasis tends to be on the literature of France and Germany.

With sixteen different contributors there are bound to be differences in the approaches and the styles, although all attempt to fit into the guidelines for the series which are that the literature should be set clearly in the social and intellectual background of the period and the region. The usefulness of such an approach is obvious but it has to be said that in some of the chapters the need to explain such complicated subjects leaves very little space for any literary criticism. There are also differences in the presentation of the bibliographies and these are more serious. In a work like this which is presumably intended for the non-specialist as well as the specialist reader it would be extremely useful to have listed the editions of the works discussed in the chapter. Ulrich Mülk in his chapters on the lyric (Die provenzalische Lyrik and Die französische Lyrik) lists only anthologies, and the late Erich Köhler (Der Roman in der Romania) also omits editions from an otherwise wide-ranging and interesting bibliography. Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann (Der französische höfische Roman) and Marc-René Jung (Satirische, komische und realistische Literatur der Romania), however, do give editions, which is very helpful as not all the texts covered are well known. Another weakness is that several bibliographies make no mention of any works in English. As a result major works are missing. Stricter editorial control might have been helpful here.

Contributors to such a volume have many pitfalls to avoid, particularly trying to avoid lists of medieval authors or works and not to lapse into a narrative account of what the medieval author wrote. At the same time they have to take into account briefly and clearly the vast amount of critical writing which now exists for most of the areas under discussion and try to give their own personal interpretation. Again it has to be said that not all contributors are equally successful and that in some cases different parts of their contributions are more successful than others. Mülk, for instance, does an excellent job in synthesising and compressing the background material in his chapters. His description and analysis of amour courtois are particularly noteworthy but the individual troubadours and trouvères get relatively little attention with no real guidance for the inexperienced reader as to their quality. By way of contrast Wolfgang Haubrichs (Deutsche Lyrik) not only guides the

unskilled reader expertly through the development of the genre from its aristocratic beginnings to the revolutionary views of Walter von der Vogelweide but is able to provide some literary analysis as well.

Other chapters suggest that the authors have been asked to cover material, not all of which interested them equally or, perhaps, some of which was unfamiliar to them. Köhler is perceptive and interesting on Chrétien de Troyes and the background (as might be expected), as he is on the differences between Thomas and Béroul, whom he dates early like several other recent writers on Béroul. On the other hand his section on the prose romances is perfunctory, particularly his remarks on the Prose Tristan, while the section on the Grail Romances is unlikely to mean very much to anyone not already thoroughly familiar with the material. Similarly Thomas Cramer (Der deutsche höfische Roman) provides an admirable summary of the varying interpretations on offer and is interesting on Parzival, but he has little to say on Lanzelet or Gottfried von Strassburg. As Köhler's treatment of the French Tristans is not wholly satisfactory either, perhaps a separate chapter on the Tristan legend would have been desirable.

Probably the most successful chapters are those by Schmolke-Hasselmann and Jung. The former provides an overall view of a vast range of romances, skilfully bringing out the importance of the political background and in particular the Anglo-Norman influence which played such a large role in the development of the later romances. Without ever descending to narrative she makes her points clearly and provides a good impression of the romance under discussion. The latter performs the very considerable feat of producing a coherent study of some widely-scattered works. The title of the chapter suggests that he was given the works which did not fit into any other category. Yet despite this drawback he guides the reader through a wide range of satirical and comic literature with an enviable sureness. The Roman de Renart gets slightly short shrift but Rutebeuf, his predecessors and the sirventes are discussed in a clear and entertaining way.

The volume is beautifully produced and lavishly illustrated in black and white which helps to introduce the reader to the medieval outlook. No chapter is less than competent and, as already suggested, the better chapters are considerable works of scholarship. Almost all readers can get something from this book, although it is true to say that those who are already well acquainted with the material will get most, as some sections are so condensed that the beginner will not easily follow the argument. This book should become a most valuable scholarly tool and the only pity is that its use will be confined to those who can read German and preferably read it fairly easily for although the style is usually free of the worst excesses of academic German

READING MEDIEVAL STUDIES

it is a long read, but a very worthwhile one for those with the patience to persist.

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Note

1. Europäisches Hochmittelalter, edited by Henning Krauss, Neues Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft, Band 7, Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft Athenaion, Wiesbaden, 1981, pp.592 f.