
As the author regretfully admits, ‘the place occupied by the Arthurian corpus in French Romanticism may seem surprisingly and disappointingly marginal.’ Despite that perception, Michael Glencross offers the contemporary reader of French and English a careful analysis of the resonance of Arthurian material to the French reading public during the half-century between 1812 (the first edition of Creuzé de Lesser’s Les chevaliers de la table ronde) and 1860 (the appearance of Edgar Quinet’s Merlin l’enchanteur). His argument is essentially that the discovery, criticism, and diffusion to the general reading public of Arthurian material was integral to the development of French medievalism during the Romantic period (roughly 1800–1860), even though Arthurian literature was distinctly less important to the French scholarly and public imagination than the Carolingian epic cycle or troubadour lyricism.

This careful, indeed painstaking study consists of six chapters, somewhat diverse in style and of uneven interest to the Anglophone Arthurian specialist. Chapter 1, ‘The Ideological Background’ (pp. 1–26), is well described by the chapter sub-title, ‘Chivalry, Feudalism and Romance in the Literary Critical and Historical Discourse of the Restoration.’ Glencross sets up a neat quadrilateral of the liberal historians Guizot and Sismonde de Sismondi (Swiss, but influential in French public thought because of his huge Histoire des Français—31 volumes between 1821 and 1844—as well as for his less widely read De la littérature du Midi de l’Europe of 1813) in opposition to the two monarchist historians Michaud and Marchangy. Other writers appear as well, for example Auguste Trognon, tutor to the children of Louis-Philippe, one of the first to distinguish (in 1836) two distinct Feudal Ages (though hardly those discerned a century later by Marc Bloch). Glencross concludes this historiographically interesting chapter with the observation that, instead of exploring the interaction between feudalism and chivalry, the most influential writers polarized oppositions.

‘By the end of the Restoration the dominant rhetorical figure in the literary and historical discourse on the Middle Ages was, literally and figuratively speaking, antithesis. In this way signifiant and signifié combined to reinforce the vision of the French Middle Ages as ‘temps pleins de grandeur et de bassesse, d’activité morale et de brutalité, d’émotion et de barbarie’ (a quotation from the Revue française of November, 1828).

Chapter 2, ‘The Literary Battleground: Medieval and Arthurian Literature in the Romantic Debate on France, 1813–1830’ (pp. 27–57), concludes that ‘Arthurian material is the serpent de mer of Restoration literary criticism, a useful subject for speculation but a vaguely defined, almost fabulous, animal.’ The chief cause adduced for this marginalization is a cluster of then-current terminological blurrings which ‘tend to confuse rather than clarify genre distinctions, such an important aspect of literary theory in the French classical tradition’ (p. 57). Poems on Arthurian subject matter and Carolingian epics were both classified, for example, as romans de chevalerie. The central figure of this chapter is Abel Villemain, the Sorbonne professor (and later...
Peer of France under Louis-Philippe) who embodies for Glencross the crucial displacement of the ‘amateur antiquarian’ by the ‘professional scholar’ as the authoritative figure in the formation of nineteenth-century educated French public opinion. Another quadrilateral, this time of Villemain’s sources—François Raynouard, Claude Faurel, Pierre Daunou, and August-Wilhelm von Schlegel (Mme. de Staël’s good friend and sometime mentor)—is set up and explored.

Chapter 3, ‘Towards the “Real” Middle Ages: The Status and Function of Medieval Literary Scholarship in France, 1830–1860’ (pp. 58–88), moves into the next generation. This chapter is more interested in institutional configurations than in individual scholars, but Paulin Paris is well treated in this discussion of the École des Chartes, the Comité des Travaux Historiques, and other state investments in the scholarly enterprise. Three overlapping generations of critical scholarship are represented by the little-published but cadre-shaping Faurel (1772–1844), Jean-Jacques Ampère (1800–1864), and Francisque Michel (1809–1887)—who with P. Paris constitute yet another quadrilateral. This chapter’s structure reflects ‘[t]he tension between the relative importance attributed to individuals or to institutions’ which Glencross sees as running ‘like a leitmotif through Romantic medievalism, manifesting itself both in conflicting theories of history and in the practice of scholarship’ (p. 86). This theme is summed up neatly by a look at the ‘contrasting assessments of progress in the study of medieval literature between 1830 and 1860’ offered in public lectures by Sainte-Beuve (in 1858) and by Gaston Paris, Paulin’s son (in 1881).

Chapter 4, ‘In Search of National Identity: Medieval and Arthurian Literature in the Historical Imagination of Quinet, Michelet, and Henri Martin’ (pp. 89–118), delivers what its subtitle promises. Glencross’s account is based on the diffuse corpora of the works of Edgar Quinet and Jules Michelet and on Henri Martin’s less popular but once much-esteemed Histoire de France depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu’en 1789. Glencross maintains that ‘[t]he Romantic historian sees his role not just as explaining and narrating the past but as imagining and reviving it as well as mapping out the future. The historian becomes both poet and prophet.’ He contends further that: ‘Of no French historians is this more true than Edgar Quinet and Jules Michelet. Indeed it is true to say that their reputations rest today on the literary rather than the historical qualities of their writings’ (p. 89).

Having by this point thoroughly discredited the substantive value of all these nineteenth-century authors’ scholarship, Glencross turns at last to the exposition of medieval Arthurian literature’s shape-changing experience in what he calls the Romantic period. Chapter 5, ‘The Bard and the Troubadour: The Debate on the Origins and Diffusion of the Arthurian Material in French Romantic Scholarship’ (pp. 119–143), was of particular interest to this reviewer for its explanation of French romantic Celtomania. Readers with other Arthurian interests are likely to find it instructive as well. Chapter 6—‘Retelling the Tale: New Versions of the Arthurian Material in French Literature, 1812–1860’ (pp. 144–172)—sweeps from Les chevaliers de la table ronde (Creuzé de Lesser’s, not Cocteau’s) to Quinet’s Merlin l’enchanteur with unaccustomed verve and a solidity owing much to the hard work of the previous chapters. It will no doubt be of greatest use to Arthurian neo-medievalists. It concludes
with the rueful concession that Romantic French neo-medievalism yielded ‘a fairly meager harvest…[c]ompared with the number of literary reworkings of the Arthurian material produced by by twentieth century French writers…Though the medieval stories were adapted and preserved through popular versions, and though the original texts became increasingly available again in scholarly editions, creative writers looked to other medieval sources for their inspiration. Like Hugo in *Notre Dame de Paris* (1831) or Balzac in *Béatrice* (1839), they found it in the material, architectural remains of the Middle Ages more than in stories about King Arthur and his knights’ (p. 172).

One of the strongest features of this chapter, as of this book as a whole, is Glencross’s insistence on the importance of popular adaptations of scholarly material and critical debate, adaptations ranging in intellectual level and in audience appeal from the stolidly edifying *Bibliothèque bleue* to the studiedly cosmopolitan *Revue des deux mondes*. His thorough exploitation of periodical literature and his assiduous integration of those results with the grand themes of of modern French historiography may well be this book’s prime contribution to continuing scholarship.

The style of this book will not appeal to all; it struck this reviewer as more wooden in the earlier chapters than toward the end, which does seem to have engaged the author more than his earnestly elaborated prolegomena to the central argument. Some readers may object to the evidently Francophile author’s tendency to quote his French sources both frequently and at length; a reader not at ease with literary French might find this useful study frustrating. This reviewer tried his hand at some English renderings of key quotations, but found in each case that the translation traduced the message excessively. Glencross doesn’t merely love the French language and its distinctive critical tradition; he has a keen eye for its riper nuances, and feels committed to reporting them faithfully. As a result, the mental world of Edgar Quinet and his fractious intellectual *confrères*, paradoxically enchanted at once by Celtomania and classicism, has come alive once more in these careful pages.

Jeremy Duquesnay Adams
Southern Methodist University