

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

C. David Benson (2019) *Imagined Romes: The Ancient City and Its Stories in the Middle English Poetry*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press. 216 pp., \$ 89.95 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-271-08320-9.

In his article ‘The Idea of a Critical Literary Geography,’ Andrew Tacker (2005) states that his primary interest is ‘how far, and in what ways, the analysis of literary texts can be enriched by the use of geographical ideas and practices’ (56). Aligned with this approach, previous scholarly works have made significant contributions to the study of the influence of ancient cities and Latin literature in general on Middle English poetry. However, before C. David Benson’s *Imagined Romes*, there was not a study looking exclusively at ancient Rome as a central theme in works by medieval English poets. In *Imagined Romes*, Benson analyzes how Middle English poets imagined the city of ancient Rome and the Romans, as well as the role that they played in such poetic narratives. He devotes particular attention to variations in poets’ attitudes towards the city and its stories, and the treatment poets give to them. But, why draw on poetry to achieve such objective? According to Benson, unlike medieval chronicles that narrate sequences of events and in which Rome is a recurrent theme, the poems he draws on are ‘isolated episodes from the city’s history and make little attempt to distinguish between its different periods’ (3). One important warning that he makes in the introductory section of the book is that *Imagined Romes* is not an attempt to discuss ‘what we know (or think we know)’ about Rome and Romans, but rather, how they were imagined and represented by Middle English poets who, presumably, were never physically present in the city (6). The analysis of such poetic representations of Rome and the Romans is deep in *Imagined Romes*, and just as Brosseau (1994) has insisted, prior to start interpreting texts, it is critical to give them ‘a better voice’, by devoting substantial effort in the text itself. This is constant across the chapters of this book and is, without a doubt, a strength of this study.

Imagined Romes is divided into two parts. The first part is fully focused on the role of Rome’s physicality (including objects and relics) in Middle English poetry. Benson draws on two anonymous and partially understudied poems. A poem titled *Stacions of Rome* is the first one he discusses. Even though, in his words, it is ‘not a very sophisticated work of literature or theology’, it does comprise rich information about Christian Rome as it is a ‘survey of Rome’s churches, relics, and pardons that argues for the city’s importance as source of divine mercy’ (14). Given that medieval Rome was profoundly religious, the *Stacions of Rome* functions as an instrument that detailed records the city’s relics and objects that possessed some degree of spiritual power. One of the most important aspects of the *Stacions of Rome* is, as Benson suggests, that:

the poem animates its catalog of Roman relics by inviting readers to take part imaginatively in the original biblical event, while contemplating both the wickedness of human sin and our hope for its divine redemption. (22)

While highlighting the ‘Christian present’ of Rome, it largely ignores its pagan past. It also glorifies the heroic martyrs and popes represented in mainly three kinds of sacred objects: churches, relics, and pardons.

Contrasting to the *Stacions of Rome* primarily focused on the Christian Rome, in this part of the book Benson also provides a deep analysis of another anonymous poem: the interpolation on Rome in the *Metrical Version of Mandeville’s Travels*. Published in Latin in the twelfth century, a work titled *Mirabilia Urbis Romae* (‘Marvels of the City of Rome’) was the most important and popular source about Rome in Europe. As Benson suggests, the so-called “Mirabilia tradition,” made of the multiple versions in different languages of the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae*:

[I]magines and idealized ancient Rome: instead of a sacred city of martyrs’ [like in the *Stacions of Rome*] shrines offering infinite mercy, however, it portrays a golden city of magnificent pagan marvels. Though often erroneously by modern historical standards, the *Mirabilia* claims to present the lost city in all its original glory. (33)

The interpolation on Rome in the *Metrical Version of Mandeville’s Travels* provides an idealized description of the magnificence of Rome’s urban landscape. Also, this poem, far from celebrating the pagan material remanences in the city, glorifies the city’s contemporary Christianity.

In the second part of *Imagined Romes*, Benson moves on to the analysis of four major Middle English (Ricardian) poets’ narratives of Rome and Romans. He is primarily concerned with the specific areas of social and/or political life of Rome that those poems describe and how they do so. The first poem by John Gower (1330-1408) titled *Confessio Amantis* is primarily political in nature, as it portrays ancient Rome as an exceptional example of civic governance and political stability. While Gower does not comment on the current English political structure and its characteristics, he takes, according to Benson, two lessons from ancient Rome: ‘(1) leaders are strongest when they govern in harmony with a wider community’, and ‘(2) a good city is one that is able to sustain itself and its values even when the leader fails’ (60). Since Rome in the *Confessio Amantis* is primarily a pagan city, Gower explains the positive attributes of Rome’s governance by highlighting the emperor-community collaboration. Benson concludes that:

The Rome imagined in Gower’s poem is a crucial element in this deeply political work, being its principal model of civic responsibility and cooperation. The English poet uses the ancient city to inform and, he must have hoped, to reform his countrymen, from the king to the commons. (78).

After Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, Benson moves on to two poems by Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400): *Canterbury Tales* and *Legend of good Women*. Instead of portraying the structural functioning of Rome’s

politics and civic culture like in the *Confessio Amantis*, Chaucer emphasizes the ‘heroic suffering’ of prominent Roman women. Chaucer is perhaps one of the only Ricardian poets who systematically emphasized, at least during his late career, the consequences of Roman gender-based inequality and made visible what women suffered. It is interesting to see how Cecilia, one of Chaucer’s heroines, who is openly against a Roman male leader, creates and establishes an alternative society within Rome. This clearly contrasts with the way Gower imagined Rome: a place of political stability and civic governance. Apart from the way Middle English poets imagined Rome and the Romans, throughout the book Benson is centrally focused on their attitudes towards the city and paganism vis-à-vis Christianity. For example, in contrasting Chaucer with the previous works analyzed Benson claims that while Gower is ‘largely indifferent to religious practices (pagan or Christian) in Rome’ Chaucer, as well as the authors of the *Mirabilia* is ‘alert to the contrasts and continuities between the two kinds of beliefs’ (94).

The last two poems analyzed in *Imagined Romes* are *Piers Plowman* by William Langland (1332-1400) and *Fall of Princess* by John Lydgate (1370-1451). In *Piers Plowman* Langland reformulates the legend of emperor Trajan and pope Gregory that portrays a Rome in which Christian and pagan beliefs are reconciled and coexist in harmony—none of his fellow Middle English poets ever did this. Besides this reconciliation, these characters are ‘symbols of the dialectic between justice and mercy’ and, according to Benson, this is the central theme of *Piers and Plowman*. Langland is clearly indifferent to Rome’s history, however, as Benson points out, through his version of the legend he ‘sees it [Rome] as a place beyond time where justice and mercy merge’ (8). This is very important because, as Benson concludes, ‘Trajan and Gregory were each eminences in ancient Rome, but the truth of the one [Trajan] and the love of the other [Gregory] are finally combined, fulfilled, and salvific not in the earthly city each led but in the heavenly city of God’ (120). Lydgate’s *Fall of Princess*, on the other hand, provides a more detailed description of Rome’s urban landscape and its customs than any of the poems analyzed in the book. The *Fall of Princess* is, coupled with the ones from the *Mirabilia* tradition, one of the ones that contains the most exhaustive physical description of the city, primarily because most of this poem’s narratives are set in Rome. One of the central elements of this poem are the ‘envoys’ that Lydgate added to several of its narratives. However, from Benson’s perspective, the one titled ‘Envoy to Rome’ is one that determines Lydgate’s central concern and theme, which is (similar to Chaucer), the human calamity. Thus, while providing a fine physical description of the city, the ‘Envoy of Rome’ tells ‘the fall of the ancient city’ and is, in Benson’s words, ‘a powerful and complex attempt to assess what had been lost with the fall of ancient Rome, and why’ (127-28). From all the Ricardian poets included in this study, Lydgate is the one who has the greatest dislike against paganism and through the narratives of *Fall of Princess*, he ‘reminds us that the city’s magnificence (like its crimes) was as transient as all things of this world’ (144).

Imagined Romes is, undoubtedly, an important contribution to the field of literary geography. Even though, as highlighted across different chapters of the book, it is not about Rome but about how Middle English poets imagined it, it opens a new avenue for future studies to focus on the influence and presence of Rome, its objects, inhabitants, and practice on medieval English or other literatures. Also, Benson’s comparative analysis of four prominent Ricardian poets’ portrayal of Rome and the Romans, and two anonymous Middle English poems focused on the city’s physicality and objects,

embodies a kaleidoscopic view of the diverse aspects of Rome that influenced the poetic production in medieval England. The polyvocal nature of *Imagined Romes* reveals the powerful connection between poetic narratives and space; connection that emerged, in this particular case, in the wake of a non-physical contact between the poets and Rome as they never were physically there. Even though throughout *Imagined Romes* Benson vastly contrasts poets' representations of and attitudes towards Rome (especially the ones regarding pagan and Christian Rome), perhaps the most evident structural limitation of the book is the lack of a conclusion section in which outcomes of this study could be commented on in a deeper way. Finally, just as scholars like Thacker (2005) and Hones (2008; 2015) have claimed, the field of literary geography is in need of consolidating as an interdisciplinary one, and even though Benson as English and Medieval scholar is more concerned with the textual than the geographical dimension in this book, *Imagined Romes* is of interest for scholars from different disciplines looking at literature and the city, imagined geographies, medieval studies, and many others. Works and approaches like Benson's are the ones helping to consolidate a 'genuinely interdisciplinary field' (Hones 2015).

Works Cited

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