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Richard W. Kaeuper, Rochester, NY

Some scholars assert that had Gerard of Cremona been the single translator of the Ancient texts flooding into Europe in the 12th century (crucial works in Greek rendered into Arabic, and finally into Latin), the medieval university curriculum would have been transformed. Nigel Bryant is a worthy successor to the tradition of Gerard of Cremona where romance and courtly or chivalric literature are concerned. His offerings to the scholarly world have been numerous; the work involved has been truly heroic. All who study and teach the medieval world owe him a profound debt of gratitude. His eight hundred-page translation of the «Perceforest»¹ would, we might have thought, lead to a quiet period of restful recovery. Instead, he has given us this new translation of an even more fundamental text, the «History of William Marshal».

Scholars of the Middle Ages, of course, know and richly appreciate the three-volume facing-page edition and translation of the «History»², edited by Anthony J. Holden, with an English translation by Stewart Gregory and historical notes by David Crouch, published by the Anglo-Norman Text Society. This publication remains an essential tool for scholars. What Bryant and the Boydell Press now offer, however, is a single volume English translation in prose suitable for broader use by all those students or general readers who would never otherwise encounter this remarkable biography. The Boydell Press are to be congratulated for this publication. It is to be hoped that this press will soon make a paperback edition available to enable the widest use of so central, so valuable, and so intriguing a medieval text.

Bryant’s translations of medieval works have always been admirable and authoritative. In this new enterprise he is taking an additional scholarly step in introducing the translation. He is dealing with an historical figure near the center of trans-Channel political and social history, a figure about whom contending views have been advanced. In fact, William Marshal has figured as the subject of three modern biographies, beginning with that of the American medieval historian Sydney Painter³, followed


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by a short and vigorously revisionist biography by the noted French medievalist Georges Duby⁴, and by what has become the standard book by David Crouch⁵. Bryant in his lively introduction to his new translation eschews the standard sections a translator usually writes, those providing commentary on such matters as authorship and textual language. Instead, he devotes full attention to understanding the Marshal himself and to the reliability of the text in presenting him. He boldly stakes out his position on these topics in two dozen intense pages of argument presenting views of considerable interest. He makes the maximal case for the Marshal’s genuinely exceptional qualities and defends the basic accuracy of the »History« in presenting them, persistently steering interpretation away from any modern doubt or cynicism. The Marshal, in short, was the exceptional figure so many of his contemporaries declare him to be in the pages of this biography.

Broad topical headings inserted throughout the text guide the reader, as do more specific notations of subject atop each right-hand page. A reader consulting this text and interested in looking at the French original might only wish that keys to line numbers in the original French of the Holden edition of the »History« could have accompanied each section of the translated prose text. Rendering a work of poetry into rose always has drawbacks; but the necessity in a single-volume version is clear.

And the prose translation is highly readable, at times even snappy; conversations sound like actual speech, readers will get a sense of what people may really have said (though doubt may surface that a five year old in the 12th century would refer to a family servant who suddenly appears in the enemy camp as »old chap«, as at p. 33) Many examples call for quotation, but one sample is Bryant’s rendition of sharp denunciation poured by the hardy on cowards who advise the Young King to flee upon merely hearing a report that his father, Henry II, was approaching in wrath. (The OF text edited by Holden follows the Bryant translation below): »Damn the eyes and balls of any man who’d urge his lord toward shame and dishonor! Flee when no one’s chasing you? Never! God forbid!« (p. 49) [Huniz seit d corz e des iez / Qui si conseille son seigner / A faire honte e dishonor! / Fuir s’en quant nuls ne vos chace, / Ce n’ert ja fait; ja Dex ne place⁶].

One further case in point is likewise illustrative. As the Marshal nears death, slowly and almost operatically, he responds to a challenging claim from a friend that his knightly career has violated essential church teaching: »Bear with me a moment, Henry. The clerics are too hard on us! They shave us too closely! I’ve captured five hundred knights and kept their arms, their destriers and all their gear. If that means that the kingdom of God is barred to me then that’s that – I can’t give them back! I can do no more for God, I’d say, than yield myself to Him repentant of all my misdeeds, of all the wrongs I’ve done. Unless the clergy mean to see me damned they should stop their harrying!«

⁴ Georges Duby, Guillaume le Maréchal, Paris 1984.
⁵ David Crouch, William Marshal: Court, Career and Chivalry in the Angevin Empire 1147–1219, London 1990 (Medieval World, 1).
⁶ Holden (ed.), History (as in n. 2), lines 2050–2055.
Either their claims are false or no man can have salvation\textsuperscript{7}. [\textit{Henri, souffreiz mei un petit}. / \textit{Le clerc sunt vers nos trop engrés}, / \textit{Trop nos vunt barbiant de pres}; / \textit{Car j’ai pris v. cenz chevaliers}, / \textit{Don’t j’ai e armes e destriers} / \textit{E tot lo hermeis retenu}; / \textit{Se por ço m’est contretenu} / \textit{Li reignes Dé, n’l a que prendre} / \textit{Car je nel porreie pas orendre}. / \textit{Je ne puis plus fere, se cui}, / \textit{A Deu, for render mei a lui} / \textit{Repentant de toz mes mesfez}, / \textit{De toz les mals que je ai fez}. / \textit{Sil ne me volent eschacier}, / \textit{Ayant ne me poent eschacier}; / \textit{Ou lor argument est ci fals}, / \textit{Ou nuls hom ne puet ester sals}\textsuperscript{8}.]

This book deserves to become a classic and to find its way into many a university course syllabus and into many a bookcase.

\textsuperscript{7} Nigel Bryant (transl.), \textit{The History of William Marshal}, Woodbridge 2016, p. 219.

\textsuperscript{8} Holden (ed.), \textit{History (as in n. 2)}, lines 18480–18496.