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Ursula Schaefer

**Michael Johnston. Romance and the Gentry in Late Medieval England.
Reviewed by Ursula Schaefer**

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Reviewed by: **Ursula Schaefer**, Technische Universität Dresden
E-Mail: Ursula.Schaefer@tu-dresden.de

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In the “Introduction” (1–20) Johnston identifies three “simultaneous developments” which the book should bring together: for one, the “gentry [...] emerging into a distinct and quite numerous stratum within the aristocracy”; secondly, the “[r]omance adapt[ing] to this change, opening up a new ideological space for this new class of readers”; and, finally, “book production” – in particular: copying by booklets and the increasing use of paper – “conveniently facilitating provincial copying and circulation of provincially oriented texts”. These three developments, says Johnston, “coalesced to yield a new type of romance” which he dubs *gentry romance* (14). His aim is to show that the gentry had an active part in the late history of English romance as some of its members – literally – appropriated (specimens of) this genre “most closely related with the aristocracy” (15).

Johnston explains in the “Preface” – a quite unusual place – that his notion of *aristocracy* is a wide one, comprising the “king and parliamentary peerage” and “the landed gentry” (v). The overall claim being that by a specific kind of romance, the gentry finds an ideological foothold “at the lower end of late medieval England’s upper tier” (v), Johnston deplores in the “Introduction” that social historians have neglected “the appeals to the gentry contained in the romances”. Moreover, “literary scholars have paid little attention to the recent flurry of studies of the gentry” (*ibid.*). Johnston sets out to close these gaps and finds his own point of departure: his excellent expertise in ‘provincial’ codicology. This is obvious in the structure of the book. Its first half consists of the chapters “1 ‘A Watered-Down Version of Nobility’: The Growth of the Gentry in

Late Medieval England” (21–47), “2 Gentry Romances: A Literary History” (48–89), and “3 Gentry Romances: The Manuscript Evidence” (90–127). Chapter 3 prepares for the following examination centering around book production in the province: “4 Derbyshire Landowners Read Romance” (128–158), “5 Robert Thornton Reads Romance” (159–205), and “6 The Irelands Read Romance” (206–249).

Chapter 1 is announced in the “Introduction” as making “the case that this class emerged in the mid-late fourteenth century and had unique sociocultural concerns, distinct from the nobility above them and the yeomen, franklins, and merchants below them” (14). Here Johnston can draw on a large body of recent sociohistorical research. It may be due to the extensive references given in the footnotes – at points taking more than half the page (e.g. 26, 28, 31) – that the reader tends to lose sight of what the author actually identifies as his own conclusions with regard to the gentry’s “sociocultural concerns”. Yet in the next chapter these take clearer shape.

Chapter 2 sets out to examine “how nine romances [...] specifically addressed the concern of this class” (14; cf. also 16). These romances constitute the body of “gentry romances”, a “new type of Middle English romance” emerging together with the gentry, “offering a social imagery for the gentry” and allowing it “to claim participation in romance” (48). The romances are *The Avowing of Arthur*, *Octavian*, *Sir Amadace*, *Sir Cleges*, *Sir Degrevant*, *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, *Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle*, *Sir Isumbras* and *Sir Launfal* (49). They qualify as ‘gentry romances’ because (a) in many of these texts the hero lives in a manor house (i.e. not at court), (b) the “role of the nuclear family” is emphasized, (c) the motif of the “spendthrift knight” is addressed, and (d) some texts “playfully draw upon the monetary figure of £ 40, a specific socioeconomic marker of the landowning gentry” (48–49). Johnston asserts that his corpus “contains the most striking combination of the gentry motifs”; moreover, he names as a supportive criterion “their tendency to circulate in gentry household manuscripts” (49). As far as the gentry motifs are concerned, he is, however, compelled to concede that they are neither “all inventions of the period”, nor are they “exclusive to the romances listed” (50). Therefore we may wonder about the methodological value of the claimed category *gentry romance*.

I will now take a closer look at one of these motifs: the “spendthrift knight”. Johnston discusses “liberality”, *largesse*, e.g. in the sub-chapter “The Knight in Trouble” (77–82). One of his texts exemplifying the motif is *Sir Launfal*, a story that goes all the way back to Marie de France, thus not really fitting the criterion of being a literary creation contemporaneous with the fifteenth-century emergence of the gentry. And the motif of spending had been of narrational relevance ever since Marie. Lanval has to leave Arthur’s court as subsidies for him stop there. He meets a fairy who provides him with constant blessings of cash and

physical love as long as he abides by her rule to keep his love relationship – and hence: the provenance of his resources – secret. Lanval fails, but the happy ending is finally initiated by an act of grace brought about by the fairy. I find it hard to see that *largesse* is a central moral issue at any stage of the development of this story. Hence, I also wonder how it is possible to arrive at the conclusion that a romance like *Sir Launfal* could convey the message that “spending like an aristocrat” assures the gentry’s maintenance “of their aristocratic status” (81).

It is (only) at the end of this chapter that Johnston clearly spells out his heuristic agenda. In the “Introduction”, he already shares Raymond Williams’s¹ stance that – in Johnston’s phrasing – “literature is a social practice that helps to articulate the dominant culture” (17). Now he quotes him with the general statement that “[p]eriods of transition between social systems are commonly marked by the emergence of radically new forms” (89). By the fifteenth century the romance is, of course, anything but a “radically new form”. But Johnston finds help with Williams’s modification that in such periods genres may be consciously continued or revived, “yet, when they are really looked at, [they] can be seen to be new” (Williams 1977: 189). Johnston takes recourse to Williams because the “motifs” previously identified as typical for his ‘gentry romances’ “offer an excellent example of Williams’s observations” (89). As the author claims that these motifs appear “in concentration” in his corpus, he thinks that this “[...] necessitates historicization” (88). The latter move he takes by looking into sociohistorical conditions surrounding the owners of his nine miscellanies which contain ‘gentry romances’, in particular such conditions related to the identified motifs.

Chapter 3 takes us to the author’s home turf. He announces his intention to explore “the manuscript evidence that leads me to believe the English provincial elite made up the main public of these romances: the earliest readers, as well as the commissioners or even, at one occasion, the scribes of the surviving miscellanies” (90). He has identified “nine miscellanies containing gentry romances” and confirms that outside them “no manuscript from this period contains multiple gentry romances” (92). One senses the risk hovering over Johnston’s entire project: that of circularity. Unwillingly, I suppose, the author even spells out the lurking circle himself: “I would thus posit a very close connection between these readers [i.e. those at a miscellany’s place of production or in its vicinity] and their literature: gentry romances seem tightly bound up with gentry families” (102). But then, what to make of the concession that his ‘gentry romances’ also had an urban audience (94, 114), which compels the author to state that “[m]edieval fictions did not respect class boundaries” (114)?

1 Raymond Williams. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

In the remaining three chapters, Johnston discusses the origins of the miscellanies and connects them with their commissioners and/or owners, in particular with ‘gentry problems’ presented in the romance(s) and bothering the gentry commissioners and/or owners in their ‘real’ lives. Thus, chapter 4 takes us to Derbyshire and the Findern Anthology, a miscellany containing works of Chaucer, Hoccleve, but also the ‘gentry romance’ *Sir Degrevant*. As this is a story both of conflict between the hero and his neighboring earl and courtly love, Johnston claims, at the beginning of the chapter, that it “allowed its readers [i.e. the Findern family] to maintain pretensions to courtly refinement while at the same time carving out a *sui generis* economic niche for the gentry”. The reason for this, Johnston argues, is that the Finderns were entangled in “disputes over their property [...] that echoed those occupying Degrevant himself” when they “acquired this text” (129).

In chapter 5, Johnston turns to two miscellanies known in codicology as the “London Thornton Manuscript” and the “Lincoln Thornton Manuscript”. Other than e.g. the alliterative *Morte Darthur* and works of Richard Rolle (in the Lincoln Manuscript), these manuscripts contain thirteen romances, among them “the gentry romances *Octavian*, *Sir Isumbras*, *Sir Degrevant* and *Sir Eglamour*, [whose] inclusion [...] marks [Thornton] as the producer and consumer of gentry romances par excellence” (159). While discussing a wide range of historical details concerning the production of these miscellanies, Johnston addresses the question of whether we may assume that Thornton had developed a specific awareness of ‘gentry romance’. However, even for him, the author “would certainly not want to argue that he read these four romances as overt endorsements of gentry socio-economic prerogatives” (183). Still, Johnston can also close this chapter by stating: “All four of Thornton’s gentry romances carve out a space for the gentry’s participation in romance” (205).

The final chapter, 6, concentrates on the Ireland family, at home in Lancashire. They owned a “romance-only anthology” of three texts, two of them ‘gentry romances’. Once more it is the presentation of economic concerns in these texts that make them qualify for the sub-genre (206–207). As a codicological curiosity, the romances have come down literally together with “manorial court documents connected to the Ireland family”. The latter, Johnston affirms, “enrich our understanding of the economical ideals found in their romances” (225), although Johnston admits that the binding-together of the romances and the economic documents is possibly “pure serendipity” (249). Nevertheless, he contends that “the Ireland manuscript affords us a unique glimpse of two contrasting sides of a late medieval gentry household: the productive side [...], and the ideological representation of the spending side” (249). The dichotomy is that between diligent monetary record-keeping in the ‘real’ world and the ideal of *largesse* in the chivalric world.

That is where the book ends. Thus it is up to the reader to judge whether the various codicological and sociohistorical details discussed in the second part of the book really provide solid supportive evidence that the ‘gentry romance’ offers “a steadfast ideal of aristocratic identity” with the function of “securing for them an ideological space within England’s literary culture” (18). At this point we need to return to the end of chapter 2 where, as we have seen, Johnston looks for theoretical support with Raymond Williams. Here he also addresses the historical parallel he somehow has had in mind all the way through: twelfth-century France. He says that it “is a critical commonplace that romance” then and there “mediated the new socioeconomic anxieties of the French aristocracy” as it “offered a new language for a new class” (88). There are many reasons why paralleling twelfth-century France and fifteenth-century England seems problematic. In France the new concept of *gentillesse* ideologically helped solve a dramatic sociohistorical crisis both for the quantitatively endangered high aristocracy and the emerging group of knights: the two were united in a common ideal allowing the aristocratic class to open for a brief period. Ideologically this is a far cry from the gentry’s alleged claim to share an ideal by adapting it to a reality fitting the ‘newcomers’. In France the chivalric ideal swiftly rose all the way to the royal court; in England it diffused down to the manor house. In France it launched a literary success story; in England it accompanied a genre’s – albeit long – period of dissolution.