Nicholas Perkins (ed.). *Medieval Romance and Material Culture*. Cambridge: Brewer, 2015, xiv + 285 pp., 37 illustr., £ 60.00.

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The past two decades have seen an increased interest in materiality across a wide variety of disciplines. Informed by the writings of Bruno Latour, Alfred Gell and others, the new field of material culture studies rethinks the relations between subject and object and widens our view from the long-standing interest in how people make things to the question of how things make people. In the context of literary studies, this shift in focus has led to an increasing number of scholarly works which study the objects intrinsic in literary works not only as embellishments and props but as agents.

The volume under review is one of several recent scholarly works that re-examine the relations between material culture and medieval romance: Dominique Battles' *Cultural Difference and Material Culture in Middle English Romance: Normans and Saxons* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013) is interested in the role which the material culture depicted in post-conquest romances plays in the differentiation between Anglo-Saxon and Norman identities, and Monica Wright's *Weaving Narrative: Clothing in Twelfth-Century French Romance* (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 2009) explores the interrelations between clothing and the texture of romance. With its deliberately "eclectic" approach (18), *Medieval Romance and Material Culture*, edited by Nicholas Perkins, explores the range of engagement with material practices in medieval insular romance between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries. Collectively, the fourteen essays of this volume, which are based on papers presented at the thirteenth biannual conference "Romance in Medieval Britain" at St Hugh's College, Oxford, provide a compelling overview of how material culture scholarship can productively enhance our understanding of medieval romance. As Perkins puts it in his introduction, they explore how "medieval romances respond to material culture, but also how romance itself helps to constitute and transmit that culture" (1). With their renewed focus on materiality, they convincingly show that relics, cloaks, rings, swords, chess pieces, harps and other objects are "complex things in romance": they are "symbols of identity formation which wrap themselves around the selfhood of their leading protagonists" and "actants that overlap with those protagonists and have their own narrative trajectories" (7). The contributors draw our attention to the potential of specific objects to travel and cross boundaries

between different spaces, examine the relationships between objects and protagonists, explore the materiality of book and body, and offer valuable insights into questions of manuscript production and reception.

In his introduction to the volume, Perkins uses the romance *The Erle of Tolous* and the illustration of the title-page for one of its early sixteenth-century copies to show that a renewed focus on both the romance's material makeup and the material culture depicted in the romance offers valuable new insights.

The first few articles of the volume (chapters 2–5) are concerned with what Robert Allen Rouse calls a "spatial hermeneutic for medieval romance" (41). He proposes an "*emplaced* reading" of romance texts, a reading that takes account of the specific circumstances in which such narratives would have been read (41, emphasis in original). Rosalind Field argues that in *The Romance of Horn* "ethical reflection" is articulated "through a tangible materiality" (40). She shows how space reflects "emotional communities" within the narrative and that the poet's detailed description of the hero's material surroundings in different locations "invites comparison and interpretation of social models and courtly morality" (40, 25). The difference between the various locations Horn travels through, she argues, lies less in the "material culture" of the courts described than in the "human responses to courtly splendour and activity" (29). Allen Rouse reads *The Siege of Jerusalem*, *Titus and Vespasian* and *St Erkenwald* against the backdrop of late medieval London, arguing that they "all engage in the poetics of cultural, religious and geographical erasure and re-inscription" (55). In order for London to uphold the fiction of homogenous Englishness in the late Middle Ages, "[i]t needs to forget its non-Christian, non-English, internal historical *others*" (46). It is in this context of forgetting and re-inscribing that Rouse discusses his primary sources, stressing their importance for the construction of a "'sanitized' history", in which London, like other Western cities of the time, could be viewed as a 'new Christian Jerusalem' that gave rise to "a Christian civic and English identity free of [...] historical taint" (56). Siobhain Bly Calkin investigates "what happens when Christian devotional objects undergo translation into Saracen spaces" (60). The author discusses two texts, *The Sege of Melayne* and *Sir Ferumbras*, showing that the devotional objects described and translated from Christian to Saracen spaces in these texts (devotional images in the *Sege* and the Crown of Thorns and nails from the Crucifixion in *Sir Ferumbras*) not only generate miracles (by virtue of their being translated) but also invite reflection on their status as religious images and relics. Calkin reads these texts also against the backdrop of the Wycliffite attack on religious imagery, concluding that these romances "carefully direc[t] attention to the distinctive ways in which different religious matter can work its devotional effects" (74). Neil Cartlidge offers "an analysis of the implied cultural geography of the *Lai de Melion*", which at first sight does not make specific

reference to its temporal or geographical setting (75). Cartlidge convincingly shows that the matter-of-fact description of Ireland when Melion arrives there chasing after his runaway wife contrasts the mystified and otherworldly image of Ireland we usually find in Romance texts. In fact, Cartlidge argues, the realistic description of the tale's Irish setting and its eponymous hero's revengeful activities there serve to reflect the "sense of [...] beleaguerment" (82) which Anglo-Norman settlers in the Dublin area faced as Irish-'English' hostilities began to increase in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

The subsequent essays (chapters 6–8) are interested in gender relations and other forms of role play. Anna Caughey examines three Scottish Romance texts, the *Buik of Alexander*, *Lancelot of the Laik* and *Clariodus*. While the act of gazing in medieval romance has traditionally been associated with masculinity, making women the object of 'the male gaze', Caughey shows that her corpus of Scottish romances in fact reverses this, giving room instead to what she calls "the female gaze" (96). Rather than objectifying the men under observation in these texts, this 'female gaze', she argues, is reciprocal and serves to "motivate knights to become better protectors of the realm" (108). It is thus "rendered unthreatening" and actually serves the greater good (108–109). Elliot Kendall approaches *The Avowyng of Arthur* from a game theory perspective. Applying this theory to the various episodes involving different heroes in *The Avowyng of Arthur*, he shows that "the narrative trajectory" of the text "argues for the superiority of cooperation and its rewards, while advising that these cannot be ensured by an unconditional exchange strategy, such as simply returning like for like" (117). Megan G. Leitch investigates the "motif of chessboard or chess-related murders" in the *Stanzaic Guy of Warwick* and Caxton's *The Foure Sonnes of Aymon* (131). She offers valuable insights into the ways in which the 'politics of chess' in medieval romance reflect and serve as "touchstones for concerns that were sustained across the 1480s" in England (144).

As Perkins notes in his introduction, chapters 9–11 "are all concerned with the formal and textual shape of romances, along with evidence for their readership" (20). They consider medieval romance texts as objects themselves and as part of the material culture that informed them. Ad Putter's essay contributes to the study of Middle English verse by examining the bob-and-wheel tradition in more detail. Putter discusses a number of texts such as Chaucer's *Sir Thopas* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, focusing on formal aspects as well as intertextual influences between them. He is especially interested in the visual layout of the manuscript page and shows that what may seem as random placement of the bob to modern readers actually contributes to the artistic value of such texts. Raluca L. Radulescu convincingly shows that a reading of *King Robert of Sicily* in its specific manuscript forms and the specific material contexts in which it

circulated offers new insights into this text, which has traditionally been classi-
fied as a 'pious romance'. She focuses her analysis on five of the surviving manu-
scripts, "[e]ach of [which] had an unusual position in the manuscript books that
contain them and develops a particular approach to the narrative of *Robert*" (169).
Her discussion of each manuscript version uncovers a "variety of tone and mean-
ing" which "draw[s] attention to the rich potential for more nuanced interpreta-
tions" of this text (182). As Aisling Byrne observes at the beginning of his chapter,
the fifteenth century saw a surge of Irish translations of English romances, but
these have not gained much critical attention. Byrne argues that some of the Irish
translations he discusses, e.g. *Bevis of Hampton*, *Fierabras*, *Guy of Warwick* and
the *Seven Sages of Rome*, bear unusual material and linguistic features that are
distinct to the Irish context. For one, Byrne shows that vernacular texts often
arrived in Ireland with the religious orders and that this "religious context has an
impact on the manner in which the material is transmitted" (196–197). For
another, some of these texts were first translated into Latin before being trans-
lated into Irish, making Latin a "mediat[or] between vernacular versions of
particular romances" (197).

Chapters 12 and 13 are both concerned with word-image relations. Morgan
Dickson examines the interrelations between three romance heroes in twelfth-
century insular texts, namely Tristan, Horn and Hereward, "whose identities are
bound to one another through the instrument they play", i.e. the harp (200).
Harping, Dickson shows, "appears to connect material from apparently differing
traditions" (208). Not only does he discuss the iconography and symbolism
inherent in the figure of the knightly harper in its literary contexts but he also
draws connections to representations in other artistic media, such as the floor
tiles of Chertsey Abbey. Henrike Manuwald examines the *Folies Tristan* alongside
two ivory caskets on which Tristan figures as a fool. Manuwald considers 'picto-
rial narratives' as representing particular versions of a given story, just as "manu-
scripts may [...] be read [...] as representatives of a wider textual version" (216).
The two caskets she focuses on, both made in the fourteenth century, are in the
Musée de Cluny in Paris and the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg
respectively and have recently received increasing scholarly attention. Her de-
tailed analysis of the pictorial narratives the caskets provide persuasively shows
that "the story of Tristan pretending to be a fool was chronologically and territo-
rially more widespread than we can assume on the basis of extant texts" (230).
She thus makes a compelling case for the study of word-image relations across
different media, which offers fresh perspectives on how literary and visual motifs
came into being.

Chapters 14 and 15 both approach medieval romance texts from a manu-
script/book studies point of view and are primarily interested in how readers in

the Middle Ages (chapter 14) and the Victorian Age (chapter 15) received, and responded to, them. Both essays make a persuasive case for an intermedial approach to medieval romance. Mark Cruse examines Marco Polo's *Livre du grand Khan* in MS Bodl. 264 alongside the *Roman d'Alexandre* and *Alexander and Dindimus*, to which Polo's text was added at a later stage. He interprets this addition "as a form of reader response" and shows that the *Livre du gran Khan*, which is 'romanced' in Bodl. 264, and the *Roman d'Alexandre* have more in common than previously assumed, the composition of the manuscript inviting not only "reciprocal reading" but also "reciprocal viewing" with regard to the miniatures (243). The *Livre du grand Khan* was markedly different from other materials on the East, but "[i]ts juxtaposition with the *Roman d'Alexandre*", Cruse concludes, "domesticate[s] what is otherwise a vision of Asia radically different from those in most other medieval works" (250). The volume ends with an essay on a Victorian edition of medieval romances which gave rise to debates over how the material culture of the past should be recreated: Nancy Mason Bradbury investigates the significance of *The Thornton Romances*, i.e. *Sir Perceval of Galles*, *Sir Isumbras*, *Sir Eglamour of Artois* and *Sir Degrevant* published by James Orchard Halliwell in 1844, for Victorian medievalism. Bradbury situates her work within the field of "'book studies' with its dual emphasis on the book as material object and as cultural force" (253).

This is an engaging book which will prompt scholars to rethink the relations between material culture and romance. And as one might expect from a book that draws our attention to materiality, it is beautifully presented.