

Frakes masterfully dismantles the conventional scholarly consensus that in *Kudrun*: a) the female characters are powerful, independent, or sovereign (in contrast to the “weak” *Nibelungenlied* women), and b) the heroine Kudrun effects a large-scale transformation of a society based on barbarism and violence (Germanic) to one based on courtly / civilized conflict resolution (Christian). His analysis reveals the class and gender bias of masculinist literary criticism. Frakes also reconsiders the traditional views of Gerlinde (as a manipulator of Hartmut) and Hilde (as a ruling queen), finding that they have been misjudged in order to exonerate their male counterparts from responsibility for their actions. This is an important and pioneering study for Nibelungen-scholarship and for medieval German studies as a whole. It will be of interest to scholars of literature, MHG philology, and history alike.

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Guerin, M. Victoria, *The Fall of Kings and Princes; Structure and Destruction in Arthurian Tragedy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995, xi + 336 pp.

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In *The Fall of Kings and Princes*, Victoria Guerin explores the medieval concept of tragedy as it is constructed in the story of King Arthur's incestuous paternity of Mordred. The thirteenth-century *La mort le roi Artu* is the earliest text that explicitly identifies Mordred as the son of Arthur's sexual liaison with his half-sister, but Guerin claims that the incest is obliquely referred to in earlier texts, including Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Although Geoffrey identifies Mordred as Arthur's nephew, Guerin suggests that the author's reference to a “particular matter” about which he “prefers to say nothing” is in fact a reference to Mordred's incestuous birth (10). She aims to show that the development of the character of Mordred in the prose Lancelot-Grail cycle is the first explicit *written* version of a much older part of the Arthurian tradition that Geoffrey of Monmouth and Chrétien de Troyes knew and incorporated into their narratives.

In a first chapter Guerin shows how the particular development of Mordred in the thirteenth-century compilation becomes a vehicle for the medieval author's exploration of notions of fortune, individual freedom, and tragedy. She notes that Mordred turns into an evil character only *after* he learns of his incestuous parentage. This change of character permits Mordred to become a focus for the fear and hate which might have been directed toward one or more of the members of the love triangle formed by Arthur, Guenevere, and Lancelot.

Mordred's presence allows the author to position King Arthur in an ambivalent position with respect to the tragedy at the end of *La mort*. Arthur's downfall is inevitable, dictated by the turn of Fortune's wheel, but it is also the result of the king's own act, the adulterous liaison with his half-sister that results in the incestuous birth of Mordred.

Guerin claims that if the author of *La mort* "explores the limits of human freedom" (86) through the story of Mordred's birth and betrayal and the resulting destruction of King Arthur's kingdom, this exploration follows a similar use of the veiled incest story in two twelfth-century romances by Chrétien de Troyes. In chapters two and three of *The Fall of Kings and Princes*, Guerin reads the Mordred story as a hidden structuring narrative in *Le chevalier de la charrete* and *Le conte du graal*. Her identification of a common structural pattern in the two romances is accompanied by detailed analyses of names, episodes, and relationships between the characters that may point to the Mordred story and alert the reader to its significance in Chrétien's two romances. Both Lancelot and Perceval are Mordred-figures; both heroes are confronted with a series of tests that reveal their potential roles in the downfall of Arthur's kingdom. Lancelot recognizes the impending destruction of Logres and averts it. Perceval fails to recognize his role in the story, and the unfinished *Conte du graal* suggests that because he does not ask the right questions at the right time, the lance (Lance-lot, in Guerin's reading) that will destroy Logres cannot be stayed.

In a fourth chapter Guerin turns to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a romance written after the story of Mordred's incestuous birth and his part in the destruction of the Arthurian kingdom have been explicitly recounted in *La mort*. The English romance does not include Mordred as a character, but here too, the story of incest and destruction haunts the narrative, foreshadowing the tragedy that will befall King Arthur. As in Chrétien's romances, incest is suggested in parallels between the characters in the romance: if Bertilak is an Arthur figure and the Lady is another Guenevere, Gawain's dalliance with the lady takes on an incestuous cast, since he is Arthur's nephew. The hidden but constantly-evoked story of Mordred gives the romance a tone of impending doom despite the hero's successful deferral of disaster.

The identification of the implicit Mordred story as a structuring presence in Arthurian romances allows Guerin to explore the relationship between inevitable doom, personal failure, and the concept of tragedy in medieval romance. Guerin claims that destruction is a constant theme of the Arthurian legend. The king's downfall is articulated through veiled references to Mordred's incestuous birth and betrayal which she identifies at many levels and in many forms in *Le chevalier de la charrete*, *Le conte du graal* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The claim that the implicit incest narrative would have been

recognized by medieval audiences assumes a reader (listener?) extremely knowledgeable about the Arthurian tradition and attentive to subtle nuances and repetitions in the text, and an explicit, detailed description of the medieval audience that Guerin has in mind would have been helpful.

Guerin's thesis is based on intuitive, detailed, and sometimes playful readings of medieval romances and these readings are clearly presented and supported with detailed textual analyses. While some readers might wish for a more theoretical or socio-historical explanation of the importance of incest as a site for exploring notions of individual agency and tragedy in Arthurian romance, or for a consideration of the implicitly gender-specific definitions of agency and tragedy, I suspect that most readers will find that *The Fall of Kings and Princes* presents a provocative view of medieval reading practices and the formation of textual traditions.

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Lewis, Gertrud Jaron, *By Women, For Women, About Women: The Sister-Books of Fourteenth Century Germany*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1996. 329 pp, illustr., bibl., index, 2 microfiches, ISBN: 0-88844-125-8.

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This thorough and highly accessible introduction to the genre of the *Schwesternbücher* (Sister Books) is the first systematic book-length study of the fourteenth-century woman-authored spiritual literature produced in nine German Dominican monasteries, located in Adelhausen, Diessenhofen, Engeltal, Gotteszell, Kirchberg, Oetenbach, Töss, Unterlinden, and Weiler. The *Schwesternbücher* contain foundational legends and biographical accounts of nuns noteworthy for their piety, composed *post mortem* in their respective communities by one or more nuns. The biographies served explicitly to goad the other sisters on, to create religious mood and motivation. "For the eternal praise of our Lord Jesus Christ and for the great betterment of all those who read this or hear it read, I will write a little" (Elisabeth von Kirchberg, quoted in Jaron Lewis, 39).

Until quite recently, most scholars discredited these texts as, for example, "completely uncritical, womanly, and naively fantastic" (Wilhelm Oehl, quoted in Jaron Lewis, 71), as the work of "pious and simple-minded nuns, . . . strong in feeling" (Josef Quint, quoted in Jaron Lewis, 72), characterized by a "genuinely female need for loquaciousness" (Hermann Tüchle, quoted in Jaron Lewis, 72). It is Gertrud Jaron Lewis' outstanding contribution to dismantle this traditional reading from the bottom up. In the first two chapters, Jaron Lewis carefully