

considerable intellectual powers were too tightly contained by her society. Elsewhere, she fends off polemical attacks on her work, comparing herself to a lion, a tigress, and a she-wolf.

Despite its philological infelicities, this fascinating book should be required reading for women's studies courses or for anyone who feels the need for a broader, historical comprehension of the origins of modern European feminism.

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Charles Stanley Ross. *The Custom of the Castle: From Malory to Macbeth*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997. Pp. xvii + 205.

This book traces the development of the episode in which a traveling knight, sometimes accompanied by his lady, arrives at a castle and is asked to abide by a strange, often unjust custom. Although this episode was widely imitated in European romance for over four centuries, Ross's is the first critical study to go beyond its literary aspects to ask how it might tell the reader something about "the challenging legal and cultural conceptions of custom in France, Italy, and England," along with the broad array of moral issues that this entails (xiii). In particular, Ross sets out to demonstrate how these "nuanced narratives explore the social limits of order, violence, justice, civility, and political conformity" (xiii). He begins with "The French Model," analyzing Malory's Weeping Castle episode with respect to its source in the thirteenth-century prose *Tristan*. He then follows the course of the romance to Italy ("The Italian Transition") where he explores the politics of power in Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* and its continuation by Ariosto, the *Orlando Furioso*. In "The English Conclusion," he focuses on Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. In moving from medieval to Renaissance, and from French to Italian to English, Ross aims to show how the episodes reflect changes in the function of custom and the authority of the past, related in part to two factors: "first, the transmutation of oral law into written law, and second, the transition from a French culture of customs to one which followed Roman or civil law and then on to England, a common law country" (10). Combining a perceptive reading of romance with an extensive background in natural and customary law, Ross asks new questions about old texts, and he thereby enriches our own reading of romance. While the early chapters leave some questions unanswered, the analysis is original, thought-provoking, and stimulating throughout.

Ross's first "test case" is Malory's episode of the Weeping Castle, a creative imitation of the Castle of Tears (Chastel de Plors) episode from the anonymous prose *Tristan* (18). Ross selects Malory's *Morte Darthur* as representative of the French model because it "follows the French tradition by looking to the past to explain social change" (16). Ross sees the Weeping Castle episode as "an allegory of social pressure" in which the victorious Tristan, rather than eliminating an evil custom of judicial murder, conforms to the custom by beheading the defeated lord and lady of the castle. A way out is found only when Galahaut returns (from self-imposed exile in protest of the custom) to challenge Tristan and avenge the murder of his parents. Ross notes that whereas in the anonymous text Tristan's courtesy in battle prompts Galahaut to respond in kind, Malory alters Tristan's motivation by having him yield to Galahaut due to the imminent arrival of

his opponent's reinforcements. While Ross remarks that "Malory seems to have missed the point" (30) of the earlier text, he leaves the reader curious to hear more about the point Malory may have been trying to make. Why does Malory then turn the *Tristan's* reciprocal acts of courtesy into a "social bargain" (32)? And how can Tristan's inability to abolish the evil custom be reconciled with Ross's statement that for Malory "Tristan represents an ideal which those who pretend to be gentlemen should strive to imitate" (34)? At the same time, by focusing attention on the serious issues at stake in this fictional form, Ross entices the reader to go back and reread these medieval narratives in a more probing way.

The underlying premise of the next section is that "the Italians developed a notion of civility to counteract a rigid social system increasingly dominated by foreigners during the sixteenth century" (16). He examines a "custom of the castle" episode in Boiardo and Ariosto, the two masters of romance epic in the Italian Renaissance. Playing Cicero's philosophy against Clifford Geertz's anthropology, he considers how natural law and the moral imagination inform the *Orlando Innamorato's* Castle Cruel episode, where the knight Rinaldo confronts a culture in which escalating acts of violence have led to the systematic murder of foreign visitors. Here, too, his analysis engenders additional questions. If Boiardo portrays Rinaldo negatively as getting caught up in the cycle of violence, does he also indicate how the knight should have reacted when attacked by the mob? More generally, what is Boiardo saying about appropriate responses to foul customs?

In refreshing contrast to those who have read the *Orlando Furioso's* Tower of Tristan episode as a fable of gender, Ross sees the episode as a fable of power, or more specifically, of the limits of an individual's power to modify the dictates of an absolutist society. In this light, Bradamante's merely tactical victory is analogous to the situation of those subject to political and foreign institutions in sixteenth-century Italy. Although Bradamante is powerless to overturn a foul custom, she can be granted an exception through witty reasoning backed by martial prowess. It would have been useful to compare this to the episodes of Pinabello's castle at Altaripa and the island of the homicidal women from the 1516 edition of the *Furioso*, especially since in these episodes, which replay elements from Boiardo's Castle Cruel, a foul custom is not just temporarily sidestepped but completely eradicated.

The evolution of social ideology reflected in the episode's variants comes into clearest focus in "The English Conclusion." Ross views the custom of the castle episode in *The Faerie Queene* as an opportunity for Spenser to oppose two different systems of values, substituting the conflict of right and wrong with a sense of the relativity of all customs. Following in the wake of Stephen Greenblatt, Ross links his textual analysis to the political circumstances of England and Ireland as well as to Spenser's own involvement in the affairs of his day. What this means for the "custom of the castle" episode in Spenser is that the knight facing a "foul custom" is less a hero acting in the interest of justice than he is a colonist trying – albeit not always successfully – to impose his own social ideology on his "host," a manifestation of the alien Other. Whereas in the first two chapters Ross tended to isolate single episodes, here he sustains his argument by comparing variations on the "custom of the castle" theme that stretch across *The Faerie Queene*. Further, he identifies an evolution within the poem itself. Whereas in the first half (1590) Spenser "generally looks to the distant past for those values that would fashion a gentleman to the ideals of chivalry," in the second installment (1596) he "seems

to have struggled more openly with the relationship between social practice and values" (83).

Ross not only applies his background in law theory to romance narratives, but he applies his knowledge of romance patterns to later enterprises, such as the Spaniards' expeditions in the New World (139-40) and, more extensively, Shakespeare's drama. Ross provides fresh and provocative readings of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, with additional insights into *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and the history plays, as well as an appendix on *King Lear* and *Othello*.

Ross cuts across temporal, spatial, and linguistic boundaries and brings philosophy, anthropology, socio-political history, and ethics to bear in his interpretation of chivalric fiction. Readers may find that the book leaves out their favorite "custom of the castle" episode which may or may not conform to the evolution that Ross traces. But this is really not the point. Ross's book sensitizes the reader to the social aspects of the "custom of the castle" episode in such a way that it would be hard to read romance again without asking the same kinds of questions that Ross has raised in this ground-breaking study.

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Dennis Looney. *Compromising the Classics: Romance Epic Narrative in the Italian Renaissance*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1996, Pp. 244.

Did Boiardo, Ariosto, and Tasso consciously attempt to camouflage the classical sources of their epic poems? Is the *Orlando furioso* really a harmonious montage of classical and medieval sources as critics have traditionally contended or is its success a result of a disharmony of these elements? And has the classical foundation of Boiardo's epic poem been largely ignored to date? These are only a few of the challenging questions Dennis Looney addresses in his provocative study, *Compromising the Classics: Romance Epic Narrative in the Italian Renaissance*. In discussing these poets, Looney considers how "narrative artists in the Renaissance renovated the popular genre of romance through their imitation of classic epic" (15). Carefully analyzing the epic poems of Boiardo, Tasso, and, above all, Ariosto, Looney notes a traditional bias on the part of readers with respect to these poets' use of literary sources. He describes this bias as a "rigid dichotomizing of the poets' sources into two groups": classical sources, associated with verbal and stylistic allusions, and medieval sources recalling themes and images. In response to these static categorizations, the study suggests how these three Ferrarese poets "compromised" classical models "by incorporating them into the narrative structures of their vernacular poems" (15). In doing so, the poets overcame, to some extent, the distinction between classical and medieval models in the construction of their narrative.

To the author, "compromising the classics" means many things: the mixing of classical sources with medieval ones, the highlighting of a particular source above all others, the incorporation of allusions into the text which encourage the reader to revisit and reread the poet's classical or medieval authorities with a suspicious eye, and perhaps gain a new understanding of the original work. While some readers may find these diverse connotations confusing at times, Looney provides numerous examples to illustrate his meaning. In Ariosto's case, for example, the critic notes how Medoro's