

Philippa Hardman, Marianne Ailes, *The Legend of Charlemagne in Medieval England. The Matter of France in Middle English and Anglo-Norman Literature*, Cambridge (D. S. Brewer) 2017, XIV–476 p., 5 b/w ill. (Bristol Studies in Medieval Cultures), ISBN 978-1-84384-472-3, GBP 60,00.

rezensiert von | compte rendu rédigé par
Ana Grinberg, Auburn, AL

Following the release of »Charlemagne and his Legend in Early Spanish Literature and Historiography«¹ and »The Charlemagne Legend in Medieval Latin Texts«², this volume becomes the third of the project »Charlemagne: A European Icon«. The books in this project focus on the medieval reception of the Charlemagne myth in diverse linguistic communities and geographical areas. Though belonging to the same series, each is organized differently. The former two have individually authored chapters. Marianne Ailes and Philippa Hardman, instead, are co-authors as they have been in the past³.

Without a doubt, this volume devoted to Middle English and Anglo-Norman versions of insular narratives within the »Cycle du roi«, »The Legend of Charlemagne in Medieval England« will be useful to scholars considering the reception of the »Cycle du roi« in these vernaculars. The book opens with an Introduction (p. 1–31), where the authors explain that their »aim [is] to trace the relation of the insular Matter of France texts [...] to the cultural and political concerns of their own times, and to ask what and how legends of an imagined Carolingian past contributed to the self-image of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century readers in England« (p. 9). Notably, the insular translators and *remanieurs* limited their choice of *chansons de geste* to the figures of Charlemagne, Roland, and Oliver opposing Saracen enemies. Therefore, this volume explores three groups of texts: the Roncevaux material (i. e. »Chanson de Roland« and the »Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle«), »Fierabras« (including »La Destruction de Rome«), and »Otinell« (as well as some responses to the Matter of France).

Advanced students and scholars will find extensive background on the circulation, development, and appropriation of the Charlemagne material in England in the first chapter, »Acculturating Charlemagne:

¹ Matthew Bailey, Ryan Giles (ed.), *Charlemagne and His Legend in Spanish Literature and Historiography*, Cambridge 2016 (Bristol Studies in Medieval Cultures).

² William J. Pukis, Matthew Gabriele (ed.), *The Charlemagne Legend in Medieval Latin Texts*, Cambridge 2016 (Bristol Studies in Medieval Cultures).

³ See, for instance, Philippa Hardman, Marianne Ailes, *How English are the English Charlemagne Romances?*, in: Neil Cartlidge (ed.), *Boundaries in Medieval Romance*, Cambridge 2008, p. 43–55; Philippa Hardman, Marianne Ailes, *Crusading, Chivalry and the Saracen World in Insular Romance*, in: Rosalind Field, Phillippe Hardman, Michelle Sweeney (ed.), *Christianity and Romance in Medieval England*, Cambridge 2010, p. 45–65; Philippa Hardman, Marianne Ailes, *Texts in Conversation: Charlemagne Epics and Romances in Insular Plural-Text Codices*, in: Taluka Radulescu, Margaret Connolly (ed.) *Insular Books. Vernacular Miscellanies in Late Medieval Britain*, London 2015, p. 31–47.



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris | publiée
par l'Institut historique allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

The Insular Literary Context« (p. 32–109). Despite of its relative length, the organization of the chapter is helpful. The first section, begins considering the circulation, reception, and ownership of *chansons de geste* in general and those of Charlemagne, in particular; followed by information on the possession of chronicles and pseudo-chronicles in Britain. Dealing with the insular narrative developments, the second section starts with some generalities about the *chanson de geste* in Britain and its particular characteristics: their brevity and tight structure, as well as their »more clerical rhetoric« (p. 67). The last section in this chapter turns to the Matter of France in Middle English and the generic consideration as romances, result of the »horizon of [writerly and readership] expectations« (p. 85). After pondering the verse forms and structure of these narratives, the chapter ends elaborating on the issue of national identity and coherence in the Middle English Charlemagne romances.

»Charlemagne ›Translated‹: The Anglo-Norman Tradition« (p. 110–155) and »Charlemagne ›Appropriated‹: The Middle English Tradition« (p. 156–220) function as twin chapters, before examining the three main textual groups. Organized with a parallel structure, these two chapters first deal with the basic themes and concerns in each linguistic tradition and then provide a thorough description of each surviving witness in chronological order, including their ownership and patronage. Though both chapters consider similar themes and thematic concerns (religious conflicts between Christians and Saracens, the role of religious objects and places, and the representation of monarchy), only Chapter Two separates this part into distinct thematic sections.

Perhaps the most compelling chapters in this book provide a detailed analysis of the Charlemagne texts that were produced in Britain: »Re-Imagining the Hero: The Insular Roland and the Battle of Roncevaux« (p. 221–263), »Re-Presenting Otherness: The Insular ›Fierabras‹ Tradition« (p. 264–345), and »Re-Purposing the Narrative: The Insular ›Otinell‹ Tradition« (p. 346–401). Instead of focusing on the language in which they were written or their audience, these three chapters study diachronically these narratives and point to the diverse modifications performed to the texts.

Of course, in dealing with the matter of Roncevaux, in Chapter Three the authors first consider the Oxford »Roland« and the Middle English »Song of Roland«. Hardman and Ailes assert about these that, though difficult to assess the alteration from a possible *ur* text in the case of the »Roland«, there is an evident »incorporation of some specifically insular concerns« (p. 263). The second part of this chapter turns to the chronicles (the Anglo-Norman and Middle English renditions of the »Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle«, including William Caxton's »Charles the Grete«), which demonstrate »continued engagement with religious practice and chivalric concerns« not as apparent in continental versions (p. 263).

Similarly, Chapter Four contemplates the vernacular adaptations of »Fierabras«. Organized in three main sections, the authors begin looking into the Vulgate tradition of this text and compare the British versions to the French⁴. The second section explores the insular additions and responses to »Fierabras«, particularly in terms of »La Destruction de



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris | publiée
par l'Institut historique allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

⁴ The standard edition today is: Marc Le Person (ed.), *Fierabras. Chanson de geste du XIIe siècle*, Paris 2003 (Les classiques français du Moyen Âge, 142).

Rome« as a textual prequel. The chapter ends with the Abbreviating tradition of the insular »Fierabras«, which is first found in a single manuscript in *langue d'oïl* but will become substantial in Britain. Hardman and Ailes reach important conclusions here: insular adaptors not only transform the *chanson de geste* into romances, they were also »skilled in the art of *abbreviatio*« (p. 291). In other words, the generic adaptations and omission of repetitions (common in *chansons de geste*) contribute to an »increased narrative momentum« (p. 318).

The last of these three chapters centres on the »Otinell« insular tradition. While the versions of this text are scant (one almost complete witness and two fragments in Anglo-Norman), Ailes and Hardman explain that there was »a wider circulation than this sparse corpus might suggest« together with narrative responses to other texts belonging to the »Cycle du roi« (p. 346). This chapter also includes three independent romances in Middle English that are in conversation with »Otinell«. Besides the characteristic *abbreviatio* and heightened emphasis on Christendom's role (instead of France's) in this textual tradition, the authors demonstrate that »Otinell« presents innovations that appear to »maximize the educational impact of the story« (p. 367). Chapter Six ends considering three different Middle English Charlemagne romances: »Roland and Vernagu«, loosely based on the »Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle«; and »Sege of Melayne« and »Rauf Coilyear« that have no known sources in the Matter of France. These three texts, in brief, demonstrate the full appropriation of the Charlemagne motif in England.

In lieu of a conventional Conclusion (p. 402–411), Hardman and Ailes examine the limited afterlife of the English Charlemagne tradition. During the 17th and 18th century, the authors comment, most references to Charlemagne and Roland stemmed from a translation of Ludovico Ariosto's »Orlando Furioso«. Some interest in these characters is rekindled during the early 19th century as »rewriting [of] heroic literature for young British readers« (p. 405). The authors point to the Franco-English rivalry as possible deterrent for a more robust post-medieval reception of the Matter of France. Yet, in the Middle Ages, the appropriation of the Matter served a specific agenda, within a »wider identity and concerns of Christendom« (p. 411). Charlemagne in medieval times and today still attracts scholars and readers of diverse age groups. Not all will be the audience of this volume. Despite its perhaps daunting length, this is an essential study for those interested in the Charlemagne legend.



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris | publiée
par l'Institut historique allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)