

*Revivalist Fantasy: Alliterative Verse and Nationalist Literary History*, by Randy P. Schiff. Interventions: New Studies in Medieval Culture. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011. Pp. ix+ 276. ISBN: 9780814211526 (cloth); 9780814292518 (cd-rom). \$47.95 (cloth); \$14.95 (cd-rom).

*Revivalist Fantasy* offers an alternative interpretation of fourteenth-century English alliterative poetry, in which Randy P. Schiff argues that the concept of the Alliterative Revival is a “medievalist rather than a medieval phenomenon” that “continues to sustain Western nationalist interests linking British, American, and Continental scholars” (2). Discussing the direction of scholarship on alliterative poetry, which he attributes to nineteenth-century scholars, he disputes the traditionally held perception that alliterative poetry is “fundamentally retrograde” (3), looking back to a war-torn Anglo-Saxon past, nationalistic in its scope, and lacking refined culture. Schiff contends that critics unconsciously positioned alliterative poetry as northern and backwards to heighten the contrast between it and the southern, refined French influence of London poets such as Chaucer. Schiff achieves his objective of shifting alliterative texts from a singularly unified group into a very discrete set of texts, each with its own contemporary style and emphasis.

After the introduction and first chapter, both of which outline his theoretical framework, the four remaining chapters focus on different texts or sets of texts that illustrate Schiff’s contentions against Revivalism. His textual analyses offer new and enlightening readings of significant Middle English poems, such as *Wynnerne and Wastoure*, *William of Palerne*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Piers Plowman*, and *Richard the Redeless*, while demonstrating how American, British, and Scottish sensibilities can inhibit our understanding of alliterative poetry and our medieval past. This study has relevance for further examinations of nationalism and transnationalism, gender, and postcolonial theories of the Middle Ages.

In the first chapter, “Beyond the Backwater,” Schiff situates his study within the current body of scholarship on alliterative poetry, describing its criticism as racially motivated. Taking on critics and translators such as Thorlac Turville-Petre, Hippolyte Taine, R. W. Chambers, George Saintsbury, and Israel Gollancz, he uncompromisingly states, “More interested in propagating a myth of English exceptionalism through cultural hybridization, Revivalists emphasize the fall of an allegedly ancient line of native metrists in order to frame Chaucer as the first English poet to transcend the Saxon-Norman *agon*” (21).

Schiff demonstrates Revivalism's nostalgia in his reading of the translation of *Wynnere and Wastoure*, a text set at the opening of the so-called Alliterative Revival. The poem, he asserts, reflects regional militarism as opposed to a primitive national identity.

Schiff's second chapter, "Cross-Channel Becomings-Animal," challenges the interpretation that alliterative poetry displays a nativist national English identity based upon linguistics while prioritizing French influences on literature. This conflict is exemplified through Chaucer who symbolizes cultural Englishness even as his texts reflect French literary influences. Schiff contests Revivalist critics' claims that alliterative poets were "struggling to preserve a poetics cognate with the English language" (46), comparing the French *Guillaume de Palerne* with its Middle English translation, *William of Palerne*. His analysis explores the transnational English-French relationship through becoming, ritual, and class distinctions, and he concludes that *William of Palerne* shares the elitist ideology apparent in its French source. Describing the author of *William*, Schiff contends that he "reveals cross-channel sensibilities in which identity is a function of feudal class as opposed to nation" (68). Such class consciousness undermines the Revivalist assumptions that all alliterative poetry reflected the warrior culture of Anglo-Saxon society.

Shifting from cross-channel explorations to the Northwest Midlands, chapter 3, "Destablizing the Arthurian Empire," focuses on Revivalist anxieties about female agency in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Schiff offers a historicized reading of the women in the text in relation to the gendered socioeconomic conditions in the Northwest Midlands. He argues that the strategic moves of the Lady and Morgan illustrate women's social and economic powers, which were expanded through late-medieval militarism, and contradicts Revivalists' association with Anglo-Saxon warrior culture. Bertilak becomes an extension of Morgan's political power paralleling the way medieval wives ruled estates in their husbands' absences. Connecting the instability of the region with the instability of Arthur's kingdom, Schiff examines "regional identity as a highly unstable, transnational experience, tied to imperial aggression rather than to a static national ideal" (79). He concludes the chapter with the contention that the powerful women, courtliness, and love-making depicted in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* contradict Revivalist notions of the connection between Anglo-Saxon culture and alliterative poetry.

Drawing upon territorial tensions between England and Scotland, Schiff discusses the *Awntyrs off Arthure* and *Golagros and Gawane* in his fourth chapter, "Borderland Subversions." He relates Revivalist identity constructions of the

Anglo-Scottish borderlands to American multiculturalism, which demands that Empire negate territorial and ethnic identities. The marked militarism of politics in both romances transmits imperial tendencies through Arthur's reign. Although Arthur and Golagros may reflect English and Scottish stereotypes, "To read them as proto-nationalist figures, however, requires divorcing them from the shifting political landscapes produced by expansive discontinuous late-medieval imperial states" (104), particularly when the nation embodies shared territories. Schiff further disputes the concept of a national English identity though the *OED* definition of the prefix "proto," suggesting that national identity emerged through ethnic memories. His compelling analysis of *Awntyrs off Arthure* and *Golagros and Gawane* expands transnationalism and territorial loyalties as sources of identity.

In the final chapter, "Bags of Books and Books as Bags," poems in the *Piers Plowman* tradition demonstrate an interest in cultural innovation that undermines Revivalists' fantasy that alliterative poetry was a rural, backward-focused tradition. Schiff sets Langland, whose poetry signals a retrograde mentality and resistance to progress, against Chaucer in order to illuminate how Revivalists endorse his writing as modern, urban, and privileged. Schiff considers *Richard the Redeless* and *Mum the Sothsegger* in addition to *Piers Plowman* to "bring material textual self-reflection to the center of technologically and politically experimental poems" (129) and to discredit Revivalist inventions of alliterative nostalgia. Textuality, political discourse, and class consciousness exemplify contemporary social concerns.

Schiff presents a compelling argument against a unified aesthetic of alliterative poetry that endorses a national, backward-looking English identity. His examination reveals regional as opposed to national loyalties and contemporary instead of retrograde class consciousness, which in itself is a product of the critics' national identities. In the end, Schiff suggests that future evaluations should act "as if there were no such thing" (162) as alliterative poetry in order to avoid a "prosodic identity" (162). Acknowledging Revivalism's hold on our poetic understandings, his textual readings necessitate our rereading of these pivotal poems.

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