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***Law and the Imagination in Medieval Wales.* Robin Chapman Stacey. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. 344 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8122-5051-0. Hb \$89.95.**

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Medieval Welsh lawbooks exist in roughly forty manuscripts, and although these manuscripts often contain similar material, redactions and variations nevertheless persist between different versions.¹ An understanding of the role of the law encompassed within these lawbooks is essential to understanding the history of Wales during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Many scholars have, indeed, argued that a difference in laws was a driving source of conflict between the Welsh and Anglo-Normans during the invasion of Wales.² Medievalists have accordingly given the lawbooks much deserved attention; however, as Robin Chapman Stacey's award-winning book *Law and the Imagination in Medieval Wales* (2018) reveals, the lawbooks most certainly deserve further, more nuanced inspection from scholars.

Stacey credits a lively class discussion as planting the seed from which her book grew. While teaching a class on medieval law, Stacey was struck by her students' curiosity surrounding a passage which "appeared to limit the sanctuary (*nawdd*) a female baker was allowed to grant an offender to the distance she could throw her baking scraper."³ This discussion brought Stacey to "two different realizations." The first was that Stacey "had nourished a largely unexamined belief in law's essential 'truthfulness,' and that, indeed, so deeply ingrained was this point of view that [she] had developed the habit as a reader of simply skipping over things that did not make sense." The second was that she found she could not answer "the questions [her] students had posted about story, humour, and law," which led to her considering how "law is often presumed to be sober and practical in ways that literature is not."⁴ Stacey's realizations grew into *Law and the Imagination in Medieval Wales*, in which she concludes "that, for at least some medieval jurists, legal writing is an intensely imaginative form of literature, one acutely responsive to practical concerns and capable of reproducing them in a sophisticated symbolic form."⁵ In short, Stacey's book is concerned with questioning the inherent truthfulness and reliability of the law and in reconsidering the lawbooks and their relationship with literature.

Readers both familiar and unfamiliar with medieval Welsh lawbooks will find Stacey's argument relatively easy to follow. She writes in a personable, accessible style, efficiently locating her argument within present scholarship on medieval Wales and law. Often, the relationship between law and literature revolves around two approaches: the law *in* literature and the law *as* literature.⁶ Stacey briefly outlines both approaches before allying herself with the latter. As an example, Stacey mentions *The Mabinogion*, the collection of Welsh prose tales which have often been considered within legal contexts.⁷ Rather than utilizing the law only to illuminate certain scenes and historical contexts in *The Mabinogion*—but maintaining a clear division between legal texts and the prose tales—Stacey suggests, “both the legal and literary genres might have been part of a common and constantly evolving narrative tradition [which] is rooted...in unspoken and largely unexamined presumptions about the nature of the law.”⁸ Among Stacey's noted “presumptions” is the—in her view—mistaken belief that the law is somehow more factual and less creative than the Welsh prose tales and poetry. The acknowledgement of the law as being as equally fanciful as Welsh literary texts makes a great deal of sense. After all, most scholars do not consider the chronicles or—for example—Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* to be wholly factual, accurate depictions of history. Modern readers and fledgling scholars might expect history to be biased, albeit with a general aim of accuracy, but no one expects a medieval chronicle to be entirely accurate. Why, then, should legal texts be the one genre whose truthfulness is never doubted?

Stacey's argument that both law and literature are part of a “common and constantly evolving narrative tradition” is novel, and it makes perfect sense when considering medieval Welsh literature. Medievalists have already noted the similarities between the triad form used in legal texts as well as in poetry, and it is speculated that poets and lawyers may have even shared similar training.⁹ Stacey traces her connection through imagined landscapes, body and bawdy, and violence. Throughout Stacey's chapters, a vision of an imaginary Wales emerges, a vision which is written and rewritten in redactions. Rather than a depiction of Wales which should be taken as historical fact, the Wales which emerges in legal texts is “less the real Wales of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries than an imagined entity embracing past, present, and—to the extent that prophecy and hopes for eventual restoration are represented in its pages—future as well.”¹⁰ Stacey's idea of a constructed Wales in legal texts seems logical given the argument that legal texts functioned also as “political literature,” an assertion made by both Stacey and others.¹¹

Stacey's chapters on landscape are insightful, and although she acknowledges scholars' awareness “that certain places mentioned in the laws have a symbolic as well as literal and historic significance in the context in which they are named,” Stacey also remarks that those symbolic meanings are seldom explored in legal texts.¹² Her suggestion that scholars should broaden their scope of inquiry to include the consideration of landscapes and, how they can be politicized is particularly useful for eco- and spatial critics. As expected of a Celticist of her calibre, Stacey expertly examines the way in which landscapes are depicted in *The Mabinogion* and demonstrates how effectively the same approach applies to legal contexts. She examines different spaces between England and Wales as well as between court and country. Those

familiar with *The Mabinogion* and Welsh poetry will appreciate her analysis of this neglected aspect of these genres.

The chapters on bawdy and the body are likewise entertaining and informative. One particularly enjoyable aspect of Stacey's book is how she organizes her information in charts and summaries. She does this throughout her text, but this method of presenting data is employed especially effectively in her "Bodies and Nobodies" chapter. Readers who are unfamiliar with, for example, "the rewards of animal body parts by which officers are said to be remunerated for their service" and how these rewards were written in different redactions will appreciate how concisely and neatly Stacey lays that information out.¹³ This same chapter is also augmented with several manuscript folios, which display both human and non-human bodies, as is appropriate for the chapter. The pictures are interesting and reinforce the sort of interdisciplinary, genre-blurring approach that Stacey employs throughout her text. These chapters are expansive in scope, analysing bodies, humour, gender, and sex. Any of these subjects in relation to the law would be worthy of study on their own, and Stacey's chapters provide an excellent overview while leaving ample room for further exploration.

Stacey's final section on violence features only a single chapter, which may strike some readers as surprising. It is an excellent chapter, though, and it is particularly useful in examining how different redactions treat violent acts. She ends the chapter by examining a shift in Welsh culture due to the waves of invasion and makes a form of postcolonial argument about how the Welsh literary tradition could be preserved even while the writers of that tradition were assimilated by the conquering Anglo-Normans. Building on the work of fellow scholar Susan Aronstein,¹⁴ Stacey also examines how the written texts—both literary and legal—construct Wales in a way which may also be gendered.¹⁵ This observation seems to harken back to earlier parts of the text, such as her section entitled "Gendering the Courtly Landscape."¹⁶ The point on which Stacey ends her chapter is so evocative that I wish she had spent a little longer on it, but there is also certainly an entire book to be written about the characterization of gender in medieval Wales.

This book has a broad appeal, which extends beyond literary and legal scholars. Postcolonial scholars interested in Wales, especially in the aftermath of the Norman and Edwardian invasions, will find Stacey's work especially interesting. Although not Stacey's primary focus, she does mention postcolonial interpretations, and much of her work—especially the parts concerned with legal texts as a kind of Welsh propaganda—seems like a good fit with current conversations about which narratives become dominant during and after the Norman invasion. Scholars like Jeffrey Jerome Cohen,¹⁷ Michael Faletra,¹⁸ and Coral Lumbley¹⁹ have examined how Welsh literature and literature about Wales work as propaganda and re-imagine Wales both past and present when faced with the threat of invasion and its aftermath. Given how elegantly Stacey shows the ways in which legal texts and literary texts are intertwined, it would be interesting to see the significance of this similarity explored further within the context of the growing literature on the postcolonial Middle Ages.

Overall, Robin Chapman Stacey's text presents a riveting, accessible, and thought-provoking study of the intersection between the law and literature in medieval Wales. Stacey is, of course, a well-known and well-respected Celticist, so one could forgive her if she employed an excessive amount of jargon in her text. While jargon has its place in academic scholarship and is sometimes necessary, Stacey's text is written in a way that should benefit and inspire both established and fledgling scholars. This manner of writing is a good fit with Stacey's goals for the project, which is meant to appeal to both legal and art-minded readers. Readers will find having some background knowledge in *The Mabinogion* and Welsh legal codes helpful to fully appreciate the text, but those who are just developing an interest in either medieval law or Wales should find the book of value also.

Endnotes

¹ Roberts, Sara Elin. 2007. *The Legal Triads of Medieval Wales*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, pp. 2-4.

² See, for example, John Davies, 2007, *A History of Wales*, pp. 114-115; Sharon Kinoshita, 2006, *Medieval Boundaries: Rethinking Difference in Old French Literature*, pp. 107-108; and Otaño Gracia, Nahir I. and Daniel Armenti, 2017, "Constructing prejudice in the Middle Ages and the repercussions of racism today." *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality*, vol. 53, no. 1, p. 195.

³ Stacey, Robin Chapman. 2018. *Law and the Imagination in Medieval Wales*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁹ Roberts, *The Legal Triads of Medieval Wales*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁰ Stacey, *Law and the Imagination in Medieval Wales*, p. 49.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25. See also John Davies, 2007, *A History of Wales*, pp. 115-116 for the significance of Welsh law in conflict with the Normans; and Susan Aronstein, 2005, "Becoming Welsh: counter-colonialism and the negotiation of native identity in Peredur Vab Efracw." *Exemplaria*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 147-151 for the relationship between Welsh law and the formation of national identity.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁴ See Susan Aronstein, 2005, “Becoming Welsh.”

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 65-73.

¹⁷ See Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 2008, “Green children from another world, or the archipelago in England.” *Cultural Diversity in the British Middle Ages*, pp. 75-94.

¹⁸ See Michael A. Faletta, 2014, *Wales and the Medieval Colonial Imagination*.

¹⁹ See Coral Lumbley, 2019, “The ‘dark Welsh’: Color, race, and alterity in the matter of medieval Wales.” *Literature Compass*.