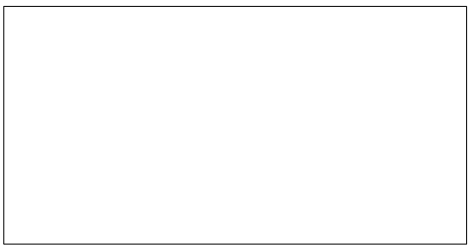

Bonsall, Jane. Women and Magic in Medieval Romance: Genre, Intertextuality and Power. Studies in Medieval Romance. Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2025. Pp. 254. £85.00. ISBN 9781843846659.

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Jane Bonsall's ambitious re-examination of the magical women of romance manages to incorporate a structured approach to her discussion that reflects her argument that these figures are inherently interconnected but also complex and individually nuanced. Bonsall brings a renewed focus to the key issues of genre and sub-genre and its position in relation to the reader, textual history and detailed context for each work. Each chapter's focus on specific characters acts as a starting point for a broader exploration of the complexities of the romances, especially in the need to consider each text as intrinsically immersed within the expectations of the genre, but also able to work within or resist those conventions. Bonsall incorporates aspects of genre theory to frame a thoughtful discussion of gender and the intersectional aspects of power; the result is a valuable contribution to ongoing reconsiderations of both the representation of magical women and the nature of the romance genre itself.

Bonsall uses Morgan le Fay to bookend this study, a structure that acts as an effective reminder of the need to consider and then reconsider these figures in conjunction with each other. The introduction explains that the book will focus on an exploration of the complexities of supernatural women and their significance in relation to the audience of the fourteenth and fifteenth century. This modest assertion belies Bonsall's wide-ranging knowledge of and reference to the romance tradition which are central to her examination of these characters. This is reflected in her consideration of the destabilising nature of the separation of fiction and reality in relation to romance structures, as well as the significance of a consideration of nonlinear reading practices to inform an understanding of the text. The book is structured around five chapters, each of which explore a different set of intersectional aspects of power and identity in relation to women and magic.

Chapter 1 explores women's healing powers as sites of potential tension, mapping developments in the Tristan texts against a context of the realities of shifting medical practice. The growing professionalisation of medical roles and the corresponding exclusion of women forms the backdrop for Bonsall's consideration of the complexities at play in the romances. She identifies three types of healer in the Tristan texts, the "holy healer maiden" (35), the "healer-lover" and the "older, maternal healer" (36). Through these categories, Bonsall links literary representation to contemporary attitudes toward women's healing roles, tracing intersections of gender, class, and age. Bonsall considers the interplay with reality, particularly reflecting on how this can be differentiated between characters, noting for instance that the nostalgia of a text like *Tristrem* allow the female healer to exercise a level of authority as she is separate from the realities of the present, but that this may not be evenly applicable to all characters. She highlights the additional complexities that age can bring, given the negative stereotypes, invoking associations with superstition and witchcraft, asserting the "greater moral ambiguity" (36) of the older maternal healer. This approach epitomises some of the complexities of magic, gender and power that Bonsall grapples with throughout this volume, as each character and text works within a complex web of associations and influences.

Chapter 2 continues this interrogation of complex influences and intersecting textual and contextual considerations in re-examining the figure of the Foreign Queen. The chapter takes as a starting point the political upheaval surrounding Isabella of France in the 1320s as a route into examining foreignness and queenship. Bonsall situates this political context within a broader literary engagement with the trope of the foreign queen, using it to explore complexities of representation in fourteenth-century romance. She connects this to the structural implications of the trope, noting its "reification and crystallisation of hierarchical, binary thinking and distribution of power that presage later colonialist thought" (59). Bonsall grounds this discussion in the long-standing conventions of romance, but establishes how *Bevis of Hampton* re-engages with the figure of the Muslim princess. Josian, she argues, occupies a distinctive position in relation to a wider hierarchy infused with tensions and conventions. She analyses Josian's simultaneous roles as both "other" and intended wife, highlighting the tensions inherent in this multifaceted characterisation. Bonsall presents this portrayal as central to the negotiation of gender and cultural identity within its broader literary and historical framework. The analysis effectively exposes the underlying anxieties about allegiance and cultural difference that inform the representation of foreign queens across the genre.

In Chapter 3, Bonsall situates the fairy mistress within the broader history of fairy traditions, noting their "association with troubled borders, liminality, and difference" (96) in line with Foucault's concept of heterotopic space. She also examines how Christian frameworks and generic conventions shape the depiction of these supernatural women, underscoring the interplay between theology, genre, and gender. Tryamour from *Sir Launfal* and Melior from *Partonope of Blois* provide excellent examples of the complex negotiation of power and agency within the romances. Bonsall's consideration of different aspects of gender identity within the texts reflect the subtlety of both the texts and characters, but also the broader complexity of the topic. Bonsall positions these characters in relation to an otherworld presented not as a distant realm, but as closely interwoven with the spaces of the text. In doing so, Bonsall shows how these characters interact with the boundaries between spaces and behaviours within the romance. Bonsall also examines the knights' willingness or failure to conform to roles or actions prescribed by their fairy lovers and the centrality of these failures to the shifting liminality of the separation of the separate spaces, roles and identities of Tryamour and Melior. The shifting power dynamics of the pairs might be temporary, but rather than reducing these figures to moralised stereotypes, Bonsall argues, their representations sustain ongoing subversions and debates about female agency and identity.

Chapter 4 turns to Melusine to explore the connections between monstrosity, otherness and motherhood, focusing on the significance of the physical in these representations. Bonsall examines the monstrous through its potential connections to the notions of sin and transgression but also as a concept and a vehicle for providing the scope to disrupt categorisation. She situates this discussion within a broader contextual framework, exploring how medieval ideals of motherhood oscillate between reverence and anxiety. The suggestion of an inherent monstrosity within the feminine becomes central to understanding the transformative body of Melusine herself as woman and mother. As Bonsall notes, the text dwells on the physical description of Melusine and her serpent tail in particular. This aligns her with the monsters that knights traditionally conquer, yet the text simultaneously resists such a straightforward categorisation. In particular, Bonsall explores the possibility of a phallic reading, positioning Melusine as a figure who subverts conventional gender norms. She also explores the intricate navigation of the text between physical and moral monstrosity, especially through Raymondin's shifting attitude to Melusine's form and its influence on her motherhood and the physical and moral inheritance of their sons. Through these aspects, Bonsall develops a reading of Melusine as a figure who embodies multiple, overlapping identities:

mother, monster, dynastic founder, and, crucially, a continuation of the fairy and "other" explored in earlier chapters.

Chapter 5 turns once more to Morgan le Fay, the "quintessential magical woman" (177), to test Bonsall's comparative method, using her as a focal point for challenging the boundaries between the romances under discussion. Bonsall reads Morgan through the interpretive lenses developed in earlier chapters, showing how the features of aspects such as healing, foreignness, fairy otherness, and monstrosity intersect within a single, multifaceted character. The chapter effectively reaffirms Bonsall's commitment to reading these figures through a consideration of both the intertextual and thematic continuities that run across the corpus, but also within the potential for the unique development of these figures within a specific text. For instance, Bonsall examines the influence of shifting ideas of witchcraft in the fifteenth century as a key consideration in reading Malory's *Morte Darthur*, alongside her wider commentary on the literary and wider contexts for this character.

In arguing for the for the layered, inter- and intra-textual and contextually-driven nature of these romances and their magical women, Bonsall undertakes a demanding and ambitious project. This examination of the complexities for specific characters elicits an array of considerations and connections that extend beyond the scope of a single volume, but which open up new areas of discussion and consideration. The result is a thoughtful and nuanced contribution to the study of gender, genre, and the dynamics of power in medieval romance.