

acquired. Many of us, not incapable of deriving pleasure from Mr. Auden's poetry at its fragmentary and incidental best, can scarcely believe that he has at this late date the inner stamina both to overcome external difficulties and to give a vital organization and discipline to his technical facility. At this crucial level his deficiencies as poet and as critic are seen to be closely related.

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MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE by George Kane (Methuen's Old English Library, 12/6).

Dr. Kane has evidently had the best of intentions—the intention (for example) to treat the mediæval romances as poems rather than as linguistic or social documents. Indeed, this intention is offered as the new and enlightened one. Unfortunately, Dr. Kane appears to share with many academic teachers so limited a conception of what a poem is that, if a poem were always merely what he and they suppose it to be, it would be quite uninteresting and trivial. For it is a conception that excludes or ignores all but the most superficial aspects of a poem's meaning. The art of the romances is conceived as the art of narrative; but 'art' and 'narrative', as they are here conceived, are things so very attenuated that they are virtually meaningless abstractions. Thus Dr. Kane can say of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (speaking of Gawain): 'His adventures with the Green Knight are essentially of no great moment, both because little more than his own life could hang upon their outcome and also because that outcome can never really be in doubt; even the simplest 14th century listener must have known that Gawain could not actually lose his head in *this* affair. By way of compensation the finer and more cultivated technique of *Sir Gawain* has protected it against a too rough exuberance, given it elegance and polish. . . .' This kind of thing is what comes of thinking of poems in terms of abstracted 'plot' and 'character', 'form' and 'content'.

Since Dr. Kane insists on applying to the romances a narrowly 'aesthetic' conception—or preconception—of what a poem is, it is scarcely surprising that he can give no good account of why they still deserve to be read. The best he can do is to hark back to the late 19th century notion that the mediæval romances offer, or *should* offer, an 'escape into fantasy'. I quote one or two of his reiterations of this theme. 'The variety of methods employed in those which have any artistic merit at all to induce the escape into the imaginative world of fiction, do not conceal that the main excellence of the kind consists in achieving "the willing suspension of disbelief"'. . . . 'The measure of artistic success in the romances is . . . the extent to which, by means determined in the temperament of their authors, they can enlist the imaginative co-operation of the reader, and satisfy his desire for the escape into fantasy'. . . . 'What is necessary to the literary excellence of the romances, and was necessary at the time of their composition, is the ability of the author to induce in his public, by some means, a ready surrender

to the experience of fiction'. To be really successful, a mediæval romance *ought*, it seems, to have the qualities that we expect from a pre-Raphaelite poem. (It is not, then, an accident that later in his book Dr. Kane can say also of a mediæval lyric, almost as if it were the highest praise, 'At times it seems almost pre-Raphaelite').

But when the romances are read without any limiting pre-conception as to what a poem is or should be—when each is viewed as an object or fact, as what it completely is—many of them will be discovered to be much more interesting and important than we could have any notion of from Dr. Kane's descriptions. Inhibited by his narrow conception of poetry (and ignoring, as the academic mind appears to be well qualified to do, the fact that this conception has been challenged by the criticism of the last thirty years) Dr. Kane is unable to recognise in the romances their other than superficial significances and to admit that these significances belong intrinsically to the poem. He is unable to allow that a poem is, in the fullest sense, what it *means*—and that its meaning is not always superficial. He almost entirely forgets also that a poem's structure of meaning is established in and through its imagery and rhythm, from which it cannot be dissociated; and that, therefore, its structure of meaning is *establishable* by the methods of literary critical analysis.

Dr. Kane pronounces judgments on the merits of the romances. He does not shirk, as so many of his academic contemporaries do, that critical responsibility. But since he misses nearly everything that, to my mind at least, is most interesting in the poems, his judgments as to their relative merits appear to me pitifully unconvincing. Indeed, he makes little attempt to convince the reader who disagrees with his judgments (as I personally disagree with many of them) that he is right and his reader is wrong. The critic is surely under an obligation to try to *show* that what he asserts of a poem is in fact true of the poem. He can only do so convincingly by examining the poem itself along with his reader and demonstrating that the significances of the poem which he speaks of really are there as observable features; that is to say, he is under an obligation to attempt to do, in his book, some literary critical analysis. But Dr. Kane, like so many who write about literature, offers his reader little in the way of quotations and of detailed analysis to support and substantiate his general assertions. Students may be prepared to accept him as an authority, at least for the purposes of their examinations, and to take the rightness of his judgments for granted, but they should not be encouraged to do so. (Students should indeed be directed to the poems themselves. But when one looks round for a collection of the romances to direct them to, one finds that there is none in circulation on this side of the Atlantic. There is only the occasional copy of French and Hale's excellent *Middle English Metrical Romances* that has found its way across—a volume which puts the Middle English editorial industry of our universities to shame, or should do so.)

The Middle English scholarship which is entrenched in the universities (if an activity so uncritical may be called 'scholarship') still persists in ignoring the scholarship that is most relevant to a critic who attempts to apprehend the mediæval romances as what they are. Dr. Kane has been content also to ignore it. Yet among the many excellent workers there have been in the field of the origins of literature there are those who have given the most exact and illuminating attention to the mediæval romances. In particular, R. S. Loomis in *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance* and J. L. Weston in *From Ritual to Romance* have shown in the greatest detail, and convincingly, that the romances come at the end of a process—indicated by the titles of these books—a process of evolution from myth (the story of a ritual) to romance. The literary critic continues to ignore their findings at his peril. Once the Arthurian romances—and the other romances that may be associated with them—are recognised as being rooted in an ancient mythology, many of them will at once be seen to be full of meaning and absorbingly interesting *as poetry*. They become recognizable as much more interesting *poems* than they have been superficially understood to be.

For example, if we compare the extant romances we should quickly recognise that certain themes or *motifs* keep recurring in them, though always as variations. The impression grows that these themes are—or were at one time—related.

. . . workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree.

What Loomis and J. L. Weston and others have shown, surely beyond any doubt, is that these themes are fragments of what was originally a coherent mythology. These scholars have gone far to reconstruct that mythology and to identify it. Of course, in the romances new meanings have been created out of these fragments of old meanings; but until we recognize and allow that these are not meaningless fragments but are in fact fragments of *meaning*, we shall continue to refuse to recognize what precisely the new structures of meaning mean, and refuse to allow that they *have* much meaning. But I must not embark here on the book that Dr. Kane should have written.

Dr. Kane refers several times to the importance of discovering the intention of the poet. This confusion between the poet and the poem appears still to be very common—a confusion that is worse confounded when a mediæval poet is thought of as if he were a 19th century pre-Raphaelite. But the notion that the modern reader is required to contrive somehow to put himself in the place of the poet or the original audience is a very curious one—though it serves to bolster up a good deal of irrelevant scholarship. That he should be required to try to discover what a 14th century poem *meant* to a 14th century audience rather than to discover, in reading it, what it *means* shows a strange conception of why people

should read poetry. Even supposing we can always guess what the conscious intention of the poet may or may not have been, the poem's total structure of meaning—to which centuries of human experience and belief may in some cases have contributed—is not necessarily to be identified with that conscious intention. Poets have themselves testified that a poem may turn out to be different from what they intended or expected it to be. The poem itself, in its totality, and not the man who *was* the poet, is the present and only definite object. What scholarship such as that of Loomis or J. L. Weston *can* do is to put the reader on the alert for significances that may be there in the particular poem he is reading. It remains for him to make sure, by critical reading, that these significances actually are there and to determine the total significance they build up into in the particular poem.

The same limitations and confusions of the contemporary academic mind which afflict Dr. Kane in his handling of the romances afflict him also in his handling of the religious lyrics and of *Piers Plowman*. He remarks of *Piers Plowman*, 'Surely the starting point is this paradox of total greatness and local failures'. It should not be taken for granted that what we have in *Piers Plowman* is not rather a number of local successes and a total failure. But if we approach *Piers Plowman* by making a comparison between it and the other 14th century alliterative poems that happen to be extant—particularly *Wynnerre and Wastoure* which appears to be its immediate predecessor in the tradition in which it comes—we might be in a better position to estimate what its particular relative value is. Dr. Kane, however, can fail even to mention *Wynnerre and Wastoure*, can say '*Piers Plowman* stands apart from the stylistic groupings of the surviving alliterative poetry', and can speak of the alliterative metre (which he says the poet of *Piers Plowman* handles with 'such mastery') as a 'remote, archaic and provincial measure'.

In spite of Dr. Kane's better intentions his *Middle English Literature* remains not untypical of the kind of book—achieving a prescribed level of conventional dullness—that the English universities now regularly turn out, approve, and inflict on the students of English. Only those who have found something to say will write interestingly and with some distinction.

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