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Laura Ashe's *Fiction and History in England, 1066-1200* takes as its subject the competition between Englishness and *Normanitas*. Ashe suggests that *Normanitas* faded in the light of an overwhelming English identity until it all but disappeared in the 1170s. She avoids arguments which see identity as constructed by language use (most of the texts she examines as expressing English identity are written in Anglo-Norman) or the centralization of sovereign authority, instead focusing on the physical place of England and the generic similarities of some of its literary output.

The book is loosely organized around several complementary pairs of texts which are used to develop the two main strands of Ashe’s argument. Chapter 1 focuses on the Bayeaux Tapestry and Wace’s *Roman de Rou* to explore the loss of *Normanitas*. Ashe surveys the various claims for ideological sympathy within the tapestry, but the pictorial nature of the work, claims Ashe, precludes any ideological program. The brief captions which accompany individual scenes do not direct a viewer’s understanding of events, but instead the tapestry “claims to present truth without interpretation” (p. 43). As such, the viewer is not presented with a pro-English or pro-Norman bias, but, claims Ashe, with a thoroughly neutral narrative of events. Medieval iconography, however, need not be either more or less neutral than a medieval text and Ashe does address one (and only one) instance which is often seen as furthering a nationalistic agenda, the peculiar posture of Harold as he addresses Edward upon his return from Normandy. Ashe argues that Harold’s posture signifies neither embarrassment nor moral perversion but merely the respect due to Edward and the scene is therefore “not ambiguous, so much as empty, of interpretive political content” (p. 41). With no national bias, the tapestry “effaces the need for political reconciliation,” but it also refuses to provide a national identity for the new ruling elite of England.

The neutrality of the tapestry, claims Ashe, was impossible by the time Wace composed the *Roman de Rou*, which she characterizes as a failed work, both for its incomplete state and for the
negative reception it received from its contemporaries. Ashe argues that, unlike the Roman de Brut, which is organized around the stable and permanent physical land of Britain (or, anachronistically, "Engleterre"), the Rou traces the much more ephemeral concept of Normanitas. Ashe argues that Wace's commitment to historical veracity resulted in the work's false starts and its incomplete status. Norman history is full of unsavory characters and a lingering reputation for violence and Wace, unwilling to ignore these less-than-chivalric details, was unable to construct or adhere to a purely noble image of what it meant to be Norman. But Normanitas was already a fading concept, so Wace's halting attempts to define it proved unsatisfactory.

Chapter 2 addresses Jordan Fantosme's Chronicle of the civil war of 1173-74. Ashe argues that Fantosme depicts the opponents of Henry II not as rebellious vassals, but as invading foreigners who attack England. What distinguishes Fantosme's "Engleis" from their enemies, according to Ashe, is not their language or ethnicity, but their respect and care for the land of England. Ashe's analysis is always interesting and there are several insightful discussions of the Chronicle's generic form and its claims to truth, but the overall argument is troubling as it is often founded upon a very loose treatment of the text at hand. Most disturbing is the rather vague sense of "land" which is encompassed in the claim that Fantosme constructed "the land of England as the stable value against which all actions are morally referenced" (p. 119). Ashe discusses numerous instances when Fantosme draws attention to the physical space that is England. In the passage cited by Ashe Fantosme uses words like "terre" (which is easily translated as "land") but also other terms which implicate the social aspects of landholding, which Ashe merely treats as "land." William, for example, evokes the loss of his realm ("perdre sun realme"), Philip of Flanders calls of the destruction of the enemy's country ("e guaste lur contree"), the narrator speaks of knights' fiefs ("lur honurs"), and Bernard de Balliol declares during battle "He who is not bold and resolute now does not deserve to have a fief or anything belonging thereto" ("Ne deit aveir honur ne rien qu'a lui apert"). In all of these cases, "realme," "contree," and "honur" denote political and social relations, but in Ashe's analysis of these scenes they are often reduced to a simple and confused idea of "land." Thus the loss of a realme is "a figurative desertion of the land" (p. 101); the destruction of a contree indicates that "[t]hese men have no intention of ever ruling the land to which they refer" (p. 99); and the potential loss of honur reveals the loss of land as the greatest injury (in the first use of honur) or (in the second use) contrasts the connection of military service with feudal tenure against the "emotional attachment between the lord and his land" (p. 102).

Chapter 3 picks up the "Fiction" of the book's title with an interesting discussion of the origins of romance. Using the Roman d'Eneas as her exemplar, Ashe claims that romance develops out of the competing claims of epic (which demands a continuous march through history) and lyric (which demands an ahistorical and atemporal meditation on a singular unchanging emotion). Leaving this text, which has little with do with Englishness per se, Ashe then turns her attention to the Romance of Horn to argue that it exemplifies an insular understanding of romance which does not revel in the ahistorical, but instead clearly places itself within an ongoing time and a stable space. This will sound to some like a standard understanding of insular romance, and indeed many of Ashe's conclusions are actually contained in a quote from Rosalind Field's "Romance as History" (p. 157), although Field arrives at these conclusions through a very different route. But Horn is also implicated in Ashe's ongoing interest in the relationship between language and reality. For example, when Horn declares his intentions in battle, acts upon them, then recaps his action, Ashe claims that he is participating in "a battle held over language and truth as much as over land and
wealth” (p. 150). In this instance, I question whether “Language is felt to be real, and reality is felt to be linguistically structured” in Horn (p. 150) because the poem never specifically mentions language (at least not in the passages quoted by Ashe). If an action described then performed is indicative of an interest in the relationship between language and reality, then surely most romances are about language and most romances claim that reality is linguistically structured (consider the oaths delivered at the beginning of Yvain or The Alliterative Morte Arthure). The slippery treatment of the text is also troubling here, especially in an argument about the inherent truth of Horn’s language. Ashe, for example, claims that the word of Horn is compared to the truthful word of God. Horn enters battle with a sword “ki fud cleris e lettres; / Escrit i est li granz nuns de Deu de maiestez,” which is translated as “shining and inscribed, the great name of God written upon it.” According to Ashe, “Horn’s sword writes God’s actions into the world, just as does Thomas’ pen” (p. 150), but the sword of the poem does not write anything: it is passively written upon. A silent sword which is merely the recipient of the name of God, however, would fit neither Ashe’s argument nor the rhetorical figure which moves us from Horn’s sword to the poet’s pen.

Chapter 4 looks outside of England to the Normans in Ireland with analyses of the Song of Dermot and the Earl and Gerald of Wales’ Expugnatio. Here Gerald’s clerical approach to secular history (characterized by a moral interpretation of history which establishes dichotomies of good and evil, or in this case, English and Irish) is contrasted with the Song’s “assumption of similitude” (p. 194) between the English and Irish. Instead of participating in a colonial discussion of race, the Song describes a martial society “grounded in the land, landholding, and lordship over men” (p. 194). The new image of Englishness, claims Ashe, had the potential to be exported to Ireland where a new land could act as the common marker of a new identity, but she laments that nationalism “can rarely, if ever, define self without demeaning other” (p. 203).

Fiction and History in England, 1066-1200 reminds us that national identity need not be articulated in a language which shares a name with the “nation.” The bold claims of the book, however, are often based on a very limited number of texts and very small portions of these texts. Part of this is necessity. The historical works which make up the bulk of Ashe’s table of contents are generally very large. Indeed, one of the strengths of the book is its attention to a generally understudied body of texts and its assertion that these texts can help illuminate how the Normans in England constructed and articulated their own sense of group identity.
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