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Adrian P. Tudor, trans., *The Knight and the Barrel* [*Le Chevalier au barisel*]. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2019. 155 pp. Notes, glossary, bibliography, and index. £80.00 (hb). ISBN 9780719097881.

Review by Geri L. Smith, University of Central Florida.

It is clear from the outset of this volume that Adrian P. Tudor deeply appreciates the artistic merit, literary interest, and historical value of the early thirteenth-century tale in verse, *Le Chevalier au barisel*, translated as *The Knight and the Barrel*. And by the time readers finish perusing the illuminating, accessible, and authoritative introduction to his translation, they will be primed to like it too, and eager to jump into the text for themselves. With no small amount of finesse and dexterity, Tudor manages to make a tale about a terrible person, who endures physical suffering and social degradation, both inviting and engaging for the modern audience. What makes this volume a particularly welcome entry into the field is that it is the first English translation of this intriguing poem, long counted in the French canon but relatively little studied in the English-speaking scholarly world. As one reads Tudor's insightful commentary and lively translation, one may be surprised that it has taken this long to reach a wider audience.

The standard Old French edition of the *Chevalier au barisel*, which serves as Tudor's base for his translation, is the version by Félix Lecoy published in 1973.^[1] At the same time a "spiritual action-tale" and a "psychological drama" (p. 3), *The Knight and the Barrel* depicts the decline and ultimate salvation of a murderous, prideful, and seemingly incorrigible baron. The poem is relatively short at just 1084 lines. The majority of the volume is therefore dedicated to helpful and comprehensive apparatus that will make this a valuable point of entry for new readers and a rich reference--and likely source of further inspiration--for more seasoned scholars of medieval literature. The introduction is extensive, and its copious endnotes offer a good deal of additional insight and suggestions for further inquiry. For the translation of the poem, which features the original Old French side-by-side with the English, Tudor aligned the two texts as closely as possible, but (wisely, in this reader's opinion) did not go so far as to attempt to replicate the octosyllabic rhyming couplets. The tale is followed by detailed notes on the text, which also serve as a glossary explaining idiosyncratic words and expressions, and a glossary of proper nouns. That in turn is followed by an extensive bibliography and an index.

The introduction, logically structured and written with a range of readers in mind, does an excellent job of preparing those readers to recognize the poem's entertainment value and significance. To do so, Tudor strikes an admirable balance between background information

and text-focused detail. After a note on the question of author and date, concluding with the assurance that the ambiguity of both does not take anything away from the interest of the poem, is an outline of the story and overview of the characters. Tudor then goes on to discuss the poem's religious and textual background, comparing this version of the *Knight and the Barrel* with others, repeatedly underscoring ways in which this text is superior to and more nuanced than its closest contemporary, authored by Jehan de Blois. Tudor concludes the introduction by enumerating the editions and translations of this text (the latter including versions in Modern French, German, Italian and Spanish) and providing an annotated list of suggested further readings.

The translation of the poem is accurate, lively, and flows well, capturing the "medieval" feel of the text while also minimizing barriers for the modern reader. In this tale, a singularly cruel, reprobate, and intemperate baron is cajoled by his knights to confess his sins before a solitary holy man who lives in a nearby wood. When the baron ultimately accedes, he does so with an air of defiance, making it clear that it is purely for the sake of the chivalric code and not out of spiritual motivation or concern for the Almighty: "For you,' he replied, 'I'll indeed go, although I'll never do anything for God. It is friendship for you that takes me there'" (p. 71). Upon meeting with the holy man, the baron arrogantly rejects all calls to repent and seek salvation. Eventually, the baron agrees to perform an act of penance--to fill a small barrel with water from a stream--which he once again treats more as an ego-serving act of defiance meant to put an end to the talk of spiritual enlightenment. Strangely, however, no matter how hard the baron tries, the barrel will not fill. The stubborn baron, in turn, vows never to relinquish the challenge, boldly declaring that he will go without washing, money, or repose of any kind until the challenge is met. True to form, his motivation is consistent with the character he has demonstrated up to that point: "Oh, I can tell you that I'm not doing this for God, I'm doing it out of sheer doggedness, anger, and spite" (p. 89).

For a year, the baron ruins himself physically, financially, and socially, trying in vain to fill the barrel from any body of water he can find. When eventually he returns to the hermit, the holy man is so devastated at the sight of the baron's condition that he is overcome by pity and remorse for having instigated the quest: "I clearly see that God hates you. Your penance is worthless, since you did it without repenting and without love and without godliness.' At this point, the hermit weeps, wails and wrings his hands..." (p. 101). The sight of the distraught hermit, suffering by proxy the pain of repentance for the baron's misdeeds, finally leads to the baron's change of heart. A miraculous giant tear wells up from within the baron and flies into the barrel, filling it to overflowing. Having turned the corner toward salvation, the baron accepts communion, whereupon he dies in the hermit's arms. Herein lies a signature and problematizing twist in this moral tale--the repenting tears of one man lead to the salvation of another.

As Tudor painstakingly lays it out, this is not simply a formulaic tale of suffering, self-knowledge, and salvation. Tudor's extended, up-close commentary on the poem is rich with background information and explanations of intertextual allusions and literary subtleties. The reader must appreciate the extent to which these are complex, "conflicted individuals" (p. 3) marked by both human faults and the potential for divine goodness. One of the key questions that permeates Tudor's discussion is the extent to which *The Knight and the Barrel* can be considered an *exemplum*. There is no explicit moral to this tale, but as Tudor contends, "the story is so brilliantly recounted that the moral speaks for itself" (p. 2). In his discussion of

hagiography and *exempla* as the religious literary context for the work, and by situating the poem in its medieval literary context more generally, Tudor effectively illuminates both how this work functions as an “exhortative exemplum” (p. 6) and yet differs uniquely from that established textual form.

Tudor’s enthusiasm for this text is palpable and contagious, and the analysis is dotted with terms such as “tour de force,” “true genius,” and “trail-blazing.” Summing it all up at the end of the introduction, Tudor adds to the anticipation, remarking that “the heady mixture of paradox, introspection, transformation and hope results in a narrative full of twists and drama” (p. 44). For its appeal, its accessibility, and its utility as a welcome new addition to the English-language canon of Old French literature, this book is strongly recommended for students at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, as well as for scholars already further along in their explorations of medieval literature.

NOTES

[1] Félix Lecoy, *Le Chevalier au barisel* (Paris: Champion, 1973).

Geri L. Smith
University of Central Florida
Geri.Smith@ucf.edu

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