

Robin Chapman Stacey, *Law and the Imagination in Medieval Wales*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. Pp. viii, 335. \$89.95 hardcover (ISBN 9780812250510). doi:10.1017/S0738248020000437

There are two lines in a famous Welsh song that say, in free translation, “Darkness is another sort of light, given to show us true beauty” (“*Golau arall yw tywyllwch/ i arddangos gwir brydferthwch*”: John Ceiriog Hughes, *Ar Hyd y Nos*, in *The New National Song Book*, ed. G. Shaw [London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1938], 176). This idea of shifting perspectives, and of revelations through darkness, came to mind more than once while I was reading this book, which examines some of the murkier gaps in and tangles of the records of medieval Welsh law, and, in doing so, serves to illuminate much about medieval law and thought.

As the introduction summarizes (9–18), Welsh legal material (sometimes referred to collectively as *Cyfraith Hywel*, or the Law(s) of Hywel the Good) is copious, but at times it is inconsistent, and difficult to date and evaluate. Similar problems of chronology and variation affect some of the literary output, and above all, the stories assembled as the *Mabinogion* (21–22 [see Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007]). Although scholars have long paid attention to the frequent law-related content of Welsh literary works, this book is an extension of more recent scholarship looking at the legal texts *as* literature.

The idea that law, and legal texts, should not be understood as something standing apart from the rest of contemporary life and thought is of great importance, not to Welsh legal history alone, but also to all whose scholarship involves consideration of such material. It may be that those coming from a background of legal practice or study would be less inclined to see historical legal texts as necessarily more solidly representative of truth than other medieval documents, as was the author’s instinct (2). Nevertheless, this book is not simply about the encouragement of healthy scepticism in this regard, but also about the advantages to be gained by searching legal texts for their reproduction of techniques, themes, and worldviews evident in the contemporary literary corpus.

Important observations are made, in particular, about the Welsh law texts’ pervasive idea of landscape and movement through space (see especially Chapter 1). Movement among court, country, and the lands beyond (*llys-gwlad-gorwlad*) is shown to be an important organizing principle in the texts, as it is in the framing of many contemporary “literary” stories. Opening minds up to space-time as well as space alone, Stacey makes a convincing case for seeing in the law texts a deliberate construction of “a vision of Wales that embraces past and present simultaneously” (42).

The value of admitting literary methods to the study of legal texts is clear when set against previous scholarship, which has sometimes struggled with

material in the law texts that simply seems to be wrong, or puzzlingly impractical. One clear example of this “added value” can be seen in the consideration in Chapter 5 of the separation of assets on divorce. The oddity of passages on this has long been observed; for example, the splitting up of pairs of quernstones between the parties seems particularly perverse. The suggestion (155) that the “rules” were never meant as a practical guide, but were intended as a warning about the costliness and damage of ending a potentially fertile partnership, seems to be a plausible resolution.

Seeing the law texts as, at least in part, a literary production also allows the freedom to consider not only choices in how material is presented, but also choices of what material to exclude or de-emphasize. Chapter 6 considers the limited discussion of interpersonal violence in some redactions of the laws, suggesting that this may be the projection of an aspiration toward a peaceful, unified Wales, as opposed to the factional infighting and the threat of violence from outside, which were frequent presences in medieval Welsh political life.

The work ends with a metaphor about darkness, and an invitation to use our imagination in looking at these texts. At the end of the journey, there are certainly more lights in the darkness. The new quest they illuminate, however, is rather daunting. Acquiring the literary expertise to bring a properly informed imagination to bear upon the complex corpus of medieval legal texts from any jurisdiction is a task many of us may find to be beyond the capacity of one academic lifetime, without acquiring the magical cauldron of rebirth featured in the second branch of the *Mabinogi*, “Branwen ferch Llŷr.” In the same tale, there is a powerful image of a leader, the giant king Bendigeidfran, acting as a bridge for his people to cross a treacherous river. This important book will, likewise, be of great assistance in helping legal historians to cross into less familiar lands.

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Niamh Howlin, *Juries in Ireland: Laypersons and Law in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017. Pp. x, 293. \$74.50 hardcover (ISBN 9781846826214).
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Unsuspecting readers should be warned about this book. There is much more to it than meets the eye. Niamh Howlin has given us a work of legal history of