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### Stefan Vander Elst, *The Knight, the Cross, and the Song: Crusade Propaganda and Chivalric Literature, 1100-1400*

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**Stefan Vander Elst, *The Knight, the Cross, and the Song: Crusade Propaganda and Chivalric Literature, 1100-1400*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press). Print, 299 pages, US\$55.00, ISBN: 9780812248968.**



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*Review*

The medieval Crusades are fertile ground for nostalgic fantasy and partisan fear-mongering, and their history is indelibly inked into our culture in the same dreamy, romantic shades as the Pre-Raphaelite painting on the cover. The war-bound knight and lovelorn lady of Edmund Blair Leighton's 'God Speed' offer an appropriate visual summary of the argument by University of San Diego professor Stefan Vander Elst (PhD, Princeton, 2006). His New Historicist reading of crusade literature claims that the 'holy warrior and the courtly lover' coexist in crusading motivations and ideologies. Responding to John Gower's claim that the Crusades had ultimately failed due to motivations of personal prowess and romantic or sexual desire, Vander Elst seeks out evidence of crusading motivations as they were cultivated and propagated through both traditional chronicle narratives as well as romance literature. He believes that, despite Gower's concerns, genres such as the *chanson de geste* and the adventure cycles helped provide ideological inspiration to Crusaders instead of hindering the movement.

In the first half of the book, the author discusses the use of *chanson de geste* elements in crusade literature as a means of inspiring successive generations of Western Christians, opening with a contextualization of the post-First Crusade Holy Land in Chapter 1. Vander Elst asks what incentives motivated people to take up the Crusade and how that motivation was disseminated. He finds his answer in 'retelling the events of the First Crusade' through the 'interpretive matrix' of romance literature. (p. 13) In Chapter 2, Vander Elst opens his textual analysis with

the *Gesta Francorum*, and claims that the text recalls a previous 'literary image' of conflicts between Christian and Muslim communities such as those found in the portrayals of Franks and Saracens in the *Chanson de Roland*. By doing this, Vander Elst suggests the *Gesta* justified the twelfth-century Christian occupation of the Holy Land with a 'double claim', a 'religious' one as Christ's heirs and a 'secular and historical one' as heirs to Charlemagne's Franks (p. 48–9). From the *Gesta*, Vander Elst moves to Robert of Rheims' *Historia Iherosolimitana* in Chapter 3. Here, the introduction of a theological framework signals the Crusade's status 'as a new Exodus' while the 'secular martial history' Robert incorporated from the *chanson de geste* tradition suggests the Crusaders are as capable and worthy of their cause as the Franks of the earlier songs (p. 57). European Christian success in the Holy Land is the fulfillment of a pattern of Biblical history where God acts on behalf of his chosen people to guide them to their divinely prophesied home. Finally, in Chapter 4, Vander Elst examines the Old French Crusade Cycle and identifies a shift away from crusading as communal responsibility towards an individual genealogical duty. Linked to inheritance, crusading became necessary to maintain the Christian state and to guarantee the safe transfer of 'material conquests' from one generation to the next (p. 77). The *chansons de geste* of the Crusade Cycle thus began to fold extensive genealogical epics into Crusade narratives for aristocratic audiences.

Part II focuses on the use of chivalric romance literature to reinvigorate the legacy of the Crusades as the early motivations faded from memory. Highly significant to this development was the changing role of women within the texts. All but absent in the *Gesta* and *Historia*, women and love transform from afterthoughts to Crusading 'motivations' in later literature (p. 103). In Chapter 6, Vander Elst digs into fourteenth-century romance texts that sought to reform chivalry by reaffirming Crusading ideologies, with Arthurian texts as a 'model' for that reformation (p. 128).

Focusing on the Teutonic Nicolaus of Jeroschin's *Kronike von Pruzinlant*, Vander Elst identifies the introduction of chivalric romance elements as a way for the author to appeal to his audience. These elements expand the crusade narrative and purpose from just the salvation of souls to include 'romance adventure', or crusading as 'love service' (p. 146). In the Second Old French Crusade Cycle explored in Chapter 7, he identifies how the literary geography of Crusading is being distanced from physical reality and increasingly displaced into the world of fiction (the 'world of Arthur'), which only strengthens the link between Crusading and chivalric adventure (p. 170). Finally, in the last chapter, the author reads Guillaume de Machaut's *La Prise d'Alexandre* and identifies the image of a perfect Crusader – a man of both 'Mars and Venus' reign, for whom 'the Crusade is a crucible, a proving ground where one can find the adventure necessary to gain honor and love' (p. 186). For Vander Elst, Machaut's text is the culmination of more than two hundred years of ideological evolution reflecting the changing needs of the European Christian community through Crusade literature and propaganda.

Vander Elst has produced an impressive first book. He maintains a strong narrative built upon a solid foundation of close readings of primary texts with a comprehensive collection of secondary scholarship to fall back upon. Not only are his textual analyses sophisticated and clearly laid out for his audience, but he offers deep historical contexts to justify his readings. However, one weakness of the book is that he allows for no alternate readings of the texts. The inclusion of an example that contradicts his reading would strengthen his argument; it would seem less like a carefully curated collection of primary texts and more like an open field within which a general trend can be identified. His identification of the ideological relationship between crusade propaganda and chivalric literature provides a fertile starting point for deeper examinations of rhetorical strategy and literary responses

to contemporary events that can be replicated and reproduced both synchronically and diachronically to collections of texts. The journey of crusading literature from epic and into the world of romance, not to mention the causes of this development, has never been more clearly delineated.

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