

Behr, Hans-Joachim: *Literatur als Machtlegitimation: Studien zur Funktion der deutschsprachigen Dichtung am böhmischen Königshof im 12. Jahrhundert.*

Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München 1989, 276 S. (Forschungen zur Geschichte der älteren deutschen Literatur 9).

*Literatur als Machtlegitimation*, the author's postdoctoral thesis (*Habilitations-schrift*), is an important, well-documented study of the German literature composed at the court of the Přemyslid kings Wenceslas I, Přemysl Ottokar II and Wenceslas II in the thirteenth century. Dr Behr isolates three major phases of German cultural activity at the Prague court of the Czech kings: the composition of didactic poetry (*Spruchdichtung*) by Reinmar von Zweter, (Meister) Sigeher and Friedrich von Sonnenburg during the reign of Wenceslas I; the adaption of secular epic and chivalric romance during the reigns of Přemysl Ottokar II and Wenceslas II (such as Ulrich von Etzenbach's *Alexander* and *Wilhelm von Wenden*, and Heinrich von Freiberg's *Tristan*, a continuation of Gottfried von Straßburg's unfinished masterwork); and a final phase of mannerist courtly love poetry exemplified by Heinrich von Meissen's *Frauenlob* and the *Minnesang* of Wenceslas II himself.

The most significant aspect of Dr Behr's thesis is his rejection of the old-fashioned view of German literary activity at the Prague court as an epigonal late flowering of

courtly poetry, a body of esoteric work intended for a closed audience of royal patrons and courtiers with exclusive, mannerist taste (p.249). The author demonstrates convincingly that these texts were generated in a thoroughly political milieu in which the estates of society played a vital role. The Přemyslids' interest in a tradition of epic and romance literature created a pro-western cultural climate in which the nobility also participated. This pro-courtly climate reached its high-point with the self-styled *Minnesinger* Wenceslas II. By the reign of Charles IV, the native Czech literature was beginning to adapt epic and romance forms to its own norms and requirements. This fourth and final phase of literary evolution is absent from Behr's book who limits his scope to the German-speaking circles of the court and nobility.

According to Behr, the German authors in questions were not naive novices but experienced and skilful propagandists whose work sought to legitimate the power and military ambitions of their patrons. As Behr demonstrates, the didactic poetry written for Wenceslas I by Reinmar von Zweter and (Meister) Sigeher did not diverge in their formulaic or communicative structure from models originating outside Bohemia which were inspired by the poetry of Walther von der Vogelweide. A similar reliance on western antecedents also applies to the secular epic and romance forms which achieved popularity at the court of Přemysl Ottokar II, as illustrated by Ulrich von dem Türlin's *Willehalm-Vorgeschichte*. With Ulrich von Etzenbach's voluminous *Alexander*, western-style subject-matter acquired a certain degree of autonomy from foreign sources; Ulrich's massive version of the life and adventures of Alexander the Great promoted a specifically Přemyslid-centred world-picture even though its models were borrowed from a foreign literary tradition. Ulrich's *Wilhelm von Wenden*, on the other hand, is a thoroughly original and independent work of political literature. This saint's legend draws on the early Christian phase of Slave history to validate Wenceslav II's political hegemony in east central Europe.

Dr Behr's thesis is a fine example of traditional scholarship and represents an important addition to our knowledge of the reception of German literature at the court of the Czech kings in the thirteenth century.