Romancing Treason is a detailed and valuable investigation into a specific and understudied political discourse of the late medieval period. The author’s central argument is based on a series of perceptibly-distinctive, socially-relevant characteristics unique to treason-focused texts produced between c.1437 to c.1497. Here Leitch claims a divergence in romance texts from the usual concerns. Prior to and after the period under consideration romances were largely preoccupied with the concept of providence, making Leitch’s period unique in its treatment of and concern with the ‘earthly moment’ (p.1). By employing literary evidence the implications of treason on late medieval ideas of community, identity, expression and morality are also considered. Leitch takes special care to draw attention to her consideration of the historiographical relationship present between the late medieval and early modern periods, more specifically to the space between the respective literary cultures of the fifteenth-century Lancastrians and sixteenth-century Tudors.

The introduction effectively demonstrates the merits of considering the symbiotic relationship between the respective disciplines of English and history as a foundation for the remainder of the study. The compelling example of MS Rawlinson D82, f.34r – an annotated verse from a vernacular miscellany – illustrates the potential impact of the political climate on literature even post-production. Here the presence of treason is indicative of a breakdown of political and social faith. Thus it played a key role in the construction – and deconstruction – of ideas of identity and community. The latter part of the introduction aligns literary treason with its historical context. It should be noted that romance manuscripts are considered alongside contemporary correspondence, chronicles and political texts (e.g. parliamentary attainders). It is indicative of the author’s ability to treat semantically literary and non-literary texts, providing a multi-dimensional study.

The inclusion of these non-literary texts creates a natural focus on a particular social collective, most notably comprising the aristocracy, gentry and mercantile classes. The variety of texts is most effective in the second chapter, which delves into the social and legal implications of references to ‘treason’ and ‘traitor’, both horizontally and vertically. A masterful comparison between the French and English laws of treason is an example of the microscopic attention Leitch pays to her sources, distinguishable elsewhere in the chapter. Evidence found in the presence of the English word ‘treson’ in a Latin narrative, for example, is carefully extracted and examined for the implications behind it.

The third chapter considers the synchronic/diachronic contexts of contemporary literature. It begins by exploring the preoccupation with treason in prose, poetry and drama, with the latter part dedicated to a fascinating comparative study of earlier and later periods. It is interesting to note that the word ‘treason’ entered the vernacular during the fifteenth century. Following a masterful and in-depth analysis, Leitch concludes that the most prominent and distinguishable feature of her treason romances is the specific inclusion of moral instruction. The fourth chapter turns to the lexicon of Malory’s Morte Darthur, where treason is held as the benchmark against which ideals should be measured. The Morte and its contemporaries were subjected by their authors to a revision which placed social instruction at the fore. The penultimate chapter places the Morte alongside other prose romances printed by William

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Caxton, who is argued to have sought, translated and printed specifically treason-focused texts. The potential of printing for vast distribution was dependent on public demand, thus presenting the possibility that Caxton’s selection rested on the concerns of his audience.

The final chapter, or ‘post script’, considers treason post-1500. Its demotion to ‘post script’ is slightly disappointing, given the aforementioned intent to bridge the historiographical divide. It does, however, provide potential for further research and development of the author’s theory: post-1500, treason is no longer the capital preoccupation, just one concern among many. Leitch has provided a chronology of contexts and texts in the appendix. This is an extremely interesting exercise. It appears, however, to contravene the firm assertion that ‘this study proposes neither one-to-one correspondence between text and event nor points of strict political allegory’ (p. 14). The issue is circumnavigated in the notion that the texts can at least be dated to the period in question. However, it would be more helpful perhaps for the appendix to have been organised in a fashion better suited to a chronology.

Romancing Treason joins the ranks of research dedicated to the consideration of the cultural, social and political concerns of the period defined by the Wars of the Roses. It is markedly different, however, in taking up the theme of treason in the context of a literary study. Given the topic it is surprising that a couple of recent studies on romances during this period have not been referenced, but this is a minor point. The author should be congratulated on producing such an intelligently written and well-researched study. Romancing Treason is highly successful in building upon current studies of romance manuscripts and their literary culture in its treatment of a theme which undoubtedly occupied the minds of those who lived in a period of such turbulence and uncertainty.