This monograph by noted Hispanists on one of the lesser known Arthurian Post-Vulgate texts, El baladro del sabio Merlin, is a welcome addition to the recent attention the 1498 incunable has received. The Baladro, which means scream, is titled for the last scene, when the enchanter is buried alive by the Damsel of the Lake, in a scene with many parallels to a hell, while the reader is haunted by Merlin’s spine-chilling yell. The version is preserved in both a Seville imprint (1535) and the incunable studied in this book, which is kept in the Biblioteca Universitaria de Oviedo. This study is a revised version of the study appearing in the facsimile edition of the Burgos incunable, making one see this version as aiming, perhaps, at a wider distribution of the study.

Three short chapters articulate studies on the textual genealogy of the Spanish Merlin, the aesthetic and ideological contexts for the emergence of the book in the Iberian Peninsula, and a last study on its reception. Though the book includes a name index, there is, sadly, no separate bibliography. Studies published by the Seminary on Medieval and Renaissance Studies in Salamanca tend to be difficult to find in American libraries, and this study merits a wider distribution: First, because it traces a clear picture of the penetration and diffusion of Arthurian themes and texts into the Iberian Peninsula, which is no easy task; second, for its clear and accessible prose.

Within the Arthurian trajectory, Merlin’s specific genealogy is traced to the Post-Vulgate Hispanic versions, relying on Harvey Sharrer and Paloma Gracia’s studies on this topic, and their relations with the Portuguese extant works and other peninsular fragments. A highly readable chapter, this concise summary of the complex and fragmentary nature of late Arthurian materials is one of this study’s achievements. The second chapter studies the text itself and its recomposition from fragments and translations, within the historico-political context of the book’s publication in Juan de Burgos’ press. With a firm step, the chapter moves along what it calls a “laberíntico arbol,” first through the tradition of prophecy in Merlin literature, and its importance from Alfonso XI’s reign onwards, then through a careful combing of Iberian literature and their use of the motif. Next to the prophetic, the authors lay out the novelesque context for the work, which takes them to interpretations of the prologue, which they take to be references to the most difficult years of Enrique IV’s reign (52-55). The third and last chapter continues with the political contextualization, this time related to the vitality of the character itself, through a close look at the different readers and readings it received. From nuns to preachers, Merlin makes his way, if in fragments, through Castilian libraries of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and provides a context for the widespread success of the chivalric genre.

The specialized reader will find a careful though readable path to the Castilian Baladro, along with a series of interesting intuitions which remain to be worked through, while the student will appreciate the clear prose and historical contextualization, along with the prodigal footnotes that point to the essential discussions in current research.

Review: Transformed encoding to P5 TEI.