

Chiavola Birnbaum, Lucia. *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion, and Politics in Italy*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993.

Although not dedicated to the medieval history of the cult of the black virgin, *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion and Politics in Italy* has proved so useful a tool for appealing to undergraduate sentiments in Medieval Art History courses that I have found myself passing the title as tip to good friends who are fellow feminist medievalists or to feminists in other disciplines of similar sympathies. As one can deduce from the title, Chiavola Birnbaum's multi-disciplinary, multi-ethnic approach brings a desperately needed unguent to some traditional intellectual and racial enemies by providing a positive common ground on which a healing discourse can begin.

Chiavola Birnbaum asserts: that the cult images (most of which are of medieval manufacture) are intentionally black, contradicting generations of clerics and scholars such as Ilene Forsythe who explained away the coloration as accident or deterioration; that shrines dedicated to Black Madonnas in Italy are located over or near pagan sites of worship of the Great Mother in one or another of her manifestations; that those manifestations are embodiments of the black goddesses of Mediterranean Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East; that the Black Madonnas were not worshipped as exemplars of humble submission (as were white Madonnas), but as powerful advocates of justice and fierce protectors of the poor and the oppressed; that to this day, centers of Black Madonna worship are also centers of progressive collectivist politics and most recently of feminist and green activism.

It will come as no surprise that the Catholic Church adamantly rejects this thesis while some individual pastors hide away their "dirty" Virgins, repaint them a ghastly white, or feign blindness to their coloration. Yet this practice of appropriation and Christianization of pagan shrines has a venerable history in the Church. When around 600, Pope Gregory the Great instructed his missionary, Augustine of Canterbury, to entice conversion by preserving pagan temples, purging pagan altars and then shrewdly reconsecrating ancient sacred sanctuaries to Christ, he was in fact reiterating a common practice. To name just a few of countless examples: the temple to Athena Parthenos, the Parthenon, in Athens was rededicated to the Theotokos, the Mother of God, in the fifth century; the Temple to Juno Lucina on the Esquiline Hill in Rome was temporarily rededicated then replaced by the great church of Santa Maria Maggiore whose black image was attributed to St. Luke; the dangerously popular temple to Artemis at Ephesus with its colossal, black, many breasted statue conveniently destroyed by the Goths in the third century was quickly replaced by an enormous church dedicated to ... the Virgin.

The breadth of Chiavola Birnbaum's study ranges from the archaeology of prehistory, through heretical and vernacular theologies, through the hermeneutics of modern Italian politics where a *cultura negata femminile*, in Gramscian terms, articulates revolutionary aspirations in a very antique language. A small caveat: her causal linkage of the first to the last, of coincident sites of megalithic (indeed Paleolithic) chthonic Mother worship with modern Italian "red zones" seems something of a *post hoc ergo propter hoc* argument and rests too heavily on the daring but still very controversial theses of Marija Gimbutas. Nevertheless, those of us searching on behalf of our students for a metaphor of multicultural spiritual righteousness will find an immensely appealing image in the Black

Madonnas and in their history as told by Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum.

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Britton J. Harwood and Gillian R. Overing (eds). *Class and Gender in Early English Literature: Intersections*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994, pp.156, ISBN: 0-253-32734-2 (hardback) and 0-253-20858-0 (paper)

In the early 1980s Sheila Delany declared that class and feminist analyses were incompatible, likening the phrase “socialist feminism” to Doctor Dolittle’s pushme-pullyou, a mythical horse-like beast with a head at either end.¹ The debate within Marxist feminism has of course moved on considerably, as Delany’s own critical practice later acknowledged, and as several of Harwood and Overing’s contributors have noted. While this present volume is certainly not trying to articulate a position that might be called “socialist feminism,” it is nevertheless convinced that “class” and “gender” can and should be brought together, and that theoretically-minded medievalists can establish models of the conjunction that are not impossible pieces of genetic engineering. The editors have not prescribed the models, but have left it up to the contributors to theorize their own view of the kind of “intersections” produced. The result is stimulating, and less eclectic than might be imagined.

This is because the volume’s allegiances tend, though I must be careful to say not wholly, towards ideologically-based approaches rather than post-structuralist ones. As Clare Lees puts it in her essay on *Piers Plowman*, “medievalists have a common interest in trying to understand the material nature of the past - its social formation, beliefs and cultural practices.” Many of the contributors insist on the economic and social aspects of the lives of medieval men and women, on marriage patterns, domestic production and reproduction, and kinship systems, and theorize this in terms of the politics of economic and gender struggle. David Aers’ essay is the most polemical, but not untypical of the volume’s convictions as a whole. To bring together class and gender is not just in the interests of a more “complete” historical reading (Aers, for example, comments that “absence of attention to gender can actually distort even the most committedly historicist and political investigation of the poem”) but because the two are inextricably, though problematically, linked (Shulamith Shahar’s “fourth estate” is but one example of this). Since the volume resists this binary taking-up of either a gender—or class—based critical position, I will deliberately not ask what feminist readers in particular stand to gain from the collection, or whether their interests might be better served by post-structuralism or post-modernism than by the models of social relations. Yet the volume does, of course, invite these questions. What is valuable is that it represents a concerted effort to model for literary texts—as opposed to historical texts and phenomena—political readings that do not ignore gender.

The eight essays cover some expected and unexpected texts: the Old English *Judith*, the Exeter Book Riddles, the Old English “elegies;” two essays on *Piers Plowman*, one on the Middle English romances, and two on Chaucer (the *House of Fame* and the