

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

*Adele La Barre Starensier, Department of Art History, Drew University*

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.<sup>1</sup> 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

*Pardoner's Tale*). Many of the North American and British critics represented here were also contributors to Allen Frantzen's 1991 *Speaking Two Languages* (Frantzen, Harwood, Lees, Lochrie, Overing ), similarly distinguished by its refusal to marginalize Old English texts.<sup>2</sup> In the earlier collection Frantzen aimed to "address the problems of articulating tradition and contemporary theory," with a view towards reinscribing Anglo-Saxon and Middle English as newly seductive within the academy. Although Overing and Harwood's project is different, their volume can also be read (although I do not have the space here to deal fully with this) in terms of its potential to administer a shot in the arm to the flagging fortunes of the discipline.

The most striking indications of this are the bringing together of essays on both Old and Middle English texts, and the translation of some of the contributors from one disciplinary field to another. Karma Lochrie, known for her work in Late Middle English women mystics, writes on the Old English *Judith*; Lees, a specialist in Anglo-Saxon prose, writes on *Piers Plowman*, and Frantzen, another Anglo-Saxonist, writes on Chaucer. Although Frantzen is the only one to comment explicitly on the anxieties provoked by such translation, both for himself and medievalists policing the boundaries between Old and Middle English, the issue is provocative because of the different histories of the institutional formation of the disciplines, and the legacies of these histories.<sup>3</sup> Anglo-Saxon studies, for example, has been far more resistant than Middle English to gender issues and anti-essentialist readings. It is interesting to speculate whether this allows Lochrie to move less inhibitedly in the field; her intelligent reading of *Judith* is the first I have seen that both emphasizes the politics of gender in the poem and is also attentive to deconstructive criticism. Using class and gender as tools of analysis necessitates a rebuttal of some of the favored critical paradigms of medieval studies, including of course allegorical reading, something explicitly noted by Lochrie and also by Lees in her important essay on Lady Meed which examines the processes of use and exchange whereby she is produced as female.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the essays fall into two parts: "intersectional-model," followed by a reading of the chosen text. Harwood offers the most thoroughgoing *marxisant* model, arguing that a superstructure can be expected to exist for the base of gender as much as for that of class, but that frequently the same superstructural institution, such as a law court, can work ideologically to secure both class and gender relations. Within this model, "gender" is understood as coterminous with "gender struggle". Curious, though, that Harwood's fascinating reading of Chaucer's *House of Fame* talks about "the feminine" being "erased" without ever theorizing this "feminine" or its relationship to "gender struggle." Harriet Hudson is one of the critics who is not entirely comfortable with the editors' invitation to theorize the class-gender intersection, but she nevertheless gives a useful, historically-nuanced account of four of the less familiar English romances in the context of changing marriage patterns among the gentry class in England.

Some of the critics who favor post-structuralist positions offer rather diffuse models of the intersection. Helen Bennett's comment that "in a way, Kristeva is saying that woman has constituted a class outside the class system, that gender has always been class" will probably strike some readers as inadequate (although it could be very interestingly pursued in the context of the "three estates" model alluded to by other contributors), but her use of Kristeva's notion of abjection in reading the gender

differences of exile in the Old English “elegies” has some important implications. Frantzen’s essay develops an intriguing argument about the *Pardoner’s Tale*, starting from the proposition that the “three estates” model in the late fourteenth century depended not on surplus production but on lack, and then, following Klaus Theweleit and Deleuze and Guattari, arguing that the three rioters do not demonstrate this socially requisite lack but rather indulge in “male fantasies,” “revolutionary” desires of excess, that require damming up. However, the Pardoner’s “productivity” with the trifunctional estates model “is sexualized differently from and in between that of other men and women in the text.” He is, anyway, a figure of the lack of the lack. Some stimulating post-structuralist thinking sits rather uneasily with the occasional vocabulary of materialist analysis, as if Frantzen cannot quite make up his mind whether to go for an ideological model or revise it altogether.

Given the probable student market for this volume, it is disappointing that the terms “class” and “gender” remain largely unproblematized, both from an ontological and a historical perspective. Although the collection was obviously put together too early to take account of Biddick’s specific medievalist critique of the whole notion of “foundational categories,” there have been plenty of attempts to de-essentialize and modify the terms (Laclau and Mouffe for “class,” Judith Butler for “gender”). Individual essays do acknowledge some of these problems. For example, Lochrie rewrites “class” as “rank” in the context of Old English poetry, Harwood reminds us that classes are not the cause but the consequence of conflict over the surplus product (although his analogous theorizing of “gender” as an effect is on shakier ground); and Frantzen involves Butler in arguing that neither sex nor gender is a transhistorical category. The inevitable incompleteness of the series of differences alluded to in the title continually, though productively, pulls at the edges of some of the essays, suggesting that the project might already need to be moved on. Culler is cited on page one as an authority for the view that texts are more interesting for what they do not explicitly articulate, but then why not race? ethnicity? sexuality? These issues have been part of Medieval Studies for a while now (see Vols. 13 and 16 of the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter*). In fact, Frantzen refers to the dependence of social structures on suppressed homosexual ties, and John Tanke has certainly taken on post-colonialism in his excellent discussion of the “linguistic violence” operating in critical discussions of Exeter Book Riddle 12 that fail to acknowledge the concatenation of ethnic identity with “class” and gender in the representation of the “wonfeax wale” [dark-haired slave woman, and/or dark-haired Welsh woman].

I welcome the volume as a whole for its engaging and accessible essays on lesser-known medieval topics (especially Anglo-Saxon texts), and for its strong political commitments. What is also valuable is that it implicitly contests the marginalization of Old English and of certain Middle English texts within the landscape of the New Medievalism and the new Middle Ages, whose principal and highly seductive features are romance, fabliaux, lais, Chaucer, Christine de Pisan, the *Roman de la Rose*, mucous membranes, body parts and talking orifices. The texts represented here are rather short on these things. But the essays suggest that there might be a new focus of interest on what Aers describes as the need “to understand divisions and solidarities in and across medieval communities, and to grasp the ways in which the texts we study relate to these structures and the antagonisms they so often entailed.” This is extremely important. I am

still left with questions about how this might best be done theoretically and within the academy, but let's hope that Overing and Harwood's staging of this stimulating round-table of medievalists will maintain the level of discussion.

1. Sheila Delany, "Confessions of an Ex-handkerchief Head, or Why This Is Not a Feminist Book," in Sheila Delany, *Writing Woman*. New York: Schocken, 1983, p.13.
2. Allen J. Frantzen, (ed.), *Speaking Two Languages: Traditional Disciplines and Contemporary Theory in Medieval Studies*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991. See also the very interesting review of this volume by David Matthews, "And All That: Memory, Loss and Medievalism," *Southern Review* (Australia) 26 (1993): 107-15.
3. Matthew's review gives a brief account of these historical formations.
4. See also Colette Murphy, "Lady Holy Church and Meed the Maid: Re-envisioning Female Personifications in *Piers Plowman*," in Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson (eds.), *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and Al Her Sect*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

Ruth Evans, University of Wales College of Cardiff

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