

BOOK REVIEWS



Burns, E. Jane. *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature*. Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.

In reading major works of twelfth- and thirteenth-century France, this study confronts us with talking penises, asses, cunts, hands, thighs. Celebrating bawdy talk in her book, E. Jane Burns urges us to listen unabashedly to the female body's indecorous utterances in courtly romance, paraliturgical drama, fabliaux, and farce. Rather than wincing at or dismissing these highly sexualized female bodies, her critical strategy subverts medieval literary misogyny by taking its sexy dames and maids seriously.

Burns' readings are oriented around current concerns with subjectivity, sexual difference, and the role of the body in the construction of each of the above. What sets her approach apart from other theoretically-minded scholars working on gender in Old French literature is her insistence on the role of the interpreter/reader's own experience of gender. While agreeing with other critics that gender is not a fixed category in Old French texts, she critiques the semiosis (read erasure) of woman and the "lived body/experience" of women typical of such critics as R. Howard Boch and Alexandre Leupin and Jean-Charles Huchet. She reclaims Old French texts for women and for feminists whose readings reflect their lived experience as women and of gendered embodiment. Her approach is a feminist variation on Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the polyphonic text, with the difference that the counter voices she posits are the product not of an inherent dialogism of specific genres, but of the encounter between a reader's (feminist) ideological disposition and the puzzling way in which literary texts can open up new spaces and then shut them down. Thus the basic heuristic move behind her conception of "bodytalk" is to recognize the reader's role in the production of textual meanings, a role which is political as well as semiotic: "bodytalk is something that we as feminist readers choose to hear" (p. 7). "Bodytalk" is a means of "saving the [medieval] text" by recognizing within it a complexity that creates a critique of the metaphysics of Western patriarchy.

While drawing upon the work of constructionist theorists such as Judith Butler, Diana Fuss, and Denise Riley, Burns' approach is most deeply influenced by Luce Irigaray's feminist analysis of the binarism of Western metaphysics. She convincingly applies Irigaray's argument that subjectivity is denied to women in the specular logic of Western philosophical thought which defines women as silent "other." Specifically, she analyzes the ways in which medieval literary conventions and narrative paradigms represent women as headless, mindless bodies. More important, she develops Irigaray's strategies of resistance, especially the latter's practice of mimicry whereby the repetition of a man's words or the framing of a male writer's text within a female writer's text changes the meaning of the male word/text when it passes through a female body or a feminist's text.

Bodytalk examines mostly narrative genres, "key moments in Old French literature where the words of fictive medieval 'women'," Burns writes, dissent from and significantly restructure conceptions of female sexuality, wifely obedience, courtly love, and adultery so often used to define and delimit femininity in the French Middle Ages. In

her introduction, "Listening to Bodies Talk," Burns identifies two paradigms whose specular logic constructs women principally as bodies. She organizes her study around these two paradigms: Part I, "Knowing Women," looks at the anti-feminist paradigm underlying the comic and moralizing tradition, while Part II, "Desiring Ladies," examines the Ovidian myth of Pygmalion that informs courtly romance.

Chapter One, "A Close Look at Female Orifices in Farce and Fabliau," offers a bold reinterpretation of the misogyny of the comic narratives of the thirteenth century. Burns focuses on the conflation of mouth and vagina in a group of representative fabliaux in which women appear figuratively as headless bodies. Burns sees the male characters' claim to know their wives' nature as symptomatic of patriarchy's inability to acknowledge female sexual difference. Their blindness to their wives' genital organ bespeaks a fear of losing their priority as subjects of knowledge and power. By contrast, the words of the female protagonists' bodies repeatedly question the logic which constructs women as mindless objects since the texts make them speak from a position of knowledge.

Chapter Two, "A Taste of Knowledge: Genesis and Generation in Old French *Jeu d'Adam*," analyzes Eve's speech in the Anglo-Norman *Le Jeu d'Adam* as a challenge to the Western philosophical split between pleasure and knowledge. Burns focuses on Eve's famous conflation of the terms "*saveur*" (taste) and "*savoir*" (knowledge) as another instance where the fictional woman's voice deconstructs the mind/body dichotomy inherited by the Middle Ages from classical and patristic traditions. She sets her reading of this twelfth-century adaptation of the Genesis story against accounts of reproduction in Plato's *Timaeus*, Aristotle's *De generatione animalium*, and Augustine's discussion of the Genesis story in *De Genesi ad litteram* and *The City of God*. Burns provides a masterly synthesis of feminist critiques of the philosophical and theological texts, and her main point about the displacement of woman's biological precedence behind narratives of transcendence, subordination and obedience, is convincing and brings the features of the *Jeu d'Adam* into new focus. In particular, the interpretation of Adam's lament over his unruly rib that gave birth to Eve as a displaced version of Augustine's lament over his unruly sexual member is a wonderful insight.

Chapter Three, "Philomena's Talking Hands," presents a brilliant reading of a neglected text. While the heroine of this Ovidian adaptation appears initially through the text's specular, fetishizing gaze as a beautiful, mute body, the tapestry and infanticide episodes, Burns contends, reveal a female bodytalk in which the primordial narratives of rape and marriage are retold in terms of gesture. Burns gives a fascinating discussion of the tapestry episode, noting that Philomena's tapestry inverts the male gaze of the first part of the story which objectified her into a set of body parts. She then argues that the tapestry, as a new form of speech embodied within an object, enables Philomena, the female body, to change from a voiceless object to a body which writes a new narrative—to another woman. Burns' reading of the revenge plot is even more bold and original, for she sees it as a parallel rewriting of Philomena's fate at the hands of Tereus. More striking still is the assessment of the killing of Itys as a rewriting of the myth of motherhood, in which the mother Progne implicitly rejects the idea that the mother has no self except for the maternal functions valued under patriarchy. Through its analysis of how the two women speak through gestures and deeds rather than words, this chapter

presents the book's most forceful demonstration of how female bodytalk undoes the binary logic that structures narratives of love and desire.

Chapter Four, "Rewriting Men's Stories: Enide's Disruptive Mouths," reads Chrétien de Troyes' *Erec et Enide* "against the grain," and argues that it contains a meta-narrative contest between male and female versions of the chivalric adventure story. Her main point that Enide's voice challenges the conventions and assumptions of the master narrative may not seem very new, but the link she establishes between the aesthetic principle of *bele conjointure*, the verb *conter* and the heroine's hidden *con* (cunt, i.e. sexuality) puts a new slant on the disruptive power of Enide's outbursts, and the energy with which the romance proceeds to contain that power.

Chapter Five, "Iseut's Enormous Thighs," focuses on Béroul's version of *Le Roman de Tristan* to show how medieval literature's most paradigmatic beauty, Iseut, redefines beauty with her laughing mouth and equivocal speech. In Burns' view, Iseut's public equivocations about her relations with Tristan and Mark, lover and husband, are a re-speaking of the sexual commodification of women's bodies, a form of mimicry in Irigaray's sense that resists the either/or logic of patriarchy. The discussion of Iseut's voice as able to "dress" and redress her lover Tristan is an especially fine example of the book's concern with the semiotic value of clothing.

There is much to praise in this innovative book. Burns' approach is that of a critic equally engaged in feminist theoretical interests and interpreting the specificities of medieval texts. There is no gap between these critical identities, and the book speaks to a broad audience of feminist critics, medievalists, and feminist medievalists. The exposition of her argument is well-handled: the major issues are clearly mapped out for the reader and the chapters are effectively organized around questions which drive her argument. Burns uses her theoretical framework to open up convincing new interpretive possibilities for these heroines and their various "bodily" modes of speaking. Her readings move us beyond the critical impasse posed by the pervasive misogynistic and homosocial character of medieval French literature. If Burns' ideological critique of binary oppositions tends to become redundant, her readings of individual texts show how varied are the manifestations of such critique.

Indeed, aside from its theoretical self-awareness, the joy of this book lies in its keen, playful, and wonderfully original readings of canonical Old French texts. Burns' literary sensibility and her ear for the verbal detail of the texts she examines, is everywhere apparent. Her readings are alert, for instance, to the acoustic play of Old French texts—she makes us hear the rhymes, so important to the establishment of meaning and thematic contrasts.

At the same time, the critical strategy of *Bodytalk* leaves us with several questions. First, Burns repeatedly focuses on the texts' *midsections*—the site where the bodytalk, the problematizing female double discourse, emerges. As she readily points out, in each of the texts she discusses (except the incomplete *Tristan*), the heroine's destabilizing bodytalk is eventually silenced or contained by the dominant narrative and its patriarchal ideology. One would like to have seen her develop more fully the implications of this fact. Second does Burns' approach to the problem of gender and subjectivity apply equally well to other narratives from the Old French canon? I am thinking specifically of the so-called "wish-fulfillment romances" such as those discussed by Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner in her recent book *Shaping Romance*. With their fairy mistresses, gender

reversals and emphasis on female *engin*, romances such as *Partonopeu de Blois* seem freer of the “monolithic phallogocentrism” that Burns attributes to Old French literature in general. At the very best, they may suggest that romance is not necessarily such a closed form when it comes to the question of women and power. Third, Burns’ concern with voice leads her to touch on the question of performance and what I would call female vocality. If we were to imagine the texts more fully as performance pieces, how could her readings be extended?

Given its polemical thrust and the brilliant interpretations it offers of major texts and genres, this book will have a powerful impact on medieval French studies. Anyone writing on Eve, Enide, Iseut, or for that matter, on gender and subjectivity in Old French literature and the female literary voice in general will have to come to terms with *Bodytalk*. Feminists working in other literatures and periods can profitably apply her approach to female subjectivity to other literary canons, and “bodytalk” will no doubt enter the critical idiom alongside “homosexual desire” and “gender trouble.” Not bad for a medievalist.

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Elliott, Dyan. *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock*. Princeton: University Press, 1993. Pp. xv + 375.

In *Spiritual Marriage*, Dyan Elliott traces the uneven but highly significant development of the practice of intramarital chastity from the early Christian era to the sixteenth century. From her evidence of more than eighty cases of “chaste marriage” drawn from chronicles and hagiographical sources, Elliott distinguishes two models—spouses who did not consummate their marriages and subsequently vowed to preserve their virginity, and couples who vowed to live chastely after a period of normal conjugal relations (the transitional model). As Elliott demonstrates, women were usually the instigators of both arrangements and the differing fates of these two models reveal highly significant changes in women’s roles in the later Middle Ages.

Elliott begins her study by considering the earliest instances of chaste marriage in Gnostic, Encratite, and orthodox ascetic texts. She argues, quite convincingly, that the practice of spiritual marriage provoked the Church Fathers to reconsider the basis of Christian matrimony. Augustine’s reconsideration, as on so many issues, profoundly altered the Christian tradition in the West: by developing a theory of marriage not defined by sexual relations, he originated the emphasis on consent as the basis for a valid marriage and created an accommodation for spiritual marriage, “a protected, but uncomfortable, middle ground between celibacy and marriage in Christian practice” (50).

The author goes on to demonstrate how this middle ground could be used in very different ways. On the one hand, it allowed some women to seek greater autonomy and it yielded some of the most positive portrayals of marital concord produced in the Middle Ages. On the other, however, it was used to make women expendable by monarchs trying to repudiate wives and by clerics attempting to control charismatic chastity. The latter movement in the tenth and eleventh centuries both interrupted and dramatically changed the development of spiritual marriage. As the reformers during the Gregorian era defined celibacy as the quality that distinguished the clergy from the laity, new boundaries were