

literary and folk treatment of widows (focusing on the *Libro de Buen Amor*) which concludes that “as surely as doctors always kill, and millers always rob ... so widows are both faithless and [oversexed].” Philip Gericke’s treatment of the medieval Spanish ballad “Fonte Frida” presents the opposite convention, the sorrowing widows as faithful turtledoves. Liliane Dulac’s comparison of advice to widows by Francesco da Barberino and Christine de Pizan, reprinted from a 1980 *festshrift* and gracefully translated by Thelma Fenster, allows us to see the practical, historically-located, secular nature of Christine’s work. Dulac’s comparison of the verbs each author employs is especially ingenious, Christine’s *come, visit, receive* contrasted with Barberino’s less active *choose, place, create, find*. (Since the essay’s first sentence indicates that these two works were written a century apart and resemble each other, dates might well have been provided here, rather than sending the reader to notes to discover when they were composed and which was first.)

The volume concludes with Montserrat Piera and Donna Rogers’ stimulating presentation of the widow as heroine. They argue that in the Catalan novel *Curial e Güelfa*, the widow Güelfa’s identification with the powerful goddess Fortuna reveals the extensive dispositive authority afforded late medieval widows. Perhaps the most suggestive essay in this section, however, is Heather Arden’s exploration of five French widow tales, all of which see female sexuality, rather than female variability, as the cause of female vice. These amusements thus take on a fearsome aspect when, as Arden says, we move from a denial of a stable female identity (fickleness) to an identification of women with positive evil — since it is female sexuality which powerfully resists and threatens male control.

The volume has not been particularly well-served by its copyeditor: *punicitia* for *puccitia*, p. 2; *principle* of the loan, p. 121; *somewhat unique*, p.161; *discreet* areas, p. 163; the *principle* opposing parties, p. 211; *bawdy* for *bawdry*, p. 283; and *dowry* is spelled *dowery* throughout Miskimin’s essay. Its many fresh and thoughtful contributions, however, which testify to editor Louise Mirrer’s acute judgment, make it an invaluable resource for the study of medieval women.

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Karen Swenson, *Performing Definitions: Two Genres of Insult in Old Norse Literature*. Studies in Scandinavian Literature and Culture, 3. Columbia, SC: Cadmen House, 1991. Pp xiii + 149.

*Performing Definitions* is a welcome and thought-provoking analysis of two Old Norse genres of verbal contest and the ways in which scholars have tended to re-enact those contests in the course of writing about them. Swenson’s structuralist examination of the *senna*, the *mannjafnaðr*, and their location within a “grammar” of genres displays a post-modern self-consciousness that is all the more refreshing for its rarity in studies of Old Norse. Unfortunately, for all the non-Scandinavianists who would certainly find *Performing Definitions* relevant to their own work in anthropology, comparative

literature, medieval literature, mythology, philology, sociology, and women's studies, Swenson assumes a thorough familiarity with Old Norse on the part of her audience. The *Forschungsberichte* comes before any exposition of her thesis or summary of her texts, and abbreviated titles of lost Old Norse poems occur without any explanation at all. Granted that the supplementary information required would fill a whole chapter, a few footnotes listing translations and surveys of Old Norse literature would have been helpful.

Nonetheless, those who can follow Swenson's arguments will find them rewarding. First, she argues convincingly in favor of labelling these genres with their ethnic designations, rather than lumping them together as a kind of "flying." She defines the *senna* as a "formalized verbal duel representing [the] construction and assertion of the heroic self within the context of being and death, the construction of the ideal self of the community within the 'sacré'" (58) — in other words, as an exchange between a man constructing himself as a hero and a representation of the Other against which he defines himself, such as a giantess or sibyl. The *mannjafnaðr* (ON "man comparison") is defined as a "verbal contest in which the participants offer interpretations of behavior in order to define someone's manliness in relation to a postulated standard of manliness" (53).

Swenson then goes on to interpret the two genres in terms of the "syntax" of the Old Norse generic grammar, suggesting that the *senna* constitutes the enabling fiction of society and non-society within which the *mannjafnaðr* can take place. Using an evocative linguistic metaphor, Swenson shows how the *senna* constructs the hero as the subject, or cultural "I," and the monster as the object. The *mannjafnaðr*, unlike the *senna*'s transitive "I define you as It," is an intransitive comparison between two subjects: "I am more heroic than you are" (37).

Swenson's frequent elision of the hero-subject of the *senna* with the man-subject of the *mannjafnaðr* is the greatest weakness in her argument. In focussing on the difference between the functions of the two genres, she overlooks the many other differences between them: the *senna* is a poetic form, set in a mythical time and place, dealing with heroes and monsters, while the *mannjafnaðr* is a prose form, set in historical time and real places, dealing with historical kings and men. Most importantly, the two genres flourished at different times: the *senna* is found in poems from the tenth to the thirteenth century, and the *mannjafnaðr* is found in sagas from the thirteenth century on. Conceivably, we are seeing the evolution of a single genre in which the "heroic man" has been replaced by abstract "manliness" and the defining monstrous female Other by "effeminacy."

Swenson concludes by examining her own enabling assumptions and their implications. After providing a persuasive reading of the mytho-heroic *Órvar-Odds saga* as an extended *senna* that explores the "problems inherent in self-definition" (88), she reads her own work as a *mannjafnaðr* with Andreas Heusler, the early-twentieth-century scholar whose taxonomy she disputes, and criticism as a *senna*, "asserting the possibility of knowledge, coherence, meaning, control" (112). Her final reading of herself as a "resisting reader," required to identify with the hero and against the excluded giantess, is one with which we can all identify, Scandinavianist and non-Scandinavianist alike.

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