

Nonetheless, Lawrence's biography belongs here because it is one of the oldest in Anglo-Norman (1140–70) and the oldest in French, as well as a fine example of a martyr's tale. It was in fact commissioned by a woman and thus shows that like Catherine, Lawrence could serve as a model to women of brave composure in the face of persecution.

The volume includes a valuable introduction that identifies clearly all the principals, discusses sources and matters of style, and offers suggestions for further reading. (To the list of readings I would add William Calin's observations on the lives of Catherine and Lawrence, in *The French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994], pp. 89–95, 101–06.) The introduction rightly strives to draw parallels between these lives and other literature written in Anglo-Norman, so to enhance the integrity and importance of Anglo-Norman literature as a body. Implicitly, however, and no doubt inadvertently, that emphasis evokes a kind of insularity for Anglo-Norman literature that threatens to sever its connections with other literature written in medieval French (e.g., it is true that the octosyllabic line was standard in Anglo-Norman narrative poetry, but it was also standard in other narrative poetry written in French).

Fortunately, readers will certainly see parallels well beyond the linguistic, geographic, or chronological frame of these two *Lives*, while at the same time appreciating the case that Professors Wogan-Browne and Burgess make for the importance of Anglo-Norman literature, and particularly for what it offered to women and to the history of literature by and about women.

*Thelma S. Fenster*  
*Fordham University*



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Kathleen Biddick. *The Shock of Medievalism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998. Pp. x + 315. \$49.95 (cloth), \$17.95 (paper).

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*The Shock of Medievalism* is deeply disconcerting to a medieval historian whom feminism has taught to question all her assumptions but who nevertheless believes that by applying traditional historical methodologies in an enlightened way she can come to know something about the past as well as about what that past means to us today. Biddick means it to be disconcerting. She argues that practitioners of the medieval disciplines, no matter how they may disavow the ideologically driven work of their early predecessors, are caught up in the assumptions of those predecessors. Feminist scholars certainly recognize that all

scholarship has an agenda; in this collection of essays, Biddick locates multiple hidden agendas in even the best of contemporary scholarship.

Unfortunately, those most in need of being disconcerted by this book will probably not read it. Biddick's use of the specialized language of cultural theory means that the book cannot serve as a point of entry into cultural studies for medievalists. For those who already have an interest in the interplay of these two disciplines—who welcome the jolt that the juxtaposition of the medieval and the postmodern brings—this book opens up new directions. The message can seem negative and depressing—everything we have been trained to do is politically suspect, we are inextricably enmeshed in the colonial project. On the other hand, Biddick's vignette of the Venerable Bede's fruitful discussion of language and power with a Chicana feminist theorist (96–100) reminds us that medievalists who are willing to understand their own work in new ways can find a world of possibilities outside medieval studies itself.

While Biddick points to some of these possibilities, it is not the work of this book to pursue them. This work is not historical but metahistorical, more concerned with how we talk about the past than with how medieval people experienced it. Indeed, Biddick would argue that our current positions are so thoroughly implicated in our work that it is not possible simply to uncover a “real” medieval experience. She analyzes the work of contemporary scholars and points out how “medievalism (old and new) intimately inhabits medieval studies” (2). “Genders, Bodies, Borders: Technologies of the Visible,” for example, is fundamentally a critique of Caroline Bynum's *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*.<sup>1</sup> Biddick demonstrates that had Bynum chosen to do so she could have written a very different book. One longs for further work by Biddick in which she takes up some of the challenges she sets for other scholars.

Nineteenth-century editors, Biddick points out, “fabricat[ed] objects for their own nationalist and imperialist ends” (2)—the Early English Text Society, for example, had a mission to trace the history of “the language that shall one day be the ruling tongue of the world” (93) and was closely connected to the Orientalist work of the Asiatic Society, while the academic and popular study of Gothic architecture and ornament led to the proliferation of the style through the empire. Modern scholars may deplore these purposes, but they still replicate the process of exclusion of some objects of study, and draw strict lines between what is interior and what is exterior to medieval studies. Biddick suggests that to insist on the radical alterity of the Middle Ages—to take the proper aim of historical study as reading medieval texts entirely on their own terms—is to dehistoricize the field of medieval studies itself, to fail to recognize how our Middle Ages is shaped by our theoretical stances (acknowledged or not).

In *The Shock of Medievalism* Biddick questions not only other historians' epistemological categories, but also her own, like her discussion of English peasants and their economic history in her dissertation and first book. The concept of the peasant can be historicized; in "Gothic Ornament and Sartorial Peasants" she looks at William Morris's construction of the "Gothic peasant" to argue that the peasant was produced out of "melancholy for work" (43). In other articles, Biddick examines the political implications of the historical study of Robin Hood, up to and including *Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves*; the anti-immigrant implications of the British turn toward family history; and, in two concluding non-medieval chapters, cyberspace, cyborgs, and science fiction. Her chapter on the *Malleus Maleficarum*, "The Devil's Anal Eye: Inquisitorial Optics and Ethnographic Authority," devotes more attention than do the other sections to Biddick's original reading of medieval sources. Here her attempt is to understand medieval inquisitors, not only the historians who have written about them (although she does take on Carlo Ginzburg and Georges Duby for their conceptual separation of women and Jews, 127–34).

The book as a whole, although not an easy read, is a strong encouragement to reflection about one's own scholarly practices. Her criticism of pathbreaking contemporary scholars like Bynum or Steven Justice, while it may not do justice to the significant contributions of their work, raises important questions which can be fruitfully discussed in the classroom or among scholars. I am not as ready as Biddick to dismiss the work of nineteenth-century editors and other scholars whose motives may be ideologically distasteful. Historicizing their work, and our own, is necessary, but does not deprive that work of all value.

For many medieval historians of traditional stripe, Biddick's work may be anathema simply because of the vocabulary she uses, let alone her ideas. They may dismiss her work as she does theirs. This is unfortunate, because both have value. If traditional, positivist history is the thesis, and Biddick's critique the antithesis, perhaps medieval scholarship will be able to locate itself in a new and productive synthesis.

Ruth Mazo Karras  
Temple University

<sup>1</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).