

## BOOK REVIEWS



**Heidi Breuer.** *Crafting the Witch: Gendering Magic in Medieval and Early Modern England.* New York: Taylor & Francis, 2009. Pp. 190. ISBN: 9780415977616.

THE TITLE of Heidi Breuer's book cleverly establishes the scope of her book, for she examines the witch both as subject and object. In *Crafting the Witch: Gendering Magic in Medieval and Early Modern England*, Breuer explores the nature of the witch, the types of magic, and, most importantly, how external forces shape the witch. Breuer focuses primarily on the female witch, bringing in the male magician as a foil. Over the course of five chapters, three of which are devoted to medieval literature, Breuer sets out to "[reveal] the operation of patriarchy in presentation and culture" (ix) using a balanced mixture of formalist and historicist methods.

Breuer directs her book to specialists and non-specialists alike, presenting a careful blend of economics, history, religion, and film studies to elucidate her readings of the witch in medieval and Renaissance literature. In addition, she offers a wide array of critical apparatus without resorting to obscure theoretical jargon. Her straightforward presentation of these theories is one of the book's strengths: the approaches include Judith Butler's performative gender, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's monstrous masculinity, Julia Kristeva's abject body, just to name a few, and all are presented in such a way that students will come away with a basic understanding of the various approaches whereas those more versed in theory will undoubtedly gain new theoretical applications, particularly in regards to gender.

In her first chapter, "Are You a Good Witch or a Bad Witch?," Breuer connects gender and magic via personal anecdotes about her childhood interest in witches, specifically Morgan le Fay; while she recognized the Morgan of Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Mists of Avalon* in the healers of Chrétien and Lazamon, she was surprised by Malory's sorceress—from where did this Morgan come?

This question is at the heart of the book, and it is in her second chapter, “Gender-Blending: Transformative Power in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Arthurian Literature,” that she begins sketching out the major characteristics of magic users in works by Chrétien, Marie de France, Geoffrey of Monmouth, and Lazamon. What she discovers are three gendered groups: the beneficial female healer, the malicious male giant, and the androgyne prophet. After a brief overview of scholarship on the romance genre’s exploration of gender relationships, including its frequent subversion of gender boundaries, Breuer argues that these figures reflect normative gendered behaviors of the time, pulling in historical evidence regarding domestic medicine and legal rights for women. The combination of close reading and secondary evidence presents a solid case for her claim that as these female witches posed no threat to the masculine feudal order, female healing was viewed as normative, acceptable behavior, both in the literature and in the historical reality.

The third chapter, playfully titled “From Rags to Riches, Or the Step-Mother’s Revenge,” focuses on the shift away from the beneficial witch of the previous centuries to the prototype of the wicked witch (or stepmother) in late medieval Arthurian romances. Breuer argues that the giant of the previous centuries is replaced by the witch because the latter poses a greater threat to patriarchy. As in other chapters, Breuer begins with modern examples—in this case, the popularity of the “make-over” television reality show—and moves into a close reading of the texts. Once the patterns of gender are established, Breuer then turns to historical evidence (in this case, discussions of social class and women’s burgeoning financial power) to bolster her conclusions. Ironically, it is in this chapter on the grotesque, manifested as the loathly lady and the churlish knight, both figures of excess, that Breuer has the least control over her subject. Whereas the surrounding chapters narrow their focus to no more than four authors, Breuer expands her range to address all nine of the churlish knight and loathly lady analogues. Due to the greater breadth of material, she is unable to address each tale with the depth of analysis found in the surrounding chapters. Nonetheless, the gendered pattern of movement from carnivalesque figures into idealized representatives of femininity and masculinity that she describes is persuasive.

Another weakness of this chapter is its tangential feel at times. Although bookended by the image of the wicked witch and her role in maliciously transforming others, Breuer occasionally seems to lose sight of her larger topic of female witches. For example, her discussions of Gawain’s feminine inversion, leading to his “castration” in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as well as his

various encounters on the tournament and battlefields, are enlightening in terms of medieval masculinity, but the connection back to the feminine witch as author of these gender-bending encounters is not always clearly delineated. In the long run, though, while her transitions back to the main theme in these instances are jarring, they are ultimately effective.

The final two chapters move out of the medieval period, using Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* to argue that Morgan le Fay's pejorative characterization results from a backlash against women's independence spanning the end of the medieval period and the early modern period. Breuer also brings in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, as well as William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest*, to show how magic is aligned with demonic forces through the Church's association of magic with heresy. As a result, witches become figures of monstrous appetites and reversed maternity. Even as belief in witchcraft waned, however, the figure of the witch persists even today, and so Breuer moves into her final chapter to explain why. After a section discussing the use of legal and literary evidence to reconstruct attitudes of the past, Breuer turns to film and television—specifically *The Wizard of Oz*, *Snow White*, *Charmed*, *Bewitched*, *Witches of Eastwick*, and *Practical Magic*—to reveal subversive attempts to return females to domestic, maternal roles; that is, to recast women as benevolent healers, such as those found in early Arthurian literature, while presenting alternatives—nondomestic and barren females—as undesirable.

Overall, Breuer's book is well thought out and informative. The tone of her writing is casual, yet engaging, and the personal anecdotes scattered throughout the book make it enjoyable yet intellectually stimulating. A particular strength is Breuer's ability to highlight how themes originating in the Middle Ages still persist today, most often in children's literature and film. Connections such as these would surely assist any teacher of medieval literature in guiding students into course material that is often viewed as beyond the horizon of students' experience.

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