

Leeds Studies in English

New Series XLII

2011

Edited by

Alaric Hall



Editorial assistants
Helen Price and Victoria Cooper

Leeds Studies in English

<www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>

School of English
University of Leeds

2011

century English writing) in Nick Havely's *Dante and the Franciscans: Poverty and the Papacy in the 'Commedia'* (2004).

Moreover, while the extensive selection of texts is a good thing, the selection of the overarching, organizational categories seems rather misjudged. The entire first chapter on Aristocratic poverty is strikingly out of place. As Hazell herself writes, poverty frequently appears in these texts as 'transitory and transitional and serves as a basis for the examination of moral and social concerns' (p. 16). Poverty here is a kind of narrative topos, a way of plunging the protagonist into a situation of trial. That such representations of poverty might be interesting in themselves is fair — one might think of the suggestions of penitential activity in, for example, Malory's *Morte Darthur* — but to place them in such a formative position in a survey (and thereby suggest that they are central to the subject as a whole) seems ill-conceived.

The discussion of poverty in the texts also sometimes seems to lose focus. Phenomena such as particular literary themes or historical contexts appear for a paragraph and then disappear again, leaving the reader with an odd sense of having read a sequence of hazily-related abstracts rather than a sustained argument or exploration of a topic. For example, in the first chapter, we move from land economy to definitions of romance as a genre, to a survey of arguments about audience, within six pages, without any sense of how these different things are relevant to a wider intellectual argument about the material. Similarly, the textual discussions themselves sometimes seem to disintegrate into shorter discussions of distinct things. It is not clearly articulated, for example, how the issue of poverty in *Ywain and Gawain* relates to the discussion of 'trouthe' in Arthurian romance (pp. 26–30).

One also wonders if the book is meant to be read in tandem with Anne M. Scott's *Piers Plowman and the Poor* (2004, also from Four Courts Press), as the appearances made by Langland's poem here are rather brief and sporadic. While Hazell does suggest in the introduction (p. 11) that *Piers Plowman* has often been the focus of work on representations of poverty in medieval literature, its absence from sustained discussion in the book is something of a drawback. Few other texts in this period — perhaps none — are so deeply concerned with the issue of poverty, in terms which are at once both economic and spiritual. It might be that Langland's explorations of poverty do not really fit into the rather static categories that Hazell imposes on the material here. Langland is deeply interested in the idealization of poverty, for example in the shape of Christ who, Langland writes, in 'pouere mannes apparaille pursueþ vs eure' (B 11.185). As some scholars — Lawrence M. Clopper particularly — have argued, it may be that Langland has a particular interest in the charismatic form of voluntary poverty offered by Franciscanism. At the same time, Langland shows a detailed and sharply contemporary concern for the failings of clerical poverty, and in the problems of social categorization and spiritual worth that accompany such figures as 'able-bodied' beggars and itinerant ecclesiastics. These multifarious intersections between Langland and Hazell's subject should have made *Piers Plowman* central, rather than peripheral, to the book.

MIKE RODMAN JONES

UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM

Dana M. Oswald, *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality*. Gender in the Middle Ages, 5. Cambridge: Brewer, 2010. viii + 227 pp. ISBN 978-1-8438-4232-3. £50.00.

This book represents an ambitious project: to interrogate medieval notions of the body and the boundaries of identity as they played out within a range of medieval literary contexts and

two discrete periods, that is to say Anglo-Saxon times and the later Middle Ages. Building on other recent treatments of sexed and gendered identity formation (such as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *Of Giants* and Caroline Walker Bynum's *Metamorphosis and Identity*), Oswald argues for a radical shift in attitudes towards the body as a stable entity between the early and later periods, tracing that shift via close attention to the bodies of the monstrous 'other' as revealed in a range of texts from both periods. Defining that 'other' in her introduction, Oswald argues for the monster within medieval texts as falling into one of three categories: the more than human; the less than human; and the hybrid human. In turn, these monstrous categories each serve to 'present a different type of commentary' on the human body (p. 6), and all tend to be culturally specific and therefore contextually contingent. For Oswald, such definitions of monstrosity also rely heavily on culturally specific notions of a human 'essence' which has its visible boundaries constantly challenged by the incursion, or threatened incursion, of the monstrous. For Oswald, too, it is clear from the interplay between the human and the monstrous in the texts under scrutiny that the monstrous also serves as a means of (re)writing cultural beliefs. This is the case not only in an historiographical writing context but also in the context of narratives of sex, gender and sexual identity.

Oswald concentrates on a number of texts whose monsters have already been subject to some considerable scrutiny in recent years, as well as to gender analysis, offering readings of varying closeness in each case. Chapter One, for example, focuses primarily on the extraordinary illustrations of those monstrous and 'indecent bodies' which populate three manuscript copies of the Anglo-Saxon *Wonders of the East*. Here Oswald argues for the primacy of this text, and its dialogic interaction between word and image, as a means of determining the often troubled relationship between sexuality and identity, building considerably on Cohen's earlier treatment of the monsters in this text. Chapter Two, meanwhile, focuses closely on *Beowulf*, offering an intense reading of the failed heroic masculinity of its eponymous protagonist as exposed by the fearsome Grendel and his monstrous mother. Here, Oswald's attention to linguistic, imagistic and contextual detail again allows her both to illuminate and extend some of the work already undertaken in this vein and is probably the most successful of the four chapters making up this book. Chapter Three fast-forwards to the fourteenth century and the Middle English *Mandeville's Travels*, in which a range of female monsters enter the spotlight. To my mind this chapter is a little less convincing than the others, avoiding the kinds of close readings and intensive analyses so prevalent in the previous chapter, for example. Another small point is that its treatment of the hybrid 'dragon woman' (pp. 131–38), enchanted daughter of Hippocrates, who can only be redeemed by the kiss of a man, inadvertently opens up the surprising omission of any discussion of the dragon-monster of *Beowulf* in the previous chapter (an oversight which ends up haunting this book by its absence, perhaps). The final chapter, which usefully combines the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and the strangely troubling romance *Sir Gowther*. Here Oswald argues concertedly for the prevalence during the later period of what she terms the 'transformative monster', who is seemingly capable of becoming (re)assimilated into society, and therefore of being 'redeemed' in a way that Anglo-Saxon monsters were not. Oswald's selections and readings in this book are generally both interesting and engaging and offer important and sometimes intricate insights into the role played by the monstrous within the confusing matrix of sex, gender and identity in the Middle Ages. Moreover, Oswald extends the scope of the earlier treatments on which she builds by drawing on an eclectic range of poststructural theories of sex, gender and identity as propounded by, for example, Julia Kristeva, Eve Kosowski

Sedgwick, Judith Halberstam, Judith Butler, and Gayle Rubin, to name but a few. Whilst at times this range threatens to manipulate some readings and disrupt overall cohesion, it is never intrusive or gratuitous. Indeed, Oswald's use of this methodological tool succeeds in uncovering the excessive multivalence of the monster and its ability to mean different things in different contexts and to threaten different types of boundaries within changed epistemologies. Here, therefore, lies the most significant contribution of this book to our understanding of how the monstrous comprises an ever-present 'identity machine' within medieval texts: Oswald seizes the Derridean notion of 'the trace' as her central tool for unpicking the problems inherent to any form of representation, writing or otherwise. If for Derrida absence and presence are always in play within language, then as Oswald demonstrates in this book, 'the trace of the monster in the text declares its presence through its absence' (14).

Monsters, Gender and Sexuality offers a strong and convincing case for the spectral presence — or trace — of the monster as always already haunting a sexed and gendered human imaginary and its texts. As such, it proves itself a valuable addition to our understanding of how, in its infinite manifestations, the monstrous operates as a 'machine' for both the construction and the policing of human identities.

LIZ HERBERT McAVOY

SWANSEA UNIVERSITY

Kiriko Sato, *The Development from Case-Forms to Prepositional Constructions in Old English Prose*. Studies in Language and Communication, 88. Bern: Lang, 2009. 231 pp. ISBN 978-3-03911-763-5. £45.00.

Kiriko Sato's 2009 book is based on her Ph.D. dissertation, defended at the University of Tokyo in 2006. Focusing on Old English syntax, it has the ambitious aim of showing why, when and how variation between old case-forms and new prepositional constructions arose, leading to the eventual prevalence of the prepositional constructions. It examines six semantic relations that can be expressed by both case-forms and prepositional constructions: 1) *instrumentality/manner*, 2) a closely related *accompaniment*, 3) *point in time*, 4) *duration of time*, 5) *national origin*, and 6) *place specification* (with parts of the body). In addition, Sato looks at one syntactic construction — augmented vs. non-augmented *dative absolute*. The investigation is divided into seven chapters, six of them being case studies of six respective texts or sets of texts: the *Parker Chronicle*, Old English *Boethius*, Old English *Bede*, Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies* and *Lives of Saints*, and Wulfstan's *Homilies*, with chapter 7 providing a summary and conclusions. Six appendices list full inventories (a total of 1,937 examples) of Sato's chosen constructions in the selected research corpus.

Each case study begins with a survey of previous research on the text concerned, goes on to an overview of absolute and relative numbers of case-forms vs. prepositional constructions, and then discusses the six semantic relations and the dative absolute in more detail. The not unexpected conclusion of chapter 7 is that prepositional constructions increase towards the late Old English period with considerable variation remaining still among the selected functions and texts (e.g., Wulfstan is about as conservative as the Old English *Boethius* in his use of instrumental case forms).

The way Sato analyses her data gives the impression of a solid dissertation. She has good points to make about the stylistic side of the two constructions; for example, she observes that