

Leeds Studies in English

New Series XLVI

2015

Edited by

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Leeds Studies in English

<www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>

School of English
University of Leeds

2015

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Reviews

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Reconsidering Gender, Time and Memory in Medieval Culture, ed. by Elizabeth Cox, Liz Herbert McAvoy and Roberta Magnani. Gender in the Middle Ages 10. Cambridge: Brewer, 2015. xii + 203 pp. ISBN 978-1-843-84403-7.

The book under review is a collection of ten essays (plus an introduction) that sets out explicitly to reconsider what might be identified as three of the most popular (and perhaps also most controversial) subjects in contemporary Medieval Studies. In her introduction (pp. 1–12), ‘*In principio*: The Queer Matrix of Gender, Time and Memory in the Middle Ages’, Liz Herbert McAvoy offers a brief methodological reassessment of the relationship(s) between gender, time and memory — the book’s three designated focal areas — that invokes, and in some regards revisits, prominent cornerstones of established scholarship. With regard to gender and time (as well as space), Herbert McAvoy centres her discussion around the works of Carolyn Dinshaw, Judith Halberstam and Luce Irigaray, as well as canonical texts such as Michel Foucault’s ‘Des Espaces Autres’. Turning to memory, she provides a (re-)reading of Augustine’s famous passage on the ‘past-ness’ of memory (*Confessions* IX.14) that draws upon the seminal work of Mary Carruthers in order to ‘challenge the absolute homogeneity of identities as generated alchemically through the interplay of gender, time and memory’ (p. 7). This questioning of traditional notions of homogeneity also sets the stage (and tone) for the book’s subsequent chapters, which are deliberately organised, not chronologically, but in terms of the human (female) life-cycle.

Amongst the book’s ten chapters, particularly outstanding are those by Patricia Skinner and Anne E. Bailey. The fact that I concentrate on these two here should, however, by no means be taken as an indication of negativity towards the other contributions, since it is only due to lack of space that I do not consider them all in turn. Skinner (Chapter 1, pp. 13–28) opens ‘The Pitfalls of Linear Time: Using the Medieval Female Life-Cycle as an Organizing Strategy’ by presenting compelling evidence to support her key argument that linearity is an idealised illusion with regard to how medieval people experienced their own lifetime. Rather, she contends, we should perceive of medieval lives (and women’s lives in particular) as cyclical experiences, which, in turn, generated cyclical memory media. Whilst this suggestion is not unprecedented, Skinner’s contribution offers new and important evidence. Her nuanced reflection on a wide range of relevant sources, ranging from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries, lends additional credibility and substance to the argument, whilst also advocating terminological flexibility and interdisciplinary negotiation. Bailey’s ‘Gendered Discourses of Time and Memory in the Cult and Hagiography of William of Norwich’ (Chapter 7, pp. 111–26) offers a case study on the cult and hagiography of William of Norwich, which claims additional significance by adding examples of Latin hagiography (and arguably history) to a volume of essays that concerns itself, first and foremost, with works of vernacular literature. Through an analysis of these Latin texts (namely *The Life and Miracles of St William of Norwich* by Thomas of Monmouth) in the light of concepts and terminologies such as those developed by Sherry Ortner, Caroline Walker Bynum and Claude Lévi-Strauss, Bailey demonstrates that medieval memories of the dead were constructed and consumed differently by men and women, thus pointing to distinct and gender-specific narrative strategies.

Overall, this is an accomplished book that engages with a wide range of perspectives and sources, literary texts in particular, including works written in Old and Middle English, Old French and to some extent Latin. In putting together the list of chapters and contributors,

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the editors deserve additional credit for achieving a healthy balance between established academics and early-career researchers, thereby providing the volume with originality and momentum. There can be no doubt that the book was inspired by interdisciplinarity and dialogue between different academic fields. Yet one might wish for a somewhat more consistent effort to combine literary and historical studies (the latter being represented mainly by Bailey, Skinner, and Fiona Harris-Stoertz's contribution 'Remembering Birth in Thirteenth- and Fourteenth-Century England'). All in all, however, this is a fine volume that delivers on its promise by encouraging the reader to reconsider his/her conceptions of gender, time and memory in the Middle Ages.

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