

**Denise K. Filios. *Performing Women in the Middle Ages: Sex, Gender, and the Iberian Lyric.* (The New Middle Ages.) Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Pp. vii + 261.**

**T**his detailed examination of gender and performance in medieval Iberian secular lyric between 1250 and 1550 is the first extensive monographic study on the topic. Its title is deliberately ambiguous, indicating that its scope includes both women who performed and men and women who staged women's voices. *Performing Women* is infused with the awareness that this poetry was not composed for private reading, but for performance spaces and occasions, largely unrecorded, involving public display of bodies, erotic gestures, taboo language, and representations of the voices of women. While her discussion is steeped in the necessary references to analyses of this poetic tradition by generations of medievalists, there is no mistaking the impact of Filios' research. She challenges the concept of a single masculine perspective and simple misogyny in medieval lyric. Although she reminds her readers that the decoding of some texts is still ongoing and that there are numerous unanswerable questions, a rich diversity of sexualities

and identities, including class hierarchies and ethnicities, is revealed when the place of women is the focus of analysis.

The idea of the written texts of lyric poetry as a partial record of a lively scene that might include music and dance is not new among approaches to other European literatures, but the process of inferring the circumstances of performance from the written evidence is still controversial among medievalists in Iberian studies. Filios' approach is new enough to warrant acknowledgement of contested interpretations. She offers a balanced argument that the gaps in the written record can be filled in by other means: manuscript illustrations; laws regarding performers and performances; and references within the poetic texts. This volume's contribution to the ongoing discussion is its gendered approach, structured by Judith Butler's theorizing of gender as performance. While *Queer Iberia* (1999) was a pathbreaking collection of studies on sexuality and gender,<sup>1</sup> most of them focused on masculinities. In the process of integrating Butler's theory into the specific circumstances of medieval Iberia, Filios' study builds upon Louise O. Vásvari's research on misogyny, ethnicity, sexual aggression, and double-

entendres in medieval Iberian texts. Filios explains her use of the concept of “double-voiced” performance: “when an individual *soldadeira* uttered the words put into her mouth by a *trovador*” and ironically impersonated herself (3). She also introduces a term from the study of Mexican-American performance artists, “parodic mimicry,” to “underline the exaggerated, partial imitation of one’s offstage identity in an onstage performance” (3).

After an introductory chapter outlining her theoretical approach, Filios addresses three types of poetry and the female figures associated with them. Chapter 2 focuses on *soldadeiras*, female dancers or singers who performed at court and were commonly depicted as prostitutes. Filios examines thirteenth-century Galician-Portuguese *cantigas d’escarnho e de mal dizer* (satiric-obscene songs) in which *soldadeiras* are central figures. Although in court settings these poems are most likely to have been recited by a male *trovador*, the presence of *soldadeiras* in the audience or onstage complicated the ventriloquism of the male performer.

While the *soldadeiras* earned money by displaying their bodies, another source of income was

available to the *panaderas*, female bakers or bread-sellers. Filios discusses the association of these highly visible figures in the urban marketplace with excessive sexual desire and prostitution in the popular imagination in Chapter 3. Here Filios takes on the *Libro de buen amor*, long-established as canonical and notoriously resistant to interpretation. Among the *Libro*’s moral fables, narratives of a priest’s illicit love intrigues and problems with go-betweens, praise of the Virgin Mary, and Goliardic satires, the *panadera* episode has been the object of intense scholarly scrutiny. Filios productively reads the *panadera*’s challenge to male power and authority in the *Libro* together with other, less thoroughly examined poems: Antón de Montoro’s “Señor, non pecho ni medro” (“Sir, I neither pay tribute nor prosper”), in which the speaker is attacked by *panaderas* demanding to be paid; Sebastián de Horozco’s “Dama de gentil aseó” (“Lady of noble condition”), in which the *panadera* is a wily negotiator; and the *Coplas de la panadera* (Couplets of the bread-baker), which voices popular unrest through the *panadera*’s grotesquely satirical depiction of the Battle of Olmedo (1445).

Literary *serranas*, the topic of Chapter 4, are aggressive women

of mythic sexual appetite who prey (comically) upon urban males traveling in the harsh environment of the mountainous regions of Spain. While these women, like the *panaderas*, appear in comic-erotic narratives in the *Libro de buen amor*, victory over them in the Marqués de Santillana's *serranillas* construes sex as conquest. Filios addresses the role of women at court, in towns, and in (or personifying) the wilderness, as they appear in distinct types of poetry. In all three types of lyric, female sexuality, whether insatiable or rejecting, mocks the alleged power of the masculine, and the taboo subjects alluded to in sexual double-entendres are revealed to be the outraged and outrageous voices of women singing the weakness rather than the praises of men.

The translations from Galician-Portuguese and Old Spanish convey the sly wittiness of the poems as well as accurate meaning. A somewhat distinctive feature of the volume is the announcement of the topic to be discussed in the next section, made unnecessary by section titles, but this is a minor criticism. Filios' comparative background and her use of anthropological approaches to performance make this a significant volume for scholars

in other literatures. The effect of this study of medieval Iberian lyric might be summarized in the words of the *panadera* in Sebastián de Horozco's "Dama de gentil aseó" regarding her most treasured attribute: "que no hay naide [sic] que se escape / si alguna vez lo ha probado" (113). (There's no one who can escape from it once he's tried it.) Masculinity in Iberian lyric can never be the same again.

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#### END NOTE

1. *Queer Iberia: Sexualities, Cultures, and Crossings from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, ed. Josiah Blackmore and Gregory S. Hutcheson (Duke UP, 1999).

