

Medieval French Miracle Plays: Seven Falsely Accused Women, by Carol J. Harvey. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011. Pp. 167. ISBN: 9781846822735.

Despite their overwhelming prevalence in the Middle Ages, stories of falsely accused women have not attracted much attention from contemporary medievalists, both as individual texts and, especially, as a cultural phenomenon. Carol Harvey's *Medieval French Miracle Plays* is a welcome contribution to the field. Concentrating on seven *Miracles de Notre Dame par personnages* staged by the Goldsmiths' Guild of Paris between 1368 and 1379 and surviving in a single manuscript, Harvey combines particular scrutiny of this historical milieu with a broad take on the motif of calumny that appears in diverse forms in each of the pieces she examines.

Six of the plays feature a falsely accused heroine and one a calumniator who repents of her sins. The variety of these miracles, whose protagonists meet similar plights with surprisingly different courses of action, witnesses to the multiple ways in which a single late-medieval community imagined women. Some of the heroines become servants or itinerant healers; two assume male disguise and excel as warriors. While their exploits may seem far removed from day-to-day reality, Harvey reminds us that "fifty years later, life imitated art when Joan of Arc, dressed as a man, raised the siege of Orleans" (145). Even those heroines who do not change their gender "may be considered empowering representations of women. Envisaging a wider sphere of influence for the female protagonist is consonant with the lives of some women at that time" (148).

As Kathy Krause notes in her foreword to this study, the emphasis some scholars have placed on the "chaste woman as guarantor of legitimacy in primogeniture"¹ neither applies to the bourgeois context of the *Miracles de Notre Dame par personnages* nor encompasses the meanings they would have conveyed to their original audience (14–15). In order to define with greater precision the possibilities conceived for women in the *Miracles*, Harvey gives equal weight to their engagement of social relations and religious beliefs. These dimensions are shown to interact with one another in shaping women's place in medieval culture. Hence, rather than limiting her discussion to the material status of women—or treating spiritual concerns as epiphenomena of their subjection to, or subversion of, patriarchal authority—Harvey stresses the centrality of the heroines' unflinching rectitude or, in one case, sincere atonement to the guildsmen's Christian life. At a time of political turmoil and struggles between the royalty and the Estates General that eventually led to Charles VI's ban on religious plays in 1382, this beleaguered community would have felt the need to

sympathize with the trials of oppressed women whose righteousness is rewarded with divine rescue.

Packing a comprehensive and accessible analysis of seven texts into a relatively condensed volume is no mean feat. Each chapter begins with a summary of the play, and sometimes of its sources as well. Whatever knowledge of medieval beliefs, French history, popular customs, and standards of imaginative writing that Harvey's reader may lack is provided when needed. Her attentiveness to the playwrights' refashioning of their sources, shaping of character, and use of figurative language sheds further light on the functions they intended their works to fulfill. Fantastic as these plays appear to us, Harvey repeatedly demonstrates their authors' concern with incorporating realistic details and pious imagery that would have appealed directly to the audience's worldly and otherworldly interests.

The strengths of this study account for some of its weaknesses as well. Harvey's wide-ranging approach occasionally comes at the expense of a fuller development of her arguments. For example, going against the opinion of most scholars, she contends that the sumptuous Cangé manuscript in which the *Miracles* are contained was not presented as a gift to Charles VI. Most of the plays' villains, she points out, belong to the nobility, whereas several bourgeois characters stand out for their virtuous conduct. Though Harvey's discussion of this evidence is perceptive, her general claim would carry more conviction if she proved its validity to the entire compilation of plays.

Moreover, given that stories of falsely accused women usually retain the contours of their plot when translated from one genre or cultural context to another, one wonders whether stock characters like the evil queen dowager, the noblewoman's lustful father or brother-in-law, and the gullible monarch really indicate or would have been regarded as signs of bourgeois dissidence. To make this case, Harvey would have to prove that the plays differ substantially from courtly versions of the same miracles in their portrayal of corrupt aristocrats. Only in a few instances, such as the derisive treatment of the queen dowager in *La fille du roy de Hongrie* (92–93), does Harvey call attention to such differences. By contrast, Nancy Black's *Medieval Narratives of Accused Queens* is by virtue of its comparative perspective more attuned to the distinctive features of the two *Miracles* with which she deals.²

Of course, no single study can effectively address all forty *Miracles de Nostre Dame* together with their sources and analogues. A choice of focus has to be made and followed consistently. Harvey seems to have opted for the seven plays as multifaceted dramatic works, which are “as much about a broad spectrum of

human behaviour as about the motif of the innocent persecuted heroine” (112). Consequently, the topos that guides her selection of material does not always occupy a privileged place in her readings, nor does she sufficiently account for the extraordinary burgeoning of miracles that revolve around calumny in just over a decade. A dedicated treatment of the falsely accused heroine in these plays might have brought us closer to understanding their mystery. In the end, we are left with a series of highly compelling vignettes—“unique window[s] into the customs and traditions, faith and superstitions of fourteenth-century France” (148)—that merit further study and plenty of directions in which to pursue it.

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NOTES

1. Krause is quoting from Roberta Krueger, *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 132.

2. Nancy B. Black, *Medieval Narratives of Accused Queens* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), ch. 4.