

BOOK REVIEWS

Taylor, Karen J., ed. *Gender Transgressions. Crossing the Normative Barrier in Old French Literature* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998). 203 pp.

Karen J. Taylor's recently edited collection of essays on gender transgressions represents an important contribution to the growing corpus of studies on sexuality and gender in the Middle Ages. The Foreword identifies the collection as a rewriting of commonly received notions from the '60s and '70s that designate the medieval period as one dominated by conservative views on gender roles and sexual mores. To refute these views, the nine wide-ranging essays explore the contested sites of sodomy, cross-dressing, and same-sex relations in Old French literature. Through a skillful combination of literary and historical analysis, and occasional references to modern theory, the contributors offer dramatic readings of medieval works ranging from the canonical to the obscure, including the *Roman de la Rose*, Marie de France's *Lais*, Arthurian literature, *Richars li biaus*, and *Yde et Olive*. The collection provides abundant evidence that transgressive behavior functioned as a motif through which medieval writers investigated conventional treatments of sexuality, gender, and identity.

The first two essays establish the tone of the collection. Each debunks conventional notions associated with the designated medieval texts by approaching the works with new and refreshing perspectives. Catherine M. Jones re-examines the Grateful Dead motif in *Richars li biaus* and argues that the privileging of the hero's trajectory silences the text's intimate interlinking of the motif with the concomitant tale of rape and redemption. Ellen L. Friedrich's provocative and convincing study of the *Roman de la Rose* departs from traditional scholarship that identifies the romance as dealing with heterosexual relationships. Her linguistically-based study of Guillaume de Lorris's text uncovers instead the homoerotic overtones apparent in the etymological history of key terms, such as *rose*, *bouton* and *brandon*.

The next three articles examine the motif of transvestism as a medium for exploring sexuality and gender in medieval literature. Keith Busby details the use of male cross-dressing in Arthurian literature to demystify the romance genre and its protagonists. Michelle Szkilnik considers many of the same sources discussed in Busby's article, but emphasizes female cross-dressing from the thirteenth through the fifteenth century. Her study of pronominal referents and telling slippages in narratives on transvestism reveals that while early medieval examples of female cross-dressing allowed for women to achieve heroic status, later literature exploits the female transvestite as a means of communicating

firmer and less sympathetic statements on women's social identity. Finally, Robert L. A. Clark's study of two manuscript versions of *Yde et Olive* identifies transvestism as a medium through which the taboo subjects of incest, same-sex marriage, and female sexuality are addressed. Echoing Szkilnik's conclusion, Clark recognizes that the ambivalence towards Yde's cross-dressing is expressed in the narrative's ultimate recuperation of her transgressions through her marriage to the king and the concomitant re-establishment of social order. If transvestism is shown as a medium through which sexuality and gender can be examined effectively, these three essays also reveal the conservative agenda of at least some medieval authors who appear to use the motif to communicate the inherent threat of a genderless society.

The remaining four essays examine the construction of heroes and heroines in medieval literature with a particular emphasis given to gender stereotypes expressed both by medieval authors and modern scholars. Glenda Warren Carl's essay on Amazons in the *Roman de Troie* serves to refute modern assumptions that medieval society dealt negatively with these women warriors. Her argument focuses on Benoît de Sainte-Maure's discussion of Amazons and his praise for their successful appropriation of both male and female attributes. Although she never states it explicitly, her article reveals Benoît's concerted effort to disassociate the Amazons from women in general. Phillip McCaffrey's essay classifies gender as one of several identity markers, which he lists as "race, nationality, lineage, religion, upbringing, gender, physical appearances, and names" (129). McCaffrey's comparative study of heterosexual doubling in *Floire et Blancheflor* and male doubling in *Ami et Amile* leads him to downplay the importance of gender by associating it with an overall quest for self-definition. Nora Cottille-Foley's study of female empowerment in Marie de France's *Lais* offers one of the few examples in the collection of a medieval author who challenges gender stereotypes by reversing conventional structures of male domination and female oppression. Her study examines Marie's rewriting of triangular relationships, in which women typically figure as passive players, to establish women as creative subjects and as members of powerful female communities. Finally, Karen J. Taylor's contribution to the collection argues that evidence of medieval authors playing with sexual stereotypes attributed to both men and women anticipates the modern move towards desexualization. Beginning with a survey of the strong female roles in *Aucassin et Nicolette* and the *Roman de Silence* that challenged traditional roles for women, Taylor moves to Chrétien's effeminization of Gauvain in later works as a means of challenging the hero's worth. In fact, Chrétien attributes an increasing number of negative attributes typically associated with women, including lack of constancy, bad counseling, and infidelity, to Gauvain as a means of critiquing the stock-hero figure. Taylor's article brings us full circle to Busby's, as they both identify

playing with gender as a means of challenging conventional constructions of male heroism.

Karen J. Taylor should be commended for her success in bringing together a cohesive collection of thought-provoking essays that consistently challenge modern readings of the Middle Ages. The collection will undoubtedly stimulate, provoke, and entertain its readers. While falling short of portraying the Middle Ages as a period of radical views on sexuality and gender, the anthology documents evidence of their interest in these issues and certainly will inspire continued research in the field.

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Richards, Earl Jeffrey, ed. *Christine de Pizan and Medieval French Lyric*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998. ix + 241 pp.

In what was a bumper year for *études christiniennes*, with the publication not only of three collected volumes of essays devoted to Christine but also major new editions of both her love debate poems and of a key political text, this particular work stands out for its important contribution to a relatively neglected area of the author's literary oeuvre: the lyric. Comprising nine essays (only one of which has previously been published) by some of the most authoritative scholars in the field, the volume's principal aim, as set out by the editor in an erudite introductory chapter entitled "Christine de Pizan and the freedom of medieval French lyric: authority, experience, women in the Republic of Letters" (1-24), is to stress the ground-breaking nature of the author's lyric output. This aim is more than amply met, with the essays demonstrating that Christine pushes back the boundaries in her verse not only in terms of formalistic innovation, but also as regards her exploration of the relationship between verse and narrative, and her representation of an authentic female voice long absent from this literary genre.

Christine's innovative approach to the well-established forms of the lyric is most clearly brought out by William D. Paden in his "Christine de Pizan and the transformation of late medieval lyric genres" (27-49). Situating her lyrics within the tradition of both *trouvère* and *troubadour* poetry, Paden argues that Christine radicalizes the carefully defined conventional forms of these genres by introducing a more subjective tone than that of her literary forebears. For example, in addressing issues such as bereavement and widowhood in her