

Geraldine Heng. *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*. Columbia University Press, 2003. pp. xii + 521.

During the First Crusade, the unthinkable occurred in Ma'arra an-Numan.

Well into a siege of that northern Syrian city, crusaders, in the words of eyewitness Fulcher of Chartre, "cooked and chewed, and devoured with savage mouth" dead Muslims (22). An act that inverted the binary of Christian purity and heathen contagion central to crusade propaganda, crusader cannibalism was a monumental trauma that called out for imaginative resolution. The literary response to cannibalism that would emerge decades later is, Geraldine Heng argues in *Empire of Magic*, the founding text of Arthurian romance, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*. Heng's thesis that the trauma of cannibalism inspired the making of romance is nothing short of brilliant; it shifts the paradigms of romance analysis, opening up that genre to new and startling meanings. By revealing how the Eastern

geography of Christian atrocity inspires and mobilizes romance in England, *Empire* locates a genre notorious for its spatial ambiguity in a specific territorial register. And by showing how cannibalism inspired romance, Heng sheds new light the many scenes of eating that proliferate in romance texts.

To be sure, cannibalism is but a starting point in *Empire*; in a Jamesonian vein (the book's title tropes on "Magical Narratives"), Heng sees romance as responding to a variety of social issues. In this far-reaching study of immense scope (from the 11th through the 15th centuries), romance texts address phenomena including the Inquisition, slavery, a monetary economy, feudalism, mapmaking, nationalism, and, above all, imperialism. Heng's book frustrates any attempt to approximate its contents. Indeed, the endnotes constitute a fascinating book in and of themselves. A long-

anticipated study, *Empire* is a major achievement that joins the ranks of such important works as Carolyn Dinshaw's *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, Steven Justice's *Writing and Rebellion*, and David Wallace's *Chaucerian Polity*. But what makes *Empire* particularly compelling for the feminist reader are Heng's claims regarding the functioning of the sex/gender system in English romance texts, claims that make this book necessary reading along with the work of such scholars as Susan Crane and Jane Burns (as well as Heng's own essays on the *Gawain*-poet).

More than any other category of analysis, according to Heng, gender serves—as the mediating and expressive terms—by which romance “discuss(es) the virtually undiscussible,” i.e., taboo acts such as cannibalism (43, 45). Thus, in Heng's analysis of Geoffrey's *History* in her first chapter, that all-too-familiar figuration of the damsel in distress licenses a more covert rescue: that of cannibalism from historical atrocity to celebratory and even sacred romance. Namely, King

Arthur's efforts to save the maiden Helen entail a battle against the man-eating giant on Mont Saint-Michel. Later, on English soil, male-male homoerotics lead to another moment of cannibalism, one that furthers Geoffrey's symbolic work of recreating trauma in familiar and safe contexts. When the Saxon aristocrat Brian serves up his own thigh meat to his princely uncle, cannibalism transmogrifies from crusader atrocity to quasi-sacred act on native soil. Moreover, the homoerotics of the episode point to yet another “unnatural act” addressed by Geoffrey: the sodomitical practices of twelfth-century elites.

Chapter Two, on the rarely studied crusade romance *Richard Coer de Lyon*, resumes the linked topics of cannibalism and sodomy. The ribald and racialist representation of a cannibalistic Richard I as an opening gambit in the popular romance reveals, for Heng, how, by the 13th century, cannibalism has become guilt-free and pleasurable, if only in the joking form assumed by the poem. Jokes as well enable the poem

to engage with sodomy. The same-sex love associated with Richard hampered the monarch from meeting the needs of an emerging national culture in England. But through laughter and wordplay, *RCL* suspends the usual rules of medieval English society and imagines sodomy and cannibalism (as well as the linguistic prowess displayed by the poem's vernacular wordplay) as markers of national identity. As Heng puts it, "[j]ust as you can tell an Englishman by his preferred diet of Saracen flesh, so can you tell him by his allegorical tail (tale) and mastery of English wit" (101).

The length of Heng's third chapter (some sixty-five pages) should not deter readers, who will be repaid handsomely by a notably nuanced reading of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* as a defense against things modern. According to Heng, the *Morte* wars against those late medieval changes (fiscal, technological, etc.) that threatened feudal chivalric masculinity. As is so typical of romance, the poem engages with social problems on a personal level: "the visiting

of concurrent, overlapping, and multilayered cultural crises on masculine anatomy." Thus, in the *Morte's* version of the Mont Saint-Michel episode, "Arthur's immaculate upper body, swathed in protective shells of fabric and armor" embodies the old chivalric ideal of knighthood while the cannibalistic giant, "a menagerie of foul beasts pulled together within the approximate outline of a man," represents multiple changes threatening to chivalry, among them Italian slave-trading and a money economy (122, 124). Heng offers a deft and subtle account of this episode, certainly the most nuanced reading to date of its engagement with the sex/gender system.

With its focus on heroines, Heng's fourth chapter speaks most directly to feminist concerns. Through a tour-de-force discussion of five English versions of the Constance story, Heng demonstrates how, after "the loss of the last crusader colony, Acre, in 1291," western imperialism shifted from territory to culture: "the enactment of a successful crusade, cultural-style,

feminine-style" (189). Thus in Trevet's *Cronicles*, Constance's marital journey to Syria leads her besotted Saracen fiancée to convert to Christianity and give over Jerusalem to the Christians (190). Such instances demonstrate how it is precisely through women that desire (heterosexual or otherwise) "lubricates, is intrinsic to, the modalities of power that bind large communal groups into mutual relationship" (187). Heng accomplishes valuable feminist cultural geographic work in the chapter, which offers a subtle discussion of the terrains of the body and the gendering of geography and mobility. The chapter ends by looking at how the maternal function of Constance (and of Griselda) suggests that nations and other social communities take their cue from the family dynamic of the mother and her offspring on the problem of knitting their inhabitants together in affective bonds. (Because Heng's fine final chapter, on *Mandeville's Travels*, lacks the stress on gender that emerges elsewhere in *Empire*, I will not summarize it here.)

Heng's account of gender and romance is cutting edge, demonstrating how the traditional interdisciplinarity and new global reach of medieval scholarship is particularly attuned to meet the ambitious goals set out by feminist cultural geographers such as Susan Stanford Friedman. Friedman advocates a "locational feminism" that "is simultaneously situated in a specific locale, global in scope, and constantly in motion through space and time."¹ By considering gender in terms of romance concepts of the Occident and Orient and by mapping the figuration of woman onto the multiple gridlines (racial, religious, aristocratic, national, familial, institutional) of medieval culture, Heng demonstrates the myriad ways in which gender travels and settles in different historical and territorial contexts.

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END NOTE

¹ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (Princeton, 1998), p. 15.