

D. VANCE SMITH and MICHAEL UEBEL. *Medieval Studies*. A special issue of *New Literary History*. Volume 28, number 2 (1997). Pp. 265.

To say that the Middle Ages and literary theory have been imagined, at least by theorists, as totally opposing discourses would be an understatement. The last time the theory journal *New Literary History* did a special issue on medieval studies Ronald Reagan had not yet been elected president, and names like Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan, which were to transform literary studies in the 1980s, were only just beginning to reach this side of the Atlantic. However, nearly twenty years after the publication of *Medieval Literature and Contemporary Theory*, a special number of NLH edited by Michael Uebel and D.Vance Smith invites readers to assess the impact literary and cultural theory has had on medieval studies, as well as the contributions medievalists have made to theory. Since I could hardly hope to do justice to each of the essays in this volume in the space of a brief review, let me instead try to suggest the scope of that assessment.

There is plenty of evidence that medievalists have, since 1979, continued to engage the insights of contemporary theory in their research. The eleven essays collected in this volume attest to the continued liveliness and originality of that exchange. In 1979, as evidenced by NLH's special issue, semiotics, linguistic theory, and hermeneutics dominated theoretical discourse. Twenty years later the range of issues, approaches, and controversies that engage literary theorists has grown bewilderingly diverse, so much so that the editors speak of a 'new eclecticism' (159). If any discourse could be said to dominate the critical scene these days, they suggest, it would be gender studies or queer theory. Surprisingly, however, neither are particularly prominent in the volume. Only the essays by Jeffrey Cohen, Sarah Stanbury, and David Hult (and only marginally by way of critique) could be said to engage gender studies, and only the essay jointly written by Robert Clark and Claire Sponsler represents queer theory and that only tangentially in its analysis of cross-dressing.

I would locate the volume's theoretical center elsewhere, in the turn to history that predictably followed the ahistorical bent of poststructuralist semiotics. This turn is perhaps best represented by the new historicism and cultural studies. Most of the essays in the volume work within some kind of historicist framework. D. Vance Smith and Louise Fradenburg provide extended meditations on the meaning of history and its pleasures. Smith, in his analysis of time and memory, argues for the importance of forgetting to history. New approaches to the Middle Ages require us to think about 'how things get forgotten': 'a number of the essays [in this volume] try to approach the Middle Ages in new ways, using something different than the stories the Middle Ages tries to tell us about itself' (171). Steven Kruger's essay on medieval representations of Jews and Moslems or Leslie Dunton-Downer's on incest in Chrétien's *Cligés* are exemplary of this approach.

As Fradenburg argues, however, our social and historicist projects cannot simply fall prey to 'rhetorics of need and productivity' (207) so prominent in defenses of the humanities these days. Medievalists must also reclaim the pleasures of their practice. Psychoanalysis, however controversial and embattled it might be, provides one of

the few theoretical frameworks for understanding how pleasure works socially, politically, and culturally. And indeed, psychoanalysis plays a prominent role in many of the volumes' essays, providing yet another theoretical focus for the volume. But this is not your father's Freud. Psychoanalytic theory is inflected by the recent work of Giles Deleuze in Cohen's provocative essay on masochism in Chrétien's *Lancelot*, of Jean-Joseph Goux and the Eastern European theorist Slavoj Žižek in essays by Smith and Fradenburg, of 'queer theorists' in essays by Kruger and Clark and Sponsler, and of theorists of the gaze in Sarah Stanbury's insightful essay on medieval visual regimes, which challenges feminist theorists to move beyond Oedipal theories of female objectification.

The volume demonstrates that medievalists continue to engage contemporary theory, but, we might ask, what does a volume like this contribute to the project of contemporary theory? Much contemporary theory—and historicist theory in particular—has been built on a simplistic construction of the Middle Ages. Modernity has been defined by a rupture, a break with the past that separates the Middle Ages from those 'subjects' of theoretical discourse: subjectivity, sexuality, exchange and consumption, nationalism, imperialism, and colonialism. The Middle Ages must, then, be seen as necessarily outside of the concerns of theory. This volume contests the caricatured views of the Middle Ages held by many prominent American theorists and for this reason deserves a wider audience among theorists than it will most likely get.

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