
Robert M. Stein and Sandra Pierson Prior, eds. *Reading Medieval Culture: Essays in Honor of Robert W. Hanning*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005. 520p.

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Reading Medieval Culture is an unusual festschrift in that it is not only a fitting “tribute to Hanning’s work and inspiration” (14), but also an unusual and important scholarly volume in its own right. The topics covered in this collection range over one thousand years, many countries, and a wide variety of works of literature, art, and history. Such an interdisciplinary and broad focus brings into relief Robert Hanning’s lasting imprint on medieval studies, not least in the area of historicist literary criticism, as well as the breadth of his own work. *Reading Medieval Culture* presents the ubiquity of Hanning’s methodological approaches within Medieval Studies today and the expansiveness of his scholarship, and it does so by collecting distinguished essays that speak to Hanning’s influence and interests. In doing so, this festschrift demonstrates most convincingly that Hanning has bequeathed his critical tools, vocabulary, and, most importantly, his enthusiasm for his work to generations of academics. This, surely, is what a festschrift ought to do.

Reading Medieval Culture is divided into three sections. The first, titled “The Place of History and the Time of Romance,” is devoted to work that reflects Hanning’s own methodological and critical interests in historiography and romance. Many of these essays center on ideas of time, history, nation, and geopolitics and show the ways in which literary constructions of place and race can be illuminated by their cultural, religious, and (geo)political contexts. Nicholas Howe’s article takes up some of Hanning’s own musings on England’s isolation from the Continent and the ways in which Bede’s conception of “Engla lond” depends upon connecting England with Roman religion and culture. Ultimately, Howe shows that for Bede, history emerges from cognitive imagination as well as from place, since our narratives of what happen depend as much on cultural affiliation as location. Christopher Baswell underscores this point in his essay on the complex linguistic hierarchy in late medieval England. In his article on the *Brut* and on Trevisa’s translation of Higden’s *Polychronicon*—which I found to be the most engaging and impressive essay in the entire collection—Baswell argues that this linguistic hierarchy is unstable, connected to cultural identity, and ultimately manipulated in order to define England against Rome: “England becomes the point of origin (and retreat) for militant empire, and Rome the far-flung (and unachieved) border of Arthurian ambition” (175). Similarly, Monika Otter investigates cognitive place and imaginative history

in order to think about the ways that individual identity can shape historical accounts. Otter's discussion of prophecy and futurity is important not just because it allows her to observe the historian in a complex moment of self-acknowledgment and self-preservation—Henry of Huntingdon writes himself *into* the future when he addresses readers of the 21st century and asks them (us!) to pray for him, thus bypassing his own death—but because it suggests that we might think about the imaginative construction of “Engla lond’s” residents. Suzanne Conklin Akbari rounds out this section by presenting a meticulous reading of *Richard Coer de Lion* as a cannibalistic exploration of what it means, geopolitically, to be English: Richard eats Saracens, but himself has Saracen ancestry. The (paradoxical) construction of England's individual and insular identity can hence be seen, according to Akbari, to challenge its geographical, political, cultural, and religious boundaries. And indeed, many of the articles in this section—H. Marshall Leicester's essay on Marie de France is another—explore boundaries, liminality, and the construction of place as a cognitive, as well as geographical, location.

The second section of this festschrift plays tribute to Hanning's work on Chaucer and focuses “especially on social discourses as performed, manipulated, and challenged in Chaucer's narratives” (11). The section is less pleasing than the first, if only because it lacks the kind of unified intellectual synthesis that appeared throughout the first eight articles. However, this section is useful in the originality of the work (William Askins' article on the historical relevance of Anglo-Flemish relations to *Sir Thopas* is particularly important), and also because the essays are so representative of the field of Chaucer studies. Margaret Pappano advances an important reading of the historical contexts of *The Miller's Tale*, and she demonstrates the ways in which the social conventions of guild brotherhood (and its oppression of women) enables the exchange between the Miller and the Reeve. Sealy Gilles, Sylvia Tomasch, and George Economou all offer indispensable syntheses of critical responses and approaches to Chaucer's relationship to Langland (Economou, whose essay on Chaucer and Langland is an essential touchstone for imagining a late 14th-century coterie) and the critical and political import of Manly and Rickert's *Canterbury Tales* (Gilles and Tomasch). These are all fine articles that reflect Hanning's work, and it is pleasing to see the implicit conversation between some of the pieces on gender and agency in this section. Laura Howes' consideration of Criseyde's betrayal and Elizabeth Robertson's exploration of *raptus* read well together, especially given Howes' commentary on Pandarus' possible rape of Criseyde and her lack of agency as an obedient daughter and niece (336-337).

Female agency and gender studies continue to inform the third and shortest section of this volume, titled “Italian Contexts.” Warren Ginsberg's essay links “Italian

Contexts” to the Chaucer section, and in it Ginsberg uses Benjamin’s theories of translation, especially “modes of meaning,” to illuminate the relationship between *The Franklin’s Tale* and *Il Filocolo*. But Joan M. Ferrante’s essay would also have worked well as a bridge, addressing as it does the political and historical importance of women to Dante’s *Comedy*. Her article could easily have been found in the first section of this collection, given that it speaks to the far-ranging (geopolitical) influence of the daughters of Beatrice of Savoy, all of whom became queens, and at least two of whom were explicitly featured (as virtuous role models, no less) in the *Comedy*. The final two essays of this section (Joseph Dane and David Rosand) are impressive in detail and make for essential reading in art history and aesthetics; again, they point to Hanning’s impressive range and challenge the reader to aim for the same breadth of interest.

In short, this volume is timely and necessary, and it will undoubtedly prove a lasting resource for generations of scholars to come. The occasional bad pun – “What’s love but the sacred plan of motion” (Spence 84), “A good ram was hard to find” (Askins 272) or “these questions...will be taken up in ways that will be better and best” (Economou 296)—is easy to forgive and even to enjoy. However, the article summaries in the festschrift’s introduction might have been more to the point. These summaries often confuse where they should clarify and sometimes fail to do justice to a very pleasing and lucid argument (written in limpid prose, as in the case with Howe or Akbari) by rendering it enigmatic. Finally, though there are very few editing mishaps—and certainly more may have been expected in a collection of this size—it is unfortunate that Jan Ziolkowski’s name is misspelled (246). ✱