
Bruce Holsinger. *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. 276p.

CINDY CARLSON
METROPOLITAN STATE COLLEGE OF DENVER

Bruce Holsinger's provocative *The Premodern Condition* most clearly focuses its concerns in the epilogue's exploration of a changed appraisal of the Middle Ages. French scholars closely associated with the foundation of "what gets embraced under the rubric of *theory*" (197) turned to the medieval period, which Holsinger calls the "most consistently abjected era in the Western tradition," in order to re-examine the Enlightenment, an era once considered to usher in the modern period (197). Thus, the Middle Ages come to be seen as a resource for post-modern thinking, almost as an antidote to the heightened attention formerly paid to the Enlightenment as the significant period that leads to modern times.

In this remarkable work of intellectual history, Holsinger examines the schooling of notable French theorists—Bataille, Lacan, Bourdieu, Derrida, and Barthes—and finds a medieval connection, either through Bataille's early scholarly work, for example, or Lacan's interest in and use of Bataille's texts. For each of these thinkers, the medieval period, its texts, and reading practices serve as resources to be marshaled against a complacent modernism, even as a refuge against the accepted proprieties of the modern. As part of Holsinger's recovery of the medieval connection, his book includes two relatively little known, at least to English-speaking scholars, works by Bataille and Bourdieu, "Medieval French Literature, Chivalric Morals, and Passion" and "Postface to Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*," respectively.

Because English-speaking readers have probably read Bataille, Lacan, and the others only in English translations, we are likely to think of French theory as a phenomenon of the last years of the 20th century. Holsinger's study reminds us how much of this new work began to appear between the wars and immediately after the Second World War. After the horrors of a Europe scarred with battlefields and camps, the legacy of the Enlightenment no longer divided us so completely from earlier ages and their supposed barbarity, no longer made us so modern and reasonable. The medieval period and its texts, so easily rejected as belonging to a foreign era of strange obsessions and passions, came to be a resource for emptying out the seeming promise of the Enlightenment to protect us from just those passions, those unspeakable longings for a distant lady, a violent encounter of knights, a god not quite apprehendable through language, an interpretation of a world of

texts that are themselves busy citing other texts. Medieval texts, with their interest in citation and further commentary, seem to have been irresistible to Bataille, the avowed medievalist, and to those who came after, even promoting the citation of each other's commentaries.

In creating a history of French theory from the French theorist's interest in the Middle Ages, Holsinger can show both that theory lives in spite of pronouncements of its death and that its "hermeneutic practices [are] fully integrated and...consubstantial with the historicist practices of literary and cultural study" (11). In their study of the texts of the Middle Ages and medieval reading practices Bataille develops his notion of "transgression" and Bourdieu his study of "habitus" (14). Historicizing theory and its practitioners in France also reveals just how interested the theorists were in the medieval period as a subject of historical study and how their theory takes as its point of departure medieval reading practices, as well as the medieval text itself.

Among several examples, I choose Holsinger's treatment of Barthes' discussion of reading practices in the 1960s for its accessibility in a brief review. In this decade, Barthes' work draws openly on medieval hermeneutic practice: the four-fold reading owed to scripture—the historical, allegorical, moral, and anagogical readings—in order to produce his own "levels" of reading: the literal, semantic, allegorical, and anagogical modes of reading discussed in both "Comment parler à Dieu?" and *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*. For *S/Z*, Barthes proposes readings that are proairetic, semantic, cultural, hermeneutic, and symbolic. In all three works Barthes plays with Augustine's mode of reading and moves away from the Robertsonian restrictions on reading in order to understand the "crossing and interpenetration of textual levels and codes...as the very fiber of the text, creating a constant tension between structural rigidity and semiotic multiplicity" (183). Barthes revels in the multiplicity of medieval readings and then uses them, though changed for his purposes, for a structuralist project of examining possible readings of literary texts. Here, Barthes' medievalism promotes a new understanding of medieval reading, set free from Robertsonian restrictions, and a new formulation of modern forms of reading in his own theoretical works of the late '60s and early '70s.

In its treatment of aspects of the work of Bataille, Lacan, Bourdieu, Derrida, and Barthes, Holsinger brings together the great names of 20th-century French theory, links them to one another through their interest in the Middle Ages, shows how their work derives from their medieval interests, and how that work could resonate for medievalists working in the "crossing and interpenetration of textual levels and codes" of the medieval texts they study. ✱