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E. Jane Burns and Peggy McCracken, eds., *From Beasts to Souls: Gender and Embodiment in Medieval Europe*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013. ix + 269 pp. Figures, notes, selected bibliography, and index. \$ 38.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-268-02232-7.

Review by Virginie Greene, Harvard University.

“Beasts” and “souls” were medieval problems; “gender” and “embodiment” are ours.

Jane Burns and Peggy McCracken edited this collection of eight essays as a thought experiment deliberately oriented toward the present, using “medieval cultural representations of nonhuman or partially human creatures” to find “new ways to think about gender and embodiment on a broader theoretical spectrum” (p. 7).

But what happens to women and gender studies when theoretical attention moves away from the human? The authors of the essays have all published significant works related to women, gender and sexuality within the field of medieval studies. *From Beasts to Souls* reflects their interest in and concern about the recent development of posthumanism and animal studies. In the introduction, Burns and McCracken acknowledge posthumanistic studies as a useful way to renew interpretative strategies, but they indicate that they are not willing to let their preoccupation for gender become lost in the shuffle. The problem, then, is that gender is extremely difficult to sever from the human. For better or worse, gendering is humanizing.

The issues at stake in posthumanism are contemporary. They are theoretical (how do we define the human vs. the non-human?), pragmatic (what are we doing to the non-human, i.e., our environment?), and global (how can we—humans and non-humans—better share the same world?). They are also academic issues (what are we doing with the humanities as institutional disciplines?). So, what can medievalists contribute to such a debate?

The key word is “embodiment.” European medieval culture tends to “embody” or “disembody” a lot of things, abstract or concrete, real or imaginary, religious or secular, human or non-human. It also tends to express thoughts in both intellectualized and fictionalized forms, verbal and visual mediums, which may explain the resilience of some of these thoughts through time. And last, it has greatly contributed to populate our imagination with monstrous or wonderful bodies that are human, quasi-human, partly human, hardly human, or not human at all. Our bodily imagination remains very medieval to this day, and the attempt to think in a “posthuman” fashion may be an attempt to reach a “post-medieval” sense of humanity. *From Beasts to Souls* demonstrates that we may need to explore more the medieval roots of our culture before moving on, if we don’t want to repeat patterns, including oppressive and unjust ones.

Most of the materials studied in the essays date from the late eleventh to the sixteenth centuries. Three essays focus mostly on Old or Middle French literary texts; others study texts in Latin or English; one studies Old French, Italian and Arabic texts; and the last studies objects from the Netherlands. The scope of each essay is relatively narrow, and the methodology used mostly interpretative and theoretical. Except in Dyan Elliott and Elizabeth Robertson’s essays, historical change is not addressed.

Jeffrey Cohen's "The Sex Life of Stone" is the most influenced by posthumanist theory. Following Deleuze and Guattari, as well as more recent reflections on ecology (Bruno Latour, Timothy Morton, *et al.*)[1], Cohen invests stone with agency, affect, desire, and artistic talent. Medieval didactic and narrative texts (Gerald of Wales's *History and Topography of Ireland*, Albertus Magnus's *Book of Minerals*, and *The Book of John of Mandeville*) provide him with examples of human desire and awe in front of the "lithic sublime" (p. 20), and descriptions of the power of stones to heal, reveal, signify, protect, arm, or even reproduce in a sexualized way. Celebrating the appeal of stones and their "temporality alien to our short years" is not in itself a provocative gesture. But when Cohen elicits from the stone a response that would neither be magic nor poetic nor fictional, he recognizes that "we have [...] a terrible problem communicating with each other" (p. 33). Thus, Cohen demonstrates that posthumanism pushed too far becomes a variety of narcissism: we would like so much that the stone look back at us.

Peggy McCracken's essay remains within the boundaries of the animal organic. After the desiring stone, nursing does and swan-children seem almost banal. Through her study of stories in the Old French Crusade Cycle, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Ibn Tufayl's *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, and a sixteenth-century Polish altarpiece, McCracken addresses the question of gender across species. The main question her essay asks is simply: "What is a mother?" The response is not simple, for the intervention of animal mothers and milk in genealogical narratives such as the story of Godefroy de Bouillon's ancestry "offers the example of an animal-human mixing that remains both acknowledged and hidden, a cross-species intimacy that promotes legendary prestige as it disavows any bodily legacy" (p. 51). McCracken identifies in these stories a Deleuzian "becoming-animal" (p. 46) passing through maternal bodies, and happening in the best families.

Matilda Bruckner revisits the most famous and, perhaps, the most read of Old French romances—Chrétien de Troyes's *Yvain ou Le Chevalier au Lion*—and proposes an interpretation that no one (to my knowledge) has yet provided. The eponymous lion enters the story as he fights a dragon, which Yvain kills. The dragon disappears from the story, but not from its poetic economy. In fact, the dragon is an essential clue to understanding the love story between Yvain and the Lady of the Fountain. The dragon is to the lady what the lion is to the knight, in a marvelous configuration deployed "in those uncertain, intermediary spaces stretching between animalized humans and humanized animals" (p. 73). Beyond Chrétien's romance, I believe that the union between a draconian wife and a lioness husband is a matrimonial myth that reappears in other French literary or cultural forms (e.g., Proust's Duchess and Duke of Guermantes, or the common designation of a disagreeable woman as "*un dragon*"). I also believe that this myth reveals how queer heterosexual conjugality can be.

Dyan Elliott starts also with a married couple. Its queerness does not come from animality but from the fact that the wife is alive, the husband dead, and that they meet in spiritual forms. Guibert de Nogent's account of his mother's vision introduces the theological question of the gender of souls. Elliott presents a brief survey of patristic responses to this question, starting with Augustine. She shows how "loaded with physicality" the spirit world had become in the minute descriptions written by Honorius Augustodunensis and Peter Lombard in the twelfth century. Elliott ends her essay with a study of Beguine emergent spirituality in the thirteenth century, opposing Cathar dualism and misogyny with a greater emphasis on "embodied female spirituality" (p. 101). In the hagiographies of Marie of Oignies by James of Vitry and of Christina Mirabilis, Margaret of Ypres and Lutgard of Aywières by Thomas of Cantimpré, the female body becomes a tool of salvation instead of "the soul's prison" (p. 102). Thus, gender ought to remain attached to the soul. This might have helped living and dead women to obtain more prestige and status as potential "brides of Christ," but it also tended to project temporal hierarchies on the afterlife.

The Middle English "Disputation betwix the Body and Wormes" introduces a third element in the debate between soul and body: the worm. It also transforms the body into a corpse. Elizabeth Robertson frames historically this debate within the Augustinian and Aristotelian traditions and shows how

complicated the discussions about gender and sex in relation to the soul were: “Female bodily characteristics clearly troubled theologians in their consideration of the nature of the soul and of the resurrected body” (p. 125). By the fifteenth century, the issue was largely set aside by theologians, but not by poets. In the “Disputation” the corpse is of a woman, and her dialogue with the worms “makes use of courtly gendered vocabulary” (p. 141). Kissing the worms becomes a sign of submission to the will of God: “That the female corpse actively embraces the eroticized worms suggests her understanding that lust belongs to death” (p. 145). Robertson concludes with remarks on the poetic message that this illustrated text precariously preserves in a single manuscript: a paradoxical celebration of life and femininity through death and decay.

Like Matilda Bruckner, Noah Guynn proposes a new reading of a well-known text: the lai of *Bisclavret* by Marie de France. He adds another twelfth-century lai, the anonymous *Melion*, which stages too a nice werewolf married to a treacherous woman. Guynn reads both lais against the grain of moralizing assumptions, whether medieval (a woman is less trustable than a wolf-man), or modern (this story is an example of medieval misogyny). The hybrid nature of the hero and the literary form of the lay each produce a casuistic form of morality, casuistry being “an ancient and medieval method of case-based reasoning” which fosters “ethical uncertainty and intersubjective dialogue” (p. 159). The violent punishment suffered by Bisclavret’s wife or Melion’s final words of warning against all wives do not satisfy clearly any sense of justice. And the question “Why is *she* the monster in this story?” cannot be answered.

That Melusine is a monster is not in debate: she knows it herself. The main question that Jane Burns asks of Jean d’Arras’s prose *Roman de Mélusine* is how hybridity is related to dynasty, and the role of gender in this connection. The romance itself is a curious hybrid of fairy tale and chronicle, and the snake-tailed woman seems to export her shifting nature beyond her body. Is she good or bad? Is she natural or unnatural? Does she come from God or from the Devil? Burns argues that she is a rewriting of the woman-serpent in Genesis, offering “a fully secularized version of that ambiguous configuration,” that is “a creature in motion, between categories, with a flavor of worlds unknown and unaccounted for in orthodox versions of the Genesis narrative” (pp. 210-1). As the founding mother of the Lusignan lineage, she seems to justify the exotic enterprises of her offspring (both imaginary and historical ones): “Melusine’s body, paradoxically both snakelike and reproductive, ensures vast political gain and territorial expansion that remaps a Mediterranean under Lusignan control” (p. 207).

The last essay addresses the issue of the gender or gendering of sexual organs when they are represented as autonomous entities. Ann Marie Rasmussen studies a sample of so called “sexual badges,” which are cheap, small pins made of lead, representing sexual organs in various settings and guises. Those studied in her essay have been found in Holland. These objects are fascinating not just because they represent “naughty bits” but because they are funny and intriguing. Also because his majesty the penis finds his equal in her majesty the vulva. But is it “*her* majesty”? Rasmussen argues that some of these badges “present us with categories of gender that differ from those of modernity” (p. 226). She identifies a form of “female masculinity” that appears in representations of crowned vulvas as well as in representations of women “doing something ordinary, something not overtly sexual, with a detached, autonomous penis” (p. 228). Whatever this activity is (cooking, planting, plowing, or harvesting), the penis is transformed by female agency into something related to food and fertility. Other badges represent sexual organs sprouting from trees or, winged, perching on trees. But these roles can be taken indifferently by male or female organs—a situation that does not mesh well with strict binary oppositions such as active vs. passive or nature vs. culture.

All the essays in *From Beasts to Souls* propose interesting insights and interpretations related to gender, bodies, species, and sexuality in medieval European cultures. A conclusion linking the essays in more specific ways than the general themes offered would have been useful. I remain unconvinced that we can move “beyond the human” in a different way than in applying our attention to the world outside

ourselves, which does not seem to me such a new thing. But I am convinced that medieval studies can contribute usefully and in a unique way to gender studies, and that gender studies are still a considerable area of research in the humanities and social studies.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

E. Jane Burns and Peggy McCracken, "Introduction: Gendered Bodies in Unexpected Places"

Jeffrey J. Cohen, "The Sex Life of Stone"

Peggy McCracken, "Nursing Animals and Cross-Species Intimacy"

Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, "The Lady and the Dragon in Chrétien's *Chevalier au Lion*"

Dyan Elliott, "Rubber Soul: Theology, Hagiography, and the Spirit World of the High Middle Ages"

Elizabeth Robertson, "Kissing the Worm: Sex and Gender in the Afterlife and the Poetic Posthuman in the Late Middle English *A Disputacion betwyx the Body and Wormes*"

Noah D. Guynn, "Hybridity, Ethics, and Gender in Two Old French Werewolf Tales"

E. Jane Burns, "A Snake-Tailed Woman: Hybridity and Dynasty in the *Roman de Mélusine*"

Ann Marie Rasmussen, "Moving beyond Sexuality in Medieval Sexual Badges"

#### NOTE

[1] "Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) and *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

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