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Morgan Powell, *Gender, Reading, and Truth in the Twelfth Century: The Woman in the Mirror*. Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2020. xiii + 419 pp. Notes, figures, appendix, works cited, index. \$125.00 U.S., €109.00, £99.00 (hb). ISBN 9-78-1641893770.

Review by Jacqueline Victor, University of Chicago.

As medieval romance narrative continues to prove a rich and not nearly exhausted site of inquiry for those interested in questions of gender, there has emerged an increasingly untenable discrepancy between scholars' work on individual texts and a longstanding, more generalized definition of the genre against which many new insights are often positioned. One major point of pressure in this dynamic is that of the knight-centric view of romance and the gender conventions it has traditionally been presumed to encode. The fact that so many romances appear to transgress the genre's own conventions should signal to us that such conventions may not be as stable, nor our account of them as accurate, as they appear in our inherited understanding of romance. Medieval romance is, in other words, ready to be retheorized along gender lines.<sup>[1]</sup>

Morgan Powell's book enters this terrain with a promising shift in focus, seeking to (re)define romance by way of female characters. Powell specifically offers a new reading of Old French and Middle High German twelfth-century romance on the basis of developments in the Marian tradition and representations of both reading and suffering women. The subject may seem focused, but the ambitions of this book are immense: it aims to locate the *raison d'être* of twelfth-century vernacular romance within a clerical literary culture that sought to bring an experience of divine truth to a lay audience through a form of *compassio* with suffering women. The argument is original, and it takes up the still much-needed task of imbricating religious and literary studies of the Middle Ages. Readers interested in female figures will be rewarded with close attention paid to several female characters and to developments in representations of Mary. However, it should be stated at the outset that readers interested in the book's argument regarding romance's origins and meaning will likely find the vernacular evidence, as well as the secondary scholarship, to be highly selective in a manner that casts doubt on the scope of the author's claims. Similarly, those who study historical women and female patronage may be puzzled by the book's characterization of the relevant evidence and by its binary framework in which depictions of women reading or otherwise engaging with literary culture serve purely as figurations that preclude their value as sources of historical evidence. In this sense, Powell's book is challenging, and indeed he does not hesitate to assert his argument as a challenge to much accepted scholarship.

The book is organized into two major sections. Part one (“Reading as *Sponsa et Mater*”) is dedicated to constructing the religious and representational context in which Powell then reads a selection of vernacular texts in part two (“Reading the Widowed Bride”). Chapter one takes up the image of the female reader as a form of illiterate “reading” embodied in the clerical view of the “psalter-reading woman,” according to which “not reading but witnessing, not clerical learning but identification with feminine desire and suffering are meant to bring about the descent of the divine to human apprehension” (p. 42). Chapter two further argues that images of Mary holding scripture at the Annunciation and her *conceptio per aurem* were a model for such vernacular literary depictions of women’s illiterate “reading” and access to the divine. These first two chapters also construct an essential argument around Rupert of Deutz and Hildegard of Bingen, whom Powell views as initiating this spiritual model for a more direct and unlearned reception of the divine, itself predicated on Marian liturgy. Chapter three explores this same concept through the visual aspects of the *Speculum virginum*, which sought “to transform the *lectio divina* into an audio-visual performance” directed at women in order “to deliver Logos as a present, sensory experience” (p. 94), while chapter four looks at the St Albans Psalter from the perspective of a potential viewer/audience and elaborates the figure of the woman as the widowed bride. In part two, chapter five focuses on the figure of the female reader, patron, and audience in Old French literature, particularly in the *Eructavit*, Landri’s commentary on the Song of Songs, and Benoît de Saint Maure’s *Roman de Troie*, the latter two of which are also the subject of chapter six. For the Song of Songs, Powell is concerned with how, in terms of audience, “*seignors* become *puceles* who follow the bride” as the reader/listener, male or female, is taught to read “as the New Eve” (p. 246), part of a “transition in which the cleric’s instruction for the illiterate layman is displaced by Mary’s reading” (p. 245). For the *Roman de Troie*, Powell offers an analysis of female characters as figures of empathy for the audience who experience divine truth through identification with their suffering. Finally, chapters seven and eight read Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* through this same lens of female suffering, according to which “courtly vernacular narrative is relocated within a hermeneutics of truth that sees suffering for or with others as a way of embracing and revealing Christ’s love of humanity in our lives” (p. 280). The female figures in *Parzival* (namely Herzeloide and Sigune) are also read alongside a parallel analysis of Laudine in Chrétien de Troye’s *Yvain*.

Powell builds his argument through careful, close readings with a strong attention to visual, comparative, and gestural detail, while at the same time making large leaps from these readings to broader accounts of vernacular literature or women. His argument aims to undo our notion of female literacy and literary patronage in the twelfth century by reincorporating the images, references, and descriptions we have of such women into a framework in which books are part of a figurative apparatus meant to signal women’s particular access to the Word, rather than an act of literacy. Ultimately, he views female “reading” as a form of illiterate gnosis: “The seemingly straightforward image of a woman reading in or reciting from a vernacular text thus appears as the highly compressed visualization of a much larger web of associations, one that, rather than simply cameoing the use of texts, instead visually encapsulates their place within a new range of mediary practices and their relationship to gnosis” (p. 196). For Powell, this representation bears traces of Mary’s *conceptio per aurem*, or her conception of Christ through hearing the Word, just as it encapsulates the position of the bride in the Song of Songs or Hildegard of Bingen’s own spiritual experiences and self-presentation.

Powell’s analyses of the vernacular literature center on two types of figures: the widowed bride, as she relates to the bride in the Song of Songs (multiple potential identities are ascribed to her-

-grieving mother, virgin, bride, widow, all of which are variously Marian), and the suffering woman in romance fiction. Of these, Powell's discussion of the vernacular *Eruclavit* and Song of Songs are among the more revelatory of his literary readings, particularly because these works are openly interested in the potential for romance-inflected vernacular literature to communicate theological ideas and concerns to a lay audience. Similarly, Powell's analysis of Sigune in Wolfram's *Parzival* is an eloquent and, I don't know how else to put it, deeply caring treatment of a female figure with sustained attention to multiple layers of comparative text and imagery. Powell's close readings of Wolfram (though admittedly beyond my own area of expertise) present strong moments of textual analysis and, along with his work on depictions of Mary "reading," are a highlight of the book.

But a question arises: what kind of book is it? In a passage cited above, Powell wrote that suffering is a way of "revealing Christ's love of humanity in *our* lives" (emphasis mine). Powell frequently chooses not to use distancing language, making it difficult at times to distinguish whether he is describing a medieval viewpoint or expressing his own convictions that resonate with the medieval. This may simply be an effect of style, but one of its results is nonetheless to raise in the reader the question of whether this work is, in addition to being a study of vernacular narrative, also a work of spiritual reflection embedded in a Christian concept of *historia*. It is certainly a book that sees in the proliferation of written vernacular narrative in the twelfth century a particularly *Christian* development, not only in the sense that the literature was written in a Christian context, but in the sense that it in fact marked the beginning of a new Christian literary era—as opposed to the ancient, Latin, or pagan—such that modern western European literature can be seen as the extension of this moment of Christian (re)birth, encoding a new and unique experience of *compassio* mapped onto Mary's conception of Christ. Whatever one might think of this framing (and it is one that many medievalists will have a strong opinion about), the book's focused interest on the religious context leads to a number of conspicuous absences that serve as objections to its larger claims. I should make clear that these are not quibbling details, but that they profoundly call into question whether or not Powell's insights (and they are insights) regarding Marian models for women in romance can be meaningfully extended to the larger argument he makes about the origins and meaning of vernacular literature.

The first major absence can be found in the idea that European vernacular literature was born in the twelfth century.<sup>[2]</sup> True, Old French romance and a variety of other written vernacular genres appeared and flourished at that time. However, Old English (and Old Welsh) literature predate this development by centuries, and they are not incidental to Powell's argument. Britain was of course a site of both literary creation in Old French and the source of many of its early legends and conventions, which circulated in both written and oral form; Marie de France's *Lais* are an example of how this oral tradition was seen to relate to romance's themes, structure, and characters (not to mention Marie being an example of female literacy). It would have been illuminating for Powell to address this earlier history given the book's interest in locating romance's origins and meaning in particular twelfth-century theological developments.

Similarly, it would have been helpful to know how Powell views the concept of the audience's *compassio* as distinct from other forms of audience response (the book does not incorporate any performance theory), going back as far as Aristotle's concept of catharsis. If this difference is strictly one of content (Christian truth), it raises the question of whether the thrust of Powell's argument is more conceptually theological or historical. As it stands, a reader not already well-versed in medieval literature would come away from this book imagining that there was not a

written vernacular precedent for Old French literature, just as they would come away with the impression that scholars have as of yet uniformly failed to explain the appearance of European vernacular literature, when in fact there is ample evidence to account for the proliferation of vernacular writing in the twelfth century. They would not know that vernacular genres existed outside of romance and religious texts. They would believe that the evidence for female patronage, literacy, and involvement in literary culture is much thinner than it actually is. Such a reader would also believe that Old French literature was solely a clerical endeavor, and that clerical authorship could be assumed to imply a vested interest in theological concerns.[3] They would not know of the troubadours, nor that males suffer equally as much if not more in romance (and other genres) as do women. These readers are worth keeping in mind, even if they are not likely the intended audience for the book, because thinking through their eyes reveals what is at stake in these absences. Powell's evidence provides a fine foundation for an exploration of female suffering and the employment of Marian and related imagery and concepts in romance, and the works he examines are suited to that argument. For scholars of Old French literature, however, the book's omissions will stand out in its larger account of vernacular literature, particularly given that it references very few scholars of medieval French literature and rarely any recent work outside of the German context.

If we peer through this framing, however, we may see that Powell has provided us with an original reading of Old French and Middle High German literature, and it is one that brings real discoveries. It is exciting to see an ambitious attempt to rethink romance through gender, to untangle the relationship between vernacular fiction and religion, and to consider the affective or experiential connection between the two. There remains a great deal of work to do in this direction, and Powell's book has the potential to push the reader beyond the boundaries of their usual thoughts.

## NOTES

[1] For full transparency, my current research aims at this redefinition. See also Kathy Krause's article "Gender and Paradigm Shift in Old French Narrative, or What Happens When the Heroine Becomes a Hero," in Albrecht Classen ed., *Paradigm Shifts During the Global Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), pp. 65-79.

[2] This is how the book is framed in the first sentence of its blurb: "The twelfth century witnessed the birth of the modern western literary tradition."

[3] Powell refers to Wolfram's predecessors, including Chrétien de Troyes, as "avowedly clerical" (p. 301) though we do not in fact know whether Chrétien was a *clerc*, nor is there reason to assume that, in the twelfth century, basic clerical training signified a greater than average theological interest.

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