

Anna Czarnowus. *Fantasies of the Other's Body in Middle English Oriental Romance*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013. 233 strony.

Anna Czarnowus's book offers fresh approaches to the subject of 'other bodies', in the light of existing medieval scholarship on this topic (for example, the work of Jacqueline de Weever, Debra Higgs Strickland and Siobhain Bly Calkin). She also highlights the current interests of scholars in other disciplines, such as social science theorists with an interest in migration, diversity, national and ethnic identities. This leads her to re-examine the evidence offered by a selection of medieval romance texts.

Czarnowus begins with the observation that Europe in the Middle Ages was not uniformly Christian: there were substantial communities of Islam in Spain, and other non-Christians in North-Eastern Europe, the target of Baltic crusading. Ethnic and racial 'others' were also involved in trade with the Christian West. She goes on to present theories of the body put forward by medievalists, but supports and challenges this with the work of non-medievalists, a practice she continues with all the issues she discusses in her introductory section. She highlights in particular the work of Judith Butler and of Carolyn Walker Bynum on the 'constructedness' of the body – especially the female body – but Czarnowus does not confine herself to the female gender. She discusses the role of the oriental body in historical and cultural contexts, and offers research-based definitions of terms such as 'romance' and 'popular' in terms of romance texts. Her discussion of the idea of the Orient takes her beyond the seminal work of Edward Said with the work of later writers and theorists such as Raluca Radulescu, Gail Ashton and John Ganim. She notes Radulescu and Ashton's view of oriental bodies as 'disturbing images', and the medieval anxiety that such 'disturbance' could rub off onto Christian bodies with whom they made contact. In addition, she endorses Ganim's definition of the Orient as an imagined emptiness into which readers may project their own desires and fears. The literary Orient and Occident, she notes, were (and are) not related to 'real' world geography. Her definition of 'oriental' romance is those texts which can be defined as 'romances', set in the Orient, or which present oriental characters whose ethnic identity is important for the plot. In consequence, she regrets that romances such as *Guy of Warwick*, the *Otuel romances* or the *Siege of Melayne* could not be included under a strict definition of her criteria. The introduction is varied, detailed and careful... perhaps a little overloaded with theories, quotations and citations and therefore less accessible to more general readers: there might be a little less concentration on the detail of every theory. This breaks up the flow of the arguments at times, but it also offers an introduction to the abundance of applicable theories, and makes some interesting connections.

Having completed her introduction, Czarnowus breaks down the discussion into several sections, in which a set of issues is represented by a different romance text or set of texts. On the way, she introduces additional theoretic material, thereby adding value to her topic, but she applies this material to specific texts, rather than the more general application she employs in the introduction. This is much more satisfying and useful; it might have been better to make more of this, and to use less theoretical material in the introduction. Although her work is centered on Middle English works, Czarnowus uses Old French referents. Given the closeness of the relationship between the two literatures in a Francophone age, this is a very useful tool in interpretation.

Czarnowus begins with a well-known and 'accessible' text, Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*, which she associates with the *Ferumbras* group of romances in order to discuss the fantasy of the exoticized, female 'other' body. This body can be enhanced by the addition of magical objects and marvellous capabilities, to create and realize that body's potential for seduction, both sexual and cultural. This section also includes a definition and discussion of Lacan and Zizek's theories of objects of desire, and the offer of *jouissance*, and of Abrisco's ideas on forms of communication, which transcend languages and cultures. These are related both to the *Squire's Canace* and to the person of *Floripas* in the *Ferumbras* romances.

Czarnowus's analysis of *Richard le Coer de Lyon*, like her other work, begins with the not inconsiderable scholarship of others, particularly on the cannibalistic elements of the story.

Theoretically, she highlights Sigmund Freud's lesser-known, early, work on totems and taboos, the two most prominent of which are cannibalism and incest. She notes scholarship on monstrous races, and the (mostly Old French) birth legends concerning monstrous, shape-changing women, of which Richard's mother is an example. The associations made are also historical (in the context of the Crusades and of Richard I's wars against the Scots and the Welsh) and ideological (medieval theories not only of Crusade, but of revenge). In the person of Richard, not only is revenge achieved, but an English, Christian, Western culture consumes its Eastern, non-Christian 'other'. Other topics are the collective, rather than individual, nature of medieval society, Eucharist, alimentary incest, and theories (citing Kilgour) that cannibalism is motivated by both hatred, and love.

If the section on Richard le Coer de Lyon has much power and interest for the twenty-first century world, arguably more so does Czarnowus's section on Aucassin et Nicolette, paired with Floris and Blanchefleur. This centres on issues of otherness and gender in the context of geopolitical settings of slavery and human trafficking, in the medieval Mediterranean. These stories have an 'eastern' provenance, and feature slave bodies. The nature of slavery and hybridity is discussed, along with the body as palimpsest, and the 'whitening' (both actual and metaphorical) of colored skin as a result of Christian baptism. An important product of the discussion is the nature of human interaction with landscape, the loss of agency and identity through slavery, gender and love, and the objectification of the human. On conversion from Islam, a previous life is forgotten ... but like the palimpsest, can it really be erased? If it can, what parts of it can be reawakened by geographical setting?

Black giantesses in the *Firumbras* romances are linked to theories of the grotesque, and the monstrous races of wonder literature such as Mandeville's *Travels*. Making the black giantess a grotesque figure, says Czarnowus, is a way of dealing with the authority, or the power, represented by ethnically 'different' women. Carnavalesque presentation is a means of control, even of negation. The discussion centres mostly on the characters of Orable (from *Amiscans*), Amyote (in *Sir Ferumbras* – a return to the first chapter, on *Floripas*) and Estragot (in *The Sowden of Babylone*). The women are discussed as physical bodies, gendered constructions such as 'abnormal' mothers, and as creatures of the margin: Estragot is a devilish, bestial character who drinks human and animal blood, living on the margins of 'communal flesh'. Even if the giantess herself is beyond assimilation (not so in all cases), her children can be changed to white and 'normal', and assimilated, by means of Christian baptism – in common with many of the other 'bodies' discussed in the book.

The penultimate section of the book concerns the story of King Horn, and the otherness of a young man in the process of 'becoming'. Czarnowus argues that Horn becomes a temporarily ethnic and cultural other in his own land, before leaving it to become 'other' in other people's kingdoms. Having lost his own father and in search of revenge for that death, he finds, or adopts – or is adopted by – a series of surrogate fathers. However, at the moment of becoming settled he always has to move on in search of his revenge, a motive to which his love (for Rymenhild) remains secondary throughout. The narrative displays grades and levels of otherness, says Czarnowus... the young male other (Horn), the female other (Rymenhild), the giant, the Saracens and King Murry. Discussion returns to Žižek and his expansion of Lacan's theories of the Real (the Real in the Middle Ages is God, and religion is *jouissance*) to link erotic/sexual and religious desire, and the deferral of desire's fulfilment. This is an interesting interpretation, which goes outside and beyond current (somewhat sparse) scholarship on this poem. This section demonstrates once again that the theoretical underpinning is best when related to particular applications, rather than in a 'disembodied' fashion (no pun intended!) at the beginning.

Finally, the elements of magic, exoticism, monstrosity and gendered displacement are brought together in an assessment of King Alisaunder. Alexander is a hybrid, a young man born from lust and magical intervention, who uses killing and conquest to gain entry to society and 'sameness' as opposed to 'otherness'. This is highlighted by the presence in his story of the monstrous races he encounters – and frequently overcomes – on his martial journeys. The romance, of course, contains the famous 'letter' in which these races are described. By killing the outsider Pausanias,

Alexander aligns himself fully with his surrogate father Philip of Macedonia: his own ‘otherness’ is set against the ‘greater otherness’ of the magical and the monstrous who inhabit the tale. Putting the stories into a historical context, Czarnowus maintains that Alexander’s conquest of India is a metaphor for the conquests which Christian crusaders (and maybe Christian kingdoms with enemies closer to home, such as England and France) wished to conquer for themselves.

This is a very useful book, part of a very good series. Physically, it is of a good size – not too short, not too long – and some very interesting texts are represented. The overall theme is very much in vogue at the moment, and the treatment of the issues within it covers a great deal of interesting ground. In addition to providing information, theories and ideas for scholars and academics, it opens up a variety of fresh applications. The setting out of theories and definitions at the outset – if somewhat distanced from particular texts – offers ideas for discussion, and the subsequent chapters present themes and texts ripe for further exploration. This is a ‘neat’ book in all senses of the word. The individual chapters are full and complete in themselves, and could be used for ‘stand-alone’ project work. The bibliographical information is, likewise, full and well presented, to enable further reading on individual topics and themes. It is, obviously, a ‘book of the thesis’ and weaknesses of indigestibility may stem from that, but Anna Czarnowus is a new, interesting thinker and a good researcher. She has set out her ideas well, in such a way as to be both informative and useful for her readers. Her book is a very promising addition to the scholarship on this subject.

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Antonio Catalfamo. 2015. *Variazioni sulla rosa*. Edizioni Tabula fati. Chieti. 120 stron.

La raccolta poetica *Variazioni sulla rosa* di Antonio Catalfamo costituisce il punto di arrivo di una maturazione poetica lunga e fruttuosa, basata sull’attenta e accorata osservazione del mondo e sull’approfondita conoscenza di filosofi e lirici della tradizione italiana. Cesare Pavese prima di tutti, scrittore che Antonio Catalfamo esplora da molti anni attraverso saggi, articoli ed il coordinamento dell’«Osservatorio permanente sugli studi pavesiani nel mondo». L’influenza pavesiana si fa avvertire in alcuni componimenti del volume, sia in quelli che appaiono debitori della raccolta *Lavorare stanca* – si veda l’impiego del modulo della poesia racconto nella lirica *Il nido* – sia quelli influenzati dalle ultime poesie di Cesare Pavese (*Il nome*). Un debito che, quando c’è, va al di là dei contenuti, poiché si evidenzia anche nella tessitura ritmica del testo poetico, nella riproduzione del tipico andamento del verso pavesiano. Tuttavia, il rapporto con Pavese non esaurisce la poesia di Antonio Catalfamo: lo scrittore piemontese appare solo il punto di partenza per una ricerca lirica personale. Benché la riflessione pavesiana sul rapporto tra realtà e mito costituisca la base su cui poggia anche la sua poetica, Catalfamo si affianca a Pavese affrancandosene, guardando a lui come a un fratello maggiore da seguire con attenzione, ma senza assoggettamento.

Anche l’immagine della donna – la grande protagonista di questa raccolta (la rosa del titolo cela e simboleggia l’amata) – sembrerebbe risentire del condizionamento pavesiano. Tuttavia la sensualità in queste liriche è armoniosa, la figura femminile è una forza in sintonia con la natura e finisce con l’identificarsi con essa (è il giardino dell’infanzia ricco di frutti). La donna dunque non è – come in Pavese – fonte di delusione e annichimento maschile quanto attesa trepidante, incontro che si realizza sulla nuda terra (come nella poesia *L’uliveto*), unione che restituisce all’uomo la gioia primitiva: “È bello sentire il respiro/della donna che dorme./ il corpo che emana calore./come terra appena zappata (*Corpo di donna*)”. Una delle figure che si ripete con più frequenza in queste liriche è l’epifania: la scoperta della donna, l’incontro con la sua irresistibile forza pagana, la rivelazione che porta armonia e rivela l’uomo a se stesso. La donna nella poesia di Catalfamo è la promessa o il sogno di un ricongiungimento con gli elementi primordiali, la liberazione dall’angustiante prigione dell’inferno di una società ebete