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Françoise Meltzer. *For Fear of the Fire: Joan of Arc and the Limits of Subjectivity*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001. x + 240 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$52.00 US (cl). ISBN 0-226-51981-3. \$20.00 US (pb). ISBN 0-226-51982-1.

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Academics, film-makers, playwrights, politicians, and even just plain folks over the centuries have found Joan of Arc inspiring, exasperating, ridiculous, and sublime. For Françoise Meltzer, the treatment of Joan in theoretical texts has duplicated and amplified these responses. Meltzer takes Joan of Arc as a figure through whom we can analyze differentiated notions of the body, agency, and gendered configurations of subjectivity through critical theory. From a careful reading of contemporary texts and the larger Christian frame of understandings of female embodiment, Meltzer uses Joan of Arc to challenge the gendered blind spots in the theorization of subjectivity.

Meltzer opens by briefly considering how the range of images of Joan of Arc has functioned since the fifteenth century. The lack of reliable or consistent contemporary images allows each generation to impose its vision of how to order the competing gender imperatives (masculine and feminine) of Joan's story (p. 6). As every interpretation privileges specific notions of how charismatic courage and gender roles ought to combine, Joan herself recedes. That is, historical distance has elided Joan's subjectivity and feminine subjectivity more generally. But, Meltzer argues, Joan's story can reveal how patriarchy maintains sovereignty in opposition to the feminine. Joan's trial represents a moment in which patriarchal hegemony was questioned and reveals a series of metaphysical conundrums focused on Joan's (female) body.

Already, then, Joan of Arc's historical self is less important to Meltzer than the ways Joan may be used to consider pre-Cartesian notions of subjectivity against the postmodern crisis of subjectivity. Meltzer's interest is in revisiting notions of embodiment as they were articulated by early Christians and revitalized in postmodern debates about the body. In Chapter 1, for instance, Meltzer traces notions of embodiment from Althusser back to Spinoza and forward to Heidegger, with Joan and her contemporaries largely absent. Joan functions as a prism through which Meltzer explores problems of subjectivity and instability in postmodernism. The analysis of Althusser's body politics allows Meltzer to consider the fascination, beginning in Late Antiquity, with saints whose mind and body were seen as one. This unity, Meltzer posits, represents postmodern nostalgia for a presumed mind/body unison before Descartes. Where the postmodern move has been to understand the body as subject to culture, Althusser's efforts to feel embodiment through physicality reflect the postmodern anxiety that subjectivity is fragile and fragmentary because it is so rarely a matter of certainty. Meltzer's use of theoretical materials to the exclusion of primary sources may not be satisfying to historians, and she is silent concerning Caroline Bynum's forceful assertion that the "Middle Ages was characterized by a cacophony of discourses" about the body.^[1] Nonetheless, Meltzer does point out that one discernible trend in recent theoretical and historical understandings of the body has been to elaborate on the notion of a thinking body before the Enlightenment. She brings this out by tracing aspects of the history of the body from Late Antiquity to Descartes.

A crucial aspect of the history of the body is attitudes toward virginity. In a circuitous but intriguing analysis, Meltzer asserts that Greco-Roman notions about virginity operated (like Late Antique notions of embodiment) to structure the social codes that constrained Joan of Arc. The wandering womb in Greco-Roman philosophy and medicine was matched in many ways by the uncontrollable penis, but self-control was considered a male virtue while female chastity was an affliction-- at best a temporary life stage; at worst a fatal medical condition (pp. 53-58). According to the author, the association of virginity and death has been depicted as parallel to masculine subjectivity as self-contained and self-evident, particularly in modern theory. For Meltzer, then, postmodern nostalgia with respect to the body is deeply entangled with a Judeo-Christian inheritance of the association of sex and death derived from ancient sexual morality. Foucault's analysis of the lack of separation of mind and body in his reading of John Cassian and Kristeva's fascination with the highly problematic feminine model of the Virgin Mary are among Meltzer's examples of such nostalgia in postmodern theory. Omitting reference to the complex understandings of the body discovered by medievalists in a number of disciplines, the author opts for the familiar dichotomy of body as feminine and mind as masculine. Perhaps the limited use of source material--the closest Meltzer gets to Joan of Arc in the sources is Gregory IX's 1220 order in support of using midwives to examine women in cases of divorce (p. 69)--produces this reductive view of medieval thought. On the other hand, Meltzer suggests how ideas about virginity came to saturate postmodern efforts to understand the discursive power of Christianity as an element in European identity.

Joan of Arc's role in Meltzer's story is as an heir to early Christian body politics and, in particular, her relationship to the strictures and structures around virginity. Asserting trans-historical claims about the stability of cultural codes surrounding virginity, Meltzer further posits that the association of the feminine with mystery works out in highly conflicted ways in understandings of virginity. She argues that the secondary status of the feminine that results from conceptualizing virginity as an impossible alterity (the woman who is a virgin is not fundamentally a woman) allows theorists such as Levinas, Freud, and Nietzsche to reinscribe the feminine as a trope of mystery (pp. 61-64). When the eighteenth-century philosopher Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon called virginity a male fantasy, Meltzer notes that he was unusual in recognizing that the notions of bodily intactness and mental purity ascribed to virginity were ascertained only when annihilated. [2] She charges that postmodern theorists have ignored Buffon in their dismantling of the subject, preferring to see femininity as a mysterious riddle, so that the transparency and stability of the male subject remains secure. For Meltzer, this means that virginity allows women to claim subjectivity infrequently, and it remains contested and qualified at best.

Meltzer then returns to Late Antiquity to examine the emergence of paradoxical thinking in the Catholic tradition about virginity. She focuses on several elements: Because virginity is against nature, it is admired as proof of fortitude against nearly insurmountable instincts; virginity allows transcendence even as it depends on the denial of bodily drives; and that which goes against nature can also easily turn monstrous (pp. 83-88). In Meltzer's view, those ideas were combined with the emergence, by the fifteenth century, of the idea that the loss of the maidenhead by carnal knowledge became irremediable, while virginity was taken as proof of sincerity. Utilizing records from the Trial of Condemnation that discuss Joan's virginity, she locates Joan as the heir to a tradition that uses virginity to claim dedication of one's life to God. For the author, women especially had to accept virginity in order to take on a role of strength outside of normal gender expectations: The pious virgin had some room to legitimize her discourse as a self-proclaimed ascetic, claiming some subjectivity despite her lack of agency as a woman.

Meltzer sees the female ascetic as slightly breaking down the binaries of subjectivity, but she also contends that both modern theorists and Joan's adversaries found this instability troubling. Both critical theorists and deconstructionists, according to Meltzer, do not quite get out of the bind that female subjectivity presents. Horkheimer and Adorno, for instance, argue that physical weakness elicits misogyny and victimization such that political powerlessness is conflated with weakness, while not

recognizing that weakness is human--not merely female. Meltzer reads Derrida as reinscribing feminine erasure by subsuming it under a masculine and phallogocentric understanding of the apocalyptic. Meltzer does not locate these readings either within or against medieval notions of the apocalyptic, except to argue that Joan fashions her own understanding of the apocalyptic as linked to her virginity. She here concurs with earlier scholarship, remarking, "Joan's Trial of Condemnation, which begins as purely political inquiry, turns more and more to the theological in its obsessive questioning" (p. 115). While I suspect historians may object to her deeply pessimistic reading of the possibilities for subjectivity, the key for Meltzer is how both iterations of the discussion of subjectivity--medieval and modern--can act in different ways to impose silence.

While historical tradition, Church authority and theoretical analyses have combined to obscure how Joan of Arc challenges the erasures of feminine subjectivity, Meltzer uses these same elements to bring out Joan's subjectivity. Working off Georges Bataille's account of the noble brigand Gilles de Rais, she compares and contrasts Joan and Rais. Executed in 1440, Rais was accused of molesting and murdering children, as well as with consorting with the devil. Like Joan, he initially rejected the authority of the Church, but he repented when threatened with torture. As a result, Rais was subjected to a milder form of execution and buried in consecrated ground. Meltzer argues that the difference in how Rais was treated brings out the political implications of Joan's conflicts with the Church concerning her understanding of the occult. Critical of Bataille's analysis for blurring the distinction between the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant, Meltzer contends that the Church of Joan's day worked on the basis of an economy of sin that requires excess--of sin and then of love--in order for the Church to control forgiveness (p. 137). She argues that Bataille's account of Rais depicts him as entering this economy; Joan, on the other hand, by resolutely maintaining that her religious experience was personal and private (*occulta*), did not. Meltzer reads the documentation of the Trial of Condemnation in terms of Joan infuriating the court because she had nothing religious to atone for. The nature of the trial, she argues, shifted because Joan left the Church no room to forgive her. For Meltzer, the heavy concentration on technical points and the punishment of Joan for her refusal to admit she had sinned represent a modern notion of mysticism as personal and private, which is elided in Meltzer's analysis with subjectivity.

Meltzer contends that Joan's dissonance with respect to Church authority was crucial to the active denial of her subjectivity. Citing the general patristic hostility toward women, she opens with the assertion that Joan inspired enormous fear in her male judges simply because she was female. Admitting that Joan was probably ignorant of the Church fathers in any substantive way, Meltzer nonetheless frames Joan within a patristic discourse that posited a woman was open to sin in a way that a man was not because of the porous quality of her body as the result of her open vagina. The patristic line continues with the familiar claim that a woman's hands were supposed to stay busy so that her other opening--the analogue to the vagina--her mouth, would stay shut (p. 146). While omitting any direct evidence concerning what the judges actually thought, Meltzer locates Joan in this context of hostility and suspicion and then reads Joan as making a distinction between the clergy and the Church as the provider of the Mass and Communion.

Meltzer argues that Joan, despite being able to make this distinction, consecrated her virginity to the Faith without recognizing that the Church, as a discourse of power, had every interest in denying her the ability to make that decision for herself. She accordingly reads the interrogation transcripts as indicating that the Church had decided Joan's voices, virginity, and even her mission, sprang from the Devil rather than God. If, as Meltzer maintains, virginity was especially useful for women as a mode of subjectivity, virginity was also the locus of danger. In the author's reading, the danger is evident in that the court had decided Joan's fate even before the trial, in part because Joan did not acknowledge the power of the court, and in part because she fit so well into a schema that divested her of autonomy as a matter of anatomy. While Meltzer's argument is problematic with respect to proving immediate contextual actions or agency, the suggestion that subjectivity might reside historically in the loci of

repression is intriguing.

As the author is well aware, the status of Joan's voices was central to her trial, and she discusses how both subjectivity and silence may have played out in Joan's case. Meltzer compares Joan's lack of an effective voice to cases of possession. As Michel de Certeau pointed out, the possessed woman transgresses discourse because something she does not know speaks in her.^[3] Meltzer argues that Joan, in contrast, did know the identities of her voices: Joan explained during her interrogations that she recognized the archangel Michael, along with saints Catherine and Margaret. Meltzer interprets Joan's certainty about the identities of her voices as the source of her logical, lucid responses during interrogation. Furthermore, Meltzer sees Joan's calm assurance as provoking a great deal of anxiety among those who examined her. She reads this anxiety both as the reason why Joan was asked to swear to the truth repeatedly and why Joan found the request bewildering and eventually exasperating. Meltzer sees Joan's frustration as indicating that she understood language in an immediate sense (the sign is the signified), and only gradually did she come to understand that the court had appropriated the right to reinterpret her speech (p. 155). For Meltzer, Joan's status as a non-subject was because she was a woman, which permitted the Church to re-appropriate her voice. While perhaps valid for Joan, the claim that she was denied subjectivity as a woman is a bit of a stretch. The idea that no medieval subjects were women seems unsupportable, and Meltzer does not allow for the rendering of other (male) individuals as non-subject, often, for example, by effeminizing them.

Meltzer's challenging penultimate chapter analyzes the gendering of the metaphysical gaze almost entirely within a male/female gender economy. Opening with the observation that we are prone to metaphor when faced with the impossible, Meltzer dismantles the apparent gender neutrality of metaphysics in Hegel and Plato. She considers Luce Irigaray's notion that women do not yet exist as a metaphysical problem to be a more honest attempt at gender neutrality, but finds Irigaray's Ethical Couple to be too utopian. More importantly, Meltzer feels that Irigaray ends up effacing the feminine all over again. She argues that "the illusion of subjectivity is more easily maintained from the male perspective and more easily veiled" (p. 178). Absent in Meltzer's considerations is much reference to medieval views that construed the masculine and the feminine in more complicated (that is, not always or necessarily binary) ways. Nor does she, despite her focus on theory, seem to consider the possibility that queer theory might disrupt the normative valences of the masculine and feminine. The absence of queer theory is striking given that the link back to Joan is the question of veiling, which Meltzer actually reads in a rather queer way. Fire, which is both a metaphor and, in Joan's case, the cause of her death, partakes of veiling. Meltzer picks up Gaston Bachelard's analysis of fire as masculine because it is warm and smoke as feminine because it veils and is changeable, and takes his claims further: fire is multivalent because it is both virile and feminine (p. 83).^[4]

Many of the disparate elements of this difficult chapter come together when Meltzer starts to draw on Jules Quicherat's five volumes of documents recounting Joan's death. She uses them to explicate how Joan's execution and its immediate aftermath feed into considerations of modernity and national identity. Burning a heretic, the author notes, is also a metaphor—one that is organized around rituals of expiation, repentance, and reintegration. Meltzer breaks down the failure of the metaphor in Joan's case, pointing out that the usual practice—in which the Church turned over the condemned heretic for trial and execution by the secular arm—was not followed in Joan's case. The morning after her Church trial, she was taken to the Old Marketplace of Rouen in order to hear the sermon exhorting her to repent and then her condemnation. The ritual in the Marketplace was carried out shortly after Joan disavowed her voices briefly, and probably, Meltzer reasonably contends, so that she could receive Communion (p. 192).

The Trial documents record that Joan denied she had recanted at all, saying that if she did, she did so "for fear of the fire" (p. 188). Witnesses, even hostile ones, Meltzer points out, agreed on two things: Joan's burning elicited piteous cries and that she reportedly said "Jesus" at the last moment. In the belief

structure of the fifteenth century, she could only do that if her faith was genuine (p. 199). Joan's body was then displayed to the crowd. Whether this was to show that she was not a man, as Meltzer contends, or perhaps to insist that Joan was merely human, the act of display is described by Meltzer as "most heinous" (p. 200). Whether contemporaries saw it that way is less significant to the author than the eyewitness report that a dove flew out of the fire at the moment of Joan's death and headed toward the Ile-de-France. A sign of the Holy Spirit, the dove, Meltzer contends, contradicts the claims of the Church about Joan and her death, and it encourages what the author sees as incipient doubts about the Church's position throughout the ritual of the execution. If the dove assured Joan's contemporaries that she was a member of the Christian community, Meltzer further argues that the flight of the dove toward France situated Joan in a patriotic discourse, with Joan as the opponent of foreign invasion on behalf of Charles VII.

Joan as the patriotic figure committed to Charles VII as a leader in the abstract (rather than a specific individual) leads Meltzer back to nostalgia, and particularly to Joan as a figure of nostalgia. Jules Michelet's understanding of Joan as offering feminine sympathy, innocence, and emotional authenticity in an increasingly industrial and "unscrupulous" world does much to construct Joan in nostalgic terms (p. 225). Meltzer contrasts Michelet's idealized depiction of Joan with Voltaire's ribald, irreverent image of Joan in *La Pucelle d'Orléans*. She uses the juxtaposition of Michelet and Voltaire to highlight their distance from each other (over the chasm of the Revolution) and their combined distance from postmodern interpretations of Joan. Voltaire's lack of nostalgia enables Meltzer to return to her premise that postmodern thought is steeped in nostalgia for certainty.

While she sees Michelet's idealism as "pathetic, if brilliant," his reveries on Joan point to what postmodernism picks up on and Voltaire ignores about Joan: the element of mystery (p. 231). Postmodern struggles with the problem of mystery are discernible for Meltzer in the attempts to interpret Joan's voices in rational terms. The nostalgia for mystery and the hope that there may be "something beyond human reason," combines at best uncomfortably with the desire for certainty in postmodern thinking (p. 234). For Meltzer, separating the feminine from the mysterious, "might also allow for a clearer sense of how we imagine, and need, an impossible that we are willing to believe in without willing to know (understand) it" (p. 239). In short, Meltzer sees such a separation as a way to rethink subject formation, on the one hand, without reliance on the male subject and, on the other, with an understanding of subjectivity as illusory.

Of course, Meltzer has indicated how unlikely such an unencumbered view of subjectivity would be: Subjectivity has been, in her account, both overdetermined by gender and gendered masculine. She nonetheless raises the question of what imagining subjectivity might mean outside a binary frame. Joan of Arc's understanding of mystery and the sacred- signaled by her lack of comprehension that her position was radical- offers a glimpse outside the frame. Articulating Joan of Arc in this way is Meltzer's nostalgic moment, but it also suggests the many ways Joan continues to resonate even in a postmodern age.

NOTES

[1] Caroline Bynum, "Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (1995): 1-33. Reprinted in Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Culture and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 241-80, at p. 245.

[2] While Meltzer focuses on the early Christian tradition, discussions of bodily intactness as dependent on the hymen remained lively in the early modern period; see for instance Ambroise Paré, *Deux Livres de la Chirurgie* (Paris, 1573).

[3] Meltzer does not cite an edition, but the relevant text is Michel de Certeau, *The Possession at Loudon*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

[4] Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, trans. Alan C. M. Ross (Boston, 1964). Oddly, Meltzer notes a range of evidence concerning ideas about the gendering of fire, but none of it is medieval.

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