
H-France Review Vol. 15 (February 2015), No. 30

Phyllis Gaffney, *Constructions of Childhood and Youth in Old French Narrative*. Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2011. viii + 236 pp. Bibliography and index. £55; \$99.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-7546-6920-3.

Review by Juanita Feros Ruys, University of Sydney.

Phyllis Gaffney addresses her study of the constructions of childhood and youth in Old French narrative with a manifest enthusiasm for and confident familiarity with the source texts. There is much to recommend this book in terms of its detailed evocation of childhood in the French epic and romance genres of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Gaffney has clearly immersed herself over the course of many years of scholarship in the numerous medieval French texts that depict childhood (around sixty discrete narratives are considered plus multiple variations of individual tales), and her sympathetic approach to these narratives and their subjects is clear. Gaffney's primary methodology is literary, and specifically generic, as she aims to elucidate differences in the constructions of childhood between the two main literary forms of the epic and the romance. (She considers a third hybrid form of the two, the *enfances* narrative, in a final chapter.) In the course of her study, she provides adumbrated plot summaries for many of these narratives. A further boon to the reader is the accessibility of Gaffney's scholarship, as she always provides clear English translations, not only of the medieval texts she cites, but also of any contemporary scholarship not in English. For these reasons, anyone wanting an overview of Old French narrative texts that deal with childhood and adolescence in the high Middle Ages could do no better than consult Gaffney's monograph.

It may seem churlish, then, to find fault with such a book, but my concerns relate not to what this book does, which is scholarly and serviceable, but rather to what it fails to do, but could have done, with the material it had to hand. Broadly, I find too much left unquestioned in this volume. My concerns coalesce around the relationship of genre to culture, the question of audience, and methodological approaches to medieval studies and medievalism.

In many ways, I was surprised to come to the final chapter, "A Slow Conversion of Sensibility," only to find some of the questions that had been raised in my mind throughout the book finally being addressed as conclusions. I believe much of the material discussed here would have functioned more effectively if it had been placed up-front as introductory matter. It is here, for instance, that Gaffney makes explicit the cultural impact of genre, noting that genres reflect deeper cultural values (pp. 179, 181). While this is true, Gaffney does not provide a sense of the cultural values that intersect with the genres she studies. Rather her approach through the three main chapters of her study remains insistently descriptive, as narrative after narrative is rehearsed in detail, while connections with cultural developments in the wider social sphere remain unconsidered. It is clear that such analyses are possible, for Gaffney occasionally inserts into her rehearsal of narrative plot lines the extra-generic reading of a tale undertaken by other scholars (as for instance, Thelma Fenster's Freudian reading of the *Aye d'Avignon* as a "family romance", p. 84), but she does not offer like commentary herself. [1]

As an example, when Gaffney mentions the syllabus that the young prince Alexander is said to have received from his tutor Aristotle in the *Roman d'Alexandre* (p. 152), it would have been interesting to

note how this compared with contemporary school curricula and how it referenced the growing influence of Aristotle as a pedagogic source at this period in the medieval West. Similarly, it seems remarkable that Gaffney could note the pervasive anti-Semitism attributed to the young Jesus in *enfances* narratives (p. 174), not only without any comment on the relation between these narratives and the position of Jews within European Christian society at this time, but even without a footnote to direct the interested reader to any research on the matter.

Indeed, it was in this chapter on the *enfances* narratives that I felt Gaffney's study broadened momentarily as she sought to answer questions about social and cultural developments rather than simply rehearsing the plot lines of tales. This appeared to be because *enfance* narratives not only disrupt traditional generic categories, but also remain themselves under question as a distinguishable genre. However, Gaffney swiftly returns to her former methodology, and in the process, potential lines of enquiry that had briefly become perceptible narrow again to the rehearsal of individual narratives and the consideration of whether each might be considered predominantly epic or romance. I also found it surprising that the question of the audience of these childhood narratives was not raised until the final few pages of the book (p. 193).

Gaffney draws the conclusion, and it would certainly appear to be supported by her research, that "the gender of these childhoods remains masculine" (p. 175). Yet so much more could have been done with the question of gender here. While I accept Gaffney's assertion that there is much less material on young women to work with in these Old French narratives, I also note that key scholarship in the field has not been brought into play to elucidate the scant references that do exist. For instance, the useful resources, *Young Medieval Women* and *The Premodern Teenager: Youth in Society, 1150-1650*, have not been cited and do not appear in the Bibliography. [2] A number of chapters in the latter volume in particular would appear to be directly relevant to Gaffney's study as they deal with the female gaze upon young knights and the question of how the adolescence of young medieval women could be conceptualized and delimited.

Moreover, where Gaffney notes that "The detailed education programme of the knight has no counterpart in the education of young girls" (p. 155), this would have been the perfect opportunity for Gaffney to contrast the situation with contemporary didactic literature and examine what educational programs were being developed for girls in that genre. Because her focus remains steadfastly on the genres of epic and romance, however, Gaffney does not move her study in this direction. Indeed, I felt that the didactic literature of the period could have provided a very useful comparison and alternative point of access throughout the book to the narratives of young people and their growth and education, but this genre remains almost unconsidered until the concluding chapter where its appearance seems somewhat belated.

In general, I felt that the usage and understanding of medieval texts outside of Gaffney's chosen genres was wanting. For instance, Andreas Capellanus's *De amore* is cited as though it can be used as an unproblematic guide to the mores of medieval love against which the narratives of romance can be measured (p. 120). It is well known, however, that Andreas's text is difficult, dangerous, certainly satirical, and no reliable authority on anything it claims to know and relate.[3] Similarly, William of Conches is no longer considered to be the author of the *Moralium dogma philosophorum* (p. 55). While this attribution does not invalidate any of Gaffney's conclusions, it does contribute to the impression that her knowledge of wider medieval intellectual culture outside her chosen childhood narratives, and therefore of how these narratives might relate to that culture, is limited.

A key example of this is the category of experience which recurs through Gaffney's study. She notes the "experience" of her young protagonists, and even refers to them as learning through experience, without appearing to recognize what a revolutionary development this constitutes. Experience as an epistemological approach to learning was growing in significance (although it was not uncontested)

throughout the period Gaffney is examining (the twelfth to thirteenth centuries), and its increasing presence and importance in childhood narratives as the means by which the child actor learns could have been adduced and discussed as a major contribution to the emerging history of experiential learning.

I was concerned at the use of Northern British colloquialisms in the discussion and translation of these Old French narratives. The word 'bairn' is used at least once to describe a young protagonist, and the term 'lad' recurs frequently. My feeling is that such colloquialisms are not only inappropriate for an academic study, but particularly out of place when translating texts from an entirely different cultural milieu, in this case, Old French.

I also felt there were issues with Gaffney's understanding of James A. Schultz's aims in his 1995 study *The Knowledge of Childhood in the German Middle Ages, 1100-1350*, and how this text might relate to her own enquiries.[4] Gaffney notes in her introductory pages that "Schultz stresses the radical alterity and cultural specificity of medieval childhood" (p. 10), without appearing to recognize that this reflects his ideological positioning with regard to the field of Medieval Studies in general. Schultz's alterist approach, which is readily apparent in his co-authored introduction and individual contribution to *Constructing Medieval Sexuality* (1997), will inevitably influence what he finds in terms of continuities and disconnects between the medieval past and the present. Although Gaffney claims that "the present study shares some of Schultz's approaches and conclusions" (p. 184), I am not convinced that she does indeed share Schultz's radical positioning with regard to the alterity of the Middle Ages. The differences between her study and Schultz's will not simply reflect the difference between Old French and Middle High German texts and cultures, but also the different methodological standpoints of these two authors. Gaffney does not define her approach to her textual material in terms of current methodologies in Medieval Studies, and I feel that this oversight of such a large question, which will shed much light on, and indeed in part determine, what she looks for in her texts and what she finds there, indicates an approach to textual study in the Middle Ages that lacks important theorization.

In her final pages, Gaffney sums up the differences she has elucidated between Old French epic and romance approaches to the construction of childhood and offers: "This may seem a somewhat modest conclusion" (p. 185). I am inclined to agree. Gaffney has read and processed a vast number of texts to produce this monograph, yet many potentially instructive lines of enquiry raised by this material and its reception in both its own context and ours have been overlooked in favour of a determined focus on the genres of epic and romance. Gaffney's study is entirely scholarly and will be extremely useful for students and researchers working in the field of Old French literature. It is just that it could have done so much more than it does.

NOTES

[1] Thelma Fenster, "The Family Romance of *Aye d'Avignon*," *Romance Quarterly*, 33 (1986), 11-22.

[2] Katherine J. Lewis, Noël James Menuge, and Kim M. Phillips, eds., *Young Medieval Women* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999); Konrad Eisenbichler, ed., *The Premodern Teenager: Youth in Society, 1150-1650* (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2002).

[3] Don A. Monson, *Andreas Capellanus, Scholasticism, and the Courtly Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005); Kathleen Andersen-Wyman, *Andreas Capellanus on Love? Desire, Seduction, and Subversion in a Twelfth-Century Latin Text* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[4] James A. Schultz, *The Knowledge of Childhood in the German Middle Ages, 1100-1350* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); and, ed. with Karma Lochrie and Peggy McCracken, *Constructing Medieval Sexuality* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), "Introduction" and a later chapter, "Bodies That Don't Matter: Heterosexuality before Heterosexuality in Gottfried's *Tristan*" (pp. 91-110).

Juanita Feros Ruys
University of Sydney
juanita.ruys@sydney.edu.au

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172