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Laine E. Doggett and Daniel E. O'Sullivan, eds., *Founding Feminisms in Medieval Studies: Essays in Honor of E. Jane Burns*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2016. 280 pp. Illustrations, list of illustrations, list of contributors, and index. \$99.00 (cl). ISBN 978-1-84384-427-3

Review by Stephen G. Nichols, Johns Hopkins University

Few colleagues, I imagine, would gainsay E. Jane Burns's signal role as a pioneer of medieval French literary feminist studies in the United States. She was influential in the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* (founded in 1985), and the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship from its inception in 1992. These dates remind us that medieval French feminist scholarship developed somewhat belatedly when compared with other disciplines. Two historians, Louise Fargo Brown (Vassar College) and Louise Ropes Loomis (Wells College) founded a women's conference--the "Lakeville History Group--in 1930, which subsequently became the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians. Even in French literary studies, the Middle Ages trailed later periods. Modernist scholars like Joan DeJean, Nancy K. Miller, Susan Suleiman, Marianne Hirsch, and others pioneered feminist scholarship in French studies from the mid-1970s. A group of seven Dartmouth scholars produced a feminist issue of *Yale French Studies*: "Feminist Readings: French Texts/American Contexts," in 1981.[1]

To understand the underlying force of feminist scholarship, its urgency at the time, it helps to recognize that it was not simply another theory or critical mode (though it was those as well), but constituted a social movement responding to the bias of credentialing and governing bodies prevalent in American academia at the time. Marginalization fostered an anomie on the part of young women scholars, which the Dartmouth French feminists expressed eloquently. They saw the ambivalent role of women in the academy as rooted in a "divided consciousness," a 'split in each of us' between our inherited discipline and our feminist practice....[F]inding ourselves in the uneasy position...[of] aliens and marginals in a tradition we have come to consider inherently male, we have been led to envision other relational possibilities." [2]

The main title of the Burns Festschrift, *Founding Feminisms in Medieval Studies*, occasions these framing remarks by way of clarifying the implicit claim in the adjective, "founding." In light of the belated arrival of feminism in American medieval French studies, the title should not be misconstrued as making foundational claims for feminist medieval studies, but rather as describing the nature of Professor Burns's work as interpreter and innovative shaper of medieval "feminisms" in French medieval studies. Professor Burns's true contribution, in short, lay in her ability to recognize the rapid evolution of feminist studies from which she shaped innovative research protocols. Elizabeth Robertson, in her excellent reflection that concludes this volume, traces the trajectory from "feminist" to "feminisms" studies as follows. "The study of women in the European past has developed dramatically...but paradoxically the more we learned about women, the more difficult it has become to ask questions about them. To begin with, feminist medieval studies followed women's studies, which evolved first into gender studies and then into the study of gender and sexuality, which, in turn, developed into the study of queer identities...Early second-wave feminism, rightly criticized for its blindness to race and class, gave way to a new movement dedicated to

the study of intersectionalities of race, class, and gender. In the wake of these developments, the term 'woman' has been effectively deconstructed and replaced with many possible identities associated with various sexual orientations; feminism has been replaced with the term 'feminisms'; and LGB organizations have now expanded their title to LGBTQ+" (pp. 238-239).

Unfortunately for the terminological coherence of the volume, the editors' use of "feminist" and "feminisms" appears to intersect at times rather than diverge into a plurality of identity issues in accord with Professor Robertson's description. They describe Professor Burns's work, for example, as "...combin[ing] all the terms of our volume's title--*Founding Feminisms in Medieval Studies*--as it interweaves feminist questions, analysis, and theory to make foundational contributions to the field of feminist medieval studies..." (p. 3). Their own explanation of the term, however, lacks Robertson's epistemological precision: "We deliberately use the plural form, *feminisms*, to signal the diversity of topics and approaches in feminist scholarship" (p. 2). It seems logical to maintain an epistemological--rather than a simple grammatical--distinction between the two forms if "feminist" implies a binary differentiation (as in early feminist studies), while "feminisms" opens up a plurality of subjects and identities.

The distinction is far from trivial, for on it depends the nature of the critical enterprise. Studies undertaken under the aegis of "feminisms," as Robertson indicates, will align themselves with post-modern contemporary modes, such as identitarian politics. "Feminist" pieces, on the other hand, may contextualize the historical role of women in medieval literary works. The former, in short, tends to downplay the medieval context in favor of showing the deep roots of contemporary post-human and identitarian concerns. The latter examines aspects of female culture to illuminate previously overlooked aspects of medieval society. Both offer valuable insights, but from very different perspectives.

While it would be tempting to characterize the essays in this volume as falling within the ambit of one or the other of these modes--although most in fact do reference aspects of them--the collection goes beyond core feminist issues. As Elizabeth Robertson notes: "In my own area of medieval English studies it seems that most recently manuscripts and form--at times from the perspective of theory--generate much more excitement than the study of women or even of gender more broadly conceived" (p. 239).

The rubrics chosen by the editors for the four groups of essays confirm this observation. Only the first, "Debating Gender," may be seen as adhering to the "feminist/feminisms" category, while the other three--"Sartorial Bodies," "Mapping Margins," "Female Authority: Networks and Influence"--evoke current critical discourses of material culture, social anthropology, geography, and politics. This is in accord with the editors' own recognition that, "While the contents of this volume attest to what has been accomplished, the gathered contributions simultaneously chart paths forward in the application of feminist modes of analysis to topics typical of feminist studies as well as *to matters that have traditionally lain beyond the scope of such inquiry*" (p. 1, my emphasis).

Within the feminist/feminisms category, one can cite the essays by Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, "Natural and Unnatural Woman: Melusine Inside and Out;" Kristin L. Burr, "Nurturing Debate in *Le Roman de Silence*;" Daniel E. O'Sullivan, "The Man Backing Down from the Lady in Tobairitz *Tensos*;" Ruth Mazo Karras and Tom Linkinen, "John/Eleanor Rykener Revisited;" Laine E. Doggett, "Women's Healing: From Binaries to a Nexus;" Cynthia J. Brown, "Anne de Bretagne and Anne de France: French Female Networks at the Dawn of the Renaissance;" Sarah-Grace Heller, "When the Knight Undresses, his Clothing Speaks: Vestimentary Allegories in the Works of Baudouin de Condé (c. 1240-1280);" and, in a ludically pedagogical vein, Lisa Perfetti's "Having Fun with Women: Why a Feminist Teaches *Fabliaux*."

The essays by Roberta L. Krueger and Nancy Freeman Regalado--"Staging Female Authority in Chantilly MS 522: Marguerite de Navarre's *La Coche*," and "Page Layout and Reading Practices in Christine de Pisan's *Epistre Othea*: Reading with the Ladies in London, BL MS Harley 4431"--demonstrate with brilliant insight and philological expertise material philology in a feminist mode. Madeline H. Caviness,

“Hats and Veils: There’s No Such Thing as Freedom of Choice, and It’s a Good Thing Too” and Ann Marie Rasmussen, “Babies and Books: The Holy Kinship as a Way of Thinking About Women’s Power in Late Medieval Northern Europe,” focus on aspects of social anthropology of primary concern to women of the era.

Geography as a space of the marginalized other figures in Sharon Kinoshita’s “Silk in the Age of Marco Polo,” and Helen Solterer’s “Another Land’s End of Literature: Honorat Bovet and the Timbuktu Effect.” Noting Marco Polo’s fascination with silk and silk products in his *Le Devisement du monde* (*The Description of the World*, better known today as *The Travels*, 1298 CE), Kinoshita offers an account of silk culture in East Asia as found in *Le Devisement* and indigenous writings and inscriptions. She shows that, ultimately, “silks from Mongol lands had become luxury items in Latin Europe,” while “imported ‘Tartar’ cloths had begun to ‘revolutionize’ western silk design: ‘dragons, exotic birds and swirling foliate motifs’ were imitated from imported *panni tartarici*” (p. 151). The ultimate effect of the silk revolution, however, ran deep in European society itself, Kinoshita avers, because “the traffic in silk catalysed contact between cultures ranging from Latin Europe to China, in dynamic modalities of exchange that unsettled political, confessional, and cultural binarisms of all kinds” (p.151).

Helen Solterer evokes the counter-intuitive gesture of Honorat Bovet who introduced a Muslim intellectual—“aussy noir comme charbon” (“as black as coal”)—as spokesman for an age-old Muslim invective against the French. Bovet’s *Apparicion Maistre Jehan de Meun* (1400 CE) was conceived four years after the defeat of European crusaders at the Battle of Nicopolis (1396 CE). To demonstrate how Bovet combats the fear inspired in Europeans by this “tres perilleux temps,” Solterer focuses on the *Apparicion*’s “literary form—that crucible of innovation for pre-modern writers” (p. 156). “The real innovation here, she finds, comes in representing a traveling life identified with the Muslim intellectual....By characterizing his traveling Saracen in this way, Bovet adapts the Muslim profile of the man of science....He is exceptional because his traveling qualifies him as an ethnographer of sorts. Reporting on a culture not his own...he personifies the scholar committed to investigating less known societies for the benefit of his own” (pp. 161-62).

Before closing this review, let me return to the distinction between feminisms and feminist modes illustrated by two major essays in the volume. The first is Bruckner’s essay on Melusine, which I would suggest represents the critical perspective occupied by “feminisms” research; the second is Caviness’s “Hats and Veils,” which, while every bit as forward looking, critically speaking, functions within the historical context of its artifacts.

Bruckner’s essay, “Natural and Unnatural Woman: Melusine Inside and Out,” poses the questions, “What is nature? What is woman?” (p. 21). Her choice of Jean d’Arras’s *Roman de Mélusine* is a graceful nod to Burns’s 2013 article, “A Snake-Tailed Woman: Hybridity and Dynasty in the *Roman de Mélusine*.”[3] Bruckner casts the mystery of Melusine between Aristotelian rationalism and the opaque mysteries of divine creation. For the Aristotelian perspective, Bruckner builds upon a classic article by Gabrielle Spiegel.[4] Bruckner does not cite any specific sources for the Christian context of the myth, although there is a classic reference with respect to Melusine-type figures in the vigorous polemic Saint Augustine launched against Apuleius’s *De deo Socratis*. [5] In his treatise, Apuleius espoused Plato’s doctrine that demons are aerial creatures residing midway between earth and heaven, who serve as messengers between the gods and humans. In Books 8 and 9 of *De civitate Dei*, Augustine—without denying the existence of demons—nevertheless does vigorously contest Plato’s and Apuleius’s notion that they, rather than angels, mediate the space between heaven and earth.[6]

Classical and medieval definitions of demons, or lamias (which is the technical term for Melusine’s demonic category) inevitably frame the discussion of Jean d’Arras’s character within a medieval context where ontology admits varying levels of materiality. For example, “Apuleius ascribes five ontological qualities to demons: 1) movement, 2) the faculty of reason, 3) a passionate soul, 4) a body composed of air,

and 5) eternal life. They share the first three with humans, are unique in the fourth, and have the fifth in common with the gods.”[7] This means simply that whatever Augustine’s theological quarrel with Plato and Apuleius, like them, he accepts demons as natural phenomena.

Within a medieval context, this makes it difficult to understand Bruckner’s natural/unnatural binary when she says, “This essay examines two Melusines: first, the natural Melusine living the life of a woman, then the unnatural Melusine, with all her animal and supernatural excesses out of the closet” (p. 23). That is not how Jean

d’Arras—or the many manuscript illuminators who portray her precisely by emphasizing her femininity—see Melusine, who never abandons her female identity, no matter what her morphology. The issue is not whether she is natural or unnatural, but that, as a lamia, she is not fully *human*, and therefore cannot be baptized into the Church. As Raymondin of Lusignan’s wife, she is a category violation; as lamia, she inhabits the same parallel realm of natural ontology as do Marie de France’s werewolf, Bisclavret, or the beautiful fairy princesses who take Lanval or Guingamor into their realms as lovers. The natural world in the Middle Ages had a much wider “bandwidth” than ours.

The title of Caviness’s contribution, “Hats and Veils: There’s No Such Thing as Freedom of Choice, and It’s a Good Thing Too,” riffs on Stanley Fish’s famous article on free speech.[8] Caviness evokes Fish’s argument that speech is always contextual and constrained in order to contest current tendencies to impose ethical or social norms of one group on another whose customs differ from them, or modern norms on past eras with very different cultural imperatives. “This paper,” she explains, “is about the contested areas in which what appears from the outside to be coercion may be within the norms of social negotiation and even individual choice” (p. 74).

She begins with a discussion of the situation of Muslim women in Western societies today, where contentious debates about veiling—or even outright bans as in France—have inspired “many Muslim women [to respond] to the controversy by choosing to wear the veil as a mark of personal freedom” (p. 75). Caviness then suggests that “the longer historical view offered by the study of medieval Europe often sheds light on our contemporary dilemmas and vice versa” (p. 75). She then segues to a discussion of dress codes prescribed “in national and local regulations” (p. 75). The latter differentiate social classes, confessional adherents (i.e., Jewish, Muslim, and Christian women), and professional categories such as the colorful garments mandated for prostitutes to make them readily identifiable, thereby avoiding confusion between sex workers and other women.

Perhaps no item of clothing, Caviness shows, is more complex than the veil. “Veiling and unveiling are long-standing metaphors for covering up and revealing the truth, and they resonate throughout western philosophy, literature, and even optics” (p. 81). The essay continues by interrogating a wide variety of medieval treatises and contexts treating the veil.

As exigent as is her scholarly treatment of the subject, however, Caviness is just as careful to avoid facile conclusions: “[T]he veil proves to be an unstable signifier—as unstable as ‘women’ themselves were held to be by the Christian clergy” (p. 83). She seeks not to provide a neat synthesis of the issue, but to demonstrate the tangled skein of customs and regulations around the practice...while calling attention to its voluntary adoption by many women. And this insight provides the link between the historical and contemporary contexts. In Caviness’s view, knowledge of veiling in the Middle Ages just might help contemporary readers to understand the relationship of contemporary Muslim women to the veil.

Medievalists and readers generally should be grateful to the editors of this volume for assembling such a rich group of essays dedicated to—in the words of Elizabeth Robertson—“this groundbreaking leader in feminist thinking” (p. 246). Not only do the contributions attest the originality and breadth of E. Jane Burns’s oeuvre, but they also demonstrate the continuing vigor of feminist theory and critical study *tout court*.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Laine E. Doggett and Daniel E. O'Sullivan, "Introduction: The Work of E. Jane Burns and the Feminisms of Medieval Studies"

Part I: Debating Gender

Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, "Natural and Unnatural Woman: Melusine Inside and Out"

Kristin L. Burr, "Nurturing Debate in *Le Roman de Silence*"

Daniel E. O'Sullivan, "The Man Backing Down from the Lady in Trobairitz *Tensos*"

Lisa Perfetti, "Having Fun with Women: Why a Feminist Teaches *Fabliaux*"

Part II: Sartorial Bodies

Madeline H. Caviness, "Hats and Veils: There's No Such Thing as Freedom of Choice, And It's a Good Thing Too"

Sarah-Grace Heller, "When the Knight Undresses, his Clothing Speaks: Vestimentary Allegories in the Works of Baudouin de Condé (c. 1240-1280)"

Ruth Mazo Karras and Tom Linkinen, "John/Eleanor Rykner Revisited"

Part III: Mapping Margins

Laine E. Doggett, "Women's Healing: From Binaries to a Nexus"

Sharon Kinoshita, "Silk in the Age of Marco Polo"

Helen Solterer, "Another Land's End of Literature: Honorat Bovet and the Timbuktu Effect"

Part IV: Female Authority: Networks and Influence

Cynthia J. Brown, "Anne de Bretagne and Anne de France: French Female Networks at the Dawn of the Renaissance"

Roberta L. Krueger, "Staging Female Authority in Chantilly MS 522: Marguerite de Navarre's *La Coche*"

Ann Marie Rasmussen, "Babies and Books: The Holy Kinship as a Way of Thinking about Women's Power in Late Medieval Northern Europe"

Nancy Freeman Regalado, "Page Layout and Reading Practices in Christine de Pisan's *Epistre Othea*: Reading with the Ladies in London, BL, MS Harley 4431"

Afterword: A Response to the Volume

Elizabeth Robertson, "Feminism and Medieval Studies: Where Have We Been, Where Are We Now, and Where Are We Going? Or, What Has Happened to Women in Feminist Studies in the Middle Ages?"

NOTES

[1] Marianne Hirsch, Nancy Vickers, et al., "Feminist Readings: French Texts/American Contexts," *Yale French Studies* 62 (1981).

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[3] "A Snake-Tailed Woman: Hybridity and Dynasty in the *Roman de Mélusine*," in *From Beasts to Souls: Gender and Embodiment in Medieval Europe*, ed. E. Jane Burns and Peggy McCracken (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), pp. 185-220.

[4] Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "Maternity and Monstrosity: Reproductive Biology in the *Roman de Mélusine*," in *Melusine of Lusignan: Founding Fiction in Late Medieval France*, ed. Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. 100-124.

[5] Lucius Apuleius (Apuleius Madaurensis), *De Deo Socratis. Apulée, Opuscules philosophiques et fragments*, ed. Jean Beaujeu (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1973).

[6] See Stephen G. Nichols, "Mélusine Between Myth and History: Portrait of a Female Demon," in *Melusine of Lusignan: Founding Fiction in Late Medieval France*, ed. Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. 137-164.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 141.

[8] Stanley Fish, "There's No Such Thing as Free Speech and It's a Good Thing Too," *Boston Review* 17:1 (1992): 3-26.

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