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Peter Haidu, *The Subject Medieval/Modern: Text and Governance in the Middle Ages*. Figurae: Reading Medieval Culture. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004. xiv + 446 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$65 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0804747431; \$27.50 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-8047-4744-X.

Review by Carol Symes, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Peter Haidu's new book cannot be read; it must be unpacked. The very title suggests that it is going to communicate in riddles, in curious juxtapositions and *non sequiturs*. Some of these interlock in ways that will seem shocking, or inevitable; others are just as likely to remain in tense opposition, or mutually estranged. A glance at the back cover, whose copy must surely have been composed by Haidu himself, will confirm this. One is not presented with a coherent summary of the book's contents. Rather, one is confronted by a barricade of declarative statements whose interrelationship remains mysterious even after one has spent some time trying to understand the argument to which they refer. Still, *The Subject Medieval/Modern* will reward the strenuous decoder and connector of dots, even if it leaves her with the suspicion that her labor has been rather more assiduous than that of the author.

"The modern subject was invented in the Middle Ages, such is the thesis of this book, destined to disturb medievalists and modernists (including postmodernists) alike. Both are deeply invested in the binarism of 'medieval versus modern,' which constitutes their historiographical self-image by Othering its opposite" (p. 1). Pace this hand-rubbing prognostication of universal academic distress, I would guess that to most medievalists, particularly historians, this assertion will seem like a logical extension of some familiar arguments. If one is inclined to agree with Joseph Strayer's position *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State* (1970), or R. I. Moore's location of *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* (1987) and *The First European Revolution* (2000) in the processes of institutionalization that have discernible beginnings around the year 1000 and which crystallize by 1250, the idea that the emergence of a state will naturally require the emergence of a subject population is axiomatic. But how does this new subjectivity, the self-awareness of those newly subjugated to the state, come into being? In order to answer this question, Haidu takes modern and postmodern definitions of modernity aback, literally: casting them into the Middle Ages, attempting to show that the individual and collective identities variously articulated by Descartes, Hegel, Marx, Weber, Gramsci, and Foucault (*inter alia*) were not the result of a modernity that begins, by definition, where the Middle Ages ends, but the product of those Middle Ages and the texts it produced in increasing abundance--texts which both constituted and expressed the new, modern subjectivity created by the ideology of the state.

The texts to which the book's subtitle refers are both literary and non-literary, and it may come as something of a surprise that Haidu is at his best when he analyzes recent medievalist historiographies and archival documents. In the first chapter, strikingly, Haidu brings the skills of a very clever reader to a body of texts usually exempt from artful critique: the ongoing scholarly debate over the interpretation of eleventh-century violence, the significance of the Peace Movement, and the upheavals (reforms?) that could constitute either a "feudal" "revolution" or a longer-term "mutation." In particular, he deconstructs Patrick Geary's claims for violence as a form of conflict-management, and Dominique Barthélemy's allied revisionist view of the same evidence, preferring the arguments offered, variously, by Eric Bournazel, Pierre Bonnassie, Jean-Pierre Poly, and Thomas Bisson. Indeed, he uses them--problematically, but insightfully--to construct his own paradigm of the late tenth and eleventh centuries as a time of "ideological crisis" (p. 36), when violence as "a technique of governance" (p. 26) was challenged by its Other, the Peace Movement. The resulting dialectic amounts to the "invention" of

what has elsewhere been regarded as a phenomenon not so much modern as postmodern, a “politics of violence.” And this, he asserts, is what makes the medieval modern: the “mass movement” of the Peace of God constitutes “a strikingly original contribution to Western history” because it signals the emergence of ideology itself as a “relatively autonomous field.” On this field, he concludes, “kings, states, and philosophers will slowly learn to negotiate with this mass—normally inchoate, occasionally assuming its role as a collective subject—until Spinoza’s ‘multitude’ in the seventeenth century lays the ground for the revolutions of the eighteenth” (p. 38).

Whether or not one agrees with Haidu in this, or credits the premises of his project, this chapter struck me as both provocative and thoughtful; it also contains the fullest and most coherent statements of the book’s thesis. I would also recommend two later chapters on “Representation in State Governance,” which pay attention to the narrative strategies of Domesday Book, *The Dialogue of the Exchequer*, Magna Carta, and various instruments of counting, accounting, and accountability. Much of what Haidu has to say in these later chapters is not new, but it is interesting to see John Baldwin and Michael Clanchy in the company of Louis Althusser and Anthony Giddens, and Georges Duby in conversation with Jacques Derrida.

But the historiography, even the historicism, of other chapters is disappointingly sketchy. It is one thing to identify the emergence of ideology as a dominant force in the eleventh century, another thing to speak of ideology as though it then took on a life of its own—“Latin ideology was inadequate to the task of constituting to subjects of the state”—and go on to assert that “no authentic, self-generated discursive representations of the knights’ or the peasants’ political beliefs as against that of the clerics surfaced” in the twelfth century (p. 72). First of all, how do we know? “No vernacular prose discourse appeared in the twelfth century until its very end: just lyric poems, poetic epics, verse narratives, verse histories.” Why should prose be privileged as the only serious discursive mode (and by a literary critic!)? And what makes Haidu think—here, as elsewhere—that the clergy was a species of political animal readily distinguishable from knights? In the eleventh century, they were not members of different castes but the younger and elder sons of the same caste, separated not at birth but as a result of the changes that went hand-in-hand with the ideology deemed revolutionary, specifically the practice of primogeniture. Nor was the clergy closed to men of humble status, particularly in the increasingly urbanized twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

For all his enquiry into cutting-edge historical scholarship and his interest in documents usually construed as “merely” historical, Haidu is curiously uninterested in historical context, or in the larger implications of his argument for the study of history. Of course, Haidu is not an historian, and the business of this book is really literary criticism. The construction of the subject is a product of the formation of modern states; but in the period between 1050 and 1250, Haidu sees this most clearly reflected in the literature of the period, mostly produced by and for clerical and then aristocratic élites, and mostly (he claims) aiming to promote the solidarity of the subjects composing those classes, through epic, romance, lyric poetry. This initial phase of medieval modernity then gives way, he asserts, to a medieval postmodernism, the result of urban life and an ever-more widespread and self-reflexive counteractivity, discernible in the different stages of the *Roman de la Rose* and the “Congés” of Adam de la Halle of Arras, culminating in the “Testament” of François de Villon.

For the most part, then, the “texts” to which the title refers are the critical editions of certain artifacts identified by nineteenth-century philologists as the key components of the Old French literary canon. All too soon, one realizes (with a familiar sinking of the heart) that the adjectives “European,” “western,” and “medieval” are all considered to be roughly synonymous with “French.” Moreover—and this is a real paradox, as well as a real weakness—Haidu’s attitude toward texts is serenely unmoved by *mouvance*. Sure: his introduction refers to “literary” texts in quotation marks and professes to be interested in how

a “new subjectivity is generated by textual and political practices.” He even goes so far as to declare that “the practices modernity categorizes as ‘literature’” have “no medieval equivalent,” and instead “do the ideological work of their polity in exploring and constituting subjectivity by providing performative models of human comportment” (p. 5). But by page 13, even spinning songs, folk tales, and proverbs have become “texts.” There is no more talk of performance. There is no recognition that ideas—important ideas, “modern” ideas—might continue to circulate via media only partially or seldom recorded in writing.

Not only that, but the process whereby his literary monuments became literary monuments does not inform Haidu’s analysis. Again, he makes the right noises: “All medieval texts represent various mixtures of orality and writing” (p. 40) and we must “locate specific texts according to both internal and external indices in a context of composition” (p. 41). But he eschews codicological methods that “would radically reorganize literary history” and declares—bizarrely, intemperately—that the study of texts in their manuscript settings “would rip the works from the historical and cultural web within which they initially appeared.” He calls his own methodology a “hazardous, sometimes speculative philological enterprise,” by which he means that he has adopted the most old-fashioned, hide-bound, essentialist approach to a few randomly-selected “works” whose conditions of composition, transmission, and inscription are entirely ignored. The result is truly subjective, a series of self-indulgent musings on some favorite “texts,” beginning (of course) with the *Chanson de saint Alexis*. The fact that the conditions that shaped this particular text (in England, for the record) could be said to support Haidu’s argument does not excuse him from dismissing them. Nor is it enough to dress these little commentaries in the latest fashions—fashions not at all ill-suited to them—and then leave the reader to figure out why the *lais* of Marie de France, for example, are touted as “postcolonial.” It is also disquieting that Haidu does not draw attention to his texts’ interest in their own incipient textuality, like the *Song of Roland*’s frequent appeals to chronicles and charters, its heroes’ dread of lyric infamy in “mocking songs.” And one wonders why these texts struck Haidu as more representative or important, more self-conscious than others. What principles governed their selection? Why, for instance, is Adam de la Halle’s farewell lyric (c. 1282) more modern and subjective than Jehan Bodel’s (c. 1210)? Because Jehan Bodel’s does not fit as neatly into the chronology, I suppose. And why is no attention given to artifacts that really do develop an intriguing subjectivity *vis-à-vis* the state, and which are demonstrably popular: Jehan’s *Jeu de saint Nicolas*, the Anglo-Norman *Ordo representacionis Ade (Jeu d’Adam)*, the *fabliaux*? Again, they would disrupt Haidu’s periodization, which depends on a conservative, “trickle-down” model of cultural evolution.

As I noted above, this book is extraordinarily difficult. At times, that difficulty is the necessary consequence of the author’s attempt to grapple with complicated issues. But in many more cases, it is sheer pretension. He favors the verb “limn” and a discursive style that is alternately turgid and obfuscatory. When unable to explain something fully and clearly, he simply stamps the abandoned proof with a “Q.E.D.” (see, *e.g.*, pp.19 and 84). Moreover, he exhibits a tendency toward overstatement that is sometimes tedious and often downright silly (the Peace Movement was “the first nonviolent mass intervention in history since Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*,” p. 31). Puzzlingly, the endnotes usually cite the full references to most sources again and again. There is no bibliography.

Although Peter Haidu locates modernity in the era usually known as medieval, he does seem to believe that there *was* a Middle Age (possibly coterminous with late antiquity?), but that this epoch ended at some point after the fragmentation of Charlemagne’s empire—perhaps as early as 842, when the Oaths of Strasbourg were exchanged, or perhaps as late as the mid-tenth century, when the violent contractions that would eventually give birth to modernity began, or began to be felt (by us). Most historians of the period would agree that there are at least two, and probably as many as half a dozen, Middle Ages. Certainly the world was a very different place in 1215 than it had been 410 or 814, and I would

definitely characterize the centuries thereafter as moving toward modernity, even if I have not been so bold as to declare them overtly “modern,” even in the hearing of disinterested undergraduates. Now, I look forward to characterizing the work of colleagues in my own history department as “postmedieval” (p. 353), rather than disparaging my own as “pre-modern.”

But seriously: if we choose to take Haidu’s thesis on board, and share his vision of its lofty destiny (quoted above), shouldn’t we do more than call each other names? Shouldn’t we admit that the relocation of the modern in the medieval displaces the very concepts “medieval” and “modern,” and renders these terms virtually meaningless? At the very least, we need to think about periodization. More vitally, though, we need to recognize that we have made a fetish of modernity, and consider how we should proceed if it has lost its power over us.

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See also Peter Haidu’s response to this review.

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