

**Kathy Lavezzo. *Angels on the Edge of the World: Geography, Literature, and English Community, 1000–1534*. Cornell University Press, 2006. pp. xiv + 191.**

Inspired by the recent successes of both the new cultural geography and postcolonial thought within medieval studies, Kathy Lavezzo's wonderful new book begins with a survey of medieval maps, cartographies that visually manifest what classical writers had long argued: "England's geographical positioning in the medieval world was the furthest thing from central" (2). However, this status as "global other" (3) was actively welcomed by English writers and cartographers, a paradoxical "attraction to the edge" (7) that granted England an otherworldly yet politically-enabling sublimity—and this "geographical remoteness" in turn "provided the means to articulate English national fantasy" (8). Moreover, England's exceptionalist alterity "could authorize the expansion of England beyond its borders, into the world" (21), a spatial shift to an otherwise Roman center that enables English imperial desires.

Lavezzo's five chapters concentrate on the production of such nationalizing and imperializing "fantasies of sovereign English otherness" (20). Chapter 1, "Another Country: Ælfric and the Production of English Identity," focuses on Ælfric's ca. 994 sermon version of Bede's story

of Gregory the Great's Roman encounter with English slave boys, a chance meeting that brings about the conversion of the Angles. Written in the vernacular, Ælfric's revision of this myth enables his English audience "to imagine themselves as others" (27) who, like the *Angli* boys with their angelic and racially distinct whiteness, are nonetheless always already Christian/elect and thus somatically superior to geographically-central Rome. The chapter ends with a suggestive coda connecting the 1709 Ælfric edition and translation of early Anglo-Saxonist Elizabeth Elstob with contemporary English plantation culture in the West Indies. As Lavezzo notes, Elstob's deliberate comparison of eighteenth-century African slaves and Gregory's *Angli* boys suggests "an alterity within the English that would potentially upset English claims for imperial dominance and privilege" (45).

If Bede enables Ælfric's deployment of Englishness in Chapter 1, he threatens that of Gerald de Barri (a.k.a. Gerald of Wales) in Chapter 2, "Gerald of Barri and the Geography of Irish Conquest." Bede assigns Irish monks a crucial role in the production of English national unity. For Gerald, writing at the late twelfth-century moment of Henry II's invasion of Ireland, pro-Irish Bede is an obstacle to be overcome, not an *auctor* to be emulated—especially since Ireland's position to the west of England makes it an even more appropriate candidate for the ideology of marginal exceptionalism. Lavezzo skillfully shows how Gerald makes

use of traditional climatic thought to denigrate the Irish: their land may be temperate and pure (as Bede states), but the people are filthy and bestial, capable of corrupting their environment. Like the Crusaders purifying Palestine of Muslim pollution, the Anglo-Norman armies are evangelists, restoring Ireland to pristine Christian identity. A map of Europe found in a ca. 1200 manuscript of Gerald's *Topography and Conquest* clarifies his geographical ambitions: placed in the center of the map, England mediates between Rome (at the map's top) and Ireland (at its bottom), functioning as an "expansionist world center" (69). Ireland maintains its marginality, but England displaces Rome.

Lavezzo has little to say about Gerald's own hybrid identity (although she briefly mentions it on p. 70). This is not the case in her analysis of Ranulf Higden, author of the *Polychronicon* and subject of Chapter 3, "Locating England in the *Polychronicon*." Lavezzo stresses Higden's Cheshire origins, noting, "As a resident of a county on the edge of his nation, Higden may well have been more inclined than other Englishmen to invoke in his writing the positioning of his nation on the edge of the world" (74). Her inclusion here of regional identity as a species of internal difference is a welcome move. The chapter proper focuses on the national narrative in Higden's universal history, identifying English *varietas* and historical discontinuity as the problems of greatest concern to the Cheshire monk. Space

(particularly England's geographic identity as *angulus*) provides Higden with the continuity the English nation requires—the land persists in spite of the many names applied to it by its multiple peoples. Higden's interest in marginality is nonetheless balanced by an investment in English centrality, one that manifests itself in his celebratory account of Constantine's British ethnicity: "the Christian imperial climax" (89) of the *Polychronicon* turns out to be the victory not of Rome, but of Britain.

Chapter 4, "Beyond Rome: Mapping Gender and Justice in the *Man of Law's Tale*," will be of particular interest to readers of this journal: according to Lavezzo, "the Man of Law's representation of Custance transforms that gendered Other into an icon of English election" (97). In this chapter, Lavezzo juxtaposes a Great Schism era debate over the limits of English common law's juridical sovereignty vis-à-vis those of Roman civil law with a sex/gender analysis of the spatial relations of Rome and England, one that depicts Rome as an *ecclesia mater* as threatening to English exceptionalism as the Sultanness and Donengild are to Custance. Chaucer rewrites Bede's myth of Gregory to remove Rome (the maternal and global *umbilicus mundi*) from the story of English conversion: God, not the Pope, sends Custance to England. However, the Man of Law's equation of Custance's sublime femininity with England's sublime isolation is undone by the tale's return to Rome and the gynocide that empties England of all

women. The Man of Law's spatial vacillations at tale's end mirror his ideological vacillations, his switching back-and-forth between imperial and national fantasies of England.

Lavezzo's fifth and final chapter, "From the very ends of the earth': Medieval Geography and Wolsey's Processions," crosses conventional period boundaries to consider the spatial implications of the career of Cardinal Thomas Wolsey. As Lavezzo notes, "More than any Englishman before or after him, Wolsey tested just how much an inhabitant of the margin of Christendom could garner the privileges of its Roman center" (116). England's marginal exceptionalism was called into question by European exploration, an ideologically-destabilizing spatial expansion that Lavezzo likens to Wolsey's equally disturbing violation of class boundaries (exemplified in the chapter by his controversial processions). The chapter contains an excellent discussion of John Skelton's attack in *Speke Parott* on Wolsey's *arriviste* excess, one that distinguishes Skelton's paradisaical Parrot from the real parrots imported from the New World. Lavezzo ends the chapter (and her book) with an account of Wolsey's attempts to appropriate centralized Roman privilege for marginal England, a strategy that fails on the personal level but is ultimately adopted by Henry VIII during the Reformation.

These short chapter synopses do not do justice to the complexity of Lavezzo's arguments—yet at the same time *Angels on the Edge of*

*the World* remains compulsively readable. I enjoyed the book even as it transformed my understanding of center-periphery relations in the medieval and early modern periods. Lavezzo's convincing case for the simultaneity of marginal and central fantasies of English nationhood complicates what is conventionally seen as a binary. Indeed, the highest compliment I can pay her book is to acknowledge the effect it has already had on my own research into medieval and early modern English regionalism. I expect that many other scholars will have similar epiphanies after reading *Angels on the Edge of the World*.

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R. Howard Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France*. University of Chicago Press, 2003. pp. 368.

Howard Bloch's most recent book, *The Anonymous Marie de France*, elegantly illuminates not only the work of this mysterious author but also the twelfth-century sociolinguistic milieu that informs the three texts that have been definitively attributed to her, the *Fables*, the *Lais*, and the *Espurgatoire Seint Patriz*. Bloch opens his introduction with an emphasis on the "unknowability" of Marie, this enigmatic writer who, by stating her name, simultaneously