

When did We Become Post/Human? postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies. 1: 1/2 (Spring/Summer 2010). New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Pp. iv + 292. ISSN: 2040-5960.

When did We Become Post/Human? is the first issue of *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies*. It provides an embarrassment of riches: a selection of twenty-eight short essays, three longer response essays, and a detailed book review essay. These follow the editors' introduction, "Before the trains of thought have been laid down so firmly: the premodern post/human," and explore a wide range of topics from an equally wide range of approaches. While some deal with topics as literally concrete as Valerie Allen's "The pencil, the pin, the table, the bowl, and the wheel" and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's "Stories of stone," others explore lesser-known medieval and early-modern examples such as Anna Kłosowska's "The post-human condition: Subject modes in the poetry of Madeleine de l'Aubespine (1546-96)" and Scott Lightsey's "The paradox of transcendent machines in the demystification of the Boxley Christ." Others explore the nexus of medieval and contemporary ("modern" not seeming the correct word, given the focus of the journal), such as David Glimp's "Moral philosophy for cyborgs" and Jen Boyle's "Biomedica in the time of animation." Whether examining the "transhuman model of medieval disability," as Julie Singer does in her essay, or considering "Postmedieval fecopoet[h]ics," which Susan Signe Morrison engages in hers, the collection certainly offers a look at most of the current discourses and questions in medieval or post-medieval studies.

The quality of the articles is uneven, although they all engage interesting elements of contemporary thinking about the body and the self, from the perspective of a technological and fragmented world, looking back on a past that often proves itself to be equally technological and fragmented. In this volume, the Middle Ages (and Early Modern Period) are never reduced to a unitary fantasy of wholeness and undifferentiation, and in that regard, it certainly adds to the more complex and varied view of the medieval period. Certainly, the volume fights against any remaining sense, in scholarly circles, that the medieval past is somehow inaccessible to contemporary modes of thinking and analysis.

I found Allen's, Cohen's, and Kłosowska's articles quite interesting and Suzanne Conklin Akbari's review essay, "Becoming human," particularly skillful in its ability to deal with each of her several chosen books fully, while still drawing conclusions about how they work together. The three response essays, particularly N. Katherine Hayles's, make a strong case for the journal's project

and the volume's particular modes of inquiry, and they effectively link pre- and post-modern methodologies and views across time. The editors' introduction asks salient questions while drawing on some quite entertaining and compelling anecdotes, making it pleasurable reading. Other pieces, such as Bettina Bildhauer's "Co-presence of the dead," which discovers a great deal more value and meaning in the recent film of *Beowulf* than a viewing of the movie would suggest was possible, show how contemporary versions of the "medieval" are as much a part of our reception of the past as the past itself. Indeed, many articles choose to examine what might seem obscure or simple examples, yet they succeed in mining them for their full potential. Throughout, the medieval body-enabled, disabled, sexed, unsexed, sexual; real and imagined; human, mechanical, and imaginary—emerges as central to an understanding of post-humanity within which figure notions of Christ's literal, figurative, and transcendent body and the discourses surrounding it. The volume's collected theoretical positions show how engaged all these discussions are in where we are—from disability studies to post-colonial, sexuality, and trauma theory, *postmedieval* finds itself on the cutting (and sometimes bleeding) edge. While many articles appear in the most familiar scholarly forms, which by no means implies that they are doing familiar things, others choose more unconventional formats, offering dialogues, anecdotes, hypotheticals, and narratives, frameworks for exploration that sometimes bring the author and material closer and sometimes serve only to increase their alterity. While these new approaches can offer incisive ways into difficult material (as in Julian Yates's "It's (for) you; or, the tele-t/r/opical post-human," which despite its absurdist title makes valuable use of section headings from modes of telephone and postal communication to refigure what goes on when we talk about being post-human), they can also do the opposite. "Continuous (r)evolutions: Thermodynamic processes, analog hybridization, transversal becomings, and the post-human," by "zooz," apparently an "amalgam of theoreticians" (235), began by asking strong questions, but ultimately became increasingly unclear and inaccessible, a jargon-loaded parody (maybe) reminiscent of Tom Stoppard's rhetorical tennis game in *Rozencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* without the rewards. Getting to the end of an article and feeling like words no longer mean anything may be an important realization in a post-structuralist world, but it also leads to the feeling that the time spent reading the article has been wasted. Given some of the article's engagement with discourses of time, perhaps that is the point, but it's not a salubrious one. Unfortunately, it's not a feeling unique to this one article, but to several of the offerings, whose language seems ultimately to undermine rather than illuminate their arguments.

Overall, *Postmedieval* is an effective project with much to offer. It provides some stimulating reading, and it certainly asks a lot of valuable questions. At times, it is a great deal of fun, and in its acknowledgement that the “medieval” is both an historical time period that produced real texts, real people, and real things, and a contemporary vision produced in popular culture that often countermands the “real,” it recognizes the way past and present interact and become inseparable from each other. It is also good-looking. Interestingly, the notes are found in the margins; while this is awkward in its unfamiliarity, they are certainly closer to their point of origin than when they’re relegated to the end of the article or the bottom of the page. Separating them from the bibliographic references is helpful and allows readers to access additional information to the article separately from what might become additional reading lists. The journal’s editors, and Palgrave Macmillan, are to be lauded for choosing the best of multiple citation systems and for thinking carefully about how to present their material in such a strong visual fashion. The illustrations are reproduced clearly in black-and-white, and the font is very readable, both in shape and size.

The journal *Postmedieval* is published in association with the BABEL Working Group, which defines itself, in the prefatory matter, as “a collective and desiring-assemblage of scholars . . . who are working to develop new cross-disciplinary alliances . . . in order to formulate and practice new ‘critical humanisms,’ as well as to develop a more present-minded medieval studies and a more historically-minded cultural studies” (i). There is a reflection of this community in the journal itself, in which one finds books by the authors of the articles advertised on its endpages, other works by the journal’s authors reviewed in the book review essay, and citations by the authors to each other in their articles. The communal nature of the group that spawned the journal permeates the volume itself. To play my hand fairly, I am a member of the BABEL Working Group, and reading the table of contents has a certain quality of old home week, a visit with people I know from this and other places and projects.

That said, since the journal’s purpose, presumably, is not to be the BABEL house organ, but to speak to readers and communities beyond itself, this sense of a closed conversation seems to me to run the volume into trouble. The problem with the journal lies in the sense of insularity it creates; like the purposely obscure *trobar clus* of the troubadours designed to be clear only to a select, elite few, *When did we become post/human?* often falls into such opacity as to be nearly incomprehensible to anyone not in “the know,” whatever “the know” might constitute.

For all its moments of interesting engagement with larger questions of how

we read and understand the premodern (aka medieval) past, the project often descends into obscurity and, occasionally, self indulgence. In titling her essay “Is the post in posthuman the post in postmedieval?” Crystal Bartolovich seems to be engaging in a kind of linguistic hairsplitting, although the essay that follows offers a cogent argument for a “modernity” produced by capitalism and its methods of exclusion of those whom arguments against any modernity (specifically Bruno Latour) seek to reincorporate. In doing so, she renders her title question more interesting than it might first seem, and yet, do we need to know while reading this discussion that the author is a vegetarian and why she has made this choice? These are distractions from the strengths of the essay itself, which ultimately makes a quite compelling case in answering the question her title poses.

At the end of their Introduction, Eileen Joy and Craig Dionne note, “What might be at stake here is not only the future of the human itself, but also of the humanities” (7). None of us can ignore that the humanities are once again in crisis, although less one of ideology than practicality, with departments closed, combined, and often threatened, and medieval studies as a discipline (as well as many of the foreign languages that support its study) often seeing reductions in hires, courses, and faculty lines. Unlike the “crisis in the humanities” of the 1980s, which was primarily about politics, with the “new right” asserting itself against what it conveniently called “tenured radicals,” the current threat to humanities is their near extinction. Under these circumstances, can we afford to choose the kind of obscurity and marginality that serve to alienate rather than include? Can the community afford to turn in on itself and speak a kind of “home language” incomprehensible beyond itself? Or are we wiser to address exactly the kinds of issues the BABEL Working Group defines for itself in a way that provides access and therefore truly makes relevant the questions we as medievalists (and friends) find so compelling?

Angela Jane Weisl
Seton Hall University