

Roberta L. Krueger. *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 338 + xvi pp.

I once had a student who insisted that Marie de France's lai "Bisclavret" was a story of an abused wife. My first reaction was, of course, horror at this wrong-headed misreading of the tale. My second reaction was delight at this willful misreading by a returning student, perhaps herself a former abused spouse, who was just finding her own critical voice. After all, why not read the title character's bestiality as one resisting reader's exposé of the male homosocial world of chivalry that required only silent complicity of women and severely punished those who did not acquiesce? Why not allow that a chivalrous man might offer one face to the court and another to his wife?

Whether the resisting reader in this case is the poem's author or its historical medieval readers, or simply the brainchild of one feminist student's imagination is a question Roberta Krueger brilliantly illuminated for me in her book, *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance*. The answers she gives through a series of readings of verse romances from Chrétien de Troyes to Christine de Pisan are multiple and complex. She does not attempt to deny that the romance was often the vehicle for misogynistic diatribes nor that as a genre it promoted an ideology of gender that reduced women to passive, compliant objects of male desire and male/male exchange. But despite the stifling misogyny and constricting social roles promoted by the genre, she manages to carve out a space for medieval women's resistance to those ideologies. Krueger's book belongs to what I like to call the "women weren't stupid" school of medieval feminism (a position, I hasten to add, to which I heartily subscribe). By this I mean that whenever a student (or benighted colleague) asks me how women in the Middle Ages might have held anything like a viewpoint that resisted male domination, I usually reply that women weren't stupid. It probably didn't escape their notice that they were oppressed (for a more sophisticated statement of this position see James Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*.)

Krueger's book asks whether romance invited women's complicity with courtly ideologies or fostered critical resistance to them. It asks whether women were sophisticated enough readers to produce their own resistance, to read against the grain of chivalric codes. Krueger has two aims in the book. The first is to understand the historical female audience of romance. To this end, she examines women's literacy, their patronage of the romance, and the extent of their political and social influence to understand how aristocratic women may have been equipped by their culture to read these stories. Her second aim is to understand the mechanisms by which the romances themselves attempted to fashion certain kinds of readers—both male and female—and how that fashioning might be both a product of and a producer of gender ideologies. It is the interplay between these two positions—historical women readers and the readers romance seeks to fashion—that makes Krueger's analyses so sophisticated, engaging, and ultimately persuasive.

Krueger's readings open up gaps in the seamless tapestry of male domination that has marked so much medieval history (and literary history) in the modern period. Courtly ideology emerges not as a unified and totalizing social organization that either exalted or demeaned women, but as a conflicted, convoluted, and contradictory set of

values, beliefs, practices, discourses, and institutions loosely connected through various literary tropes, among them those of the romance. Courtly love can be claimed neither as proof of historical women's power nor their passivity; rather it was one of the sites where gender and class roles were negotiated, renegotiated, and contested in 12th- and 13th-century France. Space permits examination of only two examples of such contests.

Krueger's analyses of antifeminist rhetoric in the chapter on the *Roman de Silence* (and elsewhere) go beyond Howard Bloch's recent controversial formulations on misogyny as a static and unchanging trope, endlessly referring to itself. She suggests a dialogic reading of misogyny in which the trope cannot simply be read against itself, nor can its relation to historical women be denied. Rather misogyny must be situated in its various contexts, each new context creating new meaning dialogically (that is the trope brings its meanings to the contexts and thus shapes it, while the context necessarily revises the meanings of the trope). Far from providing proof of men's complete and ineluctable dominance over women, then, misogyny may be a sign of male anxiety in the face of women's resistance or empowerment.

Krueger provides similarly nuanced readings of the pleasures that romance afforded its female readers. Like modern mass-produced Harlequin romances, the latter day descendants (perhaps poor relations) of the courtly romances, romance offers its women readers pleasures, even erotic pleasures, which any resistant reading must constantly take into account. But those pleasures come at a cost and Krueger is constantly aware of both the pleasures and costs afforded female readers. Unlike Roland Barthes's idealized (and male) reader, who can afford to revel in the erotic, and even liberatory, pleasures of textuality, the woman reader must always ask the cost of such pleasure. Usually the cost is liberation. The text can afford one but not the other; they seem (and I stress seem) mutually exclusive readings given the organization of sexuality that has dominated western cultures. Krueger points out that the pleasurable position romance offers a woman is a dangerous one; her reading is her seduction. Identification with the desired lady aligns her with the fictional projection of the poet's fears and fantasies; she becomes an absence through which the poet projects his own subjectivity. Of the woman who is specifically hailed by the romance text she writes, "if she complies with the narrator's request, she risks being appropriated—and ultimately effaced—by the text's seductive strategies. If she resists, her resistance fuels the fires of the narrator's passions and provides the very condition of his writing" (184). Krueger tentatively identifies the place of resistance to this interpellation as that of the *médissants*, those in the romance who speak against the lovers and so provide an external critique of courtly ideology. Unfortunately, as Krueger's readings of *Le Roman de Castelain de Couci* and Christine de Pisan suggest, this resistance to courtly ideologies may be purchased only at the expense of its pleasures, leaving us with an equally ideologically orientated moral critique of society. These chapters suggest that in the romance male desire is given over to *plaisir*, female resistance to *sens*. Here Krueger has come up against the most painful dilemma of contemporary feminist theory: how to recuperate the pleasures of female sexuality without falling prey either to male sexual objectification or an old-fashioned anti-sex morality. She doesn't resolve the dilemma satisfactorily, but I don't know of anyone else who has either.

Looking back over what I have written I am struck by the frequency with which I

use “reading” (rather than “writing”) to describe Krueger’s activity in this book. One of the marks of the author’s theoretical sophistication is that she is conscious of her own position as a reader and her irrevocable difference from the medieval readers whose activities she attempts to recover. She reminds us that the critic’s task is not to deliver up the text’s inner meaning as if it were some neatly pre-packaged consumable. Rather the task of the critic—particularly the feminist critic who adopts the stance of resistance—is to engage in a dialogue (and not always a polite one) with the texts and with all of its readers—past, present, and future. In this, both *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance* and the romance itself have already anticipated—because they have made a path for—even my former student’s idiosyncratic reading of Marie de France.

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