

Scott Lightsey. *Manmade Marvels in Medieval Culture and Literature.* The New Middle Ages. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Pp. xv + 212.
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SCOTT LIGHTSEY's book contributes to recent scholarly discussions of wonder by looking at the spectacles caused by mechanical "*mirabilia*" in Ricardian England. Although Lightsey does cull anecdotes about mechanical marvels from medieval Europe more broadly, the real focus of the book is the courtly culture and literature of late fourteenth-century England, particularly as it concerned the politics surrounding Richard II's reign (the much more general title may perhaps result from Palgrave's direction). The work argues that late medieval mechanical wonders, such as the mechanized golden angel that appeared in Richard's coronation parade, transformed the marvels of literary romance into rationalized and commodified objects, a transformation that brought both newly skeptical attitudes toward marvels and the appropriation of their meaning by more diverse social groups. Lightsey wants to see mechanical marvels as "participants in their social networks," eliciting differing responses depending on the social position of their viewers. His discussion of the artificial reproduction of marvelous bodies, together with the examination of meaning as dependent on social identity, contains much promising material for medieval feminist analysis of the body and its reception, though Lightsey himself says next to nothing about gender.

The book's first chapter discusses the coronation pageant of the young king Richard, read through both chronicle accounts and the possible allusions to the royal spectacle in Langland's *Piers Plowman*. This chapter sticks most closely to Lightsey's stated aims as he compares the various meanings surrounding the mechanized angel that handed the crown to prince Richard after his magnificent procession through the streets of London's Chepe district. First considering the pageant's "projection of style" and "conspicuous luxury" as part of a new ideology of kingship promoted by the court, Lightsey then outlines how the angel and pageant may be read differently from the perspective of its producers, the guild of London Goldsmiths. Here, Lightsey follows the material production of the marvel to create a plausible and intriguing counter-narrative to the coronation's royalist propaganda.

The following chapters are primarily concerned with courtly literary texts. The agenda for these is to examine the "reinscription" of the marvels of courtly romance back into literary texts after, presumably, their authors had been exposed to real-life experiences of mechanical wonders such as the coronation angel. So, for example, Chaucer's perspective on the marvelous elements in

earlier romances would have doubtless been influenced by his firsthand experience of things like “clockworks, *automata*, illusionistic contrivances,” etc., and the marvels to be found in his own writings would witness that influence. Chapters two and three follow this premise, looking at references to mechanical wonders in Chaucer’s work, principally segments from the *Canterbury Tales*. In the *Squire’s* and *Franklin’s Tales*, Lightsey argues, the marvel becomes subsumed into mercantile practice and is ultimately viewed as a commodity to be hawked like any other. In the *Nun’s Priest’s* and the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tales*, Chaucer voices even deeper skepticism toward the development of new technologies. This pessimistic view of technology is also the subject of chapter four, which discusses the conflation of the mechanical and the monstrous (in service to political allegory) in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*. Chapter five, while placing the mechanical marvel in the different, global context represented in *Mandeville’s Travels*, returns to the depiction of mechanical marvels as objects of rational scrutiny and mercantile exchange.

Overall, the emphasis is on the demystification of the wondrous in late fourteenth-century literature and courtly culture, which Lightsey portrays as consonant with the period’s strengthening of mercantile and scientific ideologies and concerns about the foibles of the monarchy. This is not a new take on the culture of Ricardian England, and Lightsey’s focus on canonical courtly literature limits what he can say about the alternate social perspectives on wonder that he so intriguingly imagines in his first chapter. The most glaring oversight in *Mechanical Marvels*, however, is the absolute lack of any reflection on two of the main categories of embodied social identity: gender and race.

I was reminded, when reading Lightsey’s book, of a comment made in 2008 by Katherine Lewis, who noted at an IMC Leeds roundtable that some areas of medieval scholarship are emerging as “gender-free zones” (she mentioned work on the crusades and military history as an example). I hope that the history of technology will not become such an area. Though I can’t do a word search of Lightsey’s text, it seems that the terms “masculine,” “feminine,” and “gender” appear not once. It’s hard to even find the word “woman,” as the titular “Manmade” in “*Manmade Marvels*” really does seem to mean “man” as in men, not “man” as in human. Lightsey’s references to “craftsmen” never seem to consider that women also had craft vocations in medieval England (and even positions in guilds), and the focus on men is even more sadly apparent by the fact that the sole woman mentioned, Christine de Pizan, whom Lightsey admits probably had more firsthand experience of courtly spectacle than anyone, merits only two paragraphs of discussion.

Even without the inclusion of women in the history of *mirabilia*, there

is plenty to say about gender. A perfect example of this missed opportunity can be seen in Lightsey's discussion of Chaucer's *Nun's Priest Tale*, wherein Lightsey argues that the text associates the mechanical with the animal, "clock with cock." The *Tale* is indeed a tale about a cock (the rooster, Chauntecleer), complete with its pie-in-the-face pun, and thus also, very obviously, a tale about male bodies and masculinity. The argument begs for an analysis of the relation between mechanical artifice and gender, but in Lightsey's reading one could actually forget that the text pits the masculine against the feminine in its rooster v. hen debate. Gender is similarly removed from secondary sources, such as Marilyn Desmond and Pamela Sheingorn's analyses. The feminist perspective offered by these scholars all but evaporates in Lightsey's paraphrase of their work. (Is "de-feminate" a word? We need one for the political neutralization of feminist critique.)¹ There is similarly little on race or ethnicity, although, as with gender, one would think this an obvious issue to address when discussing the artificial creation of bodies.

Hopefully, these lacunae will inspire other scholars to fill the void. Lightsey does gather many interesting accounts of mechanical marvels, and he offers a promising approach to understanding multiple experiences of these wonders, as one can see in the very first anecdote he offers (about a terrifying mechanism in the court of Ferdinand de Antequera). Read with an understanding of what it misses, his book could be a valuable source for feminist histories of technology and wonder, and it underscores the need for work in this area.

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NOTES

1. Although Desmond and Sheingorn are cited in the main text, neither is listed in the book's bibliography. I take it that the reference is to their co-authored study, *Myth, Montage, and Visuality in Late Medieval Manuscript Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).