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REVIEWS

Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1999) 360 pp.

What do Lollards, a medieval transvestite/prostitute, Chaucer's Pardoner, Margery Kempe, Quentin Tarantino, and Michel Foucault have in common? They all feel Carolyn Dinshaw's "touch of the queer" in her ambitious and wide-ranging new book, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*. It is a difficult book to summarize; indeed, that is part of its point, for the heterogeneity of its subject matter reflects both the multifarious character of sexuality itself and the multivalent nature of the texts that try to express or police those sexualities. Rather than build a falsely teleological history, Dinshaw writes a "queer history" of identifications and "vibrations" between and among pre- and postmodern texts. Dinshaw wants to make these disparate texts "touch" across boundaries of time, place, reality, genre, and circumstance. In many respects she succeeds, especially since all the postmodern texts she selects engage some vision—for better or for worse—of the "middle ages" and its sexualities.

One of the most successful examples Dinshaw gives of such postmodern texts is Robert Glück's novel *Margery Kempe*, an imaginative work in which a San Francisco gay man in 1994 identifies passionately and mystically with Margery in much the same way that Margery herself identified with Christ and the Virgin Mary. Dinshaw's use of this text works because it performs many tasks at once and touches Dinshaw's argument in many ways. First it demonstrates the *possibilities* of "queer" identification (or "vibration," "touch," "coalition," etc.—words that Dinshaw draws on and repeats throughout) across numerous boundaries and differences: a gay, Jewish man of the late twentieth century can identify with a straight, Christian, married woman of the fifteenth century. Second, it shows the *necessity* of history (an aspect of her argument that is crucial throughout, but materially so in her discussion of the Congressional hearings on the future of the NEA and NEH): through his identification with Margery, Glück's narrator comes to understand more fully his relationship with his former lover. Glück's novel is the keystone of Dinshaw's argument because it does exactly what she is doing: it expresses desires that she expresses; it enacts a "queer touch." Most important, it reaches out of the text itself and builds the coalitions that Dinshaw seeks to build: I am already one of the "converted" medievalists to whom Dinshaw "preaches," but I was not familiar with Glück's novel. I now want to read it. Perhaps a postmodernist or queer theorist who picks up Dinshaw's book will be equally inspired to read one of the medieval texts she discusses.¹⁹

What Dinshaw's book *does* is as important as what it *says*. The influence of

¹⁹Though "identification" with subjects of the Middle Ages—particularly "queer" subjects—is one thematic thread of Dinshaw's explorations, she is also at pains to insist that this can turn into a false nostalgia for a mythic past, a tendency she criticizes in Foucault, among others. She is equally critical of the view of the Middle Ages as abject other, particularly in her discussion of *Pulp Fiction*. Dinshaw's Middle Ages hold these possibilities, but only among diverse other ways of seeing them and "touching" them.

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*—particularly the notion that sex, gender, and sexuality are performed, are acts as much as identities (if not more so)—runs throughout *Getting Medieval*. And Dinshaw's text itself is a performance. Rather than proceed linearly, Dinshaw moves deftly in and out of texts of various times and genres; there is a subtle, web-like structure to this book that is belied by my opening, incomplete, and linear list of her subjects, and that does not become entirely clear until well into the book. (It is a book that definitely would repay multiple readings.) Its slipperiness imitates the ways in which her subjects' sexualities at times defy the categorizations and proscriptions meant to confine them. Again and again, Dinshaw points out the difficulty of *knowing*: How do we know who is a sodomite? A virgin? A heretic? A eunuch? A scam artist? What tests can tell us? And though Dinshaw engages in the traditional scholarly method of citing all her authorities (in nearly one hundred pages of notes!), like Foucault, whose historiography she discusses in the "Coda," she "refuses to write 'history' as it has been traditionally formulated" and "resists the search for determinative origins and 'the discourse of the continuous'" (196). So, besides gathering together heterogeneous and multivalent texts, she resists constructing one narrow, proscriptive argument herself.

Altogether, the sum of *Getting Medieval* is greater than its parts. Although the book could be dipped into at will, Dinshaw addresses most of her subjects too briefly for that method to be entirely illuminating. The exception—and the best, most complex, most fruitful chapter—is chapter 1, "It Takes One to Know One: Lollards, Sodomites, and Their Accusers." In it, for a full chapter, Dinshaw beautifully balances exceptionally astute close readings of dissident and orthodox texts with grander historical and cultural arguments about the exclusionary tactics of community building—even in a community romanticized by many historians of Lollardy as egalitarian, democratic, and progressive. But in following chapters, many subjects get short shrift. The Wife of Bath and the Pardoner in particular get glossed over rather quickly. Perhaps that is because Dinshaw has already dealt with both figures in *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*: but if that is the case, then why does she deal with them at all here? The discussion of the Pardoner's sexuality is especially unilluminating, in part because Dinshaw herself has done it better elsewhere. In the end it seems the Wife and the Pardoner (as well as "The Cook's Tale" and "The General Prologue") have been thrown in to fill out a chapter that otherwise deals with a fascinating, but short, legal account of a male transvestite prostitute who also lived and worked as a 'female' embroiderer. I wanted more about this case and about its historical milieu.

I also would have rather seen more discussion of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the main subject of her next chapter. That reading is more focused and more detailed than the preceding readings of *The Canterbury Tales*. It is also fresher and opens up the text in genuinely new ways. Although critics have dealt with Kempe's performativity and psycho-sexual passions before, Dinshaw's twist—that Kempe's white clothes are a kind of "drag" that calls into question sexual categories; that her desire to touch Christ is a desire for a "queer" touch—gives these elements new resonance. What is more, her discussion of Kempe's life and writing takes up ideas put forth in the Lollardy chapter in elegant and persuasive ways. Expanded, these two subjects could have

filled a book themselves. But just as Dinshaw gets warmed up, she moves on to Robert Glück's novel. Although the pairing of these texts fits her methodology and purposes nicely, I was still left wanting more about the original. *The Book of Margery Kempe* is a long, complex text and I would have liked to see Dinshaw focus her full powers on it.

The other text to which Dinshaw brings a tantalizing amount of her characteristic close reading talents is Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*. Although I did not ultimately agree with her reading—the film is more satirical and ironic in its attitudes towards heteronormative, white male society than Dinshaw allows—I was still impressed by her careful and detailed reading of it. But still, I wanted more. Though the theoretical and methodological implications of making a plethora of disparate texts “touch” are worth exploration, ultimately Dinshaw's performative style and methods do a disservice to her readings. A more focused book would have made a more compelling and persuasive book.²⁰

Dinshaw's earlier work, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, was groundbreaking in a bold and pointed way. It opened up entirely new avenues of reading Chaucer and became a set text in discussions of approaches to Chaucer and to medieval literature in general. *Getting Medieval* will have its influence, too, but in quieter, subtler ways. It will most likely be remembered more for its methods and its broader strokes than for any reading of an individual text, or else its influence will be felt as inspiration, as an exhortation to “get medieval” by “using ideas of the past, creating relations with the past, touching in this way the past in our efforts to build selves and communities now and into the future” (206).

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²⁰At many points throughout this book, Dinshaw makes brief statements about the heteronormative structures of romance—a subject she took up in her original article, “Getting Medieval: *Pulp Fiction*, Gawain, Foucault” in *The Book and the Body*, Dolores Warwick Frese and Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, eds. (Notre Dame 1997). Perhaps a full-length queer study of romance is her next project; it would be welcome indeed.