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## REVIEWS

Catherine Brown, *Contrary Things: Exegesis, Dialectic and the Poetics of Didacticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1998) 209 pp.

The deceptively simple premise of Catherine Brown's *Contrary Things* is this: "We . . . stand before medieval texts as medieval readers stood before Scripture" (146). In other words, modern readers face the same daunting challenges in trying to engage the lost world of medieval letters that medieval readers faced in attempting to penetrate the misty mysteries of the Bible and its commentaries. Rather than shrink from the task, Brown suggests we revel in it. Rather than tremble before the mountains of contradictions that make up the Middle Ages, we should embrace the hermeneutic opportunity we have been offered.

With that purpose in mind, Brown joyfully begins to explore the dynamics of medieval exegesis and dialectic. She writes with a lush prose that embraces the reader with lucid descriptions that clarify—though not entirely—the mysteries of her subject. Consider her explanation of exegesis (21): "We might say that, for these readers, Scripture is an encrypted data file that must be, as it were, unzipped; exegesis is the unzipping, the unpacking. Or, alternatively, the Lord in his wisdom put apparently endless clowns in a single Volkswagen. Exegesis unlocks the door and then speculates in awe about what sort of vehicle this might be that can contain such infinite figures." Such clarity merely adds to the mystery which, of course, is part of the point: the joy is in seeking, not necessarily in finding out. Such passages do much to convey Brown's own enthusiasm for the subject at hand and her joy at engaging in exegesis of her own. But despite the vigor and beauty of her words the book is by no means an easy read, or a simplistic one. She explores questions, but does not necessarily answer them. Her exploration in chapter 4 of the *ars amatoria* could easily apply to the entire work: "I hope to leave this question open, for to give it an answer would be to arrest the assiduous questioning provoked by the medieval *ars amatoria*'s juxtaposition of clerical and secular, holy and carnal. The medieval *ars* is a *quaestio*, to be studied and understood rather than answered" (92). The book is less a guidebook to exegesis and dialectic than a cheerful exploration of their context—the moments that make such hermeneutic exercises possible.

She begins by tackling exegesis, seeking to discover how readers of the Bible approached the relationship between nominal doctrine and multiple teachings—sometimes mutually exclusive. The answer lies in the Augustinian *caritas/cupiditas* dichotomy. To Augustine, all Scripture is about *caritas* and *cupiditas*. We know, therefore, that Scripture is meant to teach and we know *what* it teaches. The question for medieval readers then becomes *how* does it teach and *why* does it teach that way.

The dark, obscure places of Scripture, marked by contradiction, are "where work must happen" (22). Exegesis says there is no contradiction, since truth cannot contradict truth. Arriving at the divine meaning provides the intellectual challenge and the delight. "For monastic exegetes and their fellow travelers, then, scriptural contradiction and obscurity do anything but block the transmission of meaning; in fact, they are the very conditions for its continued and continual production," she writes (31).

From here Brown moves on to dialectic, using John of Salisbury and Abelard as case studies. Instead of the non-contradiction that characterizes exegesis, dialectic builds from Boethius's laws of contraries and contradictories. Here, rather than two propositions being true, we have opposite propositions where if one is true the other must be false, because contradiction cannot exist. Dialectic becomes more about words than about things, with truth being determined by the way in which something is said, rather than its inherent qualities. Everything is either true or false, but since all words are ambiguous, proof becomes problematic. "The dialectical world, then, is one in which multiplicity is inevitably contradiction, a contradiction less easy to work, resolve, and manage in practice than the dialecticians, in their movements of metadisciplinary pride, would have us believe," Brown observes (83).

She offers Abelard as a poster-child for dialectic contradiction, a man who prided himself on his dialectic "either/or" mindset, but whose life experience cast his reality more in the "both/and" exegetical mode. Abelard, after castration, occupies a nebulous liminal space where he is both a man and not a man. Ultimately Abelard, who unmade so many teachers before him, finds himself unmade and untaught by the vagaries of his own logic.

With her explanations of Andreas Capellanus's *De amore* and the Castilian Juan Ruiz's *Libro de buen amor*, Brown moves into secular books that seem to straddle both worlds of exegesis and dialectic. Both books seem to contradict themselves in their explorations of love. *De amore* builds a poetics of "courtly love" in the first part of the book, then undermines it in the last part through an invective against women.

She then examines the *Libro de buen amor* as a synthesis of exegetic and dialectic teaching. She approaches the book as a utopia of sorts that flawlessly transfers scriptural exegesis into a secular mold. She gleefully describes how the book defies definition. It cannot be pigeonholed into any one category. "The book suggests, even imposes, two opposed didactic reading programs," she writes (134). It can either be morally neutral, constructed out of the reader's own perceptions, or a "repository of hidden and authoritative truth" (134). "Both are alternately . . . evoked and denied." The delicious irony Brown posits here is that the reader is free to interpret however he sees fit, but will, therefore, always be wrong in so doing. In the end we have to ask, what does the *Libro de buen amor* teach us? Brown's unqualified answer is "Everything." By simultaneously being all things to every reader and defying easy answers the book requires that its readers think and figure things out for themselves. Rather than an obstacle, Brown suggests, the ambiguities of the *Libro de buen amor* are the message. Rather than a block on the road to understanding they are the road, providing a process toward understanding somewhere between exegesis and dialectic.

And like the *Libro de buen amor*, the utopian center between exegesis and dialectic—taking from both but being completely neither—she too makes no moral judgments and steers clear of any positive pronouncement of the way things were. Devoted to both subjects but exhausting neither, *Contrary Things* itself seeks to occupy the utopian in-between world, and succeeds.

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