

REVIEW: *Hybridity in the Literature of Medieval England*, by Rosanne P. Gasse. The New Middle Ages. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. Pp. x + 252. Hardback: \$139.99. ISBN: 978-3-031-31464-3.

In *Hybridity in the Literature of Medieval England*, Rosanne P. Gasse has two central goals. The first is to test the limits of the applicability of present-day critical concepts like hybridity when they are transplanted outside the frameworks in which they originally developed. The second (comprising the greater part of the book's content) is to query the corpus of early English literature for examples of its own understanding of the hybrid, the liminal, the mixed.

In the book's introduction, Gasse first tackles the theoretical notion of hybridity. The concept "has at its base a simple premise: two things, when mixed, create a new, third form" (5). Gasse summarizes some of the predominant theoretical literature on hybridity, noting that critical analyses began within the larger framework of post-colonial studies. Homi Bhaba's *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994), for example, defines hybridity as a product of the colonial process, the site at which the power of the colonizer is enacted upon the desired object that is the colonized. The hybrid is thus simultaneously a sign of the power of the oppressor as well as an indelible remnant of the oppressed. As useful as Bhaba's contribution might be, Gasse argues that like other modern definitions, this one loses much of its explanatory power outside the theoretical context of its origin—in this case, the context of European settler colonialism. Although it remains true that the hybrid always acts as a site of anxiety onto which dominant cultures might project their fears about the blending of self and other, the circumstances and the mechanisms of this projection and the specific fears it reflects are culturally and historically situated. However, the antidote to this problem of theory cannot simply be to develop an overly-capacious definition of the term that retains very little explanatory power in any one context: all hybrids are mixtures, but "not every mixture is regarded as necessarily hybridic or as an example of anxiety-inducing alterity" (3). Hybridity seems "too hybrid a thought for a single theoretical lens to grasp its nuance in full" (4), but the challenge, Gasse notes, is to "preserve the usefulness of hybridity as a theoretical concept without reducing it to simply being anything of mixed origin" (3).

Gasse's solution to the problem is to place hybridity in conversation with other frameworks of difference and apply it to the narrative strategies in representative texts to tease out its unique mechanisms in early English culture. "Race, ethnicity, class, and alterity each fixate on the difference they identify; hybridity, however, although grounded in difference, points to sameness, what is held in common. This orientation towards sameness proves instrumental in medieval English literature as it enables potential erasure of difference" (4). Throughout the book, Gasse engages in textual analyses that address race, ethnicity, class, gender, and disability as markers of difference, but she is careful to distinguish hybridity as functioning quite differently to these. The hybrid within a story might be a blend of human and animal, but the narrative function of hybridity within a text is something else. Hybridity represents a liminal but temporary state of being (i.e., identity) that is unsustainable in the long term. The characters and texts that explore hybridity face a binary choice: "hybrid identity is impossible except in the limited sense that those who travel or those who have outsider origins might have access to different groups to which they can belong



in different places at different times” (221). To continue existing purely as hybrid becomes impossible, and eventually, the hybrid character must choose one world to which they will wholly belong. Gerald of Wales, for example, may be firmly “Welsh” in our own present-day reckoning of such things, but in his own time, “ethnic identity of this denizen of the border marches was far from being clear cut, as can be seen in the fact that he sometimes identified/was identified as Welsh, sometimes as English, and at least once as a Norman” (25). “Gerald could be any one of these identities,” Gasse contends, “but only one of them at any one time”—“he could never be, in his or in anyone’s eyes, Welsh-Norman, Norman-English, or English-Welsh” (67). Through this choice to align identity with one part of the self over the others (which is sometimes voluntary, often not), the difference that constituted a character’s hybrid identity is subsumed under the sameness that is constituted by their choice, and their hybridity itself vanishes as a result. This process becomes a key refrain of the book: “Hybridity extinguishes itself in sameness” (214).

The bulk of the book is divided into chapters that operate as “case studies” of different narrative approaches to hybridity in medieval English literature, roughly spanning the twelfth to the fifteenth century. Chapter 2 addresses mixed ethnicity in English romances, with special emphasis on *Sir Gowther*, *Libeaus Desconus*, and *Richard Coer de Lyon*, along with other short romances and miscellanies. The hybrid characters in this chapter must negotiate ethnic and cultural hybridity that binds them simultaneously to competing allegiances—“Christian” and “Saracen,” for example—but the result is always the same. The texts “seem to possess but few narrative strategies to resolve mixed ethnic identity”: “silence on the subject is one strategy; determined effort to minimize difference to the point where it no longer matters, another” (61). Gasse notes that while hybridity can function quite differently from text to text, one larger pattern seems to emerge: “medieval English texts appear to welcome and embrace many types of hybridity, so long as difference in religion is not involved” (66). Nevertheless, the chapter concludes with a summary of the “optimistic message” of the surveyed literature: “it is possible for anyone from any biological background to become English, provided that she wants it enough to change fundamental patterns in her life and provided that she can establish a genuine, authenticated connection to its soil” (69).

Chapter 3 looks especially at the hybrid identities of Melusine and Merlin, two popular characters out of romance who boast supernatural hybrid identities. Both characters must contend with the fate toward which their unusual parentage would lead them. Ultimately, however, Merlin is able to retain more control over his life and actions than his female counterpart Melusine, who throughout her story “acts as a faery because a faery is what she really always is” (120). Merlin’s masculine identity allows him more freedom to “act as a powerful aid, sometimes even a pander, to British kings,” even though his hybridity keeps him on the margins of society.

Chapter 4 addresses the monstrous hybrid bodies of Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* and begins to weave in countervailing theories of hybridity that arise from disability studies and monster studies. The shifting bodies in the *Confessio* give rise to new forms of anxiety, as “shapeshifting, whether the act occurs by natural or by unnatural means, reveals the human body’s unstable hybridic nature” (124). From human-skinned chairs to skulls made into goblets, the changing and

changeable bodies of the *Confessio* demonstrate that “change is threatening because it shows we all have hybrid potentials lurking inside of us” (152).

Chapter 5 addresses “the hybridity of dying” (155). It is unsurprising that in a corpus rich with didactic eschatological literature, imagery of the dead and the dying features prominently. But in this chapter, Gasse supplies an interesting reading that situates these images within the framework of social as well as metaphysical hybridity: “What do we the living have in common with the dead other than the fact that we will become one of them some day?” Gasse asks (213). The corpse is the ultimate horror because it is so completely self and other. But the hybrid dead and dying bodies in this chapter, taken from an assortment of didactic religious texts such as *Handlynge Synne* and the *Prick of Conscience*, “restore the humanity of the corpse stripped away by strict Thomist theology” (213) and forcefully remind us that “being dead is just another way of being human” (214).

One of the strengths of the book surely lies in its clear engagement with literature qua literature. Gasse is interested in the social and historical context of early England—and context matters for her—but her “case studies” are literary analyses that dive deeply into exact wording and narrative strategy. She gracefully avoids the pitfall of too strongly relying on literature as a yardstick for measuring social reality while reasonably observing the ways in which the two must inform one another. Gasse is perhaps at times too optimistic about early English society’s ability to successfully navigate hybridity to “preserve its integrity and still bring individuals, even outsiders, within its ranks” (225), but her analysis of early English literature’s ability to imagine this navigation is nuanced, complex, and fruitful. And her final observation is certainly worthy of further consideration: “Hybridity, grounded in difference and yet pointing towards sameness, still has much work to do before it can well and truly declare itself extinguished” (226).

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