

high-status women lay and monastic. Amongst the latter are singled out the poetess Muriel, nun of Wilton, and the anonymous nuns who contributed their poetry to the mortuary rolls that circulated in England and Normandy. The linear chronological layout of the book has the advantage that specific political circumstances of the queens and other high-status women involved in literary patronage can be explained. In particular, it allows for in-depth discussion of the impact of dynastic change and conquest by Danish and Norman forces in eleventh-century England. This is an impressive study that I recommend in the strongest possible terms. A real delight to read.

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*Lyric Tactics: Poetry, Genre, and Practice in Later Medieval England.*

Ingrid Nelson.

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Ingrid Nelson deftly sketches the place of the medieval English lyric in literary history and theory. She notes that there has been no full-length book on the subject since Rosemary Woolf's in 1968. Moreover, many recent accounts of lyric neglect the medieval English phase. On the other hand, she hails Carleton Brown, R. L. Greene, and Rossell Hope Robbins, and more recently Julia Boffey, Jessica Brantley, Ardis Butterfield, Nicolette Zeeman, and others who have moved beyond formalism to consider lyric in terms of performance, manuscript matrix, and historical poetics.

A new book about medieval English lyric is sure to be warmly welcomed. This book is particularly interesting because of all that has happened since 1968 in literary theory. It is not that Woolf did not have her own set of theoretical issues to handle, but that a greater degree of confidence in a particular scholarly method was possible then, a confidence that enabled scholars to go about the business at hand a bit more briskly. Now the clouds of literary theory are massed on the horizon of every project. That is a good thing, but it does have implications for economy and focus.

Nelson proceeds skillfully, in part by means of elision. Her thoughtfulness about the theory of genre in general and lyric genre in particular is visible everywhere but adduced lightly—de Man (on lyric and anthropomorphism) gets no mention here; Derrida appears fleetingly (on voice); Foucault is briefly discussed but displaced by the more pragmatic Michel de Certeau; Bruno Latour seems to be important to her case, but is left out of the bibliography. Her book is about practice and tactics and she is herself appropriately tactical in her approach to material that might otherwise undermine her project. She wants to retain the name of lyric for these poems for example, but this is a problematic aim insofar as many generic, transhistorical studies of lyric omit the medieval English contenders while including their famous Continental counterparts. Her

navigation of this problem is nimbly done—rather than engage head-on and laboriously with the obstacle posed by this exclusion she redefines the lyric genre in terms of agile tactics (à la Certeau) and practice rather than fixed forms or essential qualities: “My central claim is that in later medieval England, the lyric genre is defined as much by its cultural practices as by its poetic forms” (4). Without spelling it out she has enlarged her subject (yoking it to trends in actor-network theory, post-Marxism, sociology) while also making it more manageable.

The book’s terminology likewise points to a pragmatic approach to theory. That she has traced the trajectory from old historicism and old philology through formalism and out into poststructuralism, New Historicism, and New Formalism is implied but not drearily reproduced in the book. Instead she has practiced what others might only preach—for example she has dropped traditional ways of describing agency and causality. Rarely does she attribute agency to a person (although conventions die hard where there are acknowledgments of other scholars to be made, and also, interestingly, in the Chaucer chapters, as if Chaucer still has a kind of subjectivity that one just cannot get around). Otherwise, agency is reassigned to inanimate entities—onto modalities and genres: “rhetoric thematizes tactics” (17) or “nonlinear and distributed mobilities inform a variety of medieval texts and practices” (14). Everywhere there is voice, everywhere there is affect; rarely a speaker or a feeling subject. This is theoretically on point but can seem a little dry. One longs for people again and thinks wistfully of Helen Waddell’s immensely lively rendering of the Continental lyricists of the earlier Middle Ages in *The Wandering Scholars*.

*Lyric Tactics* falls naturally into two halves—two chapters on lyrics as they appear in a larger manuscript context (Harley 2253 and in the commonplace book of William Herebert), and two about lyrics in larger literary works (Chaucer’s *Troilus*, his *Legend*, and Robert Mannyng of Brunne’s *Handlyng Synne*). Her approach is Marxist without the drastic political implications—tactics, and not strategy: “The theory of tactics is not oppositional with respect to the structures of power; it is relational, recombinative, and generative” (25). While the thesis is persuasive, it is somewhat emphatic, and the parts of the book that sheer off from the main argument are rather attractive—crisp accounts of Hegelian, Romantic, and post-Romantic ideas about the lyric for example, or enchantment in Herebert, or compactness in Chaucer’s lyrics, or the more speculative broadening of the overall topic into Sir Orfeo and Wyatt in the conclusion. All in all, this is a cogent and enlightening book.

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