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REVIEW

Demonic Possession, Vulnerability, and Performance in Medieval French Drama. By ANDREEA MARCULESCU. (Medieval Interventions: New Light on Traditional Thinking, 4.) New York: Peter Lang, 2018. x + 148 pp.

It is a signal achievement of Andreea Marculescu's new book to bring medieval depictions of demonic possession into dialogue both with theological and medical discourses of the period and with modern affect studies, disability studies, and phenomenology. The author's aim is to show that medieval demoniacs (who were often but not exclusively female) were taken not only as pathological objects of interrogation and exorcism, diagnosis and treatment but also as 'insurgent' subjects (p. 7) whose physical symptoms and 'disarticulated language' could be used to mark out 'zones of visual, aural, and tactile contact' in which innovative forms of 'intercorporeality', 'sensuous exchange', and ethical intersubjectivity could arise (p. 6). Marculescu locates this alternative model of the demoniac in theatre, specifically mystery plays that were written and staged in fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century France and that featured possession scenes drawn from scripture or hagiography. By her account, those scenes merge scholastic and clinical models of demonic possession with the live, embodied forms of representation that characterize theatrical spectacle, that call for 'somatic modes of attention' (p. 19), and that enable a heightened degree of affective immediacy. Mystery plays create 'an ambiguous milieu, a gray zone in which [the demoniac's] subjectivity is not exclusively produced and imposed by a theological or medical gaze' (p. 9), and in which onlookers are called upon to experience 'empathy and sensorial participation' (p. 17). The book's first chapter outlines physiological and pastoral treatments of possession, with a particular emphasis on efforts by male intellectuals to regulate women's bodies and devotional practices. The remaining three chapters turn to theatre in order to show, in Chapter 2, that mystery plays work to de-pathologize possession and to enable demoniacs to narrate their own corporeal and affective experience; in Chapter 3, that audiences are invited to experience both horror at and empathy with the suffering of possessed characters; and, in Chapter 4, that the vulnerable bodies of the possessed can be used to imagine a therapeutic ethic of care with broad social implications. Marculescu's study moves dextrously across historical, cultural, and intellectual divides and draws especially illuminating analogies between medieval demoniacs and modern hysterics, enabling her to argue, along with Louis Aragon and André Breton, that possession (like hysteria) is not a pathology but 'a supreme means of expression' and a 'type of corporeality predicated upon vulnerability' (pp. 127 and 128). This shuttling between medieval and modern can sometimes be jarring, and the author's critical vocabulary, as rich and varied as it is, occasionally obscures her argument or dulls its impact. Additionally, I would have appreciated greater clarity in discussions of gender and possession, as Marculescu typically insists that the demoniac is a 'she' even though several of her examples are male, as indeed were many of Charcot's patients at the Salpêtrière. That said, this is a valuable study that significantly expands our understanding of medieval demonology and religious theatre by turning from intellectual and elite discourses and practices to embodied, affective, and demotic ones.

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