

JÖELLE FUHRMANN. *La représentation de la femme dans le 'nouvelle' allemande du moyen âge tardif: Description de quelques schémas normatifs de l'imaginaire masculin et patriarcal*. Wiener Arbeiten zur germanistischen Altertumskunde und Philologie. Band 34. Bern: Peter Lang, 1996. isbn: 3-906756-02-5. \$86.95.

At first glance, Fuhrmann's book on the representation of women in the short German narratives of the later Middle Ages, called *maeren* or *Versnovellen*, looks impressive: 303 pages of text, 140 pages of notes and 63 pages of bibliography testify to the time and work which she invested in her study. As Fuhrmann considers literary texts subjective, she compares them with legal, theological, scientific, and medical ones in order to obtain objective and precise information about the status of women in Germany during the later Middle Ages as well as about the image of women produced by the male patriarchal imagination. This simple opposition between two types of texts providing different kinds (subjective/objective) of information is open to question considering how much ink has been spilled during the last thirty years to show that theological or medical texts are as subjective as literary ones, that theirs is only a pseudo-objectivity.

After setting out her goal, Fuhrmann discusses Hanns Fischer's definition of *maere* and the critical responses it provoked. She then describes when and how this type of story appeared in late medieval German literature and attempts to give an overview of social and literary history from the twelfth to the fifteenth century. Her account suffers from oversimplification. In particular, she includes much unnecessary material ranging from statements like: 'Si la description détaillée des veuves, qui par définition avaient perdu leur mari [...]...' (104), to two and one half pages on a definition of the concept of literature (69ff.). On the other hand, she fails to mention the problem of orality and literacy, clearly important for stories which may well have circulated orally a long time before they were written down. In addition, her account is based on a sharp opposition between a twelfth-century feudal, rural society which produced the courtly novel, and a bourgeois, urban society, which produced the *maere*. This opposition unduly oversimplifies a very complex social and literary development.

The body of Fuhrmann's study is divided into two main parts dealing with positive and negative representations of women respectively. Each part is subdivided into four chapters (unmarried women, wives, lovers, old women), then further subdivided according to themes (parental supervision, pending marriage etc.) using one or more *maeren* as examples. Fuhrmann provides short summaries of the contents together with French paraphrases and Middle High German quotations of relevant passages, adding information culled from many diverse sources. Much of this is useful, but some of it has little to do with her topic. Unfortunately, the factual information rarely contributes to an analysis of the story or stories. At the end, the reader is left with the impression that he or she has looked at many pieces of a puzzle which never come together to form a coherent picture. It is not surprising that the overall conclusion is rather disappointing: 'Nous avons pu constater à travers l'explication de ces récits brefs que la représentation de la femme, si elle s'inscrivait dans une histoire fictive, n'était pas pour autant coupée de la réalité d'alors mais au contraire,

tirait sa raison d'être de nombreux facteurs d'ordre théologique, juridique, philosophique, sociologique, médicale et artistique qui existaient à la période du bas moyen âge allemand' (318).

Finally, a word is in order about Fuhrmann's bibliography and her knowledge of research literature. The bibliography is very long, containing some rather superfluous items like the *Duden Lexikon* or the *Petit Larousse Illustré*; yet almost completely missing are titles in English, an astonishing omission considering the great number of books and articles on women in the Middle Ages which have been published by North American scholars during the last twenty years or so. I shall give just one example. To write a book on women in *maeren* without any reference to R. Howard Bloch's *The scandal of the fabliaux* or his *Mysogeny or the Invention of Romantic Love in the Middle Ages* betrays a stunning degree of scholarly provincialism.

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