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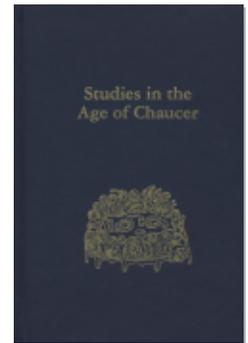
Imagining a Medieval English Nation ed. by Kathy Lavezzo
(review)

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troubling to a modern liberal understanding of the social good, and she usefully shows how and why they might be misread without taking account of the two hermeneutical types she has invoked. She also shows, again usefully, how much richer the thinking and writing about these texts become when one keeps always in the front of one's mind the ordering principle (the glass bowl) that gives and constrains the meanings of the texts. For example, she makes a good point that the hermeneutical Jew, as revealed in certain personal and relational traits of the Jewish characters in the texts, shows a far greater resistance to the totalizing image of transformation that was, in the high theology of the period, supposed to accompany baptism/conversion. This point owes a great deal to an analogy or parallel between the hermeneutical Jew and what I think the author might be willing to call the hermeneutical Alien (stranger to the community) and hermeneutical Racial (the dark-skinned "presence" or otherwise racialized presence defined, following recent medieval historiography, according to less somatically obvious distinctions). Finally, to see the past and past texts through these newly aware eyes of the hermeneutical Other is not to condemn the past for its mistakes ("to seek moral reckonings," p. 171), but to "seek ethical understandings" of it.

This is a book that one must return to from time to time to elicit its nuggets of insight. It is sometimes a beautiful read, but almost never an easy one. Returning to it, however, can be a genuinely rewarding experience.

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KATHY LAVEZZO, ed. *Imagining a Medieval English Nation*. Medieval Cultures 37. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. Pp. xxxiv, 356. \$68.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

Emphasis must fall on the "imaginary" part of Kathy Lavezzo's title, since concepts of "nation" and "nationhood" are a good deal less present in this volume than the title would seem to imply. Actually, the commendably headstrong contributors are at their best when they jettison the doubtfully applicable concept of medieval nationhood altogether

and strike out on their own. "Nation" is really only gesturally present, as Aranye Fradenburg pursues her recent interest in the underpinnings of sacrifice (with *patria* hailed as one of its justifications); when Andrew Galloway considers the contributions of Higden and Walsingham to monastic historiography; when Jill Havens reflects on the Lollards as an imagined community within the realm; when Peggy Knapp asks what "imagination" actually meant in the later Middle Ages—to think only of the first four contributions. Although this collection's blurb declares it to be "unusually coherent," I would tend to argue otherwise, in favor of the unruliness of its talented contributors, and their commendably centrifugal offerings, as its greater asset.

For all its inner diversity, this collection nevertheless does have a recurrent topic, preliminary or incidental to its stated one, and somewhat more agreeably indigenous to the Middle Ages. This is the subject of "community," in all its ramifications, and most of the contributors turn to it with evident relief. After pondering the possibility that Higden's interest in English *varietas* is itself a form of alienated national consciousness, Galloway turns to Walsingham, whose "most powerful sections access into his notions of English community" (p. 75). Havens observes that the polemic of Lollard texts "sets up an ideal of an imagined community, united by a belief in the ability of the English language to convey sacred truth" (p. 100). Kathleen Davis concerns herself with spatial and temporal disjunctions in Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, as they create an "alogical" zone in which various impossibilities can be imagined—a completed poem, a consummated marriage, and a harmonious community. Larry Scanlon's restorative reassertion of Langland's political radicalism grounds itself on ideals of community and the "true commons." In his assertion of parallels between Edward III's and Langland's views of the problems and potentialities of monetary exchange, Vance Smith gesturally invokes the concept of a "national economy," but is more actively concerned with the contribution of the merchants as a group "whose own intrinsic, communal value helped to define . . . the very idea of English *communitas*" (p. 236). In a confident and revealing essay on Richard II's indebtedness to French ideas of sacral kingship, Lynn Staley interests herself in the extent to which even contentious engagements with Richard's emergent ideal of sacralty could also create occasions for new understandings of political community.

If "community" is this collection's manifest concern, it boasts a very powerful latent concern as well. Recurrent in many—in fact, most—of

its essays is a painful sense of affront that people like Benedict Anderson (in his *Imagined Communities*, 1983) seem so intent on promulgating rules of engagement that have the effect of excluding us and our subject matter from some of the most exciting areas of contemporary inquiry and discussion. Or, to put it even more broadly, that *nobody* seems to want us involved: the early modernists with their disinclination to learn anything about our subject; Marxists and assorted modernists who think that the most cherished categories of analysis (class, heteroglossia, nationhood) did not exist prior to the industrial revolution; the postmodernists, who accept the canard that medieval culture was too static and hierarchical to entertain any alternate or contentious models. Among these last, preeminent is Anderson, whose ideas about imagined community are so pertinent to medieval studies, but who dismisses the entirety of our period as an object of analysis with the absurdly oversimplified claim that the presence of a universal language and a universal Church and the absence of a print culture automatically prohibit any medieval involvement in the imaginary self-delusions to which subsequent cultures have had such influential recourse. Despite, and because of, his categorical maneuver, Anderson haunts the pages of this collection to such an extent that one might almost declare him its absent cause. To her credit, Peggy Knapp addresses this issue frontally, locating Anderson's importance in the fact that his analysis reconciles "imaginative constructs" on the one hand and "social practices" on the other—a mediation of obvious importance for literary scholars who want to talk about texts and also about larger cultural and political enclosures. We want his style of thinking—when "nation" and "community" are at stake, we even *need* his style of thinking—and perhaps Knapp and Galloway and others are on the right track when they simply go ahead and use him in spite of it all!

Scanlon adds one more vital twist to this discussion, with an argumentatively ingenious but highly persuasive move. He demonstrates that, despite Anderson's attempt to banish medieval and premodern formations from the "modern" national consciousness, traces of these excluded materials resurface constantly as presuppositions of Anderson's own analyses, and as preconditions of the materials he takes in hand. As Scanlon wryly observes, Anderson's treatment of temporality was deeply influenced by the views of medievalist Erich Auerbach, and his key modernist categories of community and sovereignty were deeply implicated in medieval modes of apprehension.

To return to the rather occluded subject of “nation”: actually, the essay that might have the most to say about it is the one most insistent on its impossibility, or at any rate its emergence only under the most threatened conditions. This is Claire Sponsler’s concluding analysis of Froissart’s reported story of Anglo-Irishman Henry Chrystede, a most arresting example of “the confusions of ethnic identity and national affiliation that shaped English life in the late fourteenth century” (p. 307). Fittingly, Thorlac Turville-Petre, who wrote a pioneering study, *England the Nation: Language, Literature, and National Identity, 1290–1340* (Oxford, 1996), provides a short afterword. He demonstrates a good deal of reserve about the “national” part of it, though, suggesting that the circumstances of 1290–1340 were peculiar ones, and that for Chaucer and the *Gawain*-poet issues of European culture trump questions of national identity.

Kathy Lavezzo is to be congratulated for assembling a provocative collection, by a number of our most stimulating practitioners, working at top form on issues of political consciousness and the state of polity in late medieval England. Incidentally, this volume is evidently among the last to be issued by the influential Minnesota “Medieval Cultures” series, a considerable disappointment, given the success of its thirty-four published volumes in raising questions of vital contemporary importance to members of our profession.

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TIM WILLIAM MACHAN. *English in the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. Pp. x, 205. \$65.00.

In the opening chapter of this book, Tim William Machan sets out the theoretical framework that underpins the subsequent chapters. His principal thesis is that an understanding of the status of a language and its use must be based on an integrated study of its sociolinguistic context, what Einar Haugen terms its “ecology,” rather than relying on the work of independent and isolated disciplines. This commitment to an interdisciplinary method, and an ability to apply the theoretical insights