Gender, Reading, and Truth in the Twelfth Century

Powell, Morgan

Published by Arc Humanities Press

Powell, Morgan.
Gender, Reading, and Truth in the Twelfth Century: The Woman in the Mirror.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/75863.

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CONCLUSION

THE READING AND grieving widow had become, by 1200, the face of the woman in the mirror of the reading revolution that transformed Western understanding of the place of man before God. She stands at the end of a succession of mediary translations that consistently serve one and the same experience of identification achieved between audience and bride, and that we have been able to trace from the beginning to the end of the long twelfth century. Rupert’s new Marian reading of the Song of Songs itself derives from the possibly original locus of this identification as it was embedded in the much older liturgy for the feast of Mary’s Assumption. His project, however, translated the same into a hermeneutic event accessible to “immature” and “female” souls, through which they could “read” the scriptural images as Mary had. From there it was translated into an alternative, audio-visual lectio for women in the monastic life in the Speculum virginum or, in Hildegard’s audio-visual gnosis, into the model of a new authority for a woman’s unmediated apprehension of divine teaching. The woman’s reading position enters the conception of vernacular textuality as the locus of a reorientation of identification in narrative in the Chanson de Saint Alexis as staged in the St Albans Psalter. In the rendering of scripture en romans, this position fused with a new conception of the poetic performance space itself, from there to enter narrative representation, where figures of secular historia could double and prefigure the audience’s own transformation as envisioned in the delivery of the text. Finally, then, it rejoins and cross-fertilizes, it seems, the expanding treatment of Mary’s narrative, most especially in her suffering at the cross, to deliver a new poetics of truth in the reception of romance narrative. In this process of translation for new audiences and the corresponding sites of delivery, Latin becomes vernacular, lectio becomes oral performance, scriptural images acquire bodies in narrative or visual art, the experience of the liturgy is transferred to instruction and poetic entertainment. Through all these changes however, the experience that is aimed for remains the same one with the same claim to gnosis and truth and the same authorizing privilege as a “female” and “illiterate” access to the Word.

What we have most basically discovered in pursuing this woman in the mediary mirror is that there was an alternative way of reading being articulated in the twelfth century that has as yet barely been detected in the pages of modern scholarship: an alternative poetics of body and truth, an alternative to the oppositions between letter and spirit, kernel and chaff, masking exterior and inner truth—all the familiar dichotomies that subtended exegetical reading and allegoresis. The alternative resides in the possibility that the body and bodily experience themselves can reveal truth to the extent that they approach the abject humility of God-in-human-flesh. The body here reveals in and through its materiality and historicity, in its particularity as in its pain: it shuns exemplarity even as the "true woman" shuns praise and all external display, all semblance of manifest, external excellence. Thus, the body as object-to-be-read negates its
own quality as sign to empty itself of the presumption inherent in all re-semblance. Here the body can only become more itself, sink into its own immanence to the point that it attains the inverse perfection evinced by Christ on the cross. Where external perfection is inherently suspect, truth in the other is grasped only as the sense of loss and bereavement of the suffering body; that is, through empathy achieved, identification with the other in the fullness of his or her humanity. It is finally by knowing Parzival or Yvain as ourselves, their struggles as ours, that we know something of Christ through their respective narrative fates and not by knowing or decoding Parzival or Yvain as Christ. The woman in the narrative mirror taught her audience how to do just this. She does not teach imitation but rather herself seeks identification with Mary’s experience as the steadfast, suffering beloved and mother, even as she requires the same from protagonists and audience. Mary as the protagonist of the Stabat mater, the steadfast woman as mirror of Christ’s human pain, was the position from which the human soul learned to read as woman.

The search for and articulation of this new reading is not hidden from view nor is the field in which it was articulated one that can be easily overlooked: it occurs through the lectio of the Song of Songs. Here we discover somewhat differently the significance of this biblical book, even the reason for its extraordinary and pervasive predominance in twelfth-century letters and thought, meditation, and devotion. The Song of Songs was the site of the creation of a new reading experience; the text itself, in contemporary understanding, created or generated this experience, one in which the search for oneness with the Word was a process of identification with body and bride as self, in which the images of human sensual and sexual experience become not objects of renunciation but rather points of immersion through which to experience the humanity of the flesh in its communion with the humanity of the bridegroom. To read the Song was to immerse oneself in the dialogue of humanity and divinity as each sought to know the other, a song of separation and union in which knowing was a communion experienced as suffering and love, the body in pain and joy; the song of two voices seeking perfect reciprocity in love and in pain, a moment of perfect, reciprocal knowing, figured finally as enclosure in one heart. Meaning and truth were to be found in moments of continuity with this experience, moments in which the body knew itself as the chiastic complement of Christ’s place in the stable at Bethlehem, sucking from Mary’s breast, or hanging from the cross.

With the discovery of the moment at the centre of a claim to vernacular literary truth we have also identified the place of romance narrative within the hermeneutics of the sacred. It is worth reviewing in conclusion what this means for our understanding of the mediary landscape that generated this new literary form.

First, what we have called courtly romance served the communication of Christian truth and was driven by parallel developments in Christian devotion. It embraced a project defined by this message, which also contributes to its understanding as a distinct reading experience, a genre. To announce a text as avventure or âventiure implied it operated within the new body poetics and its larger model of knowing and truth.

The development of new vernacular narrative is complicit with the history of exegesis, but not such that the latter serves as a model for the former or offers methods
through which to encode or decode meaning. Rather, their common ground lies in the understanding of narrative as the recreation and renewed projection of a reading experience and above all in the conception of reading as an encounter with sacred history as presence. We need to consider whether and to what extent *en romans treire* and *ze diute sagen*, the process of inscription in the vernaculars, can be understood as the imaginative projection of scriptural images as *historia*; that is, as the projection of a reading process whereby the “meaning” found, an identification of self in sacred history, is placed in a new narrative context that enables a renewed identification through shared experience.

Where *lectio* seeks truth as an experience of presence, exegesis likewise becomes “an exercise of recognition of self in history,”¹ a search for an experience of identification so strong that it could substitute for the reader’s own factual absence at the events. In this it at once subscribed to the historian’s idea of truth as guaranteed by the eyewitness and substituted for the same an experience achieved through reading empathy. This convergence of exegesis and history, of reading to “be her” and reading to “be there,” of empathy and presence, describes the space in which the new poetics of narrative emerged. It did not operate in opposition to historical truth any more than it sought autonomy from sacred truth. The new body poetics and the idea of reading empathy were fully interdependent. They had their adherents and their detractors; the latter were no doubt most numerous among the likes of Thomasin; that is, among the more traditional clerics and *magistri* who saw themselves as potentially or factually displaced by this new mediation of knowledge. There is no basis in contemporary sources for an opposition between historical truth and a new narrative “fiction” other than this reactionary position, which thereby seeks peremptory disqualification of the latter as simply lies. As long as we discuss romance narrative in terms of an opposition between fiction and history, our attempts to grasp what is at stake are inevitably deflected back into the very opposition that served this disqualification. The operative polarity is instead one between the truth of cognition, whose vehicles are *exempla* (*bîspel*) and other applications of allegoresis, and the truth of experience, which is the claim made for “new” *mære* and *avanture*.

There did exist, finally, among the authors and audiences of the new narrative, a keenly developed awareness of its place in epistemology and poetics, as well as a discourse—a conceptual and terminological toolbox—that served to articulate the same. True to the nature of its justification and the audiences it (at least ostensibly) served, this discourse and its terminology were not those of the schools, which the Middle Ages had inherited from antiquity and have to this day been at the centre of our own inquiry. Their very authority derived from the predicated necessity of a knowing without schooled learning; the appeal to the same may at times have served to justify “extra-curricular” explorations, the possibility to operate outside the boundaries of learned tradition, and at others have been truly motivated by a concern to meet the needs of otherwise excluded groups.

Here we encounter an explanation not only for the intellectual complexity and literary quality of the first generation of romance narrative but also for its—still lamentably

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¹ *JP*, p. 469.
neglected—existence in an almost symbiotic relationship to scripture *en romans*, texts whose declared purpose is to deliver the art of exegesis or religious instruction as recast in the vernacular. The authors of romance narrative were themselves no more *illiterati* than the most prolific of twelfth-century biblical commentators, Rupert of Deutz, was truly an unschooled monk. We should think of them instead as among the most intellectually adventurous minds of their time, in the company of Peter Abelard or Hugh of St Victor—and with no lesser commitment to their religious beliefs. This might seem no surprise, except that—with our previous idea of romance as a fictional world unto itself, one even outside the bounds of the communication of Christian truth—there was no more a school or other intellectual milieu from which to envision these authors’ emergence than there existed an intellectual foundation for their purported idea of truth in fiction. Nor could much explanation be found for the persistent nonchalance with which contemporary witnesses and manuscript collections alike treated what the scholars of our own time considered such a radical divide, even antipathy, between texts of religious instruction and romances glorifying a chimera, a fictional truth.

What began, then, as an inquiry into supposed female vernacular readers and patrons ends up demonstrating how to understand new vernacular scripture—whether Arthurian or antique narrative, or exegesis and religious instruction—as varying facets of one experience, an experience that reveals truth in the body, in reading empathy as united with the truth of history. The key lies in recognizing that affective identity with the sufferings of Christ was felt to bring one into the presence of the crucial events of sacred history, and vice versa: to have been present at these events would be to know the truth and the Word as Mary and the apostles did, to know the Man-God by sharing his experience. All of this applies, however, because of the body that God took from Mary. The woman as bride and audience is our way of knowing these experiences; she makes them “our own” because she knew them as body, in her body, one time for all before us. This is why the mystery lady in the audience is always potentially Mary herself, why the successful constitution of meaning depends on moments of identity achieved between bride and protagonist, bride and audience. In such moments *historia sacra* becomes not only true but also “real” in an experiential sense, and secular history becomes not merely factual, but also “true” in the full Christian sense. The truth becomes a manifest dimension of human experience here, now, and among “us.”

What, now, should we make of the idea of female readers of new vernacular literature? The illustration tradition of Richard of Fournival’s *Bestiaire d’amours*—which provided a visual epigraph at the outset of this study—includes, in a different manuscript from the late thirteenth century, a very rare attempt to visualize the reception of romance narrative (fig. 9.1). Here, if anywhere, in a text so self-consciously staged as a written appeal to the author’s ladylove, we ought finally to find the elusive female reader of vernacular literature. The illustration instead shows a man seated in a private chamber with an open book on his knees. Neither is his gaze directed at the pages nor are these directed to his face—they are turned instead as if offered to the viewer. The man’s gaze is preoccupied with something far more immediate: armed figures in full battle dress (so close that the outstretched hand of the foremost among them all but touches the book) appear to address him, “For when one hears a *romans* read, one
perceives the adventures just as if one could see them in the present.” It is not clear that what happens here corresponds to our idea of reading at all. If the text is to be believed, the illustration instead demonstrates that romance texts operate even as pictures did for Ooliba, creating the illusion of presence of the persons and events they portray.

What occurs when the objective is instead a more generalized representation of the reception of the text in the mind or (as Richard would far prefer) in the heart, we have already seen: a lady stands between the doors of the eye and the ear to “her” memory (fig. 0.1). This model of female reception of Richard’s example of vernacular scripture is a vernacularization of the audio-visual address to the bride. It may or may not involve the literate perusal of texts; its central concern is rather a conception in the womb of memory. For a truly telling visual representation of the female reception of new vernacular narrative, and one chronologically closest to the fact, we are best referred instead to the grieving widow of the Rodenegg Iwein cycle. This Lady, placed in iconic stasis front and centre, is no less—and perhaps still more—the mirror of audience/viewer participation than she is a figure from the story itself.

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2 Bestiaires d’amours, p. 5; as quoted above, p. 1, note 2.