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**COHEN, JEFFREY JEROME, *MEDIEVAL IDENTITY MACHINES. MEDIEVAL CULTURES*,
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The latest book written by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen constitutes, alongside *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters and the Middle Ages* previously published as volume 17 of the Medieval Cultures series, another attempt at combining studies in medieval English literature and the latest literary theory. Whether the goal of the author to present the Middle Ages as 'wonderful' (xi) has been achieved can become the subject of an extensive debate. Nevertheless, Cohen's familiarity with both a range of medieval texts and such theoretical movements as postcolonialism, Deleuze and Guattari's version of psychoanalysis, queer theory or cyberfeminism (since Donna Haraway's magisterial *Cyborg Manifesto* is mentioned in passing) is impressive. A reference to disability studies and their criticism of the image of the body that prevails in contemporary culture makes the theoretical background even more all-inclusive and highly educational.

However, the qualities that generally are the book's advantages can sometimes become its serious disadvantages. An example could be the following: references to the contemporary modes of examining a human body make the introduction more lively and they constitute an interesting link between the medieval concept of the body as a machine and the personal experience of a reader, but the postscript telling the story of 9/11 from the author's

perspective is perhaps too loosely related to the book's subject. Another instance of a quality which might turn into a serious drawback is the fact that Cohen easily moves in the field of the medieval English literature, changing the focus of his analysis very quickly. Unfortunately, such fast shifting from one literary work to another leads in his case to only cursory interpretations, which is a pity for a reader who would like to become more familiar with the text itself.

The term 'identity machine' is used in order to describe the body by dint of a more comprehensive concept: it is not only the physical body whose boundaries are strictly fixed, but also the objects that surround it and the bodies it interacts with. At this point Cohen's gift to skillfully combine the present with the past criticism is again visible: he connects Deleuze and Guattari's image of a human body from *Anti-Oedipus* with the medieval humoral and astrological theories. To quote Cohen, in the Middle Ages the body was conceived to be 'aqueous, susceptible to celestial pull as in the tempestuous sea' (xvi), which testifies to the fact how strongly it was bound with its surroundings. The chapter 'Margery Kempe, or Becoming-Liquid' interestingly elaborates on that liquid-like quality of the human body, yet, the relation between that passage in the introduction and the chapter about the female visionary remains somehow unexploited. Interestingly, the concept of the human body as an entity linked to other people and objects is situated against the background of the medieval theory and not only considered in terms of how feminist, postcolonial or queer theory perceives it. The summary of the postmodern theoretical perspectives on the human body is highly interesting: when writing the study in question Cohen remembered how excluding the prevailing cultural image of corporeality is. Feminist criticism rejects that image for its masculinity since even though the sex of that normative human body is not stated, its sexless nature equals being masculine. Postcolonialism treats that image as Eurocentric: the all-human body is white and any racially different body has to be marked as 'the Other'. Queer studies perceive that body as heterosexual, which relegates other sexual orientations to the margin. In disability studies it is argued that the dominating image of human body is that of healthy and complete corporeality, which excludes all those whose bodies are somehow deficient. Cohen's ambition consists in not discussing such an image and considering some non-normative identities in medieval literature. He focuses on corporeality in various genres, as he declares in the introduction:

Medieval Identity Machines argues that the body is likewise a site of unraveling and invention in medieval texts of numerous genres' (xviii).

The chapter 'Time's Machines' is probably the most vague one in the book since it provides the reader with very general remarks about the notion of time in the Middle Ages and at present and it does not refer to any medieval text in particular. The two epochs Cohen focuses on in terms of the idea of temporality have, as he observes, one important feature in common: both in the literary period in question and in contemporary cultural theory time is analyzed in great detail. Cohen is writing that the ancient idea of linearity of events was replaced in the Middle Ages by that of time being a total system, bound by eternity. The modern concept of becoming that is present in the contemporary perspective on time is again derived from Deleuze and Guattari. Unfortunately, Cohen describes the cyclic quality of time in feminism or post-colonialism in such details (and describing specific texts) that giving any concrete exemplification of the medieval ideas somehow escapes him. It is a pity, since once he does provide the reader with more specific instances of the medieval idea of time, they are highly interesting: the non-linear concept of temporality is perfectly exemplified by Augustine's thesis that Plato took all his good ideas from Christ. Cohen's consideration of the postcolonial intermingling of assimilation, colonization and resistance is very captivating as well. However, is it not going too far in the involvement in the contemporary theory if not enough medieval texts are discussed?

On the other hand, what Cohen does write about medieval literature can be very intriguing. He discusses the *Canterbury Tales* as a literary work where ample discursive space is devoted to time. For the author of *Medieval Identity Machines* Chaucer presents us 'a conceptualization of time as unbounded middle' (21), since the two images: that of time as eternity and that of hours that can be scrupulously measured by Harry Bailey, intermingle. The open structure of Chaucer's *oeuvre* also proves that the poet might have purposefully written the *Tales* with a fixed beginning and ending but a not certain middle. Regrettably, Cohen proceeds from that analysis to the text 'I, Pierre Rivière, having slaughtered my mother, my sister, and my brother...' by Michel Foucault, which does away with the spell of the previous interpretation, since it does not refer to the Middle Ages at all.

The chapter 'Chevalerie' is based on queer theory, as Cohen himself declares at the beginning: 'Affirmative and refreshingly utopian, queer theory would seem to be the logical place from which to launch any inquiry into the

limits of the human body' (39). The idea of interpreting chivalry in the context of the relationship between a knight and his horse may seem striking at first, but it is not as incongruous as it might be. Cohen describes the medieval maturation of a man as a transformation from horseless squirehood to horsed knighthood. Moreover, he emphasizes the importance of a horse for the knight's identity by giving examples of their relationship being stronger than that of a knight with a woman. A beloved woman is often forsaken in Arthurian romance so that a quest could be undertaken, whereas abandoning one's horse is only the ultimate act of a knight's despair. The subject matter of that part of Cohen's study is so convincing that after having read the argumentation queer studies do not seem out of place there any more.

'Masoch/ Lancelotism' is entitled in such a way probably in order to shock the readers, but again they have to admit that their might be at least some truth in those considerations. Cohen presents the Middle Ages as an epoch when deriving pleasure from one's suffering was a frequent phenomenon and he bases his argumentation on the existence of courtly love. Indeed, the liege lady has to symbolically dominate over her lover and he is almost happy to be able to suffer because of the love he feels for her. The author mentions late medieval flagellants, who also derived pleasure out of pain and threatened the unity of the Catholic church through their radicalism. Chrétien de Troyes' *Lancelot* provides examples to Cohen's thesis and the choice of that romance is justified by the fact that it was, as he claims, the first romance where fully-developed courtly love could be observed. However, psychoanalyzing Lancelot may be going a bit too far, even when the outcome of such an interpretation is interesting.

The only Old English text that is interpreted in *Medieval Identity Machines* is the hagiographic legend of St Guthlac extant in two versions: the mid-ninth century *Vita Sancti Guthlaci* written by the obscure monk Felix, and *Guthlac A* from the *Exeter Book*. The latter text is of more interest to Cohen since he treats it as a literary work developing the subject of the 'belligerent sainthood'. Guthlac is presented as a highly masculine literary character who is simultaneously a murderer and a saint aspiring to achieving the ideal solitude. He fails due to his being haunted by demons- he cannot function on his own as a figure, always accompanied by either other people or by supernatural creatures.

In 'Becoming-Liquid of Margery Kempe' the visionary's obsession with language is emphasized. In her autobiography, put down by a clergyman,

she describes the suffering of Christ once someone swears by his body and she tells the story of her own visionary language. The process is called 'becoming-liquid' by Cohen since she would use the language of crying out and sobbing instead of the religious language at the time exclusively used by clergymen. The author of the study in question finds analogues to Kempe's aggression directed against her husband, her community and herself in St Guthlac's resistance to demons, which offers an interesting intertextual perspective on the two hagiographic texts. The question of Margery's Jewishness is particularly worth reading about. She used to condemn the voices of her critics as Jewish (even though at that time there were hardly any Jews left in England), but she simultaneously compared her own persecutions to those Christ had to suffer. The hardships she had to go through make her very much like the Jews who had had to suffer persecution as well. Margery frequently used the phrases 'cruel' and 'cursed' in reference to Jews, but she could any time be accused of being Jewish herself, in the sense of representing heresy.

'On Saracen Enjoyment' provides the reader with a captivating analysis of the attitude towards Arabs (and Ethiopians) in the epoch in question. Cohen stresses the fact that 'race' did not connote biology in the Middle Ages, but it was similar to the modern idea of ethnicity, so it was a cultural phenomenon. Physiological description was only used in order to emphasize the deficiency of character. At the same time Saracens were associated with the realm of carnal delights, so the fact that they connoted pleasure led to phantasmizing about their existence. Nevertheless, they primarily functioned as the abject, so their existence was the source of both pleasure and abhorrence.

Despite all its deficiencies, *Medieval Identity Machines* provides numerous compelling insights into the medieval culture. It also tells the reader a lot about contemporary theory, which unfortunately distorts the proportions between the past and the present at times. Nevertheless, reading of the study can become a useful lesson about how to write about medieval literature in a vivid mode and relate it to the achievements of postmodern theory.