



1997

Review Essay: Sigal, Gale. *Erotic Dawn-Songs of the Middle Ages: Voicing the Lyric Lady*

Peter Dinzelbacher
University of Salzburg/Austria

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Renaissance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dinzelbacher, Peter (1997) "Review Essay: Sigal, Gale. *Erotic Dawn-Songs of the Middle Ages: Voicing the Lyric Lady*," *Quidditas*: Vol. 18 , Article 29.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol18/iss1/29>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quidditas by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

with the decretals, whereas courtly love poets and clerics such as Andreas Capellanus viewed these matters very differently.

Nevertheless, Sheehan's articles continue to be valuable contributions to these topics, even if modern historians and literary historians would disagree with some of his findings. Not every article is as clearly structured as one could wish for, but as a collection of Sheehan's research, this volume will be an important reference work for those interested in his areas of specialty.

Albrecht Classen
University of Arizona

Sigal, Gale. *Erotic Dawn—Songs of the Middle Ages: Voicing the Lyric Lady*. University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 1996. xii + 241 pp. \$49.95.

Erotic Dawn—Songs of the Middle Ages: Voicing the Lyric Lady is a full-scale analysis of the medieval Provençal *alba* and its analogies in German and English. In the introduction and chapter one we learn about previous scholarship and its failure to understand the difference between this lyrical genus and the *canso*. Only a feminist interpretation, of course, can catch the *alba* ladies' voice which "cries out for a hearing." Here, at least, women, being equal to their lovers and contrary to the "mute but exalted *canso domna* and the loud but lowly *pastourelle* shepherdess" (13), articulate themselves (even if their voice is a male invention, as the *troubaritz* did not write *albas*). It is certainly right that this feature should be underlined, and Sigal does this extensively enough.

Notwithstanding its very self-assured claim of innovation, most of this book is a rather conventional literary study paraphrasing again and again what the texts themselves say clearly. Repeating many times the very same passages of the poems in question (e.g., p. 38 = 40; 41 sq. = 55 sq. ecc.) may be a useful way of introducing this lyric genre to readers ignorant of medieval poetry, but whosoever already commands a certain knowledge of the subject will not learn much new about it. This is especially true of the first part describing literary perspectives, sex and social roles, and *fin'amors* as found in this genre or in others (how often have we read previously that it is typical for *amour courtois* to put the lady on a pedestal [99 sqq.] ecc., ecc.).

The second part, dealing with the structure of the personal relations of the couple and the psychological factors underlying them, presents,

however, some noteworthy interpretation. Sigal's translations often are nice, even if sometimes too free, and the printing has been done enviably beautifully (though with a few misprints: "Hertzerin" instead of "Hetzzerin," p. 25, "as" instead of "als," p. 58 ecc.).

The author is very traditional concerning social interpretation; ever and again she identifies the *gilos* with the husband though Paden (whom Sigal unconvincingly criticizes 76 sqq.), based on solid statistics, has shown that there are other possibilities. Knowing medieval mentalities and social history, it is unacceptable to exclude the possibility that also the father or brother of a yet unmarried (and therefore well-protected) girl may be meant, or the brother-in-law of a widow. It would have been interesting to learn how Sigal might have dealt with the "vin vröulîn zart" in Frauenlob's (?) "Durch dinster finster nebel dicken" which, of course, is not quoted.

As the *albas* have been written by male poets who expressed themselves also via all the other types of lyrics, it is not understandable how, when using this genus, they could have intended a "revolutionary critique of the social order" (75), which they certainly did not aim at in their other works. As if the troubadors had permitted their own wives to cuckold them! And what is the point in using English common law in explaining Provençal poetry (117 sq.)? There are only weak attempts to understand the mentality behind the *alba* as part of the history of love, but mutuality of emotions is indeed stressed correctly as a central figure of the dawn-songs. The *alba's* music is mentioned en passant, but never discussed.

Whereas the bibliography on the *alba* is quite complete, it shows serious *lacunae* with respect to the Middle High German *Tagelieder* in spite of the fact that these play an important role in this book. Is it too much to ask from someone who publishes in a field where only a limited bibliography exists to inform him/herself on what earlier scholars had to say before? None of the three recent editions of *Tagelieder* has been cited (S. Freund, 1983; R. Hausner, 1983; M. Backes, 1992), nor have the seminal publications by H. Ohling (1938), U. Knoop (1976), A. Wolf (1979), and G. Rohrbach (1986), to name full-scale monographs only. Strange, too, that the author never mentions Oswald von Wolkenstein although he is the one German poet who wrote more *Tagelieder* than anyone else. Instead of references to him, there are some pages on John Donne (+ 1631 !), a surrogate, even if chronologically displaced, for the nonexistent medieval English *alba* (pace Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*).

Peter Dinzelbacher
 Institut für Europäische und Vergleichende Rechtsgeschichte
 University of Salzburg/Austria

Willbern, David. *Poetic Will: Shakespeare and the Play of Language*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1997. xix + 237 pp. \$37.50.

In *Poetic Will: Shakespeare and the Play of Language*, David Willbern is concerned with "plenitude" of meaning in Shakespeare's poetry (7). To this end he quotes a wide variety of Shakespeareans, each of whom adds something to our understanding of the plays. In chapter 1, for instance, he cites more than thirty critics by name. Each has something useful to say, but the poetry itself tends to retreat as the critical phalanx advances. We have reached a point in literary criticism where critics seem more interested in other critics than in the poetry which is their ostensible subject.

I found the second essay, "Paranoia, Criticism, and Malvolio," a relief, for it is witty, clever, and thoroughly engaging. Willbern posits a connection between the phenomenon of paranoia in psychoanalysis and the practice of literary criticism. He demonstrates that the "assumption of intention" underlies much criticism, from the most conventional to the most avant-garde, and that Malvolio, whose behavior resembles a textbook case of paranoia, "offers a dramatic paradigm of the risks of unconscious projection as a style of reading" (32). Malvolio's confrontation with the forged letter in *Twelfth Night* illustrates the danger of our modern, or post-modern, "obsessive critical scrutiny of words" (38).

Willbern sees language as "an aura of linguistic play in which pun and profundity coexist" (39). As a psychoanalytic critic, he is less concerned with authorial intent than with our "re-creation" of meaning as we read words on a page. He has a highly developed "psychoanalytic third ear" (45), which allows him to perceive sexual meanings that may elude other readers. In chapter 3, for instance, he discusses fantasies of oral sexuality in *The Merchant of Venice* and Leontes' "displaced homosexual affection for Polixenes" (43) in *The Winter's Tale*. To the extent that such readings enhance our sense of linguistic possibilities, they are most welcome. But the readings are readings: they have nothing to do, apparently, with theatrical experience. And Willbern's attention does not linger for long on any single play: we move in this chapter from