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**Author**

Dalton, John P.

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JOHN W. BALDWIN, *The Language of Sex: Five Voices from Northern France around 1200*, (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994), 331 pp.

During the past few years, the number of publications devoted to issues concerning the body, gender, and sexuality has increased exponentially. Nevertheless, John W. Baldwin's *The Language of Sex: Five Voices from Northern France around 1200* is no mere exercise in fashionable scholarship. Baldwin presents a wealth of carefully organized and well-documented information here, and his attempt to "listen" to these distant voices and translate their language of sex into our own raises challenging methodological questions that will be of great interest to historians and literary scholars alike.

Rather than follow the lead of Peter Brown, John Boswell, or James A. Brundage, scholars who have focused on one type of discourse over an extended period of time often covering vast geographic regions, Baldwin instead concentrates on five different discourses from northern France that surfaced between 1185 and 1215. First are the theologians, represented by Pierre the Chanter and his students Robert of Courson and master Thomas of Chobham. The Galenic legacy is represented by the anonymous *Prose Salernitan Questions*, and the classical tradition is mediated through the always enigmatic work of André the Chaplain. The romances of Jean Renart and the fabliaux of Jean Bodel speak on behalf of the vernacular. In the first chapter, Baldwin introduces us to these spokesmen by locating each in the appropriate historical context, including not only a discussion of the available biographical information, but also a useful consideration of their designated audiences and the intellectual environment that shaped their work.

Though all of these authors and their works have been studied in considerable detail, Baldwin's approach is unique. For not only does he attempt to listen to all five voices at once, he tries to do so with as little interference as possible. This study, in Baldwin's words, "is not about sexuality as a metaphor for language, rhetoric, or power" (xvii), nor is it concerned with "love." In other words, this is an exercise in historical eavesdropping, and thus it finds its organization according to what Baldwin hears as the most common concerns voiced by these texts. Consequently, we learn about how these often contradictory discourses address the sociology of sexuality, the sexual body, sexual desire, coitus, and children.

In pulling all this together, Baldwin demonstrates the kind of expertise and comfortable familiarity with primary texts that, for the

most part, makes for convincing scholarship. This is especially evident in his chapter on sexual desire. Here, the well-known and often maddening ambiguities and contradictions in "the theology of desire" are presented with impressive clarity. Situating the Chanter's argument and that of his pupils within the larger context of the debate over *concupiscentia* as conducted by Pierre the Lombard and Huguccio of Pisa, Baldwin builds a very compelling case demonstrating the efforts of the Chanter's circle to moderate what had become in Huguccio's hands an extremely pessimistic interpretation of sexual desire. When Baldwin then moves on to distinguish the theologians' discourse from the physicians' analyses of *delectatio*, the Chaplain's reinterpretation of Ovidian *passio*, the romancers' interest in *joie et dolor*, and the fableor's *talent*, he continues to work with the same meticulousness that characterizes his presentation of the theological debate, bringing the reader as close as is possible in such a study to what Baldwin would perhaps call an unimpeded "listening" to these texts.

As is often the case, however, the greatest virtue of this book proves to be its greatest weakness. Baldwin's announced attempt to "listen" to these five different "voices" raises expectations that are never realized by his method. One would think a work so devoted to "hearing" texts, as opposed to "reading" them, would involve some provocative reconsideration of our relationship to and use of the written word. Certainly, there is a rich tradition of rethinking epistemology in terms of listening rather than seeing in order to displace or perhaps even "destroy" the totalizing perspectivalism that seems so intimately related to the privileging of sight over sound in western thinking. Yet Baldwin's use of the auricular metaphor works in exactly the opposite direction. As suggested by his efforts to separate his study from any consideration of sexuality as a metaphor for language, power, or rhetoric, Baldwin intends his work to function as a pure echo of what these sources are saying. In his own words: "The deliberate imposition of present concerns upon the past violates the historian's respect for alterity and impedes historical understanding. Whatever my personal political stance as a twentieth-century male, husband, father, and feminist, therefore, I shall seek to count these commitments as irrelevant to an investigation of sexuality and gender in northern France around 1200. My conscious goal is to minimize all impulses toward present politics however they succeed in reemerging unintentionally" (xxvii). The level of "historical objectivity" assumed by this kind of positioning is startling and cripples an

otherwise rich and compelling study. For what becomes obvious as one reads *The Language of Sex* is that we are not actually "listening" to primary texts, but to Baldwin's translation of these texts, which are themselves echoes of much older utterances. And how could it be otherwise? Baldwin's claim to objectivity only encourages his audience to second-guess the reliability of his "hearing," and indeed there are moments in this work when the interference becomes nearly deafening.

Consider the following example, once again taken from the chapter on sexual desire. While discussing the disinterest of the fableurs in having their characters engage in foreplay, Baldwin notes that "[d]uring the protracted seduction in *La damoisele qui ne poorit oïr* where the young man descends the girl's body, exploring, naming, and touching, even he forgets to kiss and embrace before watering his horse at the fountain" (163). Growing up in Alabama, one of the first colloquialisms for sexual intercourse I can remember hearing was "watering the horse." Imagine my surprise, then, to discover that the very same expression was in circulation some eight hundred years ago. Or was it? Unfamiliar as I am with the text in question, I can only assume that Baldwin is summarizing, and given his theoretical position I cannot count on him to expand upon the meaning of this figure of speech or comment upon its contribution to the construction of gender in this period as a rhetorical device. But, without page or line numbers for reference, the thought did cross my mind that perhaps Baldwin is a fellow Southerner having a little fun with this narrative. The point I am making here is that in this particular situation I have no way of knowing where to locate the meaning of this expression. Is the "punch line" in the primary text itself, Baldwin's translation, or my imagination? At stake here is the process of translation: Can a thirteenth-century text be translated into twentieth-century discourse "objectively," retaining its meaning without accumulating any unwanted contemporary resonances?

The answer, of course, is no, and further proof of this can be found in one of the more disturbing of Baldwin's translations. Throughout *The Language of Sex*, Baldwin renders the French *con* as "cunt." Sometimes *con* appears in parentheses adjacent to its modern English relation, but often it does not. Describing a naming game that takes place in one fabliaux, Baldwin writes: "But her navel becomes her pit (*noel = noyan*), her pubic mound a meadow, her cunt a fountain in the middle of a meadow, and her asshole her watchman or horns-man who guards the fountain and meadow" (114-115). Ob-

viously, Baldwin strives for accuracy, and generally he does an admirable job of emphasizing the different sounds of these discourses. Moreover, I have no doubt that his translation of *con* is etymologically accurate. Nevertheless, etymological adequation does not a translation make, if indeed we are attempting to "listen" to what these voices are saying. Are we to assume that *con* had the same cultural value in thirteenth-century France as the most violent expression for the female genital organs in late-twentieth-century English slang?

Baldwin is aware of this dilemma, but regrettably he only addresses it in the conclusion, and then all too briefly. Acknowledging the contributions of critics like Hans Robert Jauss to the theory of audience reception, Baldwin merely says that he found "it difficult to apply these techniques" (235). "My chief recourse," therefore, "was to determine how one writer understood a previous author, or, more specifically, how a spokesman understood the tradition in which he was working. The results have not suggested a profound receptivity" (235-236). One thing, however, is sure: "Whatever the interpretive capabilities of the diverse audiences, they did understand the texts on the surface or literal level. This was the point of entry into all texts" (236). Baldwin considers his project a rearticulation of the surface level only, and much of the success or failure of this study will depend, I believe, on whether or not its readers are sympathetic to this approach or find it somewhat un-nuanced.

Indeed, one aspect of *The Language of Sex* for which Baldwin's methodology yields rather disappointing results pertains to his investigation of gender. Accustomed as we are to thinking about gender as a construction of language, rhetoric, and discourses of power, Baldwin's theoretical stance appears somewhat antiquated, and it necessarily limits the scope of his conclusions which, ultimately, are predictable. All five spokesmen are male, and not surprisingly Baldwin finds that they reflect a masculinist/heterosexist perspective "which placed the men on top over a broad continuum of relationships ranging from the masculine determination of marriage partners to the emblematic coital position of man-prone-woman-supine" (230). Even the works of Marie de France and Marie d'Oignies, who are occasionally cited to "alleviate the masculine timbre" (xx) of the five voices, largely conform to this bias.

Equally familiar to readers interested in gender studies will be Baldwin's recognition of some tension within this male-dominated perspective with respect to sexual reciprocity. At one level, it seems

"[t]he years surrounding 1200...were a moment of unprecedented gender equilibrium within the discourses of sexuality" (232). The one-seed doctrine of Aristotle was rejected by the physicians in favor of the two-seed theory, Pierre the Lombard and Pierre the Chanter stressed the equality of sexual relations within marriage, and even the Ovidians, encouraging lovers to climax together, recognized the advantages of reciprocity. In the fabliaux, voyeuristic interest in body parts includes both men and women, and the romanciers routinely emphasize the mutuality of desire necessary for love. Yet at the same time, we encounter instances of female rape, the privileging of the exposed female body, especially in the romances and Ovidian canon, and the fear of the insatiability of women so common in misogynistic attitudes towards sexuality. Part of Baldwin's project involves explicating how different things were prior to the resurfacing of Aristotle's physics and metaphysics, which would exercise a decidedly negative influence on the language of sex. Nevertheless, while he recognizes that this "search for gender symmetry" (233) that he locates in these five voices was itself conflicted to no small degree, he does not go so far as to consider how it may have prepared the way for the reception of Aristotelian gender theory.

Despite (or perhaps even because of) these difficulties and disappointments, *The Language of Sex* remains an indispensable resource for the study of medieval sexuality. Baldwin gathers a variety of complex materials and relates them to one another with extreme care, raising in the process fundamental methodological issues that remind us what is at stake in so much of medieval studies, concerned as it must always be with translation and reception. For this alone, *The Language of Sex* deserves an audience.

John P. Dalton  
Department of English  
University of California, Los Angeles