Compte rendus — Book Reviews

David Aers — *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity. English writing, 1360-1430*. London and New York: Routledge, 1988. Pp. viii, 215.

In this book, David Aers attempts to cross disciplinary boundaries to enable certain works written in the period 1360-1430 and the contexts in which they arose to illuminate each other. Writing from a literary background, Aers assumes the reader is familiar with the four major works he studies: Langland's *Piers Plowman*, *The Book of Margery Kemp*, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. He rejects traditional academic interpretations that portray these works as arising from a homogeneous "medieval world view" dominated by a common Christian faith and moral theory and by the three mutually supporting estates of those who pray, those who fight, and those who labor, to point out that, by the late fourteenth century, a market economy had superseded the earlier feudal regime and that, frequently, voices of dissent from the laboring classes and, more rarely, from women broke up the purported harmony of the medieval outlook.

In the model Aers adopts, linguistic, social and subjective processes are "ultimately understood as bound together in the structure and history of particular communities" (3). Neither individual experience nor an individual text can be shaped in separation from the community in which it arises, although it may reveal tensions in the presuppositions of that community. Inevitably, any work that attempts to understand the subjective experiences of medieval individuals from groups that were for the most part illiterate must confront the problem of lack of evidence. Because she wrote such a marvelous and revealing book, Margery Kemp, who was certainly an atypical fifteenth- century woman, may be used to gain insight into the lives of thousands of later-medieval women who did not write. Fictional works, including those pretending to portray far distant times and places, may be used to gain insight into the real historical communities of their authors. In these circumstances, the literary and social historian, lacking proof, does well to provide a suggestive and plausible account.

This Aers does for each of the four works he chooses, but he is most succesful in the chapters on Margery Kemp and on *Troilus and Criseyde*, chapters that are picked out on the cover of the paperback because of their interest for women's studies. For readers of this journal, points of interest in Aers's discussions may concern the ways in which he uses his four works to add a subjective and individual perspective to what is already known using the usual techniques of social and economic history.

In his discussion of *Piers Plowman*, Aers concentrates on its images of people dependent on alms or on wage labor. From at least as early as Clement of Alexandria (d. before 215), the traditional Christian position had been that one should give charity to *all* the poor, including those that might be deemed "unworthy", since any one of the poor might be beloved of God. In contrast to this, in post Black-Death England with its labor shortage, members of the land-owning classes sought to separate sharply

the deserving, physically handicapped, poor from the able-bodied who, in their view, ought to work and to do so for their traditionally low wages. *Piers Plowman* reveals the tensions between these views, not least in the depiction of the poet himself, who, on the latter view, might be portrayed as an undeserving vagabond, beggar and waster. Aers argues that Langland ultimately espouses both the traditional Christian advocacy of kindness and charity to all and the upholding of community and family against individualism and vagrancy, but does so in a way that is ineffective. Against the emerging elements of a market economy, Langland has no alternative vision of Christian community that would not condemn the laborer to give up the product of his labor to the support of the landowner. As Aers himself closes the chapter: "It is the greatness of this wonderful poem, its religious vision inseparable from its powerful historical imagination, to have been able to dramatize just how, and so often just why, it is not and could not be everywhere equal to the greatest force and to all consequences of its questions. Nor have we proved to be" (72).

The chapter on Margery Kemp is much less focussed than that on *Piers Plowman*. In it, Aers shows how Margery was both a product of her environment and shaped by resistance to that environment. Margery's life reveals much about the importance of a market economy in fifteenth-century England — much of Margery's relative freedom came from her position as a daughter of a burgess. She was able to buy her freedom from wifely duties, and her image of God permited her to believe it was possible to buy pardon through pilgrimages or other means. Margery left her family to pursue her salvation, but she replaced it with the Holy family through which she was able partially to regain her sense of self-worth by means of mother-like love of Jesus imagined as an infant. Margery built her self-image through reaction against the clergy, and yet she would not have been what she was without clerical support. In a period when the clergy was defending itself against the Lollards, in some ways, Margery's activities supported the church, for instance, in her belief in the concrete miracle-causing power of the Eucharist. On the other hand, she appeared to be much more a threat to married men, who feared she might lure away their wives.

In the chapter on *Troilus and Criseyde*, Aers directs his attention to the ways in which heterosexual love is related to the making of masculine identity in a particular class and culture. He argues that Troilus, as portrayed by Chaucer, exhibits aspects of a psychodynamic described by Melanie Klein: Troilus's attitudes toward Criseyde are parallel to the Kleinian child's attitudes toward the mother, where the child ascribes to the mother an omnipotent ability to meet his needs and, at the same time, fears her ability to withdraw her care or punish. Whereas a daughter who has experienced these feelings toward her mother may, in a later heterosexual relationship, feel she has within herself a mother's nurturing power, the male child may continue to assume the psychological position of the dependent and needy child.

This use of Kleinian psycology to illuminate *Troilus and Criseyde* is interesting and yet, as Aers admits, frought with uncertainty as social history, since it is not clear that late-medieval children had the sorts of childhood experiences that twentieth-century children have. Rather than insight into late-medieval relations of individual, gender and community, one may be obtaining insight into what Chaucer imagined might have been the case in Greek and Trojan times. Other authors such as Stephen Knight have claimed to find in *Troilus and Criseyde* evidence of a *new* self-counsciousness corresponding to the fourteenth century's changing social structure and patterns of behavior and feeling (118). Monica McAlpine, contrary to Aers, believes that in Troilus's relation to Criseyde, he goes beyond the childish

self-centeredness typical of much knightly love rhetoric to become Criseyde's true friend, again perhaps exemplifying a new moment in social history. Unfortunately, even if we accept the fit between *Troilus and Criseyde* and the Kleinian picture, we have little way of knowing how typical this was of any real historical place or period or when, à la McAlpine, individuals may have gone beyond this situation.

In discussing *Troilus and Criseyde*, Aers remarks on the precariousness of individual private transformations unsupported by the public realm and, in the final chapter, concerning *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, private/public disjunctures become the focal point. Again, there is the problem for the social historian that we have to do with a poem attempting to imagine a quite different time, that of King Arthur's Court, from the one in which it was written, so that however persuasive Aers may be, in the end, we may only learn about imaginary persons and communities rather than real ones. Only insofar as the past and present situations are alike or only insofar as the poet, attempting to imagine the past actually describes his own historical situation, can we expect to learn much about late-medieval social history.

In portraying an idealized past chivalry, then, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* reveals, in Aers's view, emerging contradictions within the knightly code of honor — either in King Arthur's day or in the poet's own. We are shown Sir Gawain in a private space in which his feelings do not match the public code of the knight. But in this case, Aers claims, the poet proposes no alternative to the knightly code of honor still firmly established despite its failure to correspond to real world changes such as those described in *Piers Plowman* and *The Book of Margery Kemp*. In this instance, according to Aers, it was left to history to resolve the contradictions that the poem reveals and leaves unexplained. Literature, here, rather than evoking new social and individual patterns, presents a backwards looking ideal, which the historical aristocratic community attemped to emulate.

Thus, of the four works Aers studies, it is only *The Book of Margery Kemp* that appears to break out of the community-shaped cultural pattern to reveal an idiosyncratic individual. *Piers Plowman* reveals the tremendous economic changes affecting late-medieval England and the self-serving ethical revisionism of the land-owning classes without Langland proposing a more viable Christian ethic for the new market economy, while, as Aers describes them, both *Troilus and Criseyde* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ultimately accept the standard chivalric ethic despite revealing strains on individuals imagined as encompassed within it. Some, like Carolyn Heilbrun in *Writing a Woman's Life*, argue that individuals cannot shape their own lives without pre-existing stories, so that a life must be imagined before it can be lived. If that is the case, then, Langland and Chaucer and the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* may have helped subsequent readers live different lives even though they themselves only partially pointed the way to a break from existing social and cultural patterns.

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