Book Reviews

Elizabeth D. Harvey. *Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts.* New York: Routledge, 1992 (1995 pb). Pp. x, 173. $15.95.

In a clever alignment of twentieth-century feminist theory with male-authored or anonymous texts from the English Renaissance, Elizabeth Harvey discovers, in the Renaissance sense of the word, the numerous ligatures between voice, text, property, and gender. Reading through theory by feminists such as Elaine Showalter, Sarah Kofman, Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray, Harvey takes a fresh look at such major figures of the Renaissance as Erasmus, Spenser, and Donne, and effectively confronts and dismantles the relevance of the old term "persona" or T. S. Eliot's "third voice" in dealing with the cultural complexity of ventriloquized voices (male authors speaking as women). According to Harvey, "The feminine voice that is represented in early modern texts by male authors speaks because it purportedly issues from a female body that gives it life and currency" (4). Creativity and nature are within the province of the feminine, but control and mastery belong to the masculine. Thus, while the male author both fears and admires the power of the feminine and admits that writing is a kind of birthing (belonging to the feminine), he uses woman's speech to reassert his own masculine control over the object that is woman.

Detailed and astute readings from a wide variety of texts including literary writings, misogynist pamphlets, documentary evidence of the diminishment of the status of midwives, and the work of feminists such as Cixous and Irigaray remind us how woman's voice (her silence or her garrulity) was for the Renaissance author inextricably bound to cultural constructions and expectations (moral and proprietal) of the woman's body. "Medical representation of female physiology," Harvey writes, "overlapped with cultural ideology in ways that make it impossible to dissever one from the other" (4). Gender difference was "not a matter of kind, but of degree" (33). Women were, after all, merely imperfectly formed men, our bodies not generating enough heat to

push the genitalia outward (33). Thus, the Renaissance author could link the desirable quality of a woman's silence and her undesirable penchant for garrulity with a woman's "natural" and understandable imperfections.

In her rejection of critical and theoretical attempts to create or to see voice as a transhistoric "monolithic construction" (5-6), Harvey takes up early modern concepts of female physiology and reveals how "transvestite ventriloquism" allowed male writers to create "a feminine voice that seems to be—but is not—linked to a whole set of feminine characteristics (a sexualized body, an emotional make-up, an imagination)" (4-5). As the male author "ventriloquizes" the female voice, he seems to provide a space for expression, a release from the oppressive Pauline strictures of silence, but, as Harvey so eloquently proves, his "ventriloquistic appropriation of the feminine voice" is finally the conservation and maintenance of a patriarchal society's view of woman as object, as property; it is "a mastery of the other, a censorship of its difference" (132).

Because I used the phrase "reading through theory" earlier, I should explain the double axis Harvey provides with her interpretation of theoretical matter. She frames her readings of Renaissance texts with twentieth-century theories, moving out of theory into the primary texts and back out again with incredible fluidity, except perhaps with respect to her critique of the evolution of Showalter's works, a reading which not only threatens the balance of the chapter which contains it but also the balance of the book. After we find our position within the theoretical material, Harvey leads us into the Renaissance material, providing historical context when and where we require it. We read each section, therefore, as through a polarizing filter. We can easily counter the modesty topos of Harvey's claim that she moves with "a kind of transgressive abandon between the historical context of the early modern period and twentieth-century feminist theoretical writings" (6) with praise for her dexterous management and interweaving of textual, historical, cultural, and psychoanalytic analyses. If this be "transgressive abandon," we need more of it. The book as a whole forms a subtle reflection of the feminist theory which Harvey clearly valorizes (Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva). Even Harvey's alteration of traditional forms of words ("animicity" for animism, "complexify" for complicate, and so on) speaks to the demands of such feminist theorists, demands that tell us how we might challenge traditional borders and boundaries. So in practice as in thought Harvey investigates the cultural connections between the figuring of woman and the female body as a metaphor for voice. Particularly intriguing are the chapters, "Folly and Hysteria: Duplicities of Speech" and "Matrix as Metaphor: Midwifery and the Conception of Voice." In "Folly and Hysteria," Harvey imbeds her analysis of Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* in a matrix of references to

Catherine Clement's and Cixous's *The Newly Born Woman*, to the historical codification of madness and hysteria as illuminated by texts such as the *Malleus Maleficarum*, and to Linda Hutcheon's *Splitting Images* in which Hutcheon reveals irony as a genre creating "insiders and outsiders" by its very nature. In this chapter, Harvey recalls that "One of the enabling ideological matrices for Erasmus's representation of Folly is a construction of woman whose capacity for language is inseparable from her female physiology" (64).

In "Matrix as Metaphor," which relates early modern practices of midwifery (and the Renaissance understanding of female physiology) with voice, Harvey addresses the issue of male appropriation of woman's privacy, the duplicitous nature of midwifery handbooks which argue for woman's involvement, but argue for it in Latin (a language largely outside the sphere of the potential female midwife), and the assimilation of tropes of pregnancy and birth into a language of masculine colonization of woman's body. While this lengthy chapter appears to move across myriad boundaries, it draws together ever so neatly the points of the matrix to reveal the position of the ventriloquizing male as "a midwife, an intermediary, and liminal figure" (in this case, John Donne) and his desire to create in himself "the interpreter figure between life and death" (115). The author's positioning or ventriloquizing thereby assures a masculine control over the literary construction of the feminine.

In *Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts*, we have a text lucid in its anatomization of Renaissance texts, intelligent in its use of feminist theory, and astute in its consolidation of early modern and postmodern ideas. Well aware of the obstacles that arise in the use of postmodern feminism in addressing Renaissance cultural positions and attitudes, Harvey never allows the theory to dominate or reshape the literary text. Rather, by placing the theory beside or around analyses of the texts or clearly demarcating her movement between past and present, she creates a dialogic structure not unlike that of Kristeva's "*Stabat Mater*," which also comes into play in "Matrix as Metaphor."

The extremely tight-knit prose and rich diction of Harvey's text may cause difficulties for non-specialists, but students or scholars of either theory or early modern texts will find this text enjoyable and rewarding. Finally, in an academy that has become somewhat timid about admitting any affection for the traditional canon of early modern work, Harvey reminds us that we must not turn away from canonical works, but rather we must use the powerful ideas and theories that our century provides to find ways of discovering new treasures of the texts.

DONNA M. F. BATYCKI