

H-Net Reviews

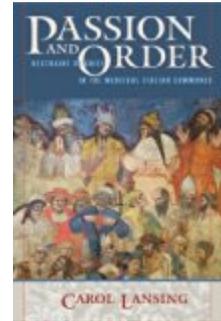
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Carol Lansing. *Passion and Order*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007. 244 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4062-5.

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Mourning in Medieval Italy

This wonderful book begins with archival records from late thirteenth-century Orvieto that report fines for 220 people (mostly men), who were found guilty of mourning the dead. These documents are surprising not only because “we expect the state to pursue tangible threats, not gestures of sorrow” (p. 14) but also because “it was effectively the same men who first wrote the statutes, then broke them by wailing at funerals, and then paid the fines” (p. 15). To address this paradox, Lansing has written “a speculative essay on a constellation of ideas about the restraint of emotion, gender, and state formation in late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Italy” (p. 11). This book goes well beyond the confines of a case study to examine a wide set of sources: “from analysis of the social and political milieu of the laws to evidence such as testimony in court cases, epic poetry, sermons, painting, and liturgical drama as well as intellectual history materials: theology, political and moral treatises and letters” (p. 219). As that varied list suggests, this is a book of intellectual exploration and one of its greatest strengths is the author’s willingness to share with the reader the development of her interpretations, signaled by phrases like “I have come to think” (pp. 5, 69) and “I realized” (p. 123). As she puts it: the book’s “structure retraces the paths I followed as I sought to make sense of the mourning sentences” (p. 9).

This book should be celebrated for the openness of its approach; its engagement with materials from Homer, Plato, and Sophocles to John Chrysostom, Ambrogio Lorenzetti, and Petrarch; and its generosity both

to other scholars through citation and to its readers by signaling its arguments so clearly. Scholars in many fields will benefit from the truly interdisciplinary inquiry that Lansing sets forth. In the same spirit of open intellectual inquiry that this book exemplifies, I want to note a few moments—inevitable in such a wide-ranging inquiry—that raise questions and call for comment.

Lansing’s main thesis is that while “mourning fines have been seen as a direct effort to stop ritual behaviors that promoted the disruptive vendettas” (p. 67), she sees them as related to “the Stoic association of the passions with female nature” (p. 7) that she finds expressed in the lay intellectuals of the period. Lansing writes that Albertano of Brescia’s *Book of Consolation and Counsel* is “the closest I have come to a ‘smoking gun,’ a text in which a medieval author directly stated that civic peace requires that men restrain their emotional distress and depicted this idea in terms of passionate female lamentation” (p. 10). Lansing’s discussion of Albertano’s work, however, reveals a more complex representation of gender roles than Lansing allows, since the figure of reason is represented not by the man, as one would expect given the typical gendering of passion with woman and reason with man, but by the wife, suitably and no doubt allegorically named Prudence. While Lansing is certainly right that “the concern in the treatise is with male emotionality” (p. 166), Albertano’s text demonstrates that reason can be gendered as female as well as male, following a well-established Boethian tradition of consolation that was particularly revived in this period. Lansing ar-

gues that “Albertano articulated precisely the ideas that seem to have driven the laws” behind the Orvieto statutes (p. 171), but his mode of representing them, in which the woman plays the role of reason, stands in contrast to Lansing’s larger claims about the female gendering of passion as opposed to male reason.

Instead of using the dichotomy of male reason and female passion as an explanatory paradigm, Lansing could have explored how gender is used as a category in discussions of emotions throughout history. Indeed, the intellectual tradition that Lansing traces seems particularly interested in exploring the permeability of these roles, as in her example from Plato’s *Phaedo* where weeping is coded as feminine but is then performed by a man (p. 106). The complexities of gender categories in the medieval world have been explored in the now classic studies of Caroline Bynum, like her *Jesus as Mother* (1982), which is exemplary from its very title, and they permeate medieval literature and art. Lansing’s claim, for example, that in Lorenzetti’s *Good and Bad Government* “the psychological qualities that are the source of bad government are depicted in gendered terms: again, the disordered appetites of women” (p. 185), elides the similarly female-gendered figures of Good Government in the same fresco. While the exclusion of some evidence is undoubtedly necessary for such a wide-ranging book, a fuller consideration of the complexity of these materials would have enriched the book’s argument.

In the introduction, Lansing states that her book is

part of a shift from a concern with “burial ritual” to the “emotions associated with loss” and “the psychology of sorrow,” which she associates with the poetry of Dante and Petrarch (p. 3). In her discussion of laments in literary works, however, she discusses only the epic tradition represented by *The Song of Roland*, Chretien de Troyes, and *L’Entrée d’Espagne*. Although Lansing does dedicate a full chapter to Petrarch’s letters and philosophical treatises, which, despite her protests in the introduction (pp. 10-11), fits rather awkwardly in the book as a whole, the rationale for the exclusion of his poetry is never explained. Petrarch’s poetry, along with that of Dante and Cavalcanti, would have provided valuable examples of mourning that are all the more remarkable for their sustained attention to anatomizing those emotions that Lansing wants to access. While one understands an historian’s diffidence before the formal conventions of medieval poetry, the recent studies of Ronald Martinez on Dante and Petrarch from the perspective of lamentation and mourning could have indicated a potential path of entry. Even if this poetry could not be integrated into Lansing’s already vast inquiry, it does suggest a fruitful field for further research.

This is a richly researched and thought-provoking study written in a clear voice that engages multiple disciplines in an effort to think through difficult historical evidence. It will have much to offer scholars in a range of fields.

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