

Vishnuvajjala, Usha, *Feminist Medievalisms: Embodiment and Vulnerability in Literature and Film*, Leeds, Arc Humanities Press, 2024; e-book, pp. 134 + viii, RRP £99.00; ISBN 9781802701531.

Usha Vishnuvajjala, Assistant Professor at the State University of New York, has built her academic brand on medievalisms: the study of the ‘reception of and engagement with medieval culture’ (1). Following her first book, 2022’s *Women’s Friendship in Medieval Literature*, her 2024 publication *Feminist Medievalisms* provides a unique methodology for interpreting how feminism is represented, and notably, experienced.

Vishnuvajjala makes her introductory stance on medievalism very clear, maintaining how most modern theory focuses on ‘institutional history, martial culture, or men’s writing’ (1), with current medievalisms only addressing women in the context of misogyny, violence, or women as exceptions in otherwise masculinist spaces (1). Therefore, her introduction establishes a repeated theme of the text: how hierarchies affect our reading of both history and gender, and *Feminist Medievalisms* is her attempt at redefining medievalisms outside of masculine-coded concepts of power, authority, and institutions (5). Her alternative is a reading model that promotes vulnerability, connection, and an ethical understanding of one’s own time and place (6).

Vishnuvajjala outlines her methodology as a combination of textual analysis, and participatory, or experiential, medievalism. She specifically draws from Daniel T. Kline’s definition of “participatory medievalism”: the active decision to immerse oneself in a neomedieval environment (3). Interestingly, Vishnuvajjala chooses five case studies that do not involve a fictional neomedieval world at all. Instead, the author reiterates that these texts display embodied or experiential encounters with medieval women in a real or imagined past (4).

Chapter one ‘Nested Medievalisms and Affected Bodies in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*’ outlines how Austen’s depiction of a medieval past haunts her early-modern present through an exaggerated Gothic mode (30). Vishnuvajjala considers how Catherine Morland’s proclivity for novels, as opposed to ‘real solemn history’ (31), opens her to emotional connections with past women – specifically the nuns from the Abbey – whose history and identity has been obscured by strict patriarchal social codes (20).

This ongoing theme of reimagining history continues in chapter two ‘Feminism and Medievalism in Woolf’s Final Works.’ Firstly, Vishnuvajjala considers the emotional and historical context of 1938’s *Three Guineas*, with the oncoming threat of war inspiring Virginia Woolf to critique pedagogical English institutions for inspiring ‘unreal loyalties’ to war, bloodshed, and national pride. (49). The following analysis

of *Between the Acts* recontextualizes English history by placing women as central to the past. The text involves a country pageant that personifies the ‘birth’ of England, and portrays English lower, middle, and upper-women throughout the ages. Woolf metatextually challenges the audiences’ ability to think of the past as a series of narratives, wars, or political developments (66), instead, they experience the lives of everyday people and are encouraged to think of themselves as *part of* history. Vishnuvajjala maintains that Woolf’s outlook on witnessing history being retold is an empathetic and feminist method of experiencing the past, through a shared ‘feeling of vulnerability’ and connection (66).

Chapter three ‘Medievalisms as Feminist Sanctuary in the Late Twentieth Century’ was a standout of the book, as Vishnuvajjala’s focuses on two modern texts – Madonna’s ‘Like a Prayer’ music video and the 1992 Whoopi Goldberg film *Sister Act*. Vishnuvajjala focuses on their shared imagery of churches, nunneries and the ‘witness seeking sanctuary’ trope from medieval literature, arguing how these visual encounters are a commentary on intersectional issues in the present, such as racial policing, violence against women, and inter-racial romantic relationships (68).

Chapter four ‘Chaucer, Vulnerable Bodies, Somatophobia, and Theory’ examines modern politics, where Vishnuvajjala finds a link between radical right misogyny and the Medieval conception of ‘trouthe’ in art and literature; as a gendered oath of loyalty or fidelity (96) instead of objective truth. The author maintains that this perception contributes to the contemporary right-wing view that women are biologically incapable of truth (109), with references to Hillary Clinton’s treatment from the Republican press as a brief case study.

Feminist Medievalisms is only tangentially connected to medieval history and scholarship, but ideal reading for students studying feminism. Vishnuvajjala displays a poignant understanding of the ethics of defining feminism in our increasingly binary and conservative world – stating how she had to rethink whether her project was on ‘women’ or ‘feminism’ and chose the latter (2). Her model of reading is gender-neutral, and can be ‘experienced by anyone’ (7) willing to associate, identify, be affected by, and empathize with the women of the Middle Ages (20). I would thoroughly recommend both her introduction and bibliography as useful springboard to more niche ideas, as she has included a variety of texts on both feminist theory, and contemporary feminist readings of medieval texts, ideas, and historical figures.

This short book includes multiple subfields of research – feminist history, medieval history, the history of emotions, literature, and more – and there were many, many instances where I was demanding further detail and analysis. Notably, chapter four concluded with an entirely new and fascinating discussion: the dichotomy between thinking with the ‘mind’ or ‘body’ (120), but its placement ten pages before the conclusion felt jarring. Considering Vishnuvajjala’s established interest in hierarchies, her discussion of the dichotomies between ‘mind and body, reason and passion, psychology and biology’ should have taken far more of the book, maybe even a whole chapter (108).

Separately, Vishnuvajjala's lengthy case studies are all engaging and well-reasoned. However, each chapter was incredibly varied, with little noteworthy flow between the texts. Chapter four was the biggest stylistic outlier, with her discussion of 'trouthe' occasionally reaching in the connections made. I would certainly like to see a version of Vishnuvajjala's work where she applies her reading method to more closely linked texts, perhaps expanding on the briefly addressed connection between medievalisms, Austen, and Anne Radcliffe.

Personally, I found Vishnuvajjala's overall model of 'feminist medievalisms' to be a nebulous concept. The audience's participation in experiencing vulnerability seemingly applies to both the characters in the text, and the readers of the text, which can get confusing. Furthermore, she stated in her initial definition that her model is intended to provoke ethical questions for the contemporary reader's world and environment, but this line of thinking was only really relevant to chapters three and four. Her work could have benefited, structurally and cohesively, from greater connections between each case study, with the author restating her model in each new context. However *Feminist Medievalism's* most noticeable flaw was its conclusions; each chapter ended abruptly, and her final two-page wrap-up was rushed, unsatisfying, and lacked a unifying discussion to close out the four chapters.

Putting aside the lack of a conclusion and the briefness of certain arguments, *Feminist Medievalisms* is a salient discussion of how we approach hierarchies in history and literary historiography. Vishnuvajjala's own mode of 'feminist medievalisms' may be vague and open to interpretation, but when taken individually, each chapter was an excellent analysis of Austen, Woolf, *Sister Act*, and Madonna. The author's choice of texts is a relevant testament to her overall ethos, as it was especially refreshing to see a music video and a popular comedy film treated with equal relevance to Chaucer or *Le Morte d'Arthur* in modern medieval studies.

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