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# A Poetics of History: Karen Cushman's Medieval World

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## A Poetics of History: Karen Cushman's Medieval World



[Joseph Zornado](#)

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There is no was.

(William Faulkner)

Historical fiction occupies an uncertain space in the field of children's literature. Offer a teacher or scholar a work of historical fiction in any genre, from picture book to novel, and you are sure to get a varied, contentious response about what makes historical fiction work. Why? Because historical fiction has ambitious, ambiguous aims. For instance, should historical fiction be good history, even if this means the story might be, say, a little dull? Or, on the other hand, should the author take liberties with setting, dialogue, and character in order to provide the audience with "a good read?" What happens when a historical fiction contains no "famous" historical personages, or no clear identification as to when in history the story takes place? In short, what are we supposed to experience when we read historical fiction? History? Fiction?

Karen Cushman's Newbery Honor book *Catherine, Called Birdy*, and her Newbery Award-winning *The Midwife's Apprentice* are no exceptions to this debate. Though honored by the Newbery award committee, Cushman's *Catherine* and *Apprentice* nevertheless draw mixed opinions about the books' merits as historical fiction from teachers and scholars alike. Those who favor the books praise the main characters, young women who discover within themselves the strength and confidence to survive, even thrive, in a brutal and unforgiving medieval world. Skeptics charge that Cushman's work is not "real" historical fiction, but rather, simply "fiction" because her work sacrifices historical "facts" in order to tell what amounts to contemporary stories about female adolescence.<sup>1</sup> Alyce, the main character in *Apprentice*, does, says, and thinks in a way young women in the fourteenth century simply could not. In Cushman's first book set in medieval England, *Catherine*, the daughter of a knight--and by rights a "lady"--develops a keen sense for the logical inconsistency that surrounds and makes up her life, and grounds her demands for fair treatment on this way of seeing the world. Some argue, then, that the history in these novels reflects more of Cushman's late twentieth-century concerns about women than it does historical truths of English medieval culture and countryside. And worse still, Cushman's work has been labeled by some as "politically correct."

Yet, to my mind, those critical of Cushman's work rely on a too rigid sense of history and historiography. To dismiss Cushman on the grounds that her work violates traditional notions of historical fiction blinds us to Cushman's larger project: *Catherine, Called Birdy* and *A Midwife's*

*Apprentice* challenge our notions of historical fiction, history, and how we make meaning of and from the past. Cushman's first two novels reveal a passion for the *process* of history-making rather than the product produced by the historian--which is why she populates her texts with marginalized, heretofore unexamined characters from medieval England. No kings or bishops take center stage in her first two novels. Rather, young girls with no power, no voice, and little or no future are her protagonists.

Cushman sets out to challenge traditional notions of historical fiction by writing a new kind of historical fiction. Consider the literary notion of "setting." Setting represents one traditional element of historical fiction, and it remains an element that, among others, raises the hackles on some historians. "Setting must be integral to the plot, otherwise the tale is simply a 'costume romance' that exploits rather than explores history. . . . Whether a picture book, a book for beginning readers, or a novel, the historical story is composed of two elements. To be taken seriously, it must fulfill the requirements for both good history and good literature" (310). Yet, just what amounts to "good history" and "good literature" is not always so clear, and in fact is largely determined by the individual reader. The historian Allan Nevins commented on this problem of perspective when he wrote, "the facts of the past do not change, but our view of them does" and as a result, "each era tends--and perhaps needs--to reevaluate history in the light of its own experience" (Silvey 310).

In *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Hayden White offers an analysis of just this kind of historiography. White draws on Northrop Frye's work to analyze the metahistorical process behind each and every attempt at history making. White writes,

It is sometimes said that the aim of the historian is to explain the past by "finding," "identifying" or "uncovering" the "stories" that lie buried in chronicles; and that the difference between "history" and "fiction" resides in the fact that the historian "finds" his stories, whereas the fiction writer "invents" his. This conception of the historian's task, however, obscures the extent to which "invention" also plays a part in the historian's operations. (7)

It is at the level of "metahistory" that the historian and fiction writer share the will to invent, to order, and to discriminate among the countless historical moments that each considers as resources for their work. White "postulates a deep level of consciousness on which a historical thinker chooses conceptual strategies by which to explain or represent . . . data. On this level," White writes, "the historian performs an essentially *poetic act*, in which he prefigures the historical field and constitutes it as a domain upon which to bring to bear the specific theories he will use to explain "what was *really* happening" in it. This act of prefiguration may, in turn, take a number of forms, the types of which may be characterized by the linguistic modes in which they are cast (x). And what was really happening in history is not so much a collection of facts, but rather, White suggests, it is the process of history making that *is* at the bottom of every written history. "The dominant tropological mode and its attendant linguistic protocol comprise the irreducibly 'metahistorical' basis of every historical work" (xi).

White uses Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* and with it identifies the tropological modes from which historians and storytellers choose. The first set of four modes (out of three) consists of how historians plot their "historical moments." Following Frye, White calls these different modes the Romantic, the Tragic, the Comic, and the Satirical. White reduces it like this: if a historian has a Romantic vision, the king's death might represent the end of the story and the beginning of the prince's reign. Life goes on. Long live the King. If, however, a historian employs the Comic mode then the king's death--like a Shakespearean comedy--might mean the possibility of reconciliation and union for the individuals concerned. The prince marries the duchess, political stability is restored and a dynasty is born. On the other hand, if the historian employs the Tragic mode, then the king's death might be historicized in a way that it signifies the end of a golden period of peace and prosperity. White identifies the Satirical mode with

Irony and self-criticism:

Satire represents a different kind of qualification of the hopes, possibilities, and truths of human existence revealed in Romance, Comedy and Tragedy respectively. It views these hopes . . . Ironically . . . like philosophy itself, Satire "paints its gray on gray" in the awareness of its own inadequacy as an image of reality. It therefore prepares consciousness for its repudiation of all sophisticated conceptualizations of the world and anticipates a return To a mythic apprehension of the world and its processes. (10)

White goes on to say that the historian then takes this plotted history and makes sense of it by placing it in a larger context, or what White calls "a nomological-deductive argument" (11). This argument--whichever one of four modes a historian chooses--contains within it universal laws of causal relationships. In short a nomological-deductive argument is nothing more than a kind of epistemology by which a historian makes sense of the stories of their culture. "What goes up must come down" is a kind of nomological-deductive argument that makes sense of the banal--though plotted--story "the rock went up and suddenly stopped, and headed straight down."<sup>2</sup> Whether meaning of this event is presented as a crisis or an opportunity depends on the historian, his or her mode of plotting, his or her epistemology and, finally, the ideology that, like salt, gives flavor to the whole mix.

He calls this final, most important ingredient to the historian's project the "Mode of Ideological Implication."<sup>3</sup> What this means is this: when we examine the way in which a historian employs the Romantic mode, for instance, and then makes sense of the universe and its laws through a nomological-deductive argument, we can tease out the historian's Ideological leanings. "There does," White writes, "in fact, appear to be an irreducible ideological component in every historical account of reality" (21). In other words, the historian cannot help but leave "fingerprints" all over his or her work, which in turn reveal the ideological assumptions embedded in the history; it follows then that the histories that historians write also reveal in turn the modes of employment and modes of argument they have employed. The historian, then, is not unlike an artist who makes conscious--or unconscious--choices about his or her color palate and then paints a picture with those colors. The picture reveals the color palate and silently speaks of the artist's choices. Because of the colors the artist has originally chosen, he or she simply cannot successfully paint certain kinds of pictures and will be more inclined to paint others.

I cite Hayden White's work on metahistory at length because it offers a particularly useful way of seeing Karen Cushman's medieval world and the kind of historical fiction she is writing, especially in the case of *Catherine, Called Birdy*. White describes the trope, "Irony" as a notion that grows directly out of the Satirical mode. He describes it in terms that are reminiscent of a "postmodern" analysis of language. White writes that

Irony thus represents a stage of consciousness in which the problematical nature of language itself has become recognized. It points to the foolishness of all linguistic characterizations of reality as much as to the absurdity of the beliefs it parodies. . . . This is why characterizations of the world cast in the Ironic mode are often regarded as intrinsically *sophisticated* and realistic. They appear to signal the ascent of thought in a given area of inquiry to a level of self-consciousness on which a genuinely "enlightened"--that is to say, self-critical--conceptualization of the world and its processes become possible. . . . As a paradigm of the form a representation of the world process might take, it is inherently hostile to the "naive" formulations of the Formist, Mechanistic and Organicist strategies of explanation. And its fictional form, Satire, is intrinsically antagonistic to the archetypes of Romance, Comedy and Tragedy as modes of representing the forms of significant human development.

In *Catherine, Called Birdy* Cushman moves the reader through a narrative that, among other things, plays out in fiction a number of the tropological modes White identifies in *Metahistory*. It

is no accident, I think, that Cushman's protagonist, Catherine, discovers the limits of particular modes of thinking and abandons them only to settle on a kind of Satiric mode of self-reflection, adopting as she does an ironic turn of mind. Catherine discovers her ability to doubt even as she discovers the ability to trust her own instincts. As a result of this peeling-away of narrative modes, Catherine discovers her own capacity to suffer, and at the same time to doubt the cultural constructs that inflict that suffering; Catherine discovers the process of life, and as a result, she grows from seeing herself as someone else's property to seeing herself as self-possessed.

Yet, even Cushman herself seems a little uncomfortable with this idea. At the end of *Catherine* Cushman writes in an Author's Note, "our ideas of individual identity, individual accomplishments and rights, individual effort and success did not exist. . . . No one was separate and independent, [not] even the king" (165). Still, this begs the question, does the medieval life of the community necessarily exclude any hope of self-consciousness? Self-consciousness is a large part of what makes humans human, even in the thirteenth century. And from self-consciousness comes the possibility of self-awareness and from self-awareness comes the possibility of doubt. And from doubt, or "aporia" as White terms it, grows that Ironic turn of mind known so well in the post-modern age, which "tends to dissolve all belief in the possibility of positive political actions" (White 38). But for Catherine (and Alyce in *Apprentice*) the possibility of *personal* action--however politicized and anachronistic it might appear to be to us--opens before her and she saves herself.

This might sound as if I am suggesting that Cushman has written a radical, proto-feminist novel. When, in fact, Catherine's story could easily be read as a subversive tale bent on maintaining the oppressive status quo.<sup>4</sup> Again from White: he writes that "inasmuch as one can legitimately conclude from a history thus construed that one inhabits the best of possible historical worlds, or at least the best that one can "realistically" hope for, given the nature of the historical process as revealed in her account of it." One might conclude from all of this that Catherine--and women and children in general--already inhabit the best world that they can "realistically" hope for--they just need to learn how to make the best of it. Catherine's betrothal to Shaggy Beard, her escape from this betrothal because of his death and her subsequent marriage to Stephen, Shaggy Beard's fair-haired son might not be the stuff of medieval feminism, but rather, as sentimental propaganda: make the best of it and things will work out in the end. Which means that one might read *Catherine* in this way: paternalistic betrothals designed only for political and economic gain of the Father can work out in the end, if the daughter knows her place.<sup>5</sup>

Because Cushman is a fiction writer as well as a historian in this case, she has at her disposal all of the tools White describes in his *Metahistory*. As a result, Cushman does not confine her story to merely the Romantic/Comic modes of emplotment, but rather, she also employs the Satirical mode in her narrative and by doing so subverts a strictly conservative ideological reading. Cushman's manifestly Romantic/Comic plot is undercut by the content of Catherine's chronicle. This undercutting of conservative ideological implications works in two ways: first, Catherine's interest in the lives of the saints compels her to begin each day's journal entry with a small fact from a saint's life celebrated on that day. So, for instance, on the twelfth of July Catherine notes the "Feast of Saint Veronica, who wiped the face of the suffering Jesus with her veil, where His image remains to this day" is undercut by Catherine's mundane journal entry. "It is too hot to write. Too hot even for the cats to chase mice" (139). As Catherine's journal entries continue one is bombarded by an almost unending list of violence and cruelty in a majority of the lives of the saints that Catherine notes. As a result, the distance between the theological history of the church and Catherine's own experiences grows greater and greater until, finally, Catherine begins to question quietly the broader cultural history that shadows her own sense of time and place. Or, in other words, this is one of the ways Catherine learns to doubt, to look for multiple meanings, to find shades of gray rather than black and white.

Second, Cushman's historical fiction employs--and perhaps even relies on--the reader's own doubt as a part of the reading experience. Much of Cushman's audience is well aware of the plight of women over the past seven hundred years. As late twentieth-century readers raised in an age of irony, skepticism, and resignation, we bring to the text the knowledge that for women and children--the marginalized--things have not improved very much at all for most of this past millennium. So that if Catherine were to transcend her historical moment somehow in her story, we know that it is only for one moment, and as such it remains anachronistic, conservative fantasy.

Still, the self-conscious Satirical mode of *Catherine*, combined with the reader's own doubt about the "truth" of the history presented destroys any effort on the part of her audience "to use history as a means of comprehending the present world in anything but Conservative terms" (White 12). In other words, because the Satiric mode undermines the Comic and Romantic modes also employed in the novel, Catherine's story calls attention to itself as a necessarily provisional mode of truth-making; the provisional nature of the textual form unravels in a way that calls attention to the provisional nature of the content. Further, it is precisely because her audience questions the history of Cushman's fiction that we participate in a new kind of historical fiction. Simply put, we doubt that it is true. We ask of Cushman's medieval world questions like: could a young woman have been as brave, strong and true to herself as Catherine was in the *thirteenth century*? This must be an anachronism. Women did not have a sense of themselves as anything more than property for hundreds of years after that, right? <sup>6</sup> From this critical question some dubious conclusions have been drawn, among them the claim that the novel simply does not work as historical fiction because Catherine (or Alyce) could not have existed *because Cushman's characters violate our notions of medieval England*. This perspective reduces Cushman's two novels to political tracts and maintains notions of historical fiction as the domain of places and dates rather than the interpretive process it is.

But what if I could invent a history where Catherine and Alyce did "exist"? How might that version of history shape the present moment? By refusing to consider the possibility of Catherine's existence we fall prey to another kind of conservatism, one which maintains *today's* status quo, for if we change our view of women in history, perhaps we will have to change our view of women (and children) *right now*. The writing of history and the reception of it share something in common: both are largely determined by what White calls "Ideological implications."

I call Cushman's work historical fiction precisely because she calls attention to the provisional, slippery nature of storytelling, the writing of history, and the nature of the self. Catherine develops a sense of self--something that is, according even to Cushman, beyond the medieval mind set. Nevertheless, Catherine's growth and development falls along poetic--rather than scientific or historic--lines. Catherine's growth comes as a result of her brother Edward's encouragement to keep a journal. She does, and her writing grows stronger, and so too her vision. She becomes, by all rights, a writer, a poet and, finally, a character possessed of an "ironic" mindset.

For instance, late in the novel Catherine takes tentative steps in distinguishing ideological traces in the lives of the saints from the so-called "facts" in religious history--itself a small step to philosophical and religious skepticism. Catherine notices "how many male saints were bishops, popes, missionaries, great scholars, and teachers while female saints get to be saints as a result of giving birth to a male saint, or refusing to marry some powerful pagan. *It is plain that men are in charge of making saints* (142; italics mine).

Though this remains only a short entry in Catherine's chronicle, it speaks loudly to her skeptical point of view. What this entry of July twenty-sixth does not say speaks even louder: there is no mention of God, divine forces, the infallibility of popes or any other theological construct, though in past entries she has shown the intelligence to tackle theological issues in her own

way. No, by July twenty-sixth Catherine recognizes however implicitly that culture--be it secular or religious--is created by men for men.

Even in her role as Lady and as caregiver she finally abandons much of the superstition and ignorance of medieval medicine and resorts to what feels right: when her mother's legs have swelled late in her pregnancy, Catherine first tries "a paste of bean meal, flour, vinegar, and oil, but the dogs kept trying to eat it. So I washed her off and have been rubbing her legs with sweet-smelling oils and singing her sweet songs and it seems to help" (139).

Later, in an entry from the twelfth of September Catherine reveals a decidedly ironic--even post-modern--notion of people. "I think sometimes," she writes, "that people are like onions. On the outside smooth and whole and simple but inside ring upon ring, complex and deep" (197). And like her entry about the creation of saints, what Catherine does not say implies the depth of her ironic turn of mind: onions have no inside, only ring upon ring of outside. Catherine's onion metaphor is a self-consuming one from which nothing is left when the last skin has been peeled. Catherine might also have written it this way: people (and the history they write) have no essence; we are only our clothes, our occupations, and the expectations the community and culture place on us. Perhaps this is a crisis or perhaps this is an opportunity.

Because Cushman is not writing straight history or traditional historical fiction she has the freedom to draw on aspects of both genres and reject others. She employs multiple tropological modes as a historian and avoids "real" historical figures so that she might concentrate on the simple, plain, and powerless in her two novels. For some this is a problem in Cushman's work, but White's analysis of historiography reminds us that scientists and historians have never agreed on what makes history a good account of reality. White reminds us that, when debating the historiographical enterprise "it is important to bear in mind,"

this congenital disagreement (or lack of agreement) over what counts as a specifically historical explanation of any given set of historical phenomena. For this means that historical explanations are bound to be based on different metahistorical presuppositions about the nature of the historical field, presuppositions that generate different conceptions of the *kind of explanations* that can be used in historiographical analysis. (13)

*A Midwife's Apprentice* is another successful example of Cushman's challenging historical fiction precisely because it approaches the same kind of tension between fact and fiction, history and story that *Catherine, Called Birdy* explores. Some have criticized the novel as anachronistic because Cushman tells a tale of a young female orphan who, with luck and help, leaves the dung heap on the fringes of society and begins a process that, ultimately, leads her to a more secure, and most importantly, meaningful existence. What in this bare outline is anachronistic? Did young girls starve and sleep in dung heaps during the Middle Ages? If a second daughter was lucky enough to survive her initial birth during the Middle Ages, she very well may have been abandoned afterwards, and yet lived somehow. Did young girls desire a meaningful existence even though born and raised in a dung heap? Probably not, if only because they lacked the emotional and intellectual integrity to ask for more from life. Might it be possible to imagine a situation where a young girl does somehow manage to ask more of herself, her village, her life? Yes. Karen Cushman's novel is proof of this. What I am driving at is this: Historical fiction like Cushman's *A Midwife's Apprentice* does not examine a different medieval history, but rather, organizes the parts in a way that speaks to our concerns today. This is not anachronistic. This is simply the process of interpretive meaning-making at work.

For instance, Alyce stumbles into a similar crisis of meaning when, in a scene reminiscent of Catherine's onion-skin metaphor about the nature of people, Alyce attempts to help an orphaned boy called "Runt." Alyce first encourages the boy to change his name, knowing from her own experience how humiliating and debilitating names can be. Runt and Alyce then

discuss names and naming in some detail.

"What then is the king's name?"

Alyce did not know, so she hid the boy in the chicken house and went about the village asking folks what was the king's name.

"Longshanks," said the baker.

"Hammer," said Thomas At-the-Bridge.

"The Devil Hissself," said Brian Tailor, who was a Scot and so had reason to feel that way.

"Just 'the king' is all," said several.

"Edward," said the bailiff. "The king's name is Edward."

"Edward," said Alyce to the boy.

"Then Edward is my name," said Edward, who used to be called Runt. Alyce nodded. (65)

Two things strike me about this passage: first, as already noted, the power of names and the power of naming takes center stage. And second, Cushman suggests that those who live on the fringes of society see (and know) only what their position in life allows them to see. So few of the villagers know the king's "Christian" name, though they have their own name for him drawn from their own or their community's experience with him. So, the bailiff--a kind of medieval law enforcement officer--knows the King's name to be "Edward" because he draws his authority, ultimately, from him. On the other hand, the Scot knows the king as "The devil hisself." How we name others, it seems, speaks as much about who we are as how we name ourselves.

By the time Alyce names Edward she has already gone through her own similar naming experience in which she chooses a new name, and in the process draws herself out of the dung heap and into the human community. With luck and a bit of mistaken identity, the young girl called "Dung" and "Beetle" names herself "Alyce" after being mistaken for a young woman of the same name, a young woman who reads. After this case of mistaken identity, "Beetle" wonders about it and realizes a truth about herself. "This face," she said, "could belong to someone who can read. And has curls. And could have a lover before nightfall. And this is me, Beetle." She stopped. Beetle was no name for a person, no name for someone who looked like she could read (31). As a result, Alyce christens herself anew--really for the first time--and here the pace of emotional growth gains momentum.

Names, it seems, have everything to do with who we are, where we come from, the power to read the world and the power to read ourselves. When we name ourselves--with a first name, a title, a degree, or even as "father" or "mother"--we change our perspective on the world. We see more, we see differently, and we see with a purpose. Without a perspective from which to see, we see everything that is to say, we see nothing. The world is one flat blur. When we see from a particular perspective the world takes on perspective, too. Things lose their blur and come into focus a little more because, with a name--that is, with a perspective--we begin to develop a way to discriminate among images. We focus on things because, as we attempt to know ourselves we look for some reflection of that self in the world, at least at the beginnings of our emotional and intellectual development.

From the moment Alyce names herself--like Catherine's growth as a writer discovering herself in the writing--in *A Midwife's Apprentice*. Alyce's growth as an emotional and intellectual woman takes off. Extending the power of naming, not unlike some latter-day Eve in the garden, she names her nameless cat "Purr." Rather than run or hide, she defends herself from the boys who torment her in the village. She takes some gentle revenge on the villagers who tormented the girl called "Dung" and "Beetle." And rather than merely serve Jane Sharp, the



village midwife, she begins to pay attention to the art of midwifery, and her skills--and her confidence--as a midwife's apprentice begin to develop.

Cushman's interest in the process and power of naming speaks to the power and process of historical fiction and its cousin, history. What we see is, really, up to us and the sense we make of it depends on who we are, the information we have at our disposal and the values and cultural mores by which we determine which parts of that information are important and which parts might be disregarded. Historians and historical fiction writers work this problem out according to their own goals, but both share a similar desire to get to the truth about things. Both order their historical information in a way that best suits their ends. Does Cushman tell the "whole truth" about the relationship between the village and the manor, between the peasant and the lord? Probably not. Perhaps this might best be left to the historian. Nevertheless, Cushman persuasively draws a medieval world not so much to provide facts about medieval England, but rather, to help us remember the truth about who we were as people, and as a result, help remind us of who we are right now. Cushman's *A Midwife's Apprentice* remembers the past in order to help us recover the present.

Alice Miller, a writer deeply concerned with children and their position in society, writes about repression and how we tend to recycle (to our detriment) what we forget. Miller's observations about memory and repression address a long overlooked question that Hayden White's work on metahistory implicitly asks but never answers: from where does one's ideological leanings come? According to Miller and her work on repression, creativity, and destructiveness one's ideological stance is a result of a complex array of influences, chief among them is a parental response to childhood trauma. When a parent invites and makes room for a child's emotional response--whatever the traumatic event--a child will not have to resort to repression, denial, or play-acting in an attempt to fulfill poisonous parental pedagogy. <sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, as parents we were not always invited to experience our own emotional lives when we were children and as a result fail to observe the complex emotional lives of our own children. Further, because we remain locked in our own coping mechanisms learned in our own childhood, we pass these on to our children. This often takes the form of child abuse. Miller writes,

Nature gives us only the ability to anesthetize ourselves when the mistreatment becomes unbearable. Our organism protects itself against the threat of death with the help of repression and denial. We forget the beatings and the disdain, or else we maintain that they did us some good--and go on to engage in the same practices with our children. The protective mechanism used by the child thus becomes fateful for the adult and for our species, for repression leads--out of pure ignorance--to the destruction of our own children and our fellow human beings and to the acceptance of abuse as a normal way of life. (8-9)

Miller's observations offer us a way to understand the individual as a process of recovering (remembering) one's own personal history, even if those memories take the form of forgotten emotions and later present themselves as conscious or unconscious ideological leanings.

Literature offers a way to remember the past and live more passionately in the present. It helps us remember ourselves. Those in medicine and psychiatry have concluded that, yes, the repression of memories does occur. In many cases repression is a type of psychic safeguard. It helps the abused and traumatized to stay alive in the midst of unspeakable cruelty and suffering. In other words, repression can be a good thing for a while. It acts as a defense mechanism in the face of suffering. We can shut it out, shut it off, and go on somehow. Nevertheless a lifestyle of repression, science also tells us, leads to unhealthy habits, even disease. We store memories in our bodies on a cellular level--and if the memories are traumatic enough they come out, some say, as a physical disease. These outbreaks of memory testify to the traumas we have repressed and that our bodies--when we break out in stress, illness, and disease, ask us to remember.

Cushman marks Alyce's growth and development as a woman and as a human being not so much by the skills she learns as a midwife's apprentice or the babies she helps birth--though these are important details to consider--but rather, by her ability to feel her emotions. At the outset of the tale Alyce, known as Dung, is numb to the cold, to her hunger, and most of all to her emotions. As Alyce gains a measure of physical security in her life--i.e., food, shelter, and a kind of surrogate mother in the guise of Jane Sharp, the midwife--she begins to remember inchoate memories that mark her as human: she remembers how to make a song after helping Tansy the cow give birth to twins. Soon after, Alyce helps the Bailiff's wife give birth after the midwife had given the baby up for lost. So grateful are the Bailiff and his wife that they name their daughter Alyce Little. Never before has Alyce felt so complimented, appreciated, and respected by her community. That night, for the first time, she "lay down on her straw mat by the fire, and had a dream about her mother" (60).

After a later, second attempt to act as mid-wife ends in failure,

Alyce backed out of the cottage, then turned and ran up the path to the road, she didn't know why or where. Behind her in that cottage was disappointment and failure. The midwife had used no magic. She had delivered that baby with work and skill, not magic spells, and Alyce should have been able to do it but could not. She had failed. Strange sensations tickled her throat, but she did not cry, for she did not know how, and a heavy weight sat in her chest, but she did not moan or wail, for she had never learned to give voice to what was inside her. She knew only to run away. (70)

Alyce finally gains enough experience and confidence that she can experience loss, shame, and disappointment. Nevertheless, though the sensations "tickled her throat" she cannot mourn nor give voice to her pain and so she runs away. Only after meeting the young boy, Edward, and finding him safe and happy does she discover how much she has missed him, her life in the village and her role as the midwife's apprentice. Yet before she can go back she must give voice to what is inside her. After Edward helps her identify and experience her maternal feelings, she finds a voice for the sadness and loss she experienced as a child.

She would not be bringing Edward back with her to make her heart content, but she knew she had not failed him, and she breathed a heavy sigh of sadness, disappointment, and relief. It felt so good that she did it again and again until her sighs turned to sobs and she cried her first crying right there in the hen house . . ." (97)

Soon after this she masters her fear and feelings of worthlessness and helps a woman birth a baby. From this experience Alyce recovers another part of her emotional life: she learns to feel joy in her own abilities, and pride in herself as a woman. "And then she laughed, a true laugh that came from deep in her gut, rushed out her mouth, and rang though the clear night air. And that was the true miracle that night, the first of June--the month . . . named for Juno, the Roman goddess of the moon, of women, and of childbirth" (111). Soon after Alyce discovers her desire to return to the village and take up again her role as midwife's apprentice.

*Catherine, Called Birdy* and *A Midwife's Apprentice* represent stunning examples of historical fiction because *history* and the malleable--and contentious--process of history-making plays such a large role in the reader's experience of these texts. Cushman's *Catherine, Called Birdy* and *A Midwife's Apprentice* foreground Catherine's and Alyce's "becoming" and in the process, foreground the notion of history itself as one that is always becoming. From one perspective Cushman's historical fiction does not offer her audience historical figures from which we can draw a "true" experience of medieval England. We cannot. It is this among other things that separates her from the likes of *Johnny Tremain*. And yet, Cushman's handling of historical figures--and her view of women in thirteenth-century England--provokes a kind of crisis of knowing in the reader: what do we know of the past but the stories we tell of it? From this unmooring of our surety, and through the personally familiar yet historically overlooked

Catherine and Alyce, we gain a broader understanding of our own society, and of our own sense of how we construct ideological notions of "woman," "child," and "self." Cushman teaches us, and we learn a little about how we too tell stories, sometimes whoppers, to justify our own ideological assumptions; she provides us with the opportunity to read her historical fiction the way her work reads us: as historians, as poets, as truth-makers.

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## Notes

[1](#) When I write about skeptics and critical opinions of Cushman's work I am drawing on, among other things, conversations and discussions held on the Child.Lit Internet group.

[2](#) White identifies the four modes of argument as "Formist" Mechanistic Organicist and Contextualist. Marx represents the most famous Mechanistic historian. Organicist histories tend to provide a synthesis of data and point to "the telos toward which the whole process is tending over the long haul" (19). The Contextualist historian inclines "more toward synchronic representations of segments or sections of the process, cuts made across the grain of time as it were" (19). "The Formist theory of truth aims at the identification of the unique characteristics of objects inhabiting the historical field. Accordingly, the Formist considers an explanation to be complete when a given set of objects has been properly identified, its class, generic and specific attributes assigned, and labels attesting to its particularity attached to it" (14).

[3](#) The four modes of ideological implication according to White are the Anarchist, the Radical, the Conservative, and the Liberal. "Radicals and Anarchists believe in the necessity of structural transformations [in a society] the former in the interest of reconstituting society on new bases, the latter in the interest of abolishing "society" and substituting for it a "community" of individuals held together by a shared sense of their own common humanity" (24). Conservatives . . . are the most suspicious of programmatic transformations of the social status quo, while Liberals are inclined to view it through the analogy of [social] adjustments or "fine tunings," of a mechanism. In both of these ideologies the fundamental structure of society is conceived to be sound (24).

[4](#). Consider this: on the one hand, the affinities between Cushman's Romantic and Comic modes of plotting *Catherine* combined along with her Organicist mode of argument suggests a Conservative ideology latent in what otherwise might be construed as radical, proto-feminist texts. According to Hayden White, "The Romance is fundamentally a drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero's transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it, and his final liberation from it. . . . The archetypal theme of Satire is the precise opposite of this Romantic drama of redemption; it is, in fact, a drama of diremption, a drama dominated by the apprehension that man is ultimately a captive of the world rather than its master, and by the recognition that, in the final analysis, human consciousness and will are always inadequate to the task of overcoming definitively the dark force of death, which is man's unremitting enemy (8-9). Comedy and Tragedy represent *qualifications* of the romantic apprehension of the world, considered as a process, in the interest of taking seriously the forces which oppose the effort at human redemption naively help up as a possibility for mankind in Romance. Comedy and Tragedy take conflict seriously, even if the former eventuates in a vision of the ultimate *reconciliation* of opposed forces and the latter in a *revelation* of the nature of the forces opposing man on the other. And it is possible for the Romantic writer to assimilate the truths of human existence revealed in Comedy and Tragedy respectively within the structure of the drama of redemption which he figures in his vision of the ultimate victory of man over the world of experience (10).

5. From this conservative perspective one could read "the daughter's place" as a place from which she complains and resists *for a time* though ultimately yields to the overarching wishes of the father and his culture.

6 This may be true, but this does not mean that a woman in the thirteenth century was congenitally unable to grow from this ideological belief. Consider Frederick Douglass, American abolitionist, former slave. He did the impossible by teaching himself to read--like Catherine in a way--and discovered his own humanity in the process though many along the way still viewed him as chattel.

7 In *The Untouched Key* Miller offers a reading of Buster Keaton's childhood as an attempt to please parents and audience. Beginning as a three-year old in the twenties, Buster Keaton played on stage with his parents--and later made it into film. As a child, however, his role on stage was to take as much abuse as the performance required and *never to respond emotionally*; Keaton's role as a child, then, was to maintain a dead-pan face for which he was rewarded. The flatter the expression, the more the audience laughed. This might sound reasonable, yet apparently the physical abuse on stage could become so extreme that police and other authorities were routinely summoned to a show to make sure the child Keaton had not been damaged. More often than not the Keaton family moved on before the authorities arrived. In an interview late in life Keaton waxes poetic about his childhood, idealizing his parents, and revealing that he couldn't smile for years after, and in fact, he says, "I still can't." Keaton would have us believe that smiling is merely an act of muscles in the face and that he has mastered them--thanks to his parents. Miller suggests that, perhaps, smiling is a little more than a muscular activity.

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