



## PAINTING LIONS, DRAWING LINES, WRITING LIVES: MALE AUTHORSHIP IN THE LIVES OF CHRISTINA OF MARKYATE, MARGERY KEMPE, AND MARGARET PASTON

After pondering the question in the title of this roundtable, I have come to the conclusion that the key question is really that of *how* to be both a medievalist and a feminist. It is not sufficient simply to self-identify as a feminist medievalist; one needs to approach medieval texts and subjects from a feminist perspective, a practice which, as we all know, is not always straightforward. In studying medieval women, for instance, one must specify what aspect of 'woman' one intends to discuss, reclaim, or interpret. One might research images of women in literature, study the texts of women writers, examine women's lives. One might approach any of these areas of research in different ways, asking different questions, seeking different answers. Elaine Showalter indicates in 'Toward a Feminist Poetics' that there are two types of feminist criticism, examining either the 'woman as reader,' which she calls 'the feminist critique,' or the 'woman as writer,' for which Showalter adopts 'the French term *la gynocritique*.' I suggest a third area for feminist criticism, whereby a woman's life story is filtered through the impressions and words of a male writer, thereby complicating our view of the *written-woman*. Today, I will address this area of medieval feminist study which I believe is both complex and important, that is, the involvement of male writers in creating the images of 'historical' women. In the process of addressing this issue, I hope to present one possible tactic for a medieval feminist. I approach this area, however, through the image of a fictional woman, the Wife of Bath, not only because she is such a colorful representation of a woman created by men, but also because she (or Chaucer, through her) addresses directly the problem of how an image can be influenced by the creator of that image.<sup>2</sup>

I speak here specifically of the Wife's question, '[w]ho peyntede the leon, tel me who?' (692), alluding to the Aesopian fable of a lion and a peasant, in which the lion wonders who painted the scene of a man killing a lion.<sup>3</sup> Most scholars latch onto the Wife's question in order to justify her discussion of the 'wo that is in mariage' (3),<sup>4</sup> for the Wife points out that it is ancient clerics who wrote negative views of women.<sup>5</sup> Had women been writing, according to the Wife, they would have written negative things about men, not women: 'By God, if wommen hadde writen stories, / As clerkes han withinne hire oratories, / They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse / Than al the mark of Adam may redresse' (693-96). I would like to suggest another way of looking at the message of this fable: had women been writing about themselves, they would have been more accurate in their self-depictions than were

the clerics.<sup>6</sup> Instead of expanding my discussion of either lions or marriage, therefore, I use this anecdote to introduce the question of how much we can surmise about historical women whose lives are filtered, wholly or in part, through the assistance of male writers. In regard to this topic, I am thinking in particular of three medieval Englishwomen, whose lives collectively span centuries, and whose texts scholars view as at least to some extent biographical or autobiographical.

These three women are Christina of Markyate, Margery Kempe, and Margaret Paston. Many other women could be chosen as examples, of course, but I choose these women for the complicated nature of the composition of their stories.<sup>7</sup> *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, for example, is a quite mysterious text, bordering on the saint's life, about which we know very little, including whether or not it is considered to be complete.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the strangest quality of this *Life*, however, is that parts of it are so detailed and, frankly, 'realistic,' that most scholars agree with C.H. Talbot that the writer must have been 'very close indeed' to Christina and that he certainly was writing during Christina's lifetime.<sup>9</sup> Though parts of the *Life*, particularly those relating to Christina's very early years, have the fairytale qualities of the true saint's life about them, many other parts reek of reality.<sup>10</sup>

Though Christina herself was likely interviewed for the narrative, she does not appear to have had any part in the actual composition of the text. This fact raises the question for me of the accuracy of the apparently 'realistic' parts of the narrative, and I am not alone in this doubt. Ruth Mazo Karras is careful to point out that we 'see [Christina's life] only through male (and monastic) eyes,' and Thomas Head concedes that, 'the language of the *Life of Christina of Markyate*...tells us little or nothing of Christina's self-understanding.'<sup>11</sup> Specifically, I wonder, how would this biography of Christina have differed if it had been written by either Christina or one of the nuns of her priory with whom she lived in her later years? This question, naturally, is one which likely can never be answered, but it highlights the fact that Christina's *Life* was wholly written by a monk at St. Alban's, by a male writer distant from Christina's thoughts if not from her daily life. Written, indeed, by one of those clerics the Wife of Bath mentions, who—as she comments—can only 'speke good of wyves' who appear in 'hooly seintes lyves' (689–90).

In contrast to Christina's *Life*, the *Life of Margery Kempe* is supposedly written entirely by Margery with the help of a scribe who recorded her words.<sup>12</sup> Lynn Staley, on the question of the composition of this text, suggests that 'Kempe' the Author self-consciously created the persona of 'Margery' by carefully manipulating her use of the 'trope of the scribe.'<sup>13</sup> In other words, the text relates the fictionalized construction of a life created by Kempe the author about a fictional character named Margery.<sup>14</sup> At the opposite extreme is the point of view propounded by Robert Ross, that Margery Kempe had little control over her text, that instead the narrative was created primarily by an anonymous writer who interviewed the woman, Margery, and created from a series of questions and answers an oral history about this woman.<sup>15</sup> The middle ground accepts at face-value the claim of Margery Kempe that her book

relates the real story of her life, or rather, parts of it, through the recordings and transcriptions of the two scribes. The initial proposal, that Kempe the female author created a fictional Margery, is both compelling and desirable, but is it wishful thinking? Wouldn't it be nice to have another female writer like Julian of Norwich in early fifteenth-century England, someone whose talents we could compare with Chaucer's and with those of Christine de Pizan? It is, however, more likely that a male scribe recorded Margery's story, and that fact raises questions about the extent to which the final product was molded by the priest who wrote down Margery's words. Sarah Rees Jones, noting the influence on the text of hagiographical and mystical traditions, wonders, '[w]ho were the male scribes whom the narrator in the text claim were charged with the writing of successive versions of the book, and what role did either they or Kempe play in the composition of the text?'<sup>16</sup> Françoise Le Saux also discusses the two primary scribes, pointing out that the first 'redaction clearly distorts the voice of the dictating woman—how otherwise could one explain the intrusion of German in the idiom of the first text?'<sup>17</sup> With the more competent second scribe, however, Le Saux points out that 'Margery has to pay a heavy price: she loses her control over the structure of her narrative, which is expanded into two books, the second of which is controlled entirely by the second scribe, who is more of a co-author than a copyist.'<sup>18</sup> Who, then, really shaped the depiction of Margery—the subject of the text, or the male scribes? In this case, it is certainly unclear who 'peynted the leon.'

The third woman whose image we examine by way of a text is Margaret Paston, who never intended to write any sort of autobiography, but whose letters to friends and family create, despite herself, a vivid depiction of this fifteenth-century woman.<sup>19</sup> Diane Watt claims that, generally, from 'private letters...the critic can analyze the character of the writer' among other things, including viewing the letter as 'an expression of the writer's individuality and immediate personal experience.'<sup>20</sup> She points out, however, that most of the Paston letters, while 'written for a limited and private audience...contain little inner reflection.'<sup>21</sup> Many of Margaret's letters, like those of most of the other Paston women, were business letters meant to keep other family members informed; furthermore, they were, of course, filtered through the efforts of a male writer. Norman Davis, after establishing Margaret's likely inability to write, comments that, "[i]t is seldom possible to know whether a letter written by a clerk was taken down verbatim at dictation or composed more or less freely on the basis of instructions given by the author."<sup>22</sup> Had Margaret just generally given her scribe a broad sense of the desired content of her letters, then the impression of literal accuracy that this collection of letters conveys is patently false. Had she, instead, dictated to the scribe, the possibility still remains for errors caused by mishearing.<sup>23</sup> People today who have secretaries type their letters from dictation regularly find inaccuracies upon review; for the same reason, then, we must wonder how carefully Margaret ensured that it was, in fact, wholly her own words and thoughts which were sent in her name. Did she have the scribe, like the priest of Margery's book, 'red it ovyr beforh this creatur every word' to check the letter's accuracy, or should we question, as we do with Margery's book, how much of the composition was truly Margaret Paston's?<sup>24</sup> Watt notes that medieval household 'secretaries...might well

contribute to the substance of a letter as well as introduce (often undetectable) editorial changes into the text.<sup>25</sup> In short, then, who painted *this* 'lion'?

The Wife of Bath's words about the painting of the lion not only introduce the Wife's immediate topic about the woes of marriage; they also imply the possibility of a great inaccuracy in men's words about women and in male images of women, whether the male writer is unsympathetic like the Wife's old clerks, a compassionate friend such as Christina's scribe, or a professional scribe as in the cases of Kempe and Paston. In a sense, every medieval text is like a painting about which we have to make assumptions without the benefit of having the painter with us to relate his or her ideas. As medieval feminists, we need to ask in all cases regarding the recorded lives of women, 'who painted the lion, tell me, who?', and we must seek an answer far more complicated than simply 'a man' or 'a woman.'

—S. Elizabeth Passmore, University of Connecticut

<sup>1</sup> Elaine Showalter, 'Toward a Feminist Poetics', repr. in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David H. Richter, 2nd edn. (Boston: Bedford, 1998), pp. 1375-86, at p. 1377.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue' are drawn from *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> In "'Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?': Rhetorical and Didactic Roles Played by an Aesopic Fable in the Wife of Bath's Prologue,' *Studies in Philology* 80.3 (1983): 238-52, Marjorie M. Malvern suggests, though her 'immediate concern is not with sources,' that the fable version Chaucer's Wife refers to is that by Marie de France, because of the reference to a painting rather than a sculpture, as in Aesop's version (239-40: n5).

<sup>4</sup> See Mary Carruthers, 'The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions,' *PMLA* 94.2 (1979): 209-22; and Susan K. Hagen, 'The Wife of Bath, the Lion, and the Critics,' in *The Worlds of Medieval Women: Creativity, Influence, Imagination*, ed. Constance H. Berman et al. (Morgantown: West Virginia UP, 1985), pp. 130-38.

<sup>5</sup> The quotation is worth repeating: 'The clerk, whan he is oold, and may noight do / Of Venus werkes worth his olde sho, / Thanne sit he doun, and writ in his dotage / That women kan nat kepe hir mariage!' (ll. 707-10).

<sup>6</sup> I am inspired here by Christina Rossetti who in the late nineteenth century brings up this same point in the opening section of her 'Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets.' Rossetti claims that, 'had such a lady spoken for herself, the portrait left us might have appeared more tender, if less dignified, than any drawn even by a devoted friend.' See *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, ed. R.W. Crump, vol. 2 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1986). This compelling poem (and poet) has finally been receiving serious feminist scholarly attention: see, for example, Betty S. Flowers, "Had Such a Lady Spoken For Herself': Christina Rossetti's 'Monna Innominata,'" in *Rossetti to Sexton: Six Women Poets at Texas*, ed. Dave Oliphant and Robin Bradford (Austin: Harry-Ransom Humanities Research Center, 1992), pp. 13-29.

<sup>7</sup> In contrast, for example, such writers as Marie de France, Julian of Norwich, and Christine de Pizan were responsible for the actual recording of their own writings.

<sup>8</sup> The standard edition is *The Life of Christina of Markyate: A Twelfth-Century Recluse*, ed. and trans. C.H. Talbot (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1959; repr. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1998). Talbot suggests that the fourteenth-century manuscript, the only source for Christina's Life, could either be missing up to a quarter of its text or may represent an abridgement (pp. 4-5).

<sup>9</sup> Talbot, *Life of Christina of Markyate*, p. 6. See also Christopher J. Holdsworth, 'Christina of Markyate,' in *Medieval Women: Dedicated and Presented to Professor Rosalind M.T. Hill*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), pp. 185-204, especially his comments on the composition of Christina's *Life*, about which he says the author 'writes a good deal of direct speech and most of it reads as though [Christina] had told him, perhaps many times, what had happened' (p. 195).

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Renna, in 'Virginity in the *Life* of Christina of Markyate and Aelred of Rievaulx's Rule,' *American Benedictine Review* 36.1 (1985): 79–92, points out that the author, while creating a 'personalized narrative,' still 'retained, even intensified, the virginity theme of the traditional female accounts' (82). Moreover, Renna suggests, 'the Christina of part two [of the *Life*] loses some of the vitality and realism of the Christina of part one' (85). I maintain that even the first part of the *Life* has some fairytale-like images, such as that of the dove which Christina's mother saw fly from the monastery and take shelter in her tunic sleeve while she was pregnant with Christina (Talbot, *Life of Christina of Markyate*, pp. 34–35).

<sup>11</sup> Ruth Mazo Karras, 'Friendship and Love in the Lives of Two Twelfth-Century English Saints,' *Journal of Medieval History* 14 (1988): 313; and Thomas Head, 'The Marriages of Christina of Markyate,' *Viator* 21 (1990): 76. Head adds that the 'monk, however, had conversed with the nun, and the details which he provides concerning her life bespeak a thorough and accurate knowledge of its events' (76).

<sup>12</sup> *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Lynn Staley, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publ., 1996).

<sup>13</sup> Lynn Staley Johnson, 'The Trope of the Scribe and the Question of Literary Authority in the Works of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe,' *Speculum* 66 (1991): 820.

<sup>14</sup> In agreement with this view are such authors as Carol M. Meale, "'This is a deed bok, the tother a quick': Theatre and the Drama of Salvation in the *Book of Margery Kempe*," in *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al., (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000), pp. 49–67. In 'Her Own Creature: Religion, Feminist Criticism, and the Functional Eccentricity of Margery Kempe,' *Exemplaria* 11.1 (1999): 1–21, however, Mary Hardiman Farley finds 'insufficient support for Lynn Staley's claim that [the book] is a subtly crafted work of fiction and protest' (2).

<sup>15</sup> Robert C. Ross, 'Oral Life, Written Text: The Genesis of The Book of Margery Kempe,' *Yearbook of English Studies* 22 (1992): 226–37. Unlike Ross, Sue Ellen Holbrook (in 'Order and Coherence in *The Book of Margery Kempe*,' in Berman, *The Worlds of Medieval Women: Creativity, Influence, Imagination*, pp. 97–110) gives the agency of remembrance and creation to Margery directly, saying: 'Margery remembers her life and constructs her book. Indeed, we discover that the construction of the text is at once the construction of a life, a life to which Margery gives definition and meaning as...she uses her full creative power to compose her book' (p. 98).

<sup>16</sup> Sarah Rees Jones, "'A peler of Holy Cherch": Margery Kempe and the Bishops,' in Wogan-Browne, pp. 377–91, at p. 378. Jones further wonders, following Staley's suggestion, that, 'if we are sceptical of Margery, the central character of the book, should we not also be sceptical of Kempe the author?' (p. 379). See also John C. Hirsch, 'Author and Scribe in the Book of Margery Kempe,' *Medium Aevum* 44 (1975): 145–50.

<sup>17</sup> Françoise Le Saux, "'Hir not lettyrd": Margery Kempe and Writing,' in *Writing and Culture*, Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 6 (Tübingen: G. Narr, 1992), pp. 53–68 at p. 63. Le Saux further notes, though, that this first 'scribe had neither the competence nor the energy to recast Margery's discourse on a large scale' (p. 63).

<sup>18</sup> Le Saux, "'Hir not lettyrd": Margery Kempe and Writing,' p. 64.

<sup>19</sup> *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Norman Davis, part 1 (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1971).

<sup>20</sup> Diane Watt, "'No Writing for Writing's Sake": The Language of Service and Household Rhetoric in the Letters of the Paston Women,' in *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre*, ed. Karen Chere-watuk and Ulrike Wiethaus (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1993), pp. 122–38 at p. 122.

<sup>21</sup> Watt, "'No Writing for Writing's Sake,'" p. 122.

<sup>22</sup> *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, p. xxxviii. Davis points out that Margaret Paston's 104 extant letters were written 'in an astonishing variety of hands—apparently twenty-nine in all...and some letters are in more than one hand' (p. xxxvii).

<sup>23</sup> Davis lists a few, such as 'sere and here' for 'Sere Andrew,' and 'rapere with' for 'rape rewith,' about which he comments that '[n]either mistake...would be made by anyone composing as he wrote,' *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, p. xxxviii.

<sup>24</sup> Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 20.

<sup>25</sup> Watt, "'No Writing for Writing's Sake,'" p. 136: n1.