

In Part Three Berman uses statistical sources such as rent rolls or account books from the wealthiest Cistercian women's houses in France. These examples help dispel the myth that nuns and their communities were too poor and small for any complete study of female religious houses. The information also tells us about the governance of houses with details of their economic standing in the community, the nuns' management of property, and their success as administrators.

The last part of the collection focuses on narrative and normative sources. These sources present a contrast to what we have been given in previous parts of the collection. The descriptions of nuns here provide the reader with an idea of what the attitudes of ecclesiastical men may have been towards Cistercian women. Berman highlights instances in the General Chapter of Cîteaux where houses of nuns are mentioned, usually in complaints made against the abbess by a particular abbot (121-124) including one of the more famous cases, the Bishop of Lincoln's visitation of the convent of Nun Coton and his report of abuses he found there (119-121). Berman warns us that some of the descriptions of nuns and "snippets of evidence [are often] taken out of context" and can often lead to misinterpretation of the reality of the situation (115).

Constance Berman's previous works have contributed a great deal to the study of the Cistercian order as well as Cistercian religious women. What Berman has given students and teachers here is a glimpse into the lives of these women in a time where the primary historiographies of the Cistercian order do not. She has also provided students with a first-hand look at the problems and difficulties that faced medieval women religious from associating themselves with an order that initially rejected them.

More importantly for those who teach monasticism, she has provided students with a text that is straightforward while at the same time providing a wealth of primary source material at their fingertips. This collection has given students who want to study religious women in the Middle Ages a window into a world that may seem foreign and often alien to them.

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Patrizia Caraffi, *Figure femminili del sapere (XII-XV secolo)*. (Biblioteca Medievale: Saggi; 12.) Roma: Carocci, 2003. 138 pp. €15.60.

Patrizia Caraffi, a Romance philologist and medievalist at the Università degli Studi of Bologna, has written a welcome addition to the Italian-language feminist criticism of medieval literature. This pleasant and readable book comprises four chapters of previously published material (revised and expanded), a fifth of new material, and a brief introduction. Its focus is the figure of the learned woman in selected medieval texts from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries in the major Romance languages.

The book ranges widely across time, space, and language traditions. Chapter 1 examines those *lais* of Marie de France which posit alliances among women

as necessary for women, arguing that Marie explores feminized versions of problematics typically, in courtly literature, presented from a masculine point of view. The second chapter surveys portrayals of Medea in classical and medieval texts, and tracks their shifts in emphasis between two poles: the wise woman seduced and abandoned, loyal to her disloyal husband; and the monstrous sorceress, disloyal to her first and second families, and barbarous in her vengeance. Chapter 3 analyzes the learned and loyal slave girl in *The Thousand and One Nights*, among other Iberian texts. Chapter 4 studies the Spanish *Libro de Apolonio* and other versions of that tale (and tale-type). Chapter 5 considers the *Decameron* tales (II.6, IV.1, IV.5) which Christine de Pizan rewrites in her *Cité des Dames* with the aim of re-presenting them from a feminocentric point of view, eliminating both the covert misogyny of the masculine focus, and the overt misogyny of anti-feminist language, characteristic of her source.

The introduction opens with Christine's oft-cited observation that "if women had written the books," then women would be portrayed quite differently than in the male-authored canon. Caraffi briefly surveys the conventions of the misogynist tradition in medieval literature, and wisely identifies it as a strand rather than a universal in the period. But while Caraffi engages with this question of "who painted the lion" in the chapters on Marie de France and Christine de Pizan, she does not explicitly address why male authors might adopt a similarly contestatory position, in writing or rewriting the female protagonists who people the middle chapters of the book. Thus the male authors (such as Boccaccio and Chrétien) whose paradigms Christine and Marie modify seem pre-assigned to the category of misogyny or at best indifference to women, whereas the authors (anonymous or clearly male) who create the lively female figures explored in chapters 2-4 are allowed, by default, to have a pro-feminine perspective.

Caraffi aims to "mettere a fuoco alcune figure femminili del sapere che sfuggono a un sistema di opposti così netto – da una parte un femminile obbediente e muto, dall'altra una voce di donna autonoma e per questo pericolosa—" (13) (focus on some female figures of learning who elude so neat a system of opposites – [which features] on the one hand a feminine which is obedient and mute, and on the other, the voice of a woman who is autonomous and therefore dangerous). Caraffi describes them as "fanciulle fragili nel corpo, ma forti nell'animo" (maidens frail in body, but strong in mind); she recognizes, but does not thematize, the paradox her authors create in assigning these values to heroines. To associate women with intellect and emphasize the fragility of their material being is already to contest the conventions of the misogynist strand of western thought broadly construed (Islam also figures in this book, and Caraffi does some very useful cliché-busting on this account as well). What I missed, ultimately, was some explicit discussion of the locus of this contestation *when its authors are male*. Intentionality is out of fashion as a critical focus, but so for a long time was biography; both are elided, but not eluded, in analysis by attributing to "the text" the mechanisms and positions which in fact are usually a reflex of authors. Anglophone feminist criticism has rapped many a knuckle with the "essentialist" reproach, and I do not

mean to suggest that Caraffi is giving in to essentialist logic when she takes for granted the feminist motivations of her female authors. I only wish she had taken the opportunity to discuss possible feminist (or pro-feminine) motivations, and the ramifications of these, in male authors.

Like every book, *Figure femminili* has the defects of its virtues. It is an undoubted merit to have identified and tracked this thematic thread in the history of the defense of women. Because the book assembles female figures of learning from such a broad spectrum of material, however, it does not give substantial consideration to questions of context, intended audience, or material circumstances of production and transmission. Caraffi's taxonomical project also tends to depend excessively on theme and plot as the major basis of evidence, sidelining subtleties of voicing and play with genre which might nuance or even change her findings. Thus in discussing Christine's recentering of the *Decameron* figures of Ghismonda, Lisabetta, and Ginevra, Caraffi quotes misogynous utterances without always identifying the speaker to whom they are assigned, or weighing their immediate rhetorical aim (126, 132, 46, et al.).

I appreciated the broad critical background of *Figure femminili*, and its ample integration of criticism in English as well as in the Romance languages. Caraffi's argument could be strengthened by more of the now ample feminist criticism on her texts (E. Jane Burns, Peggy McCracken, Elizabeth Archibald, and Kathy Krause were some notable absences, as was Alcuin Blamires). Like many scholarly books these days, this one lacks a separate bibliography and index – a decided inconvenience. The series “Biblioteca Medievale” has been an excellent resource for medievalists, offering editions, translations, and commentary for dozens of medieval texts both canonical and extracanonical, and I hope that the series editors will consider uniformly including bibliography and index.

The book would be richer if there were more of it. Ultimately the introduction, at five pages, is not able to locate Caraffi's own analysis in an ongoing critical conversation; to offer a broad panorama which the following chapters will elaborate; to do the speculative and abstract work which will be fleshed out in the rest. The impression is vivid that the book's component parts are imperfectly blended, and the lack of editorial smoothing – *Sendebär* is summarized twice, for example, in different places – confirms some lack of conceptual integration. Chapters seem to end in the middle of a discussion (this is especially true of 2, 3, and 5), and the book itself ends without even a summary conclusion. Every sustained analysis requires a moment in which author and reader can pan back and consider a variety of topics: roads not taken; avenues for future thought and study; the sights just surveyed; the look of the landscape in light of what has just been traversed. The conceptual and aesthetic implications of the analysis need to be addressed at the book's end, and if they had been, it is a safe bet that most of the quibbles I have raised would have vanished.

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