

² Julian of Norwich is also briefly mentioned on p. 728. I could find no mention of Catherine of Genoa and the index was no help in this respect. The fourth and "missing" woman from this volume was Hildegard of Bingen.

³ For a consideration of the various debates surrounding women's status in fourteenth-century England, see S.H. Rigby, "Gendering the Black Death: Women in Later Medieval England," *Gender and History*, 12 (2000), pp. 745-54.

⁴ For an argument that Italy is closer to the northwestern model, in terms of women's participation in the work force at least, see Samuel K. Cohn, "Women and Work in Renaissance Italy," in *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. by Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis (Longman: London and New York, 1998), pp. 107-26, esp. 114-20.

Klassen, John M. ed, with Eva Doležalová and Lynn Szabo. *The Letters of the Rožmberk Sisters: Noblewomen in Fifteenth-Century Bohemia*, translated from Czech and German with Introduction, Notes and Interpretive Essay. The Library of Medieval Women. Cambridge: D.S.Brewer, 2001. Pp. x, 134.

This excellent addition to The Library of Medieval Women presents translations, from Czech and German into English, of letters written between ca. 1448 and 1488 by two sisters in the most powerful noble family in late medieval Bohemia, the Rožmberks (Rosenberg). Most of the letters were written by Perchta (ca. 1429-1476), who signs her letters "born of Rožmberk and the wife of Lord John of Lichtenštejn," documenting her unhappy arranged marriage. The letters were critical to Perchta's unrelenting efforts over more than two decades to mobilize her birth kin and connections in order to secure the marital economic and social rights that her husband and his family denied her. Additional letters from Perchta's servants and from her kinsmen further illuminate her situation. A small number of letters from Perchta's sister, Aněžka (d. 1488), survive, and these provide a tantalizing glimpse into the life of a noblewoman who remained single and lived on the family estate throughout her long life.

These documents open a remarkable window into the conditions, beliefs, and expectations that shaped the lives of late medieval noblewomen. From a modern perspective, Perchta's life is lived as one long conflict between the medieval ideal of obedience and submissiveness to one's male relatives, an ideal with which Perchta aligns herself, on the one hand, and on the other, Perchta's struggle to better her situation and assert her rights. Her letters are urgent, forthright, pressing demands for help. Thus she writes to her father in 1450, after about one year of marriage: "Let this be given to my dear lord, my father, Lord Ulrich of Rožmberk. And dear lord! That which I wrote you in my first letter, that I am doing well, is unfortunately not so; would that I was doing well. On the contrary, I am doing very badly. And the complaint I bring before Your Grace is that I am in such a disorderly residence that there is no way I can get used to it" (p. 35). The letters allude to a state of near-constant strife and turmoil: neglect by her husband; abuse by her mother-in-law; attempts to send away her servants; lack of sustenance and assistance while in childhood; threats and fear of poisoning; and Perchta's distraught state of mind. In 1451, Perchta's lady-in-waiting writes a dramatic letter to Perchta's brother, Henry, berating him for neglecting his sister and informing him that Perchta's husband beats her and abuses her so badly that "others say that if it had been

a peasant woman that he married, she would not have suffered this much from him” (p. 52). In 1454 a letter from Perchta to her father relates that she and her husband have reconciled, but less than a year later conditions have deteriorated again. Ten years on, a set of remarkable letters chronicle Perchta’s energetic efforts to shore up her husband’s desperate financial situation by pawning her jewels, which is followed by her negotiating a separation agreement. Letters written after her husband’s death show Perchta still pressing her husband’s family for payments that were promised but apparently never made.

Klassen’s fine introduction provides essential information about the social, political, and economic dimensions of aristocratic marriage in fifteenth-century Bohemia and clarifies Perchta’s plight. Like many (most?) late medieval aristocrats, the fabulously wealthy and equally fabulously indebted Rožmberks were mired in “cash flow” problems. Perchta’s father delayed in remitting payments of Perchta’s dowry to her husband for five years. Instead of bringing resources into the marriage, Perchta was a dependant, and worse (as the quarrels over her servants indicate) a financial drain. The brief reconciliation in 1454 coincides with a partial dowry payment, which in any case was not paid in full until 1460, and then only because of some high-powered political wheeling and double-dealing on the part of Perchta’s brother, John. Klassen does an excellent job of establishing the social and moral education that probably shaped Perchta’s understanding of herself and her place as a noblewoman. He also elucidates some widely shared notions of a noblewoman’s rights as a wife that were violated in this marriage. All of this information makes even more interesting the apparent dichotomy between Perchta’s assertions of submissiveness and her constant speaking up on her own behalf.

Oral communication—messengers, gossip, scandal, reputation—is an omnipresent powerful and formative social force. Much of what is “really going on” between Perchta, her husband, and her in-laws remains opaque because letters functioned differently in Perchta’s world than in ours. For Perchta, letters supplement oral messages, the oral testimony of other visitors, and orally created and circulated reputation. Perchta often insists that the dreadful things she has learned or experienced cannot be written down. Reporting to her brother about a conversation with her husband she writes, “it is not proper to write about the rest; he talked about himself indecently and desperately” (p. 45). Her style, too, is oral rather than literate, in part because she probably dictated most if not all of her letters. Yet the letters also show Perchta learning to operate in a world in which written documents could be powerful weapons. The composition and preservation of her own letters testifies to this. Further, beginning in the second year of her marriage, she drafts a will and asks her brother to carefully examine the original dowry contract and its seals. Later in life she will no longer rely on intermediaries but demand to see or keep for herself original legal documents.

The letters raise a number of questions that the introduction and essay do not address. How many children did Perchta have and what became of them? That Perchta was mistreated while in childbed seems to have caused outrage, but we are left in the dark about the conventions surrounding confine-

ment in noble households. The letters allude constantly to the problems of women's limited mobility, yet they give the impression that the problem is not that women are locked up but rather finding the material resources (escorts, horses, carts) to travel safely from place to place. However, teachers may in fact be grateful that the letters suggest such interesting areas for students to explore on their own.

This readable and inexpensive translation deserves a place in many classrooms. I will use this volume when I again teach the so-called "orality/literacy" debates because it illustrates and complicates beautifully, for example, some of Roger Chartier's ideas on the practical impact of writing. Anyone who teaches any version of the Griselda story should read these letters and consider teaching them alongside the literary text. Perchta is not, and never claims to be, a literary artist, but one is struck and moved by the subtle changes that emerge over time in Perchta's sense of self-representation. The final and lingering impression is Perchta of Rožmberk's indomitable spirit. The words she writes to her brother, John, in 1464 (p. 77) echo powerfully across the centuries: "I am striving for nothing but respect."

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Lewis, Katherine J. *The Cult of St. Katherine of Alexandria in Late Medieval England*. Woodbridge, Suffolk, and Rochester, New York: Boydell Press, 2000. Pp. 277.

Katherine J. Lewis's ambitious book, *The Cult of St. Katherine of Alexandria in Late Medieval England*, sets out to explore why St. Katherine of Alexandria was such a popular, powerful figure. Lewis's main concerns are "reading" St. Katherine as she would have been read and interpreted by late medieval English people and examining how St. Katherine, her life, and her actions were turned to ideological uses. The preface sets up these questions and provides a composite narrative of St. Katherine's life compiled from the Latin and Middle English versions that would have been available to the English audience of the late medieval period. Chapter 1 introduces more background material, sets up the parameters of the study, and introduces the types of materials used in the book's analysis. Chapter 2 explores the early history of St. Katherine, the history of the virgin martyr tradition, and how St. Katherine fits into this tradition; Chapter 2 also provides a list and brief analysis of the various lives of St. Katherine available in late medieval England. Chapter 3 examines St. Katherine's functions in parish life, with some concentration on parish guilds. Chapter 4 takes the analysis of St. Katherine's functions into the domestic sphere. Chapter 5 finally explores St. Katherine's meanings for women, with the caveat that men, too, followed St. Katherine devotedly.

Lewis's research is astoundingly detailed and comprehensive, including not only such expected materials as artwork and literature, but also wills, guild records, household objects, and pageants. Lewis always puts these primary sources to excellent use, and her knowledge about the saint and her cult is