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Denis Renevey and Christiania Whitehead, eds. *Writing Religious Women: Female Spiritual and Textual Practices in Late Medieval England*. Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2000. Pp. xi, 270.

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Christiania Whitehead's assertion in the introduction to this collection of essays that this volume presents "a new configuration of the defining features of women's vernacular spiritual and textual practices toward the close of the Middle Ages," is no idle boast. *Writing Religious Women* presents provocative new perspectives regarding a variety of vernacular religious texts extant in England between 1220 and 1500, their authors, readers and subjects.

Renevey and Whitehead attribute this new configuration to several innovations. First, drawing upon Nicholas Watson's work on vernacular theology, they have devised a gender-based category of vernacular religious writing, "female vernacular theology." Its main criterion is that the works considered be ones "in which women play a significant role, as either author, recipient or subject." This allows a wide range of vernacular religious writings in both prose and verse, from a variety of genres, to be included in these studies of female textual religious culture. Second, the essays in this volume enter "uncharted territory," focusing much of their attention on less-studied texts. Third, and most importantly, the essays straddle the divide between exclusively historical approaches to the study of women's spiritual practice, and the examination of women's textual practice, that is, the examination of the issues surrounding female literacy, book-owning and reading practice.

Situating their analysis at the intersection of women's spiritual and textual practices allows the essayists to explore relationships, both textual and historical, that have received little contemporary critical attention. Whitehead examines the allegorization of Mary as a fortress, an image which has been largely ignored by feminist scholars, in a little-studied vernacular poem, the *Château d'amour*, by Robert Grosseteste, a prominent churchman usually studied for his influence in ecclesiastical circles. Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou also examines vernacular religious lyrics written by male clerics, but she analyses the semiotics of the female body in a variety of poems, comparing the models they provide the woman reader for conceiving the female body with those offered in secular poetry and devotional prose texts. Samuel Fanous focuses on the use of time and place in the *Book of Margery Kempe*, bringing new evidence to bear on the long-standing debates regarding the role of the second amanuensis in shaping Kempe's narrative, and the *Book's* relationship to contemporary devotional literature. Anne Mc Govern-Mouron introduces a little-known early thirteenth-century Latin treatise, the *Liber de modo bene vivendi ad sororem*, with its middle-English translation, the *Manere of Good Lyoyng*, and investigates the affinities between this text and two well-known texts written for a female audience, the *Ancrene Wisse* and Aelred's *De institutione inclusarum*. Rebecca Selman explores the "sex change" quotations from the Latin *Horologium sapientiae* undergo when

they are incorporated into the *Speculum devotorum*, a vernacular life of Christ translated and compiled from various Latin sources. Marleen Cré challenges the present-day assumption that spiritual texts by women express a typically female spirituality with her examination of Julian of Norwich's short text and Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls* within the manuscript matrix of British Library MS Additional 37790 (Amherst). And Richard Lawes, examines the autobiographical texts of Julian of Norwich, Thomas Hoccleve and Margery Kempe in the light of the psychiatry of the 1990s in order to explore medieval subjectivity.

Although the editors and the authors emphasize the contribution these essays make to our knowledge of female spirituality, equally important is their reconfiguration of the boundaries between religious and lay spirituality, latinate and vernacular culture. Most notable in this regard are the essays of Bella Millett, Denis Renevey and Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa. Millett explores the relationship between the devotions outlined in Part One of the *Ancrene Wisse* and those in the Book of Hours. Through careful reading of the texts combined with close attention to the historical context, Millett argues that the *Ancrene Wisse*, written for lay anchoresses, played a role in the transition of the Book of Hours from monastic to lay use. Renevey also demonstrates the influence of anchoritic practices upon late medieval lay devotional practices. Renevey argues that the performative dimensions of Margery Kempe's devotional practices, the notorious exemplar of late medieval lay spirituality, "were informed by a well-established tradition rooted in English anchoritic practices." Yoshikawa also examines Margery Kempe's spirituality, but in relation to the Sarum liturgy and popular hagiography. Yoshikawa argues that the liturgical celebration of the lives of the virgin martyrs fostered and facilitated Kempe's "aspiration to contemplation and spiritual identity as a bride of Christ," activities which obfuscate the boundary between lay and religious spirituality.

Unfortunately, both the editors and the authors underplay the new perspectives on lay spirituality that these examinations of female vernacular theology provide. This is surprising given the thoughtful discussion of English vernacular theology in the introduction. In my opinion, the most provocative and promising aspect of *Writing Religious Women* is the way it straddles the divide between female spirituality and vernacular theology, revealing glimpses of the complex interaction between female spirituality and lay spirituality in late medieval England. The essays in this collection not only contribute to a new configuration of the defining features of women's spiritual and textual practices, but focusing as they do on vernacular works accessible to an increasingly literate laity, they also raise new questions regarding late medieval English lay spirituality.

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