

BOOK REVIEWS

Larrington, *Carolyne*. *Women and Writing in Medieval Europe: A Source Book*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995. *xiv* + 277 pp.

Larrington's anthology of medieval texts and cogent introductions is designed for classroom use. This compendium provides a full and varied collection of primary texts, topical introductions, and bibliographical apparatus that inspires both an understanding of women and writing in the Middle Ages, and a desire to read and learn more.

Larrington states, "I have tried to select texts which are seldom reproduced elsewhere, or which are difficult to find" (5): she satisfies her desire while simultaneously proving both her scholarly abilities and her sensitivity to diversity. Among the unique texts are "An embroidered praise-song" (250–51). This late fourteenth century panegyric, composed by the Serbian princess Yephimia and preserved as an embroidered coffin cover, "derives its meaning and artistic effectiveness from the purpose of the pall, its physical disposition and the materials in which it is made" (250). The poem provides an opportunity to think about the material culture of the Middle Ages, the intersection of text and textile, and the uses of poetry. Yephimia asks the dead prince to speak with God and to

... beseech him that the Orthodox Christian faith may stand inviolate in the land of thy fathers; pray that God the Victor may give thy beloved sons, Prince Stephan and Prince Vuk, the victory over all foes, seen and unseen. . . . (251)

Surrounding the pall stands the deadly warfare between Christians and Muslims in Serbia, Bosnia, and Croatia—warfare that continues today with "foes, seen and unseen." This text, and others Larrington has selected, provide a rich opportunity to explore medieval literary and cultural attitudes, alternating between familiarity and strangeness. Another of Larrington's selections, from Gertrude of Helfta's *The Herald of Divine Love*, provides a startling example of the authority trope:

And I had been thinking that I had repaid all these gifts of which I speak, if not through writing, at least verbally, but the Lord confuted me with those words which, that very night I had heard read at Matins: "If the Lord had taught his doctrine only for the sake of those who were then living, there would only be his sayings, and not the Scriptures, but yet it is on account of the Scriptures that many are now saved." And the Lord added: "I want to have in your writing a clear, incontrovertible witness to my divine loving kindness, through which I shall benefit many souls, in this Last Age." (146)

Students can be effectively introduced to a prime theoretical issue, women's authorizing strategies, with this and other texts Larrington has chosen.

Larrington herself translated the selections from *The Herald of Divine Love*; her work as translator provides nineteen of the seventy or so selections and includes texts in Old English, Latin, French, German, and Icelandic, her academic specialty. Five selections translated by Larrington come from Icelandic literature, and the volume contains others' translations from Welsh, Dutch, Italian, Norse, and Spanish, as well as French and German. Such breadth helps Larrington accomplish her desire to feature the rarely-anthologized and unusual. At the same time, she employs some familiar texts—Christine de Pizan's, Margery Kempe's, and Hildegard of Bingen's—to provide a "comfort zone" for readers of previous anthologies of medieval women's writing and, in the way she deploys these writers among her book's different divisions, to give readers a chance to get to know these familiar authors and texts in a new way.

Larrington divides her texts into seven topics: "Marriage," "Love, Sex, and Friendship," "Motherhood and Work," "Women and Christianity," "Women and Power," "Education and Knowledge," and "Women and the Arts." Each division begins with a full introduction, and the introductions are themselves cross-referenced. For instance, in the introduction to the "Marriage" section Larrington refers to both introduction and texts in the "Women and Christianity" section. The cross-references keep the reader within the book itself, helping to make the whole experience more familiar and memorable. The ease of on-the-spot note-taking (the book's paper is substantial and margins adequate) along with effective cross-referencing underscores this book's suitability for classroom use. This well-designed book illustrates that, unlike electronic texts read on-screen, codex technology accommodates a reader's multiple activities and affords a certain dynamic pleasure to boot.

Larrington's emphasis on context neglects neither history nor letters: motherhood and work, for instance, are evaluated from different perspectives and connected to the introductory material about marriage, while bits of primary texts within these introductions keep the focus on written artifacts. Larrington doesn't purport to give all the answers and, used in conjunction with the bibliography, her introductions invite teacher commentary and inspire class discussion. Similarly, the introductions to the seventy or so individual texts always include full references to edited sources along with the exact or approximate date of original composition. Putting such references where they're most useful—at the head of the text, right as the reader begins her reading—underlines the volume's reader-friendliness. Additionally, in another move to distinguish the book's parts, both topical introductions and text introductions use a sans-serif typeface, while texts, including quotations in topical

introductions, use a typeface with serifs. I found this typographical distinction provided a quick cue, when flipping through pages, to distinguish commentary from primary sources.

Rather than footnotes (there's not a single one in the book; instead, difficult words are followed by a one- or two-word translation in square brackets), all references are made parenthetically, keyed by author's last name to a comprehensive bibliography concluding the book. The bibliography is clear, complete, up-to-date, and accurate, although from a teaching standpoint one might have wished primary sources listed separately from secondary sources. That's a small complaint, however, and doesn't detract from the immense usefulness of the bibliography. Larrington makes each referent clear and findable. Her model of scholarly activity can itself serve a useful purpose in the classroom, especially at the introductory level where correct and appropriate citation and level of scholarly inquiry may be important pedagogical issues.

The fourteen black-and-white illustrations fit their topics well, and deliver a cross-section of images from well-known manuscripts, including the Bibliothèque Nationale MS 12420, of Boccaccio's *De Mulieribus Claribus*, as well as a tapestry image and the reproduction of a wax seal. No doubt the decision to reproduce images solely in black-and-white, with the exception of the book's cover, has kept the volume's price in the affordable range, another of its strengths.

Accessibility is key to the book's success as a classroom text for both student and teacher. Larrington's collection can help us walk the line, so productive in our teaching and learning, between familiarity with medieval mentalities and the ever-present "otherness" of the Middle Ages. Larrington understands this aspect of our profession and recognizes her book's role in helping us find that middle zone of productive learning:

Although the attempt to recuperate the "real medieval woman" . . . must inevitably be a hopeless enterprise, yet through the writings by, for, and about medieval women which this book has presented, we may have illuminated some sense of our own, and their, historical contingency, their sameness and their Otherness, the forces which shaped their lives and identities, and the continuities and disjunctions between then and now. (231)

It is clear to me that Larrington's text will repay my use of it, and I count it a welcome addition to my panoply of teaching texts.

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