



Evans, Ruth, and Lesley Johnson, eds. *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 257 pp.

Barratt, Alexandra, ed. *Women's Writing in Middle English*. London: Longman, 1992. 328 pp.

At a time when English Departments worry about declining enrollments in the earlier periods, these two volumes attest to the lively and enlivening influence that medieval feminist studies has had in the undergraduate classroom. Ruth Evans' and Lesley Johnson's *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect*, a volume "designed with the student reader in mind," valuably brings together essays that are now classics in the field with more recent essays to demonstrate the variety of perspectives that make up medieval feminist studies. Alexandra Barratt's anthology, *Women's Writing in Middle English*, offers a productive (and occasionally unsettling) counterpart to those perspectives by presenting a number of texts by medieval women, many never before published. Together, these two texts offer a rich dialogue on medieval women and English literary culture of the later Middle Ages.

In their *Introduction to Feminist Readings in Middle English*, Evans and Johnson define medieval feminist studies less as a unified set of beliefs or tenets than as a mode of questioning attentive to the shifting influences of language and history on the category of gender. They claim an influence not only from post-structuralism and recent historicisms but also from medieval feminism's own past, which they trace to Mary Carruthers's groundbreaking 1979 essay, "The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions," reproduced at the front of their collection. Taking as paradigmatic the Wife's famous question, "who peyntede the leon, tel me who?" (692), Carruthers caused a minor skirmish in the pages of *PMLA* with her insistence that "the fable of painting the lion teaches that the 'truth' of any picture often has more to do with the prejudices and predilections of the painter than with the 'reality' of the subject" (22). For Evans and Johnson, this observation cuts in two directions; while it offers a critical perspective by which feminist readers, both medieval and modern, might begin to unsettle the more troublingly misogynistic of medieval texts, it also suggests that those texts are also open to a wide range of potentially destabilizing readings. If representations reflect the biases of their makers, in other words, the interpretation of those representations is likewise shaped by the experiences, tastes, and predilections of their readers, many of whom we can now confidently

assume to have been female. How, ask the editors and authors of this volume, might women have read medieval texts and culture differently?

Teasing out this difference is the task of several essays in the collection. Felicity Riddy's "Engendering Pity in *The Franklin's Tale*" begins by inviting us to imagine how Agnes Chaucer, the poet's mother, or Katherine Manning, his sister, could have read *The Franklin's Tale*. The invitation resituates the *Tale* from the frameworks of medieval classicism or scholastic discourses in which it has been commonly read to the genres that garnered a large female readership, such as those represented in the Auchinleck manuscript, which center on questions of "nourture," gentle upbringing. Such a reorientation illuminates the tale's concern with the making of the "gentil" man, which Riddy reveals to be a highly gendered pursuit. Similarly considering the interpretive activities of readers, Lesley Johnson's analysis of *The Clerk's Tale* ("Reincarnations of Griselda: Contexts for *The Clerk's Tale*?") notes that the text's appeal to readers invites continuous unsettling, concluding that "the sheer variety of textual reincarnations of Griselda suggests that her story has some kind of surplus discursive value which resists total mastery and control" (211). Jocelyn Wogan-Brown's "The Virgin's Tale" productively opens up the possibility of a similar decentering of the apparently misogynistic hagiographical and devotional texts addressed to women religious by considering how women might have read and enjoyed these texts (an aim it shares with Ann Clark Bartlett's recent and important *Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature*).¹ Also considering the potential of female reading to decenter the authority of canonical male-authored texts, Susan Schibanoff's now-classic essay of 1986, "Taking the Gold Out of Egypt': The Art of Reading as a Woman," traces Christine de Pizan's strategic self-fashioning as a woman reader, premised on the conviction (expressed in the *Querelle de la Rose*) that "readers invariably recreate the texts they read in their own images" (235).

The remaining essays in the collection bear out the editors' assertion that feminist analysis is at its most productive when it attends to "the particular historical features of the period" (5), whether literary, social, or political. Carruthers' essay showed how productive this reading could be by breaking from prevailing Robertsonian practices to read the Wife of Bath not as an allegory of carnality but as a figure at the nexus of gender and changing economic practices of the late Middle Ages. Following this lead, Sheila Delany (in her 1983 essay "Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath and *The Book of Margery Kempe*" reprinted here) reads the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe together as examples of "the internalisation of mercantile capitalism" in their conflation of sexuality and commerce. Where the historical analyses of both Carruthers and Delany tend to discount the specific demands of the literary in the Chaucerian text, other essays in

the collection demonstrate, in the editors' words, "the asymptotic relations between history and literary texts" (9). Ruth Evans's "Body Politics: Engendering Medieval Cycle Drama" takes women's absence from the cycle dramas as the starting point for an analysis of the dramas' construction of a male "social body." Turning to the medieval literary mode of allegory, Colette Murphy (in "Lady Holy Church and Meed the Maid: Re-Envisioning Female Personifications in *Piers Plowman*") considers how competing aristocratic and mercantile models of female worth inform the personifications of "Lady Holy Church" and "Meed the Maid."

In all, the essays in this volume offer a valuable and varied analysis of women as readers of medieval literature or as potent symbolic presences within it. While offering essays on by-now canonical figures such as Christine de Pizan and Margery Kempe, the volume's focus is primarily on women as respondents to man-made culture. "What might the (medieval) world look like if women made it too?" (17), the editors ask, echoing the Wife of Bath's famous question about what the literary field would look like "if wommen hadde written stories" (693).² Yet medieval women did write stories, as Chaucer himself knew and we have come to appreciate. Indeed, a neglected note in the *Riverside Chaucer* suggests that the source of the Wife's own reference to "painting lions," that paradigmatic lamentation of women's exclusion from writing, is Marie de France.³ Without diminishing the important real and emblematic roles that medieval women played as readers, it is also important to recognize that they were also writers, as a generation of new anthologies and studies has established. And, as this new work further establishes, medieval literary culture looks quite different if we take that writing into account.

One of the richest of those new anthologies is Alexandra Barratt's *Women's Writing in Middle English*, which offers a wide selection of both well-known and little-known texts, together with a thoughtful editorial apparatus and a useful introduction. Altogether, it makes an invaluable resource for undergraduate courses on medieval women in Middle English. In Barratt's cautious description, the anthology offers a "history" of women's writing in Middle English, rather than a "tradition," avoiding the attempts at generic or thematic unity that other anthologies (most notably *The Norton Anthology of Writing By Women*) have tried to offer. Instead, Barratt's selections demonstrate the richness and variety of medieval women's writing, from the practical (the Middle English "Trotula" text, *The Knowing of Woman's Kind in Childing*, and *The Book of Hunting*, believed to be by one "Juliana Berners") to the devotional (ranging from the well-known Middle English texts of Julian of Norwich and Bridget of Sweden to the never-before-published meditations of Dame Eleanor Hull and *Revelations of Saint Elizabeth*) to the lyric (represented by a wide assortment of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century poems). The selections here also demonstrate the permeability between these genres and

modes, as *The Book of Hunting* expresses its prosaic subject matter in courtly verse, while the Trotula text and the mystic texts both make use of the unspeakability topos for describing the mysteries of the divine in the latter, and the mysteries of the female body in the former. As Barratt herself freely admits, the category of female authorship itself is highly unstable in the Middle Ages, a point registered not only in the uncertainty of some ascriptions (such as Trotula and Juliana Berners or anonymous texts such as the Findern lyrics and *The Assembly of Ladies*, here excerpted) but also in the instability of gender as a category within the texts themselves: for example, in a short lyric, we are told in Barratt's note, "feminine pronouns have been written between the lines in appropriate places so that the poem can be adapted to a male speaker and the gender roles reversed" (287).

The texts included here could provide useful and productive counterparts to the perspectives offered in *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature*. Carruthers's and Delany's analyses of the late-medieval commodification of love and marriage could gain further nuance if read alongside Margery Brews Paston's "Valentine" letter to her intended, John Paston, in which financial negotiations over dowry arrangements are interlaced with lyric expressions of love; by the same count, Margaret Paston's expression of anger at her daughter Margery's elopement in her own letter provides chilling evidence for Wogan-Browne's observations about the brutal "norms of Christian patriarchal control and punishment of daughters" (174). Against Long's reading of Margery Kempe's "hysteria" deriving from childbirth and sexual phobias we might read Eleanor Hull's surprising prayers in praise of the virgin's womb or the unexpectedly lyrical description of female anatomy in the Trotula text.

By representing the variety of genres and registers in which medieval women wrote, Barratt's anthology offers the outlines of a productive response to Evans' and Johnson's question, "What might the (medieval) world look like if women made it too?" If writers like Margaret Paston demonstrate that women did make the medieval world, they also show that women's writing is not always the feminist writing that we might wish. But *Women's Writing in Middle English* and the texts it presents challenge medieval feminist studies to take into account the Margaret Pastons as well as the Margery Kempes.

Jennifer Summit
Stanford University

¹ Ann Clark Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995).

² *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987).

³ *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 871.