

BOOK REVIEWS

Bartlett, Anne Clark, *Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1995, xii + 212 pp. ISBN 0-8014-3-38-0.

Devotional reading forms a large part of the literary culture of medieval and early modern women and much work has been done in recent decades in tracing and understanding this aspect of women's history. Bartlett aims to examine devotional texts circulating in England between 1350 and 1550 for what they may have offered to female readers. Her argument is that devotional reading operates within a pervasively misogynistic framework, but offers women alternatives through the complexities of reading itself (as argued by Fetterley and Butler)¹ and through interplay with other discourses. Three principal "counter-discourses" are identified: those of "courtesy" (as in narrative romance, lyric, and conduct books), "familiarity" (the use and development of the conventions of monastic *amicitia* in women's spiritual *familiae*), and psycho-physiological discourses of nuptiality and passion. The central chapters explore these counter-discourses: Chapter Three deals with secular romance and related texts of social formation; Chapter Four argues that spiritual *amicitia* might provide models as well as prohibitions; and Chapter Five that the graphic representation of female desire in devotional texts could have been supported and authorized by Galenic medicine (via Avicenna and Gaddesden, and especially by the role of specular pleasures in sexual arousal in Avicenna and Albertus Magnus). The afterword focuses on two texts, an exemplum and the very interesting treatise, *Book to a Mother*, in order to reiterate that "the feminine can never be totally contained and erased in a devotional text" (146). In recognition that without some specific location and context, the possibilities claimed for particular discourses must remain speculative, the central argument is framed by a first chapter surveying women's reading and book ownership, and a second comparing Aelred's twelfth-century *De institutione inclusarum* with its later Middle English versions in order to argue for a masculinizing of women in the Latin text versus a feminizing in the vernacular text. An Appendix on extant books owned by medieval English nuns and convents completes the historical framing of the book.

Working with the notion of discourse rather than text opens up devotional literature's ability to negotiate and interrogate sexual, domestic, and socio-economic constructions of women in the formation of spiritual identities and aspirations. The book is thus positioned to contribute useful discussions of the value of devotional reading for medieval women readers and to add to the body of scholarship on this late medieval prose. In several places, most notably in the

third chapter on romance as a constitutive, counter-discourse of devotion, the book offers spirited argument suggesting that devotional prose was neither inert nor irrelevant to the politics of spiritual and social formation for women. In this chapter, the socio-economic and affective implications of such tropes as Christ the Lover-Knight and the decorum and environments of courtly heroines are discussed with reference to romance, lyric, and courtesy books, and the potentially affirmative variant readings their discourses might offer. There are welcome possibilities here for nuancing the modern discussion of medieval misogynies and for resisting simplifying accounts of medieval texts.

There are some problems with the relation of these possibilities to the readers for whom they are claimed to have been available. In the first chapter's survey, women's literacy is seen via an unproblematized linear evolutionary model without consideration of changing political and social factors affecting female readers during the period in question. This chapter argues that the existence of greater numbers of Middle English devotional texts in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries promotes feminizing textual strategies, but it does not allow for the possibility that some women's reading may have become *more* restricted and that the texts they read may have attempted *more* coercive strategies in the fifteenth century than the fourteenth century, as a result of the church's stances towards the orthodoxy of lay readers. Nor does it consider the crucial roles of thirteenth-century women readers, who may provide a smaller audience, but deserve at least a footnote in an argument claiming to identify the "first generation" of English female readers (7).²

In the central chapters, evidence is also sometimes handled in a cavalier or reductively simple way: a reader of the discussion of courtly discourse in devotional texts who was unfamiliar with the texts in question would have no way of knowing, for instance, that a thirteenth-century text is being quoted alongside a sixteenth-century lyric (68-9), when the Corpus manuscript text of *Ancrene Wisse* is cited and the lyric is identified only by its number in an undergraduate anthology. (Why not use the late fifteenth-century re-writing of *Ancrene Wisse*, printed by de Worde in the *Tretyse of Love*? Especially since it cannot be assumed that a late medieval audience would find the early thirteenth-century West Midlands language of the earlier version transparent).

Consideration of the evidence for language, transmission, and reception should quite properly be kept to the footnotes of the discussion, but some awareness of such evidence needs to inform the argument. (The policy, presumably the publisher's, of using only translations without giving their originals, even if only in the footnotes, does not help and is especially regrettable given the relative accessibility of Middle English prose and the importance of soliciting further detailed literary and historical scholarship on the languages of women's reading and writing in medieval Britain.

Again, unwary readers of Chapter Four on discourses of spiritual friendship may well form the impression that the lives of earlier British holy women (*pace* Eve and Goscelin, *pace* Christina of Markyate and abbot Geoffrey) represented them as without male supporters, since it is claimed that later texts “openly reject misogynistic fears of friendship between women and men, both by depicting mixed-sex spiritual friendships and by revising their earlier medieval sources to omit warnings against such mixed-sex relationships” (107). The hagiographic lives of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 114 are cited to prove this: Christina Mirabilis “lives with a circle of male supporters” and Marie d’Oignies “maintains close ties with several ‘special friends’ from her childhood” (107). But the representation of mixed-sex spiritual friendships does not *of itself* guarantee the absence of misogyny in the construction of these relationships. This study does not compare these fifteenth-century Middle English lives with either their thirteenth-century Latin sources (in insular circulation from the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries) or with earlier insular holy women’s lives, comparisons that might have provided evidence to support an argument for differences. Nor is any account taken of Deery Kurtz’s study of these lives in which she argues for the effects of the fifteenth-century orthodox backlash as circumscribing a *narrower* behavioral range for religious women.³ Readers are left with no way of evaluating the strength of the argument unless they have already made these comparisons or are prepared to undertake the work of making them. Similarly, while medical texts *could* perhaps provide a “powerful and unexpected validation of the female body and its capacity for piety” (139), hard questions must be asked about the dissemination of medical texts and the generic permeability of their discourse within the sub-cultures of vernacular and female reading. For *whom* might such a possible validation have possibly operated, and in which ways and in which contexts?

The Appendix listing extant books owned by medieval English nuns and convents is drawn, with full acknowledgment, from Ker and Watson, to whose listings it adds some of the texts contained in manuscripts owned by nuns. Information built up on the basis of Ker’s work by paleographers, art historians, and other scholars (in for example the volumes of the crucial *Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles* published during the 1980’s and currently continuing) since the second edition of Ker’s *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain* was first published in 1964 is not exploited.⁴ A full survey of manuscripts provenanced to female houses and their contents has now been published by David N. Bell in his *What Nuns Read: Books and Libraries in Medieval English Nunneries* Cistercian Studies Series 158 (Kalamazoo, Michigan and Spencer, Mass.: Cistercian Publications, 1995): it includes discussion of the nature and implications of the manuscript evidence.

Bartlett's study is an enterprising and lively book in many ways, and its breezy and energetic style will engage readers with an important body of texts which still remain closed books to many students and teachers interested in the theory and history of women's reading and writing. I welcome the increased attention it will solicit for an area where there is much to be explored, and many of its ideas deserve further discussion. But some of the work that should have been done in this book will also be required: too much of the argument fails to carry conviction or does not advance beyond speculation, and too much of the documentation is inadequate and sometimes misleading. The minor corrections needed are excessive in number: the misquotation of manuscript numbers would, for instance cost anyone relying on the book a lot of lost time, and it is a pity that the reader is not directed to more recent information on the texts and manuscripts of women's late medieval literary culture in Britain. Doubtless pressure for fast publication from theses is the villain of the piece, but it is most regrettable that a book which in scope and enterprise could have constituted a major contribution to the history of women's reading in late medieval England should fall victim to it.

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¹ Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, 1978); Judith P. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

² See Bella Millett, "Women in No Man's Land: English Recluses and the Development of Vernacular Literature in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries," in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 86-103.

³ Patricia Deery Kurtz, "Mary of Oignies, Christine the Marvelous, and Medieval Heresy," *Mystics Quarterly* 14 (1988), 186-96.

⁴ Neil R. Ker, *Medieval Manuscripts of Great Britain* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1941; 2nd ed., 1964); Andrew G. Watson, *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain: Supplement to the Second Edition* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1987). See further a *A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles*. Volume IV, *Early Gothic Manuscripts, II, 1250-1285*, by N. J. Morgan (London: Harvey Millar, 1988); Volume V, *Gothic Manuscripts, 1285-1385*, 2 vols., by Lucy F. Sandler (London: Harvey Millar and Oxford University Press, 1986); Volume VI, *Later Gothic Manuscripts*, by Kathleen L. Scott (London: Harvey Millar and Oxford University Press, forthcoming).



Constable, Giles, *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Pp. 423. 30 illustr.

As the title of this book suggests, Giles Constable's *Three Studies* is not a volume unified by one systematic thesis but rather three separately developed topics: medieval interpretations of Mary and Martha, the ideal of the imitation of Christ,