

recognized by medieval audiences assumes a reader (listener?) extremely knowledgeable about the Arthurian tradition and attentive to subtle nuances and repetitions in the text, and an explicit, detailed description of the medieval audience that Guerin has in mind would have been helpful.

Guerin's thesis is based on intuitive, detailed, and sometimes playful readings of medieval romances and these readings are clearly presented and supported with detailed textual analyses. While some readers might wish for a more theoretical or socio-historical explanation of the importance of incest as a site for exploring notions of individual agency and tragedy in Arthurian romance, or for a consideration of the implicitly gender-specific definitions of agency and tragedy, I suspect that most readers will find that *The Fall of Kings and Princes* presents a provocative view of medieval reading practices and the formation of textual traditions.

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Lewis, Gertrud Jaron, *By Women, For Women, About Women: The Sister-Books of Fourteenth Century Germany*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1996. 329 pp, illustr., bibl., index, 2 microfiches, ISBN: 0-88844-125-8.

This thorough and highly accessible introduction to the genre of the *Schwesternbücher* (Sister Books) is the first systematic book-length study of the fourteenth-century woman-authored spiritual literature produced in nine German Dominican monasteries, located in Adelhausen, Diessenhofen, Engeltal, Gotteszell, Kirchberg, Oetenbach, Töss, Unterlinden, and Weiler. The *Schwesternbücher* contain foundational legends and biographical accounts of nuns noteworthy for their piety, composed *post mortem* in their respective communities by one or more nuns. The biographies served explicitly to goad the other sisters on, to create religious mood and motivation. "For the eternal praise of our Lord Jesus Christ and for the great betterment of all those who read this or hear it read, I will write a little" (Elisabeth von Kirchberg, quoted in Jaron Lewis, 39).

Until quite recently, most scholars discredited these texts as, for example, "completely uncritical, womanly, and naively fantastic" (Wilhelm Oehl, quoted in Jaron Lewis, 71), as the work of "pious and simple-minded nuns, . . . strong in feeling" (Josef Quint, quoted in Jaron Lewis, 72), characterized by a "genuinely female need for loquaciousness" (Hermann Tüchle, quoted in Jaron Lewis, 72). It is Gertrud Jaron Lewis' outstanding contribution to dismantle this traditional reading from the bottom up. In the first two chapters, Jaron Lewis carefully

reconstructs the historical context, the manuscript traditions, and issues of authorship and genre for each of the nine monastic settings. She concludes that the composers of the *Schwesternbücher* established a genre *sui generis*. What makes the texts so remarkable is that they constitute a relationship of authors and audience that is exclusively female. As the title so aptly puts it, they have been written by women about women for women, thus short-circuiting at least to some degree patriarchal lineages, male-identified textual pedigree, and possible censorship. The mode for such brave and thoroughly woman-identified communal self-promotion ("Saints 'R' Us" . . .) on the way to heaven is the stuff of legend and hagiography, used to such an extent that five hundred years later, it elicited the reproach of simple-mindedness and utter redundancy. Although Jaron Lewis does not mention it, the female (and numerically larger) wing of the late medieval *Devotio Moderna* movement created a similar tradition for its own community, yet produced also theological and devotional tracts, letters, and autobiographies.¹ A comparison of the two groups could shed more light on the formation of themes, styles, ideological function and choice of genre.

The chapters following the contextualization of the Sister Books cover the *Rezeptionsgeschichte* (reception history) of the manuscripts from the fifteenth to the twentieth century; miracles, visions, and charisms; theological and spiritual concepts; the question of the *cura monialium* (for the most part resolved amicably between the friars and the nuns, with only mild tinges of anti-clericalism and up-front rebellion on the side of the nuns); accounts of the nuns' interactions with the outside world, and a final chapter on education. The book ends with a full translation of a charming Diessenhofen hymn to the Holy Spirit that equals Julian of Norwich's unflinching theology of a Divine that can exclaim: "I am he, the endless fulfilling of all true desires" (*Showings*, Long Text, Fiftieth Chapter). And who can resist the Töss author's comparison of cloistered life with secular life? "[Here] you have everything without any worry: You have good company—they do not; you always have good learning and teaching—they do not; nobody lays snares for you—they do not have this. They fight with each other and one wants to get ahead of the other—you have your bodily needs taken care of without any worry. Everything is being prepared for you—they do not have this. You have God, if you want to—they do not: he is quite unknown to them, for one induces another one to sin" (215).

Jaron Lewis's careful and detailed reading of the manuscripts, unfailingly sympathetic to their authors and palpably enthusiastic, reveals subtly and finely wrought variations within the larger, clumsier framework of hagiographical stereotype; to develop an eye and an ear for such nuance and richness might only be possible after a thorough exposure to feminist questions. The challenge posed by her reading reminds me of the hard-won battle in art criticism to demolish the boundaries and definitions of "fine art" (masculine, public,

long-lasting, unique, etc.) and “crafts” (feminine, domestic, short-lived, unoriginal, etc). Jaron Lewis makes a case for elevating the long despised home-spun tapestries of female, local sanctification of fellow female monastic travellers to the blue-blooded level of canonical male-authored religious texts, or to even abandon any hierarchically organized arguments for literary and theological worthiness altogether.

Jaron Lewis offers both an exhausting survey of major themes in the *Schwesternbücher*, ranging from the traditionally theological to the counter-cultural spiritual (such as nuns preaching to fellow nuns), and also argues for a particular historical manifestation of *écriture féminine* that dislocates ahistorical, androcentric categories of literary analysis. And yet her feminist stance is more implicit than explicit in her approach to her data; it is a matter of fundamental attitude toward the material, trying to recapitulate the nuns’ world sympathetically and minimizing areas of political conflict both inside and outside of the monastery. The reader will search in vain for theoretical jargon or meta-analyses of any kind, including issues of female victimization and submission. Only in passing, for example, does Jaron Lewis suggest that “the authors’ recourse to miracles is meant to protect them against questions raised by the ecclesiastical authorities” (275). The nuns are portrayed as they were depicted in the biographies, as agents of their lives and profession, as “intelligent, well-educated, dedicated to their monastic ideal, and are shown living a life of integrity and of a remarkable inner independence” (Epilogue, 285). *By Women for Women about Women* is a magisterial and important study; now that the Dominican nuns’ rehabilitation has been undertaken so splendidly, it might perhaps be exactly the book’s lack of a hermeneutics of suspicion that will stimulate fresh research and render it useful to other scholars in the long run.

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¹ Gerhard Rehm, *Die Schwestern vom gemeinsamen Leben im nordwestlichen Deutschland* (Berlin, 1985).



Margherita, Gayle, *The Romance of Origins: Language and Sexual Difference in Middle English Literature*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994.

Margherita’s book is a bold and passionate contribution to medieval studies. Its agenda is massive: it asks us in the largest sense possible to rethink how we know (or how we think that we know) the *mat[t]er* (a favorite Margheritan pun) which we study. Although the title specifically calls attention to “language and