

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



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

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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

sexual difference," Margherita shows that all sorts of considerations—aesthetics, politics, ethics, theology, empire, criticism—are implicated in these categories. Most important for Margherita is the vexed relationship between historical analysis (which in her view is neither historical nor useful as an intervention into present-day concerns) and feminist psychoanalysis (which has in the past come under attack for being itself ahistorical and irrelevant for medieval studies). What this book promotes is a sort of joint effort: a critical practice that "interrogate[s] the conditions of historical meaning in terms that efface neither the specificity of the past nor the urgent political and philosophical concerns of the present" (x). The key for such a practice is the interrogation of *origins*. Some of the types of origins considered here are the constitution of the subject through the Oedipal (and particularly the pre-Oedipal) drama, the operation of (oppressive) binary oppositions, the fetishization and erasure of the feminine, and sometimes, the return of the repressed.

Chapter One, "Margery Kempe and the Pathology of Writing," supplies a nifty rebuttal to earlier critics of Kempe (theologians-cum-armchair-psychologists) who "diagnose" Kempe as hysteric. Margherita explores the complexity of that term in a reading of Freud's Dora. The thesis of the chapter sets up the consistent position of the book, that "the seductive threat of the maternal is a metaphor for the instability of language itself, its pathological tendency to slide back into the materiality from which it derives, and then finally into silence" (27). But in one of the chapter's most provocative moments, Margherita also suggests that Kempe's struggle to speak legitimately in some ways prefigures the position of feminist theory, more specifically of medievalist feminists today (41), who may find themselves both on the margins of mainstream academic discourse and outside philosophical traditions predicated on binary logic. I have a bit of trouble with this line of reasoning and with some of the evidence that Margherita musters to shore it up, but I like the argument's conclusion: that Kempe comes to terms with her marginality by "privileging the sensual over the spiritual, reacting against a paternal discourse that makes the flesh the price of the word" (30), by embracing the paradoxes and contradictions of *her* origins.

Chapter Two, "Body and Metaphor in the Middle English *Juliana*," explores the gruesome torture of the saint, and builds on Chapter One by concluding that this drama "represents the sacrifice of the feminine or feminized body that enables the transcendence of logos, or in Lacanian terms, of the paternal metaphor" (43). Margherita also notes *Juliana's* political agendas, arguing convincingly that the text celebrates the essential Englishness of the saint, and therefore creates a narrative link between faith, orthodoxy, the miraculous, and the English language (43).

Chapter Three, "Woman and Riot in the Harley Lyrics," examines the further implications of feminine sacrifice, reading the courtly discourse as a "repress[ion of] the primal violence of tropological substitution, a violence in which the feminine body is *obliterated* ('written out') in a poetic struggle for dialectical resolution or transcendence . . ." (62). This obliteration occurs in a number of ways: through the representation of a link between sexual excess, linguistic instability, and feminine riot; through a sleight of hand generated by scopophilic representation (metaphor) followed by a quick switch to metonymy; and through a homosocial poetics that condemns and renounces the feminine.

Chapter Four, "Originary Fantasies and Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*," invites readers to consider what Margherita calls "more canonical texts," yet to continue to read them "extra-canonically," attending to the discursive "pathologies" revealed through a feminist-psychoanalytic lens. Here, Margherita speculates on the relationship between such pathologies, the poetry in question, and the critical reception of the Chaucerian text, arguing that the anxieties displayed in the poem are reflected in the poem's interpretive history. Citing examples, she concludes that "The critical insistence on mirroring unities, on recuperating the poem's 'excesses,' partakes of the fantasy of coherence that the *Duchess* both creates and subverts. For both the poem and its critics, femininity—as excess or 'nature'—is the psychic danger that undermines this fantasy" (88). The examination that follows explores the position of Chaucer as the Father of a patrilineal tradition of English poetry and the relation of the male critic to that tradition. But in a surprising turn, Margherita argues that—through the return of the repressed—the poem represents an overarching sense of lack and "a deviant identification with feminine desire" (88).

Chapter Five, "Historicity, Femininity, and Chaucer's *Troilus*," begins with a sharp critique of current new historicist practices, and then analogizes these to the *Troilus*. Like new historicism (here represented largely by the work of Lee Patterson), Margherita takes the Chaucerian poem to be an exercise in melancholia, the simultaneous denial of loss, and the displacement of the status of history onto the slippery ground of sexual politics (107), in which, that is, "sexual difference is made to compensate fetishistically for historical difference" (111).

Chapter Six, "Father Aeneas or Morgan the Goddess," compares ideologies of nationalism, epic, and romance, in order to show how each requires "the erasure or abjection of maternal or feminine origins" (129). To do this, Margherita explores the implications of the Virgilian frame of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. She argues that the frame pits Juno's refusal to forget the transgressions of Aeneas against the nationalistic memory (and aspirations) of the poet and the Trojan voyagers. Margherita compares this "neutralization of the *bellatrix*—or

perhaps more accurately *bellatrices*" (135) with Gawain's projection of his own weakness (lack) onto Morgan le Fay, who, as Margherita argues, represents "the maternal origin which patriarchal narratives, particularly epics, consistently reject" (141).

The Afterword returns explicitly to the observations on current historicist practices which introduce the book and which pepper the text's previous chapters. And here I think that *The Romance of Origins* makes most obvious its greatest strengths and problems. My major quarrel with this work is that its depiction of the current historicism sets up what appear to me to be straw targets. Many recent new historicist explorations in medieval studies draw on anti-foundationalist assumptions deriving from Nietzsche, Foucault, Bakhtin, Deleuze, Bourdieu, and others. My take on this book is that it seeks to intervene in debates that are largely already settled. (I may be wrong about this, though.) On the other hand, the psychoanalytic readings Margherita constructs are deft, imaginative, and inspiring. Once the book moved on from its observations about current historicism, it was a riveting read. Perhaps what saves *The Romance of Origins* from becoming preachy is its wit. After all, Margherita admits, at the end of her discussion of *Gawain*, "I too have an axe grind" (151).

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McCash, June Hall, ed. *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996.

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In response to Rita Lejeune's 1976 appeal for a single book on the topic of women's patronage, this volume, billed as "the first to deal exclusively with the question" (ix), represents an important contribution to the growing corpus of studies of female self-empowerment in the Middle Ages. Twelve wide-ranging essays examine various forms of patronage from the early Byzantine empire to late medieval Burgundy, with emphasis placed both on individual figures, such as Empress Theodora, Matilda of Scotland, Elizabeth de Burgh, and Isabel of Portugal, and on particular groups or families of patrons. While most benefactors studied here are associated with the aristocracy (cf. the articles by McClanan, Caviness, Huneycutt, Parsons, Shadis, Jambeck, Underhill, and Willard), the participation of religious, intellectual, and illiterate women in the artistic process likewise receives attention (cf. Ferrante, Caviness, Hanna). The conventional definition of patronage as the support, through a variety of means,