

reversals and emphasis on female *engin*, romances such as *Partonopeu de Blois* seem freer of the “monolithic phallogocentrism” that Burns attributes to Old French literature in general. At the very best, they may suggest that romance is not necessarily such a closed form when it comes to the question of women and power. Third, Burns’ concern with voice leads her to touch on the question of performance and what I would call female vocality. If we were to imagine the texts more fully as performance pieces, how could her readings be extended?

Given its polemical thrust and the brilliant interpretations it offers of major texts and genres, this book will have a powerful impact on medieval French studies. Anyone writing on Eve, Enide, Iseut, or for that matter, on gender and subjectivity in Old French literature and the female literary voice in general will have to come to terms with *Bodytalk*. Feminists working in other literatures and periods can profitably apply her approach to female subjectivity to other literary canons, and “bodytalk” will no doubt enter the critical idiom alongside “homosexual desire” and “gender trouble.” Not bad for a medievalist.

Nancy A. Jones, Cambridge, Mass.

Elliott, Dyan. *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock*. Princeton: University Press, 1993. Pp. xv + 375.

In *Spiritual Marriage*, Dyan Elliott traces the uneven but highly significant development of the practice of intramarital chastity from the early Christian era to the sixteenth century. From her evidence of more than eighty cases of “chaste marriage” drawn from chronicles and hagiographical sources, Elliott distinguishes two models—spouses who did not consummate their marriages and subsequently vowed to preserve their virginity, and couples who vowed to live chastely after a period of normal conjugal relations (the transitional model). As Elliott demonstrates, women were usually the instigators of both arrangements and the differing fates of these two models reveal highly significant changes in women’s roles in the later Middle Ages.

Elliott begins her study by considering the earliest instances of chaste marriage in Gnostic, Encratite, and orthodox ascetic texts. She argues, quite convincingly, that the practice of spiritual marriage provoked the Church Fathers to reconsider the basis of Christian matrimony. Augustine’s reconsideration, as on so many issues, profoundly altered the Christian tradition in the West: by developing a theory of marriage not defined by sexual relations, he originated the emphasis on consent as the basis for a valid marriage and created an accommodation for spiritual marriage, “a protected, but uncomfortable, middle ground between celibacy and marriage in Christian practice” (50).

The author goes on to demonstrate how this middle ground could be used in very different ways. On the one hand, it allowed some women to seek greater autonomy and it yielded some of the most positive portrayals of marital concord produced in the Middle Ages. On the other, however, it was used to make women expendable by monarchs trying to repudiate wives and by clerics attempting to control charismatic chastity. The latter movement in the tenth and eleventh centuries both interrupted and dramatically changed the development of spiritual marriage. As the reformers during the Gregorian era defined celibacy as the quality that distinguished the clergy from the laity, new boundaries were

drawn in lay spirituality. While the clergy were using chastity to define and secure their ascendancy, spiritual marriage all but disappeared from the historical record. When it reappeared in the thirteenth century, it offered much less to women.

New theological emphasis on the “conjugal debt” and canonistic undermining of female vows combined in the High Middle Ages to constrain women’s spiritual autonomy. One result was that the virgin-wife model of spiritual marriage, which offered women the greatest freedom, was only rarely accorded the official sanction of canonization. Another was the marked interiority and penitential character of late medieval female sanctity. Elliott shows how these qualities transformed the transitional model of spiritual marriage. Wifely submission to the husband, especially in rendering the marital debt, came to be equated with penitential submission to God’s will. The fulfillment of a desire to live chastely could only be achieved in these late medieval *vitae* after years of pious submission to male demands. Elliott also reveals a link between mystical ecstasies and this penitential sexuality: “The women who enjoyed a mature mystical relationship during their marriage are precisely those whose aversion to the [conjugal] debt was greatest...” (237).

Any scholar working on late medieval spirituality, particularly those attracted to Caroline Walker Bynum’s *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*, will have to reckon with Elliott’s compelling, if less optimistic, analysis. So too, those studying marriage in the Middle Ages and the history of the Gregorian Reform cannot afford to ignore this work. Elliott’s assessment of the significance of demands for clerical celibacy is especially insightful, although she tends to adopt the “top-down” view of her clerical sources. Pressure for priestly continence came as much from the laity as from clerical reformers: what do we make of the laity’s participation in the construction of clerical ascendancy through celibacy? Although Elliott’s analysis in this section treats the laity as passive or merely responsive to clerically-initiated changes, her framing of the significance of the Reform raises many tantalizing questions.

The strengths of this book are numerous. First, the truncated summary of it above does not do justice to Elliott’s richly nuanced narrative. The author embraces, rather than represses or reduces, the complexity of her evidence and in doing so reveals several stunning paradoxes. The most salutary is her repeated demonstration of how a practice and ideal dominated by women could also be used against them. Another strength of this study is the author’s judicious and insightful use of hagiographical materials: the motives of the authors, the historical realities that resonated in their texts, and the uses of these texts are all weighed in Elliott’s analysis of the *vitae* and canonization processes. Finally, throughout the book Elliott precisely locates this lay practice in relation to theological, canonistic, and ecclesiological discourses.

In sum, this is an excellent book. In it, Elliott combines the strengths of traditional ecclesiastical history—a mastery of theological, canonistic, and hagiographical sources—with the best aspects of feminist criticism. This work deserves not only a wide readership, but also emulation.

Maureen C. Miller, Hamilton College

