

for point. Her remarks hang on paraphrase. In a book that includes so much meticulous and salient commentary on narratives such as the *Roman de Renart*, there is no reason why Gravdal could not devote the same close attention to all her material. It is not that there is insufficient evidence for seeing the red of rape, as some curmudgeonly critics might have claimed a generation ago, but that the wealth of evidence is given short shrift.

This pattern of rushing through her most promising sources brings me to my second question, of a more theoretical nature. By studying representations of rape from legal texts together with those from lyric and romance, Gravdal dispenses with the aesthetic categories of literary and non-literary. True to her post-structuralist critical self, she investigates “the ways figures of discourse ‘move’” (140). Nevertheless, her argument continues to be defined by the very categories she explicitly rejects. Her contention that legal accounts of women’s rape are shaped by literary models keeps us firmly within the parameters of the oppositions: literary vs. documentary, fictive vs. real. To point out that literary representations of rape are no less “real” than events, or that documentary renditions of rape are shaped by fictive elements does not eliminate the oppositions. It merely turns them around.

One way out of these categories might involve studying the *social effects* of texts—how a spectrum of works about rape bears upon its various publics. Feminist critics like Gravdal could focus more on the influences that textual representation exert on women and men to act in a certain manner. What purchase do figures of rape have on their actions? Admittedly this is a vast and vexed inquiry, one that calls up the relation between texts and human behavior. Yet Gravdal hints at it herself. Referring frequently to the “consequences” of representing rape, she begins to reckon with the question. By recognizing the didactic potential of all texts, she suggests the need to explore how precisely such potential is realized. If we follow such a lead, Gravdal’s work, I believe, will help us to advance the debate over the connections between the “sexy” depictions of women and the abuse they endure, between textual models and their social impact.

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Meale, Carol M., ed. *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993. Pp. 223.

The rather lackluster title of this collection of essays belies its contents, which offer a challenging and vital contribution to medieval feminist studies. Focusing broadly on “women and literature in Britain,” the British contributors to this volume advance new perspectives on female literacy, patronage, book circulation and writing practices in the Middle Ages. In so doing, many of them also offer a productively unsettling view of literary study more generally and the terms in which it has been conventionally figured.

For example, Julia Boffey’s essay on “Women Authors and Women’s Literacy in Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-century England” is less interested in locating female counterparts to the male author figure than in examining “the different senses in which ‘writing women’ might have existed in the period.” The questions that guide Boffey’s analysis suggest the extent to which examining the “writing woman” brings together

textual studies and feminist studies in a way that will leave neither unchanged by the encounter:

What kinds and standards of literacy did medieval women possess? By what methods were the compositions of women “authors” recorded and disseminated, in an age when scribal skills were not automatically concomitant with authorial ones? How is it possible to locate women’s writing in a period characterised by anonymity? Only by uncovering exactly what constituted women’s writing can we begin to answer the most pressing questions of feminist criticism: “what does writing as a woman mean, and to what extent does it involve a new theory and a new practice?” (159)

To modify Mary Jacobus’ question (which Boffey cites), it would appear that the project of writing *about* writing women requires no less than “a new theory and a new practice” of its own, even as it unsettles the theories and practices that have traditionally structured the work of literary history. Examining manuscript evidence for medieval women’s literary practice, including the Findern manuscript, Boffey’s analysis doesn’t recuperate women writers and readers so much as it throws both of these terms into question. This is not, however, to suggest that such an approach is any the less crucial to feminist literary history. Indeed, by mobilizing the tools of textual analysis to query the very terms of the project, Boffey’s analysis eschews the (albeit powerful) temptation to reify the “woman’s voice” and rather seeks to examine the status and construction of gender as a textual trace.

Boffey’s essay joins many in this collection in demonstrating how the study of women and books throws into focus a set of difficult questions underlying medieval studies more generally. In her essay “Women in No Man’s Land: English Recluses and the Development of Vernacular Literature in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries,” Bella Millett poses the crucial question, “How far is it possible to discuss the relationship of women and literature in a period which had no real equivalent to our own modern concept of literature?” (86). And in her essay on “Laywomen and Their Books in Late Medieval England,” Carol M. Meale, the collection’s editor, suggests further that “in an age when ‘reading’ could be a communal activity . . . the term ‘reader’ may need radical redefinition if we are to understand women’s use of books” (133).

This emphasis on the fluidity of medieval genres and the variable settings in which texts could be consumed finds cogent treatment in Jocelyn Wogan-Browne’s analysis of “Women and Anglo-Norman Hagiography in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries,” which takes up the point that textual meaning is “complex and to a significant extent negotiable between reader and text, rather than automatically fixed by the text” (64). Tracing the circulation and use of hagiographical texts enables Wogan-Browne not only to question the fixity of these texts’ meanings (for example, she questions the idea that narratives of female martyrdom are incommensurable with possibilities for female agency, or that male saints’ lives offer no point of identification for female readers), but also to complicate the oppositions frequently assumed to structure medieval society and to circumscribe women’s lives. Felicity Riddy pursues a similarly searching line of analysis into the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in her essay, “‘Women Talking About the Things of God’: a Late Medieval Sub-Culture.” Like Wogan-Browne, Riddy examines how the production and circulation of religious texts in the vernacular crossed

boundaries between women in religious and secular communities and between male and female readers and writers. While Wogan-Browne finds that female-authored saints' lives attracted secular female patrons and were read in both male and female religious houses, Riddy finds that "nuns and pious gentlewomen shared a literary culture" (111), and she cites the example of Richard Rolle and his female associates to support her argument that "in the relation between the male clerks and their women readers it must often have been difficult to tell who followed and who led" (107). In each of these essays, a focus on the medieval book offers insights on medieval women's lives and literary practices by challenging the boundaries assumed to divide men from women and women from one another.

Textual studies can reveal the extent to which female authorship has been constituted for us through modern editorial assumptions about gender. They can also lead to exciting new discoveries, such as Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan offers in her study of "Women and Their Poetry in Medieval Wales." Conceding that inquiry into Welsh women poets in the Middle Ages is complicated by the uncertainties of oral composition and transmission that conditioned their work, as well as by the uneven and sometimes antifeminist work of their modern critics and editors, Lloyd-Morgan sheds new light on the contexts in which women poets composed and shared their work. Training her focus on the example of Gwerful Mechain (fl. 1462-1500), the most prolific woman poet in Welsh of her time, and long after, Lloyd-Morgan's essay offers an example of a medieval woman poet whose name will perhaps be unfamiliar to many, while at the same time reflecting on the textual processes and politics to which female-authored texts have been and continue to be subject.

Given current interest in historicist approaches to literary texts, this collection offers perhaps its greatest contribution in making a case for the history of the book, which, as many essays show, presents a rich meeting-point between "literature" and "history," "text" and "context," and between women's status as consumers of texts and as producers of them. At a time when questions about medieval women have been notably absent from recent discussions about female authorship, female readers, and the uses of gender in constructions of literariness and canonicity, the contributors to *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500* might have engaged some of these debates more directly than they do here, and in so doing, made a case for the urgency of their topic within a larger critical context. Since the collection is instead addressed rather narrowly to medievalists within literary fields, it will perhaps be up to its readers to bring its most challenging arguments and findings to bear within a wider critical arena.

While rewarding readers with a nuanced perspective into the many ways in which medieval women interacted with literary culture and claimed textual practices for their own uses, *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500* takes the study of women and literature into a new level of complexity, by enabling us to complicate our understanding of what we mean by "literature," and indeed "women," in the Middle Ages.

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