

## BOOK REVIEWS

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*Virgin Lives and Holy Deaths: Two Exemplary Biographies for Anglo-Norman Women: The Life of St. Catherine; The Life of St. Lawrence.* Trans. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne and Glyn S. Burgess. London: Everyman, 1996. U.S.A.: \$6.50.

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This small and mercifully inexpensive volume makes available two important twelfth-century saints' lives, translated into readable English from Anglo-Norman, the French spoken in England after the Norman conquest. The appearance of the life of St. Catherine of Alexandria in particular breaks new ground, for the text offered here, a translation of the earliest (ca. 1175–1200) of eight rhymed biographies of Catherine in French, was originally written in Anglo-Norman by the nun Clemence of Barking and thus represents a rare find: a work written in the vernacular by a woman about another woman (one other leaps to mind, Christine de Pizan's *Dittié de Jehanne d'Arc*, which she wrote to celebrate Joan's entrance into Paris). Since Clemence had to have known how to read the Latin sources in order to set Catherine's story in French, she figures in the ever-growing list of medieval women proficient in Latin. Although Catherine's historicity has been challenged (her feast-day has been eliminated from the Roman Catholic calendar of saints), her *Life* provides a fascinating tale of yet another woman stepping into a "man's" role through the eloquence and persuasiveness of her public speech.

The focus of interest of Catherine's *Life* lies not in how much physical torment she suffered but in how much she knew and in how well she spoke. Clemence relates that Catherine's father, a king without other offspring, "had her taught letters and how to argue a case and defend her position. There was no dialectician on earth who could defeat her in argument" (5). In reality, rhetorical training for women was quite unlikely, which makes Catherine's represented life all the more intriguing. Thus verbally and intellectually armed in the service of Christianity, Catherine overcomes fifty of the Emperor Maxentius's most "subtle" clerks, brought in for the sole purpose of debating her; the proof of her success emerges when they embrace the Christian faith, for which they subsequently become martyrs. She converts the empress as well, who, at her husband's orders, is tortured mercilessly. Catherine thus displays her powers of speech in at least two ways: through her triumphant, learned *disputatio* with the clerics; and, through her ability to make things happen when she speaks (i.e., to persuade people to act, in the instance to convert). Finally, as a *puella senex*, Catherine will suggest to readers other such young women, Joan of Arc (again), for example.

Given the probable intended audience for this book, St Catherine's *Life* will, I believe, attract more attention than its companion piece, *The Life of St Lawrence*.

Nonetheless, Lawrence's biography belongs here because it is one of the oldest in Anglo-Norman (1140–70) and the oldest in French, as well as a fine example of a martyr's tale. It was in fact commissioned by a woman and thus shows that like Catherine, Lawrence could serve as a model to women of brave composure in the face of persecution.

The volume includes a valuable introduction that identifies clearly all the principals, discusses sources and matters of style, and offers suggestions for further reading. (To the list of readings I would add William Calin's observations on the lives of Catherine and Lawrence, in *The French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994], pp. 89–95, 101–06.) The introduction rightly strives to draw parallels between these lives and other literature written in Anglo-Norman, so to enhance the integrity and importance of Anglo-Norman literature as a body. Implicitly, however, and no doubt inadvertently, that emphasis evokes a kind of insularity for Anglo-Norman literature that threatens to sever its connections with other literature written in medieval French (e.g., it is true that the octosyllabic line was standard in Anglo-Norman narrative poetry, but it was also standard in other narrative poetry written in French).

Fortunately, readers will certainly see parallels well beyond the linguistic, geographic, or chronological frame of these two *Lives*, while at the same time appreciating the case that Professors Wogan-Browne and Burgess make for the importance of Anglo-Norman literature, and particularly for what it offered to women and to the history of literature by and about women.

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Kathleen Biddick. *The Shock of Medievalism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998. Pp. x + 315. \$49.95 (cloth), \$17.95 (paper).

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*The Shock of Medievalism* is deeply disconcerting to a medieval historian whom feminism has taught to question all her assumptions but who nevertheless believes that by applying traditional historical methodologies in an enlightened way she can come to know something about the past as well as about what that past means to us today. Biddick means it to be disconcerting. She argues that practitioners of the medieval disciplines, no matter how they may disavow the ideologically driven work of their early predecessors, are caught up in the assumptions of those predecessors. Feminist scholars certainly recognize that all