

Transforming Memories in Contemporary Women's Rewriting by Liedeke Plate. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Pp. xi + 239. ISBN: 9780230232211

FOCUSING AS IT DOES on contemporary writers such as Angela Carter, J. M. Coetzee, Maryse Condé, Michèle Roberts, Margaret Atwood, Jeanette Winterson and others, one may at first wonder at its selection for review within a journal focusing on medieval scholarship. Indeed, the primary issue upon which *Transforming Memories in Contemporary Women's Rewriting* concentrates is that of the consolidation into a contemporary literary genre of the feminist praxis of “women’s rewriting” of myth, legend, and history as traditionally represented within patriarchal contexts. According to Plate, this new genre and praxis came into being alongside the rapid development of women’s writing more widely during the twentieth century as its adherents “affiliated with the International Women’s Movement” and began to comprehend much more clearly “the relationship of gendered identities to language and literature” (5). As such, it is a book seemingly imbricated with the politics of power hierarchies—an important enough theme in itself, of course. However, what sets this study apart is Plate’s concerns with how such a feminist endeavor has, in her estimation, now become “an integral part of the social organization of capitalism” itself (4). For Plate, the hitherto unprecedented “mainstreaming of assumptions about feminism’s central tenets” has led to a weakening in the ability of contemporary women’s writing to unsettle those “culturally central texts” (5) that have prospered under patriarchy and that have therefore set the course of what has often been remembered as a monolithic Western “culture” and its “history.” It is at this juncture, then, that the crucial importance of “women’s rewriting” as a generic category enters the scene. As Plate cogently argues within this context, contemporary women’s rewriting (and thus “re-membering,” in the sense of re-calling and re-assembling) of the founding texts of a culture reanimates the past as a “presence” and becomes one of the new, more promising “technologies of memory” (5).

For the feminist medievalist, such a statement of intent can only chime loudly with the personal enterprises laid down by many a woman whose work and voice have survived the vicissitudes of literary politics over the intervening centuries—and herein lies the primary importance of this book to feminist medievalists. Within this context, we may wish to recall the words of Marie de France writing in her prologue to her *Lais* in the twelfth century, for example (words, moreover, with a firm eye on the economics of writing as she references the hope for benevolence of her royal patron, Henry II), where she asserts her rejection of patriarchal, Latinate practices of translation, glossing, and obfuscation in favor

of the retelling of stories from the oral tradition, written down, moreover, in the “feminine” vernacular. Again in the context of “re-membering,” we may also be mindful of the insistence of Julian of Norwich on her right to transform the language of mysticism and devotion into one saturated with hermeneutics of the feminine as another case in point. The concerns of *Transforming Memories in Contemporary Women’s Writing*, therefore, are ones with which the feminist medievalist has long been familiar. Indeed, the range of astute theoretical frameworks offered by Plate in this study provide exceptionally helpful ways of reconsidering the types and imperatives behind women’s (re)writing in the premodern period too—whether those women were authors, compilers, collaborators, translators, or patrons. As a result, their enterprises, and the difficulties that frequently beset them, can fruitfully be assessed alongside those modern (re)writings that dominate Plate’s study (such as Michèle Robert’s, *The Wild Girl* [1984], reissued as *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene* in 2007; Anita Diamant’s *The Red Tent* [1997], Christa Wolf’s *Cassandra* [1984]), among others, and the re-membered female figures that they feature.

This engaging, study, which is both well theorized (Plate has frequent recourse to Jakobson, Kosofsky Sedgwick, Foucault, Cixous, and Showalter, for example) and accessible, is divided into four discrete sections: “Consuming Memories” concerns itself primarily with cultural technologies of memory and their power structures; “Fair Use” examines the politics of (re)writing, what Plate terms “Récriture féminine,” and the antiauthoritarian reading practices necessitated by the genre; “Cultural Scripts” focuses on the “practice” of women’s silence and its role within the enterprise of decanonization; and “Mythical Returns” examines closely women’s relationship to the myths and legends of the past, along with those now under constant (re)construction within the identity-conscious and identity-constructing environments of twenty-first-century “new” media. Of these, the fourth section, “Mythical Returns,” probably offers the most resonance for the feminist medievalist, arguing for women’s rewriting as an attempt “to enter cultural memory through the literary market” in the same way as Christine de Pizan, writing in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, famously justified her own writing in part as a necessary commercial enterprise. Like many of the authors featured in this section (Jeanette Winterson, Margaret Atwood, and, again, Roberts and Diamant) who “challeng[e] the myth’s place in contemporary culture” (177), Christine de Pizan also rewrote the relationship between mythical women and her own contemporary culture.

Also especially pertinent to the feminist medievalist is section three, “Cultural Scripts,” in which Plate argues for the political enterprise of recuperation,

asserting convincingly that in “supplying stories of the text’s silences” women’s rewriting forms an important “response to literary silences and the silencing of women’s voices in literature” that not only authorizes silence as women’s experience but also produces the “authorization to speak about it” (105). Again, the medieval resonances are profound: did not Julian of Norwich insist upon her God-given right to break her prescribed silence and write/speak of her singular mystical experience in spite of her own cultural conditioning? And herein lies the primary fissure in Plate’s study—for the medievalist, at least: while focusing on the politically and economically charged re-presentation by contemporary women writers of women from the past, she, like so many scholars of contemporary literature, entirely overlooks the literary endeavors of re-writing that were undertaken so concertedly by medieval women like Marie, Christine, and Julian. As a result, their achievements are inadvertently relegated to a type of silence once again—the silence of oversight. Had this valuable and engaging study considered, even in passing, the plethora of women writers engaged in literary rewritings before the Victorian era (which provides a type of *terminus post quem*), it might have served to further consolidate the coherence and breadth of its feminist scholarship. Nevertheless, it is a book to be fully recommended to any reader concerned with the cultural—and capitalist—politics of gender, writing and memory.

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