

BOOK REVIEWS

Ann Marie Rasmussen, *Mothers and Daughters in Medieval German Literature*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997. xvi+253 pp. 11 black-and-white illustrations, 1 table.

This book examines the roles of mothers and daughters in selected works of Middle High German secular literature from the twelfth century to the fifteenth, and the way they address and reflect the socio-political order. Among other things, it exemplifies how literary evidence (albeit anonymous or male-authored) can be used to fill in gaps created by the scarcity of women-authored historical documents. The author shows, for example, how stereotypical representations of mothers and daughters as disorderly or compliant, conformist or subversive, experienced or innocent are exchanged and deployed for specific purposes. The use of these stereotypes reflects certain historical developments, such as the emergence of patrilineal kinship organization among the nobility, changing feudal marriage practices, noblewomen's exercise of political power and the sexualization of women and the changing notion of women's honor (xi).

The author foregoes a true survey of mother-daughter relationships and strict chronological order to highlight instead "how the literary conversation between mother and daughter about sex and love falls out along lines of genre and class" (222). The book is divided into two parts, with each chapter focusing on a single canonical or extremely popular text. The first part, consisting of five chapters, treats noblewomen and the subject of romantic love and women wielding power. It moves from epic to didactic poetry. The second part, comprising two chapters, focuses on the sexualization of common women in lyric texts. Following Trude Ehlert, Rasmussen shows how women's "instrumental function" (23), their socialization as a passive instrument in the self-realization of males, becomes inflected with Ovidian love lore and converges with political issues for noblewomen, whereas for the lower classes women's instrumentalization is limited to their strong sexual desire and the choice of a sexual partner.

An introductory chapter analyses a nonfictional text, the spiritual biography of Yolande of Vianden by Brother Hermann (after 1283). By examining such topics as male authorship, genre and genre expectations, the ideology of class and lineage, and the politics of Dominican reform, it sets out the terms of discussion for the following five chapters. It also underscores the difference between the individual identity formation in works by nineteenth- and twentieth-century women authors and the anonymous or male-authored medieval fictions about women which renders the psychoanalytic approach unsuitable (17).

Chapter 1 (“Unruly Mother, Exemplary Daughter”) focuses on Heinrich von Veldeke’s *Eneasroman* (c. 1170–c. 1185), one of the first German texts to exhibit the new discourse of class-linked romantic love (29). Rasmussen traces the differences in the mother-daughter conversations between Heinrich’s version and that of his sources. Here, erotic passion is linked to empire building; the unruly mother who possesses the knowledge of Ovidian love lore and wields political power is demonized as an agent of destruction, while the submissive daughter who experiences sexual passion upholds the patriarchal order.

Chapter 2 (“Exemplary Mother, Unruly Daughter”) examines the *Nibelungenlied*, beginning with the fundamental miscommunication between mother and daughter regarding the interpretation of the falcon dream. The protagonist, Kriemhild, moving through marriage to widowhood, progresses from object to subject status, transgressing her mother’s example but also reversing the gender hierarchy and posing a threat to patriarchy. The anonymous epic *Kudrun* (c. 1230–1240) is shown in Chapter 3 (“Mother, Daughter, Foster Mother”) to have a dual mother-daughter plot, in which the foster mother is a would-be mother-in-law. The mother-daughter plot between Hilde and Kudrun has to do with the transfer of knowledge and power across generations, while the mother-daughter plot between Gerlint, the foster mother, and Kudrun is a story of cruelty and deprivation with parallels to the saint’s life in which the protagonist chooses suffering. Central to *Kudrun* are the kinship politics of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europe in which agnatic (patrilineal) and bilineal kinship systems coexist. In contrast to the *Nibelungenlied*, the aristocratic mother and daughter in *Kudrun* actively wield public (male) authority.

Chapter 4 (“In This She Takes After Me”) is a study of the relationship between Queen Isolde and Princess Isolde in Gottfried von Strassburg’s *Tristan* in which the mother’s education of the daughter in the instrumental function is subverted. The trial of the seneschal demonstrates Queen Isolde’s considerable power which she has gained through fulfilling conventional gender roles. Rasmussen interprets the love potion as a concretized symbol of the continuity between mother and daughter, the mother’s gift to her daughter which is meant to ensure her access through love to power within the patriarchy. In fact, the princess never replicates her mother’s role; rather she resembles her in character, using passion, power and knowledge instead to defy society (132).

An example of thirteenth-century didactic poetry, *Die Windsbeckin* parodies a mother instructing her daughter about love. In Chapter 5 (“If Men Desire You, Then You Are Worthy”) Rasmussen deftly analyses the humor in this poem by pointing to the divergence of literal and rhetorical levels of meaning and to the manipulation of stereotypes of innocence and experience.

Neidhart's summer songs from the first half of the thirteenth century (the subject of Chapter 6, "I Inherited It From You") feature a series of peasant mother-daughter dialogues in which the characters (the roles are interchangeable) voice a strong springtime desire for sex. Written by and for aristocrats, such poems have been interpreted as parodying medieval aristocratic self-fashioning (171). In a series of inauthentic Neidhart poems the essential similarity between mother and daughter results in rivalry which gives way, ultimately, to solidarity. In conformity with the widespread medieval notion of women's nature, mother and daughter conspire together to use their sexuality to deceive men.

In the final chapter about a fifteenth-century rhymed couplet text which circulated in a South German urban context, "How A Mother Teaches Her Daughter Whoring," the nature / nurture theme is taken up again. The male victim is now present in the person of a male eavesdropper / narrator. Rasmussen analyses two of the three redactions with different endings to illustrate the difference between female-centered and male-centered constructions of women's honor. In the male version, chaste behavior constitutes women's honor. In the female version, women's honor has to do with a woman's self-understanding and self-description. It is a label which she herself owns and controls. Following a discussion of late medieval German cities' attempts to regulate prostitution as an illustration of contemporary social practices and registers open to women, Rasmussen concludes that a mother teaches her daughter how she is sexualized (reduced to her sexual function), then she teaches her how to use that condition to material advantage.

As I have tried to suggest by quoting chapter titles and reproducing some of the arguments, this book is elegantly done. Each chapter opens with an epigraph from a poem by a twentieth-century German woman writer. Rasmussen's study is intended for an audience of specialists and non-specialists, as the lengthy quotations, English translations, and plot summaries suggest. It offers ample evidence that medieval mother-daughter stories are about the construction of patriarch and the transfer of information between women across generations.

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