BOOK REVIEWS

Alcuin Blamires. *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. 279 pp.

"[A] vigorous case for women was available by the late Middle Ages." So begins the conclusion to Alcuin Blamires's latest contribution to the literature on the status of women in the Middle Ages. Blamires has been steeped in this subject matter for some time. Beyond the anthology *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, a collection of medieval texts he edited with Karen Pratt and C.W. Marx (Clarendon Press, 1992), he is the author of a considerable list of articles on aspects of medieval gender doctrine, including several concerning women and preaching and several that treat Chaucer. He also delivered a paper recently (March 6, 1999) at Fordham University's conference on The Debate about Women, Men and Gender entitled "Refiguring the 'Scandalous Excess' of Women."

This new work lays out what Blamires calls the "formal case" found in medieval literature in defense of women, an argument much less well-known than the persistent misogynist discourse modern critics love to hate. Blamires chooses the term "profeminine" to describe the works he is talking about, those "pre-modern texts which develop constructions of 'woman' which are positive according to the cultural ideology of their period" (12). In calling the profeminine side of the polemic a "case" and a "defense," Blamires deliberately uses juridical terms; the case, in his words, is "a mode of discourse which aims to build a positive representation of women in response to either specified or implicit accusations" (8–9). In other words, it is a direct challenge to the detractors of women's nature so prevalent at the same time and it coalesces, quite logically, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as a counterweight to the misogynist writings that hit a high point during that period.

Blamires catalogues the arguments most commonly used in making the case for women (9, and in more detail on 60-61): it insists on the ethical obligation to honor women as mothers of us all; it castigates men for "antagonistic generalization"; it demonstrates the privileges bestowed on women by the Christian god; it documents the contributions of women throughout history; and it avers the moral superiority of women over men. This list defines the material treated in his volume. Chapter 1 establishes the corpus constituting the formal case while Chapter 2 explains its origins and procedures. Chapters 3 through 5, entitled, respectively, "Honouring Mothers," "Eve and the Privileges of Women," and "The Stable Sex," explore at length the characteristic claims of the case, the authority on which they are based and examples of their usage in a wide range of medieval texts. Texts cited range from scripture, Augustine,

Jerome, Gregory, and Chrysostom, to Alcuin, Hildegard of Bingen, Andreas Capellanus and Boccaccio. Chapter 6, "Exemplifying Feminine Stability," looks at works that make an "incidental" case for women even though their primary purpose is not the promotion of the profeminine cause; as his sample, Blamires examines Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim, and several examples of romance, including Chrétien de Troyes, the Middle English *Erle of Toulous*, and Jean Renart. Chapter 7, "Profeminine Role-Models," provides a selective catalogue of women drawn from the Old and New Testaments, the classical tradition, female martyrs, and contemporary history, all of whom were cited as examples of strength and assertiveness and as prophets and preachers. Chapter 8, the last, provides close readings of the formal case as presented in three authors central to the discussion—Abelard, Chaucer and Christine de Pizan, three names that come up frequently in earlier sections as well. A short conclusion considers the impact of the case for women of the period.

As Blamires's reason for using quasi-legal terminology implies, the entire subject matter of the book situates itself, of necessity, against the backdrop of misogyny that we have all learned to reckon with as a prevailing voice of the era. The structural misogyny (a term Blamires borrows from Alastair Minnis) that shaped most facets of public discourse did not allow for much thinking outside the box. Blamires succinctly states this real constraint in his conclusion: "it is only sensible to admit that the medieval case for women had very little room in which to manoeuvre" (236). It might seem, therefore, a somewhat thankless task, to look for and list the material marshaled *in favor* of women, particularly to readers of the late-twentieth century, when those defenses are almost inevitably inflected by larger considerations of a patriarchal agenda. For example, strength and outspokenness as attributes in women were praised only in the service of the more highly prized virtues of chastity and unyielding faith. Throughout the book, beginning with the blurb on the dusk jacket, Blamires warns the reader that "even the formal medieval case for women . . . strictly . . . satisfies few feminist criteria" (11). As a result, the material he brings to light often seems hopelessly compromised. Following a section on the virtues of the good wife who busies herself at home, he acknowledges that such a model "amounts to the direst provocation from a feminist perspective, despite its countervailing verdict on male complacency" (93). Nevertheless, he counsels curbing our anachronistic impatience. If we ignore or demean the importance of the characteristics for which women were honored, we risk underestimating the polemical engagement of certain medieval texts with misogyny. What Blamires does most successfully is point out the juxtaposition of criticism and defense, the inextricably intertwined nature of the two traditions.

Despite the formidable amount of information involved, the impressive erudition displayed and the hair-splitting nature of the arguments traced in

detail, this book does not bog down. Informal, almost chatty, Blamires's prose speeds us along pleasantly and easily, quite an achievement for what could have been a very dry enumeration. He indulges on occasion in brief editorial comment, placing himself firmly on the "profeminine" team. Several examples: "writers like Lydgate," he writes, "cultivated a tiresome habit of dropping heavy clangers amidst ostensibly profeminine discourse," (7); the infamous Ecclesiastics 42:14 is a "ludicrous verse" and Gregory's interpretation of it "galling," (128); Mary Magdalene's role as a preacher could be minimized by arguing that she was pressed into service "at a time of extreme staff shortage in the Church's infancy," (197). Such commentary lightens the tone.

The volume itself is equally user-friendly. The footnotes are placed at the bottom of the page for easy reference, a feature particularly useful for notes such as these, which are packed with scholarly material that augments substantially both the primary and secondary sources discussed in the body of the work. The small, handsome book is easy to hold and largely error free. (One exception is the formatting of the notes on pp. 37-8.)

What are the major contributions of Blamires's book? First, in terms of new findings, Chapter 2 suggests as a crucial source for the profeminine case the third book of Esdras, which belongs to the Old Testament apocrypha. Blamires pinpoints in this text the portion describing the debate at the court of King Darius about what one thing might be designated the strongest; Zorobabel, the third competitor, names women. His arguments provide "a structure of ideas for defending women, a selection of cues" (58) that circulated in versions of the Vulgate and in the first-century *Jewish Antiquities* of Josephus, available and convenient for integration into works such as Nicole Bozon's *Contes moralisés*, John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, and Jean Le Fèvre's *Livre de Leësce*. While not arguing that the Zorobabel passage had an overriding influence on subsequent defenses of women, Blamires labels it a starting point analogous to the quotation ascribed to Theophrastus in Jerome's *Adversus Iovinianum* on the perils for men in choosing a wife, a passage often at the heart of misogynous treatises. The chapter then broadens to discuss the rhetorical strategies adopted in defending women, including the use of *exempla*.

In the identification of the Zorobabel model as in its other discussions, the most important service this book renders is to recognize affiliations among texts. It lays out a synthesis of evidence culled from a very large body of texts, spanning the canonical and the obscure, texts medical, philosophical, theological and literary in nature, written in Latin and a variety of vernacular languages, and composed over the course of a millennium and a half. The bibliography of primary sources testifies to the impressive compilation of material. To consider these works all together, from the same perspective, is to make connections and

to see continuities that are simply not apparent when reading any individual text in relative isolation, as we are wont to do. Which leads us to a third significant contribution of the book: as the author himself states, he hopes to counterbalance the analyses that sometimes result from that isolation, those that proclaim the appearance, *ex nihilo,* of profeminine material in medieval authors without sufficient contextualization. Our future readings of Hildegard of Bingen, of Christine de Pizan, of Jean le Fèvre, will be richer and more balanced for taking into account the traditions of both misogyny *and* defense that these authors had assimilated as part of their scholarly culture.

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Brigitte Buettner. *Boccaccio's "Des cleres et nobles femmes": Systems of Signification in an Illuminated Manuscript* (College Art Association Monograph on the Fine Arts 53), Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1996. 208pp., 110 illus (4 in color), appendix, notes, bibliography, index, 8 1/2" x 11".

The subject of this study is the production of meaning in a sumptuous illustrated copy of Boccaccio's lives of illustrious and noble women that was presented to Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy and brother to the French King Charles VI, on New Year's Day in 1403 (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS fr. 12420). Apart from the value of her analysis, Buettner has done a great service to the general field of women's studies by making available all the pictorial illuminations, together with their associated decorated initials (albeit for the most part in black and white). They are arranged in the order in which they occur in the manuscript, and there is only one external illustration, both immediate indications of the author's synchronic approach to the book. The women who figure here are presented in chronological order, from the ancient goddesses such as Ceres, Venus, and Isis to mythological characters such as Europa, the Amazon queens, Thisbe, Medea, and Arachne, Clytaemnestra, Helen, Circe, and Penelope, Dido, Sappho, and Lucretia, to Romans such as Irene, Hortensia, Cleopatra, and Portia, and the series closes with a few later Christians—among them Pope Joan, and Joanna, queen of Sicily and Jerusalem. The text life of each is prefaced by a single picture of some salient event enacted in ca. 1400 costumes and settings, the norm for historical representations. Here is an extraordinary series of vivid yet elegant images, of women birthing and committing suicide, avenging murder and riding in combat, being tortured and executed, inventing Latin and working on panel paintings, and acting as ambassadors and priests.