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ANGLO-SAXON STUDIES

GENDER AND POWER: FEMINISM AND OLD ENGLISH STUDIES

‡

MORE is being written about women in Old English (OE), but whether or not we might label such criticism feminist, in that it attempts to theorize, reconstruct, or dismantle existing constructions of femininity in non-patriarchal ways, is debatable. We originally aimed each to explore one area of Anglo-Saxon studies; instead, through the collaborative process, we discovered the impossibility of discussing these areas separately. Although we identify some broad trends in scholarship on women in history (Bennett), literature (Overing), and language (Lees), our work shares a general concern to highlight the problems of traditional disciplines and methodologies (binarisms, and other varieties of anti-feminist criticism). The interrelationship between society, language, and power that we detect suggests the inadequacy of traditionally separate disciplines, and clarifies, for us at least, the importance of non-patriarchal approaches that draw on interdisciplinary and cultural methodologies. Our comments here are more selective than Helen Bennett's important 1989 survey. Bennett outlines below how feminist historians have identified the status of women as a central concern of history that recognizes the relationship between the sexes as socially constructed. Questions of methodology, power, and the construction of gender are also central to Gillian Overing's analysis of literary studies. Clare Lees' work on OE language identifies it as the area of Anglo-Saxon studies with the least feminist scholarship. As we move from broad sociohistorical issues to literature to language, we discover that the narrower the field of inquiry, the less feminist work has been done.

More consistently than in literary and linguistic studies in OE, historians have addressed issues raised by contemporary feminism, which pose fundamental challenges to traditional historiography. Analyzing the status of women and women's relationship to men, feminist historians reassess historical periods to point out the consistency with which eras of supposed progressive change are precisely those that mark a relative loss of

status for women. Feminist historians also adapt standard theories of social change to account for the impact of the relationship between public and private power. They find that woman's power in comparison to man's is greatest where private and social spheres coincide. Where the two spheres are clearly divided, women's power is much more limited, their status clearly inferior to that of their male counterparts (Kelly-Gadol). The collection of essays on medieval women and history, edited by Susan Mosher Stuard, raises these general feminist historical issues. All have relevance for the history of Anglo-Saxon women. Barbara Hanawalt's essay in the volume ties the historiography of medieval women to broader historical trends: interest in social history and interest in women's rights. Hanawalt provides an overview and demonstrates that the study of medieval women has a long tradition. The volume is a valuable resource, as are Dietrich's and Meyer's biographical essays in The Woman in England from Anglo-Saxon Times to the Present; all of these essays supplement the bibliographical information below, which is representative of historical research on Anglo-Saxon women in particular.

Most studies explore Anglo-Saxon women's relation to power. Of course, there is no question of equality or near equality between the sexes. However, with the exception of Anne Klinck, who sees the restriction in women's power as occurring between the early and late Anglo-Saxon periods, scholars from Doris Stenton to Christine Fell generally conclude that women in pre-Conquest England held more power than their Anglo-Norman (and many more recent) successors. Three categories of women form the basis of historical scholarship: queens, religious women (abbesses and nuns), and "ordinary" women. Queens like Æthelflæd, who ruled Mercia outright for several years, are rarer than queens who exercised power and influence through husbands or sons (Judd, Wainwright, Stafford). But the historical records contain sufficient references to queens to reflect an ongoing significant political presence that transcends the role of passive peace-weaver. Religious institutions offered women another avenue of influence, Abbess Hild of Whitby being the prime scholarly example (Fell, Judd). Studies of land charters, of wills, and of laws governing marriage, adultery, and abduction demonstrate woman's economic and resulting social position (Clark, Meyer, Dietrich, Judd, Stenton, Whitelock, Colman, Klinck).

Investigations of each type of women address feminist issues. Fell has shown how gender assumptions have influenced readings of certain words crucial to the definition of woman's place in Anglo-Saxon society (morgengiefu, biggan, agan). Studies of religious institutions illustrate connections between woman's power and her denial of her gender (McNamara, Schulenberg). In relating the public/private dichotomy to medieval history, J. A. McNamara and S. Wemple demonstrate the connection between a queen's or noblewoman's power and the lack of strong political institutions. With male primogeniture and strong monarchies firmly established, with institutions formalized and powerful families no longer wielding state power, women were excluded. J. T. Schulenberg uncovers the institutional practices that prevented women from becoming saints, and she also documents the diminishing importance of women in religious movements as those movements became established and institutionalized. Such studies bring to light how women often help to found the structures and institutions that proceed

structures and to be suspicious of any binarism imposed on scholarly investigations. Feminist historians need to examine the public/private dichotomy itself: what makes the division, where the line is drawn and how divisions are made in relation to women.

Finally, while Betty Bandel has documented the increase in misogyny among post-Conquest historians, scholars must confront the lack of women's texts from the Anglo-Saxon period, and assess women's history as filtered through men's voices. This filtering needs careful examination: Victoria Tudor, for example, shows how institutionalized church anti-feminism gave rise to the textual tradition of St. Cuthbert's misogyny. Another area for further investigation is the negative treatment of certain Anglo-Saxon queens in the historical record. Traditional historians may have had an ideological cause for the evaluations: disapproval of powerful and assertive females, justifying restriction on queenly power. A comparable explanation is offered by Janet L. Nelson in her essay on the Merovingian queens, Brunhild and Bathild, where the queens' poor reputation in history originated from their befriending and offending the wrong church officials.

The body of critical work on women in literature raises two issues: one is the extent to which feminist theory (or any theory) is employed at all in recent criticism, and the second, and possibly more pressing issue, is the extent to which the theoretical or ideological underpinnings of any critical approach have been consciously acknowledged by critics or readers. Such an acknowledgment identifies the power of the critic and reader to construct gender, and reveals the ways in which these constructions are not ahistorical but culturally relative. Bearing in mind that feminist criticism has the primary task of recognizing, analyzing, and deconstructing often subtle varieties of anti-feminist criticism, both issues are briefly examined, but the focus is on the second.

The controlling premises of binarism motivate or provide an unacknowledged rationale for many of these critical arguments, elevating on occasion the most glib sexual stereotyping (female=passive victim, male=active hero) to critical and cultural principles (Overing, ch. 3). Alain Renoir posits, for example, the "existence of a tradition of suffering women" (235), a cultural acceptance, indeed expectation, of female suffering and passivity. Renoir's premise surfaces in Anne Klinck's examination of the development of female poetic characterization. Klinck agrees that the female character may well be confined, literally, conventionally, and emotionally, but hypothesizes that such captivity adds a psychological dimension, which the poet, in turn, might artistically exploit. Elaine Tuttle Hansen also finds some virtue in what is never questioned as necessity, envisioning female suffering as a moral, though totally ineffective, directive which highlights the "irrepressible evils in man and his society" (113). Though Klinck and Hansen are attempting to revalue or reconsider women's roles and their representation, the basic conceptual assumption of woman as weak/passive/victim is construed, and only to be understood, in terms of its binary, oppositional relationship to man as violent/active/strong. There is no room for "other" possibilities, or alternative constructions of female (or male) identity.

Helen Damico takes on some of these assumptions about female passivity in her reassessment of *Wealhtheow*. She rejects many of the traditional, dichotomized views of this most important female figure in heroic poetry (tragic or ironic victim, idealized or ornamental figure). Instead, the queen is cast as an autonomously powerful military figure, with the additional mythic and distinctively menacing qualities of the valkyrie.

to exclude and marginalize them. They show that we ourselves need to beware of such Damico's arguments and evidence for the valkyrie connection are too numerous to debate here, but some of the attractions and drawbacks of the basic construct require attention. One compelling aspect of this argument is that it gives voice and authority to Wealththeow and confirms a recognition of the enigmatic power of her presence in the poem. But the valkyrie embodies contact with death, and her priestess-like function casts her as the repository of masculine fear and ambivalence; she essentially participates in the fulfillment of masculine desire. Thus while Damico's vision of mythic, semi-religious power may appear to contrast with Renoir's powerless passivity (Wealththeow as a "very worried mother" whose voice has a "pathetic ring" to it, 229-230), both views are subsumed by the assumption of passivity on a much broader scale, that is female participation in and identification via masculine forms, definitions, and motivations. Carol Clover offers some keen insights into this masking process in Norse contexts.

Another side of this binary coin is apparent in assessments of those preternaturally strong and saintly Christian women of the OE period, whose martyrdom and suffering critics have transformed into triumphant, aggressive vindication. The catch, of course, is that they may be not-weak as long as they are not-women. They might be "empowered to overcome the limitations of both their sex and their unaided mortality," (Hansen, 117), but the cost is identity, sexual and spiritual. Jane Chance details the ways in which female sanctity and Christian approbation are so thoroughly dependent on ideals of chastity (xv). The escape from passivity is predicated upon denial and obliteration of the feminine body, a point Chance makes abundantly clear. Less clear in Chance's study, but clearly implied, is that the overall critical view of Christian women as vindicated, aggressive, or triumphant overlooks the patristic invention of their necessary subjugation, glosses over their complicity in their own disappearance as women, and reaffirms either/ or binarism while simply reconfiguring its elements.

Carol Falvo Heffernan reintroduces the female body into her reading of The Phoenix, a mythical creature whose androgyny might presuppose Christian and Marian dimensions in the poem. Her breakdown of the gynecological imagery in the poem graphically delineates stages of menstruation, conception, and birth, and though Heffernan concludes that her reading of the poem's signs enables her to "explore the connotations of femininity" (125), it offers no comment on its implications. The Marian body is eventually metaphorized, identified, and (de?)feminized via the figure of Ecclesia, and any hypothetical or theoretical possibilities for remetaphorizing the female body are left unexplored.

Much of what is not feminist about recent criticism on/of women in the literature is not, or not only, that it is not consciously employing this or that variety of feminist critical theory, but that it does not more consciously acknowledge the masculinist (call them binary, traditional, patriarchal, patristic) premises upon which it operates, and that the potential for feminist hypotheses is closed down by the need for "clarity," definition, and a concept of structure that relies on the principle of opposition. In this regard, Pat Belanoff's study of the female poetic image offers a different point of departure — one based on an acknowledgment of ambiguity. She sees inconsistencies and complexities of poetic representation as a reflective function of cultural phenomena, a result of the "ambiguity and problematic status of the Anglo-Saxon woman in a society undergoing

untheorized as yet, it does allow Eve in Genesis B to be two things at once, to be Germanic *and* Christian, and to escape, however temporarily, the above varieties of masculine critical definition.

Faced with the wealth of feminist scholarship on contemporary language description and use, the paucity of interest in the language of the Anglo-Saxons from a feminist perspective is striking. Two recent surveys by Healey and Mitchell (On Old English, 325-44), amply demonstrate that language studies are flourishing but fail to identify feminist approaches as even a future area for research. The paradigm of traditional historical linguistics still dominates, and few scholars have addressed the issue of language from the perspective of society and culture with which feminist criticism is most actively concerned. Scholars are still assuming that language is a neutral, static given rather than an actively defining and defined construct. To put the matter bluntly, the question of whether the language of the Anglo-Saxons is a feminist issue has yet to be asked. Nevertheless, scholars such as Fell, Chance, Damico, and more recently Belanoff, have used linguistic evidence to support their arguments about women, in society or in literature. The silence of historical linguists concerning the theoretical implications of their philological approaches together with the failure of those scholars actively interested in women's studies to engage in a dialogue with contemporary feminist theory has been severely self-limiting. However, we can use feminist insights into the patriarchal construction of traditional language theories to begin such a dialogue and to inquire into the possibility of reconstructing the roles of women as agents — both speakers and writers.

Although we await the publication of Allen J. Frantzen's major critique of the history of Anglo-Saxon studies, and the history of OE grammar has yet to be written, it is clear that many of its grammarians have participated in the debate about the relationship of language to society (whether or not they acknowledge it), and that much grammatical theory has been productive of gender asymmetries (Denis Baron). To redress this antifeminism, we ought to pay greater attention, for example, to the work of Elizabeth Elstob, eighteenth-century grammarian and editor of OE (Beauchamp). However, twentieth-century accounts of OE, which describe it as a language displaying both "grammatical" gender (in noun-phrase internal grammar) and "natural" gender (in noun-phrase external grammar), still seek explanations for these features along the two axes of biological sex and linguistic formalism. That is to say: either biological sex has everything or nothing to do with grammar. Social theories of gender play little role in such explanations. Bruce Mitchell's discussion of grammatical gender is perhaps representative in that examples of miscongruence between nouns and attributive words are treated as exceptions to the conventional rule governing concord in Old English (Old English Syntax, I, 29-37). More extreme is Istvan Fodor's account of the origin of grammatical gender, which treats gender as a morphological-syntactical category almost devoid of extra linguistic features. Other explanations of this vexed question, such as Naomi Baron's transformational rules for concord or André Joly's more integrated account of representation and expression, depend heavily on a binary features analysis. The same paradigm of gender versus sex operates in explanations for the so-called loss of grammatical gender in late Old English and early Middle English. Ross' theory of the "naturalization" of grammatical gender in nouns has been convincingly discredited by

rapid and complex cultural change" (829). And while this ambiguity remains Charles Jones. Jones' own theory of the reanalysis of surface-features originally marking gender as either case-indicators or, more controversially, discourse-markers indicating shared speaker-hearer knowledge, is one of the most promising for future research. Few of these theories seek to integrate extra-linguistic features of language use with formal elements, and readers should treat with caution explanations that claim to speak objectively in terms of "triumphs of sex over gender" (Mitchell, I, 35).

Writers actively interested in women tend to overlook this confusion in linguistic theory of biological sex, grammatical gender, and social gender. Analysis of the social roles of women *and* men needs to be more sensitive to the nature of linguistic evidence and the value of grammatical gender for assessing terms for kinship, sex, or class (Stanley and McGowan). Vic Strite's survey of OE semantic field studies demonstrates just how far existing research depends on thematic and literary analyses rather than on sociolinguistic and cultural issues. Fell's valuable analysis of friwif locbore reminds us, too, that post-Conquest attitudes to women can determine the meaning of OE phrases. In her 1984 study Fell is also sensibly cautious in evaluating the claims of semantic analyses and pronoun use, but her claims for linguistic equality in the use of mann (17-19) are open to debate. The social use of language in OE texts is beginning to be examined (Lees), but the question of female literacy and language use in English or Latin still awaits detailed investigation. Barrie Ruth Straus' speech act analysis of The Wife's Lament is an important account of the speaker's powerful language, but it is hard to see what is distinctively female about her language. Belanoff claims that one characteristic of poetic image of the Germanic woman is that she is a powerful speaker (822-23). But the power attaches to the speech, not the speaker, and Belanoff does discuss its sources and nature. Both articles appear to be implicitly based on a distinction between female and male language but neither present cases that distinctively gender language use (and it is still debatable whether such cases could be made). A more productive avenue is suggested by Elizabeth Robertson whose work on the early Middle English Ancrene Wisse clearly demonstrates how medieval theories of women and sexuality have influenced the choice of language used by the male author.

In exploring various contexts for the OE language, we have been seeking to hear women's voices and to articulate their silence. Our substitution of language as compartmentalized for the idea of voice, or language as contextualized, aligns our scholarship with cultural and interdisciplinary studies rather than with the isolating categorization of traditional patriarchal methods. We note with pleasure therefore that 1990 is the year when a series of new initiatives in OE and medieval studies follow the same trend: this year sees the publication of Helen Bennett's essay on women as mourners; Damico and Olsen's collection of essays on women; Frantzen's history of Anglo-Saxon studies and his collection of essays on contemporary theory and traditional disciplines (which includes feminist essays by Gillian Overing on Genesis B, and Karma Lochrie on medieval female spirituality); and, last but not least, Gillian Overing's study of gender and language in Beowulf.

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WOMEN AND MEDICINE

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appointment of midwives in his parishes — Saunier is able to document the existence of no fewer than 113 midwives in the area to the S.W. of Paris in this thirteen-year period. Her findings make a tremendous addition to the thus-far meager evidence we have for medieval midwives.

Sigal, Pierre André, “La grossesse, l'accouchement et l'attitude envers l'enfant mort-né à la fin du moyen âge d'après les récits de miracles,” in *ibid.*, pp. 23-41. Sigal uses the accounts of miracles from various canonization procedures and collections of miracle stories from France and Italy from the mid-thirteenth through fifteenth centuries. From these sources he culls surprisingly rich information about the realities and attitudes toward sterility, pregnancy, birth, concern for the infant's soul, etc. Like Saunier's work, Sigal's study shows the importance of religious sources for documenting women's history in the Middle Ages.

Monica Green

BOOK REVIEWS



RENATE Blumenfeld-Kosinski, translator and editor, *The Writings of Margaret of Oingt, Medieval Prioress and Mystic, Translated from the Latin and Francoprovençal With an Introduction, Notes, and Interpretative Essay.* The Focus Library on Medieval Women. Newburyport, Mass: Focus Information Group, 1990.

In a recent issue of the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter*, (No. 9, Summer, 1990, 2 - 5) Linda Lomperis raised the timely issue of collaborative work in literature and history. Her subtitle, “What Literary Scholars Want From Historians,” leads her to propose four areas “in which historians and literary scholars might be able to work together”:

- 1) questions regarding the possibility of “feminism” or of “feminist consciousness” in the Middle Ages;
- 2) questions surrounding female literacy in the Middle Ages;
- 3) sexuality, sexual practices, and the notion of “deviancy” in the Middle Ages;
- 4) questions surrounding medieval women's socio-political agency.

This beautiful collection of the writings of Margaret of Oingt (ca. 1240-1310) suggests a number of answers to which literary scholars should be willing to listen. In the concluding essay, “The Idea of Writing as Authority and Conflict in the Works of Margaret of Oingt”, Blumenfeld-Kosinski makes a broad statement which outlines an approach to Lomperis' questions:

What did it mean to write as a woman in the Middle Ages? For the majority of writing women it meant to compose religious works. Looking back over the centuries, one finds only a handful of women who wrote secular narrative or poetry. [...] This is hardly surprising, for being able to write presupposed a relatively high level of education and, except for the nobility, women only had access to education in the convent. [...] But even in the convent, education was a privilege: lower-class women seldom benefited from educational opportunities. They remained what they had been in the outside world: the servants of others. Consequently writing, particularly in Latin, was circumscribed by both class and gender (71).