

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).

In this cloistered context, writing was often a source of conflict. A number of remarkable women in the Middle Ages wrote or dictated literary works in Latin or the vernacular, usually about their own spiritual experiences and understanding. All such works were subject to scrutiny (sometimes to repression) by the ecclesiastical hierarchy. But medieval religious women's deep passion for self-expression, justified by the grace which made them the vehicle of visions and insights into the spiritual life, brought women into full participation in the written culture of medieval Christianity. Blumenfeld-Kosinski's introduction is especially useful in its careful construction of this culture, setting the life and writings of Margaret of Oingt into the context of women in the Carthusian order, and the broader world of female piety, mysticism and religious writing.

The writings of Margaret of Oingt presented in this volume are taken from the only known extant copy, manuscript 5785R of the municipal library of Grenoble. Unlike some other medieval women mystics, Margaret never intended her work to be circulated. In fact, the zeal of contemporary ecclesiastics to sniff out doctrinal errors in women's writings (a contemporary mystic, Margaret Porete, was burned as a heretic) encouraged an intimate audience. The extant writings of Margaret of Oingt are: "A Page of Meditations," "Mirror" (two first-person visionary narratives), "The Life of the Virgin Saint Beatrice of Ornacieux," and a number of letters and stories. All of these works are personal affirmations of piety, and all are especially interesting from the point of view of narrative voice.

The longest text, "A Page of Meditations," begins with Margaret's first-person account of a vision:

In the year of our Lord 1286, on the Sunday of Septuagesima, I Margaret, the maidservant of Christ, was in church at mass when, as an introduction to the mass, the following verse was being sung: "The sighs of death will surround me" (Vulgate Psalm 18,4). And I began to think about the misery to which we are consigned because of the sin of our first parents. And while thinking about this I began [to feel] such fear and such pain that my heart seemed to fail me completely, and because of this I did not know whether I was worthy of salvation or not (25).

This personal account of liturgically-inspired compunctio is familiar from visionary writings by Angela of Foligno, Hadewijch, and a number of other medieval women mystics. The resolution of this terror through the bittersweet love of Christ is completely congruent with the monastic literary culture in which Margaret wrote. It should also be noted that Margaret's vivid descriptions of the torments of Hell give the work its particularly stern emphasis on the importance of suffering.

"Mirror," on the other hand, deliberately places a personal account in the second person:

It seems to me that you have heard it said that, when you listen to someone tell of some grace given by our Lord to some of His friends, you are better for it for a long time. And because I desire your salvation as my own, I will tell you, as briefly as possible, of a great favor done not long ago to a person of my acquaintance." (41).

The literary device of proclaiming one's own visionary experiences as those of another (a device used by Paul in 2 Corinthians 12,2) is discussed in Blumenfeld-

Kosinski's introduction (16, note 1). Here, Christ appears to the visionary holding a book. On the clasps are written words which cause Margaret to meditate on Christ's passion. "The inside of this book was like a beautiful mirror, [...] In this book appeared a delightful place, so large that the entire world seems small by comparison" (43-44). This book showed the glorious body of Christ, a body "so noble that one could see oneself reflected in it, more clearly than in a mirror" (45).

The life of Beatrice of Ornacieux, for whom Margaret may have been novice-mistress in the charterhouse of Parmenie, is another type of mirror, the account of the spiritual sufferings and the graces and miracles of an exemplary holy woman. Yet, even here, there is an emphasis on the special validity of a woman telling her own story. After a description of Beatrice's miraculous escape from a locked room in order to join her sisters at matins, the narrative ends:

When the vicar and the prioress arrived they ordered her in the name of the obedience she owed them to confess how she had gotten out. And she confessed everything exactly the way it has just been told (62).

The letters (actually selections from her letters) manifest the changes of voice described above, and include other accounts of visions, some of them erotically passionate. The collection ends with three stories about Margaret obviously added after her death; here another person is describing her life as a mirror. Every one of these texts speaks to the issues raised by Lomperis; what is more, they raise crucial questions about scholarly definitions of literature and history.

The series in which this book appears, The Focus Library of Medieval Women, is dedicated to publishing a variety of medieval women's literary works. Christine de Pizan's "Letter of Othea to Hector" was also published this year, and works by Bridget of Sweden, Hrosvit of Gandersheim, and a collection of fourteenth-century German convent literature are projected between now and 1992. These will join the already-published collections by Elizabeth Petroff, Katharina Wilson, and Peter Dronke as invaluable resources for teaching and scholarship. It will be a gift to feminist scholarship in general if they receive the attention they deserve as examples of medieval women's literature.

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Mary F. Wack, Lovesickness in the Middle Ages. The 'Viaticum' and its Commentaries. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990.

This study of medieval medical views of lovesickness stemming from Constantine the African's chapter on love in his eleventh-century translation/paraphrase of Ibn al-Jazzar's Zad al-musafir into Latin (Viaticum), and the ensuing commentary tradition, is, especially in two major respects, truly exemplary. First, because of its interdisciplinarity, and second, because it is based upon painstaking manuscript research. Part Two (179-265) offers annotated working editions of Constantine's chapter in the Viaticum and the commentaries on it by Gerard of Berry (c. 1200, Paris), Egidius (Giles of Portugal? c. 1220), Peter of Spain (later Pope John XXI, in two versions, c. 1250) and the physician, Bona Fortuna (c. 1300-1320, Montpellier?). Part One (3-176) consists of eight interpretative chapters: the first, on the background of passionate love in antique and early