

times, places, or contexts was it considered a private sanctuary or a public institution?

Another issue raised by these essays is the notion of power in suffering or self-abnegation. Both Joan Ferrante's study of the roles women play in medieval literature and those they adopt in their own writings, and (more explicitly) Elaine Hansen's reading of Chaucer's *Griselda*, assert the possibility of power through self-denial and patient endurance of oppression. This concept will seem, no doubt, repugnant to many modern feminists and very much like grasping at straws to those unsympathetic to feminist scholarship. It is, nonetheless, quite a commonplace in medieval texts. The authors' use of it here, however, remains unsatisfying in several ways. First, one obviously needs to consider this theme in relation to the Christian tradition. Second, if we look more broadly at victory through suffering in Christianity, we need to consider men's uses of this source of empowerment as well as women's. Did men and women in the Middle Ages draw differently upon this tradition? Did their use of it change over the course of the Middle Ages? Did this route to empowerment become more specifically feminine by the late Middle Ages?

The rich variety of questions raised by these essays is an indicator of the lively scholarship which informs the collection. The editors provide an excellent introduction, placing the work of the contributors in theoretical context and setting out important issues which are and are not treated in the essays. The collection also provides a valuable resource for teaching: these essays could be profitably employed in seminars and used to integrate women's issues into survey courses. Women and Power in the Middle Ages is, in short, a provocative as well as useful compendium of recent scholarship.

*Maureen C. Miller, Hamilton College*

Carolyn Dinshaw, Chaucer's Sexual Politics. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989

A learned, engaging, and useful book, Carolyn Dinshaw's Chaucer's Sexual Politics should be welcomed by both Chaucerians and many other readers interested in the history of gender and the ongoing project of interpreting canonical male authors with feminist questions in mind. Dinshaw situates her reading of Chaucer in the context of a traditional assumption about the gendered nature of literary activity: namely, the pervasive and influential idea that the written text is a woman, the reader/interpreter a man. Careful to resist the totalizing moves for which she critiques patriarchal hermeneutics, Dinshaw notes from the outset that this historically influential metaphor reflects only one of several models of gendered reading, and is not in itself a static or seamless tradition (for example, she details distinctions between Pauline theories and Jerome's "more subtle" thinking about the text as the female body). At the same time, she persuasively argues for the continuity of patriarchal hermeneutics from Augustine to Levi-Strauss and Lacan. She uncovers telling presuppositions about gender underlying modern textual editing practices as well as in the two apparently opposing schools of twentieth-century criticism represented by D. W. Robertson and E. Talbot Donaldson. For all their differences, as she astutely observes, both of these influential medievalists "perform 'masculine' readings...while each critic implies that his reading is finally neuter and normative" (29).

According to Dinshaw, Chaucer himself stands at least partially outside this tradition of sexual politics, in a position from which he both exposes the consequences of its discourses on “lived lives,” male and female, and imagines alternatives. Her study is organized in such a way as to suggest a developmental poetics illustrating this point. In three early chapters Dinshaw examines texts where, she contends, male narrators figure the act of “reading like a man.” In the first of these, Troilus and Criseyde, she finds Chaucer delineating the different but equally masculine responses of three characters, Pandarus, the narrator, and Troilus; from the reductiveness of the poem’s close, among other things, she infers the poet’s critique of the totalizing impulse that all three men sooner or later exhibit in their efforts to control Criseyde. The poem affords us, then, what Dinshaw reads as a “denaturalizing” perspective, viewing gender as a “catalog of postures” and taking in this way the first step in any feminist analysis (29-30). Criseyde’s interior monologue in Book II, moreover, may hint at a positive alternative to men’s reading, one that resists a monological closure excluding what is different or other and posits instead a reading “that keeps the whole in view” and attends to “every word” (54-55). Turning to The Legend of Good Women in the next chapter, Dinshaw finds no such alternative; here, instead, the narrator’s “flight into security and control” (66) — his reading, again, “like a man” — threatens to stop literary activity altogether. In The Man of Law’s Tale, we are able to see once more the limits of the masculine postures that define the male narrator when we ourselves read not like a man, but, according to Dinshaw’s characterization, like a woman: attending to contradictions and problems that are only partially repressed in the text, and in this case focusing especially on the narrator’s attempted exclusion of stories about tyrannical women and mother-son incest.

That which has been silenced and repressed, the Other, the woman, is precisely what is at last given voice, Dinshaw believes, in two subsequent works she considers: the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale and the Clerk’s Tale. Viewing the Wife as representative of a feminine alternative to patriarchal hermeneutics, Dinshaw associates the character’s strategy with Irigaray’s notion of mimicry, the self-conscious assumption of the feminine role in order to make visible what the role was designed to cover up, “a possible operation of the feminine in language” (quoting Irigaray, 115). The end of the Wife’s Tale, Dinshaw suggests, does indeed express a male fantasy, the recuperation of the feminine within patriarchal discourse, but she argues that this is not a bad fantasy; it seeks to respect both the male reader and the feminine as read, its end is not “purely masculine gratification,” and the text is able through the Wife’s deafness to “register the toll taken on the feminine corpus” (117). Similarly, in the Clerk’s Tale the male narrator critiques previous translations of (i.e., “turnings away” from) the female character, and his Griselda is able to tell us what it feels like to be a figure of speech. In both the Wife’s Prologue and Tale and the Clerk’s Tale, Dinshaw argues that Chaucer’s impersonation of female characters should be seen as a “‘feminine’ poetic strategy” (154), insofar as impersonation entails a double reading, an invocation of both absence (the woman who is impersonated) and presence (the impersonation). In her final chapter, Dinshaw turns to the Pardoner as the ultimate figure of resistance to patriarchal, oppositional thinking. This is a character, she maintains, who upsets gender categories, follows the logic of fetishism, and at the same time records the pain of his experience, of being constructed by theories of development that posit subjectivity on the loss of the mother’s body. The

Pardoner's Tale finally leaves us with a poetic based not on defining woman as lack, but on the body of Christ as the ground of "absolute Presence" (183).

Read as part of the current discussion among feminists about how we as writers and readers can interrupt the perceived continuities of patriarchal hermeneutics, this book should spark lively debate. Not everyone will agree, I suspect, with Dinshaw's readiness to assign control over contradictions and gaps in the text to the figure of the knowing, unified, empathic male author or, concomitantly, with where and how she draws the line between narrator and author. The equation of Chaucerian irony and ambiguity with a "'feminine' poetic strategy" merits fuller discussion; as it stands, it may not satisfy those who worry that the male writer's appropriation of feminine positions does not serve the interests of actual females. And if Chaucer finally turns away, as Dinshaw argues, from the human body to a poetics grounded only in the body of Christ, where does this leave the embodied woman reader? Chaucer's Sexual Poetics seeks to write Chaucer into the history of feminist theory and celebrates the author for his ability to mark "the flexibility and complexity with which language and literary acts, gender, and power are interrelated" (9). To me, these words more certainly describe Dinshaw's own aims and insights. The persistence and intelligence with which she attends to and fleshes out the category of gender in her historical reading of patriarchal hermeneutics makes this study a resource for medieval feminists, and her comprehensive placement of Chaucer in this context should help to persuade even Chaucerians uninterested in feminist theory that they can no longer ignore or readily answer all of the questions it poses.

*Elaine Tuttle Hansen, Haverford College*

## REPORTS



### MEDIEVAL WOMEN: WORK, SPIRITUALITY, LITERACY & PATRONAGE

(University of York, September 10-12, 1990)

Conference organizers: Felicity Riddy, Jonathan Goldberg,  
Amanda Lillie, Peter Biller (University of York)

(A brief report: further comments are invited)

SIXTY or more "Medieval Women" identified themselves as such when they took their places in the dining hall of York University's Derwent College for three days in September and thus were distinguished from the other diners at tables which were labelled "International Befrienders." The two categories, quite obviously socially constructed, are not, of course, mutually exclusive and nor were they at the York conference, which was marked by its friendly and cooperative atmosphere. The program of papers read at the conference (listed below) reflected the organizers' commitment to