

of leadership, particularly in artistic patronage, and those from Southern France, where female rule was more accepted, had long intermarried with the Spanish royal houses.

Diane Reilly  
Indiana University



**Sandy Bardsley. *Venomous Tongues: Speech and Gender in Late Medieval England.* (The Middle Ages.) University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. Pp. 214.**

**T**he identification and legal persecution of overly vocal and disruptive individuals (usually women), has been taken to be quintessentially a manifestation, like the witch craze and Puritanism, of a “crisis” of order in early modern England. Scholars as distinguished as David Underdown and Martin Ingram have employed the zealous prosecution of scolds as a “poster child” of sorts for the dysfunctionality and anxiety of the early modern English. Marjorie McIntosh’s *Controlling Misbehavior in England, 1370-1600* (1998) overturned such studies by revealing that concern about, and prosecution of,

scolds was in fact a late medieval development that can be traced back to the early fourteenth century. Sandy Bardsley’s *Venomous Tongues: Speech and Gender in Late Medieval England* fills the void in scholarship McIntosh’s book created and demonstrates skillfully why scolding was, in fact, a typically medieval concern.

*Venomous Tongues*, which claims a broad-ranging focus on “sins of the tongues” rather than just scolding, divides quite naturally into three pairs of chapters. The first two place scolding in the evolving discourse of sins of the tongue. What began as a fashionable subject of sermons, during the fourteenth century was laicized and popularized by alarmist authorities responding to both the economic upheaval associated with the Black Death and the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. Apprehension about the disruptive potential of peasant voices manifested itself in the courts with the emergence of scold prosecutions. Royal appropriation of jurisdiction over certain types of defamation, the emergence of treason by words, and the criminalization of barratry (bringing false claims against a person), similarly expressed the desire to suppress the voices of the lower ranks, as did the

decline of hue raising, a previously popular and inexpensive form of initiating a criminal indictment. Concerns about order were not merely class-based; gender also played a crucial role. Drawing on art and a wide range of literature, Bardsley shows that fears about the unruly speech of women dominated the discourse.

Women also dominated the courtroom. Chapters 3 and 4 contrast the medieval discourse of men's and women's voices as well as their respective rates of participation in the courts in unlawful raising of the hue, defamation, scolding, swearing, blasphemy, and muttering (being disruptive in court). Not only did women appear in greater numbers, but also men who were vocally disruptive ran the risk of being considered womanly.

The last two chapters contain the meat of the study. Bardsley examines patterns of scolding, employing 600 cases drawn from across late medieval England. While emphasizing the "extreme flexibility of the label" (122), she does, nonetheless, identify some recognizable traits. Scolds were more likely to be single or married women, rather than widowed; they were more likely to be poor than well-off; and they were more likely to be involved in feuds between

families or in other petty crimes than those "who stayed completely out of trouble" (122). Bardsley quite astutely cautions that because "prosecutions of scolds could wax and wane significantly within a single jurisdiction over time," the strongest conclusion one might draw is that the prosecution of scolds was guided by the interests of powerful local individuals who manipulated the elasticity of the term to target those whom they considered a threat to local order.

There is much to praise about Bardsley's work. McIntosh showed that scold prosecutions originated in the Middle Ages. Bardsley explains *why*. By tying speech crimes to the growing discourse of sins of the tongue, Bardsley links seemingly unrelated phenomena. Scolding, defamation, treason by words, unlawful raising of the hue are all offenses that make much more sense when studied together. Moreover, her work contributes substantially to the debate over the late Middle Ages as a "golden age" for women. Adopting Judith Bennett's theory of "patriarchal equilibrium," Bardsley highlights that arguments about the increased economic, and thus social, clout of women are "built on a house of cards" (9). While the post-plague world may have witnessed some

improvements to the status of women, equally negative changes, like the growing prosecution of vocal women, worked to maintain women's relative subordinate position to men.

Serious flaws in scope and methodology, however, mar Bardsley's potent insights. The extent of the book's pretensions is problematic, leading Bardsley merely to skim the surface of some crucial subjects. Compounding this problem, her archival research is focused entirely on scolding; for other speech crimes, she relies on a handful of printed sources and the works of other scholars, sometimes leading her to risky conclusions. Bardsley's discussion of defamation, a well-documented offense with a shared jurisdiction between ecclesiastical and royal courts, presents a prime example of the difficulties of this approach. The simple fact that Bardsley neglects R.H. Helmholz's critical work on defamation (1985)<sup>1</sup> in her opening historiography demonstrates that this book is not really about all sins of the tongue. Nevertheless, Bardsley argues boldly in favor of the fifteenth-century "feminization of defamation," effected at the hands of the church courts (80). This conclusion rests on an oddly eclectic array of eight printed sources drawn from the

ecclesiastical courts, with no coherent geographical focus, in which the vast majority of her sources span the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and throughout which she makes no attempt to differentiate between *ex officio* and instance jurisdiction. Given her records, it is not at all surprising that she sees dramatic rises in figures for the fifteenth century! She advises against drawing rash conclusions about scolding based on patchy evidence, yet is willing to make big, but tenuous, claims about defamation in the church based on much less evidence. Defamation is simply one example. Although Bardsley perceptively ties treason to scolding, she presents no original research and does not even seem to be aware of the only historical study specifically focused on the subject (I.D. Thornley's 1917 article in the *English Historical Review*).<sup>2</sup> Bardsley's book would have been better served with a narrower focus on scolding and its context and with a narrower, more accurate statement of its aims.

Bardsley presents herself as a social historian of the law. This is not at all an easy field to negotiate. More often than not, social historians of the law are accused of being too legal-minded for social historians, yet insufficiently legal-minded for legal historians. In

*Venomous Tongues*, Bardsley works hard to fashion a book that social historians will find accessible. Her handling of the literary material, in particular, is highly original and should be commended. It is hard to imagine, however, that this work will pass muster with legal historians. The huge body of work by legal historians on the pivotal nature of the fourteenth century as an era of legal change is absent entirely from the text. Many of the developments that Bardsley identifies here are mirrored in other changes in the law during a period in which England, and Europe in general, was becoming more conscious of the need for individual accountability. This more specialized perspective is indispensable in order to present a more balanced and coherent argument. Without it, Bardsley's work remains interesting, but not compelling.

Sara Butler  
Loyola University

#### END NOTES

1. R. H. Helmholz, ed. *Select Cases on Defamation to 1600* (London: Selden Society Publications, vol. 101, 1985).
2. I. D. Thornley, "Treason by Words in the Fifteenth Century," *English Historical Review* 32 (1917): 556-61.



Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, eds. *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2006. Pp. xvii + 508.

The selective reading that is the fate of most essay collections would do poor service to *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages*, a title which operates on a number of levels. The essays are presented in pairs, "Dialogues," with the second essay of each pair constructed as a conscious response to the first (although the second essay often moves into other territory as well). "Dialogues" also refers to women's literary relationships and conversations as revealed in a variety of texts that are discussed in the essays.

The "reading" of the subtitle also functions multivalently, as the medieval women under discussion are readers, but they are also being read. The fluid and sometimes contested meanings of "reading" and "writing," especially as they relate to medieval women's experience is a focus, overt or implied, in each essay. Linda Olson provides a thorough overview of the questions of female literacy, including women