

*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

who heard and discussed texts read aloud (but who could not technically “read”). A number of the essays discuss the difficulty of defining “writing” as it may or may not apply to women: how can we—and should we—try to disentangle the tasks of composing, revising, and copying? Mark Vessey, in his dialogue with Catherine Conybeare on Augustine’s correspondence with women, provides the traditional view that male scribes gave literary shape to their female correspondents’ ideas (p. 82), while Conybeare argues for the women’s own subjectivity and “authority” (p. 62). In one of the most engaging of the collection’s dialogues, Nicholas Watson and Felicity Riddy thoroughly disagree about the level of *auctoritas* that can be claimed for Margery Kempe in the composition of her *Book*. Taken as a whole, the collection reveals the high level of textuality of the women and cultures under discussion, whether or not they could “read” or “write.”

The essays are arranged chronologically beginning with Augustine (as so much medieval scholarship does). Unfortunately, the collection then moves straight to the twelfth century providing the mistaken impression that there were no “reading women” between late Antiquity and the

High Middle Ages. After this jump, Mary Jane Morrow’s analysis of Anselmian prayer-texts in the twelfth-century Shaftesbury Psalter (BL MS Lansdowne 383) leads her to an exciting, if conjectural (as David N. Bell remarks in his response), argument about literary sharing between religious men and women who saw themselves “as having similar social standing through recognition of shared work, common interests, and even friendship” (98). Her close readings of Anselm’s letters to Abbess Eulalia and of the Psalter texts and illuminations show a relationship of “mutually supportive collegueship” rather than a superior male teacher instructing an inferior female learner. Bell expands upon Morrow’s discussion of the Shaftesbury nuns’ Latin literacy. He makes the important point that the Shaftesbury Psalter was a “collective and liturgical” book while the later Books of Hours more commonly associated with literate women are “personal, private, individualistic” (118).

C. Stephen Jaeger and Giles Constable’s fascinating dialogue about the attribution of the *Epistolae Duorum Amantium* to Heloise and Abelard, with Jaeger arguing for and Constable against, will be very useful as a teaching

tool. Either essay, separately, would be entirely convincing to anyone not a specialist in twelfth-century Latin literary culture. As a pair, they force any reader to make an individual decision about this scholarly puzzle.

Alison Beach details the literary culture of a house for nuns to show that “Women wrote some—and possibly many—of the anonymous sermons from twelfth-century Admont” (p. 169). Beach shows that the literate and literary religious woman was not exceptional in the culture of the nunnery. Most strikingly, Beach advocates for a “paradigm shift” to view such women as unexceptional, pointing out that there is now evidence for so many “atypical” women that they probably were not as exceptional as we have assumed (p. 196). John van Engen’s response adds to Beach’s call for a paradigm shift arguing that the exceptional women we do celebrate emerged from a culture where high levels of female literacy were standard. Together, Beach’s and van Engen’s essays necessitate a reworking of assumptions about literacy and gender relations on the continent in the twelfth century.

Alcuin Blamires and Barbara Newman’s dialogue on female and feminine intelligence—*ingenium*—seeks to clarify the

ways in which women and their intelligence were portrayed throughout the period. Blamires is at his best in individual readings and word studies of Malory, Chaucer, Gower, Christine de Pizan, and others, but his overly broad topic leaves him only with the halfhearted conclusion that “the creative intelligence of women remained an open matter in the Middle Ages” (226). Newman asks some very good questions about Blamires’ essay and the topic as a whole. She makes provocative connections between the historical or literary figures that Blamires discusses and the very wise, very ingenious *figurae* of Wisdom, Truth, or Philosophy. Blamires and Newman address secular texts reminding us, in a volume devoted mainly to religious literary culture, that women read for reasons other than religious devotion.

Four essays discuss women and the feminine in Lollard discourse and belief. While some modern scholars have hoped to find in Lollardy a gender revolution as well as a theological one, Fiona Somerset’s meticulous reading of the Walter Brut trial documents shows “why Lollardy was not hospitable to women’s learning” (257). Kathryn Kerby-Fulton reads those documents through a more continental lens, connecting Brut’s ideas to the Free Spirit

and other European movements. Alfred Thomas' discussion of a little-known fifteenth-century Bohemian poem, "The Wycliffite Woman," provides basic information (including an essential English translation of the full text) about the migration of Lollardy into Eastern Europe and its mingling with Hussitism. Thomas and Dyan Elliot both provide welcome insight into the text's connections among female heresy, female teaching, and female sexual predation.

Katherine Zieman and Margot E. Fassler engage in a wonderful dialogue about the *Sermo Angelicus* of Birgitta of Sweden. Zieman argues that the Bridgittine Office "provided a text of divine origin that validated the women's community in particular" (308) while Fassler points out that based as it was on the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin, the Bridgittine Office was not as theologically or intellectually challenging as the full Benedictine Office (p. 337). Their work will inform both growing interest in Birgitta and her textual legacy and the complex relations between women and liturgical performance (see, for instance, Anne Yardley's 2006 *Performing Piety*).

Elizabeth Schirmer and Steven Justice focus on issues of

subjectivity in late medieval English women's devotional reading. Four essays about Margery Kempe end the collection. The dialogue between Watson and Riddy (referenced above) precedes Genelle Gertz-Robinson's and David Wallace's essays contrasting Kempe's preaching with that of Anne Askew. These break the barrier into the early modern, with Wallace arguing that the connections between the two women ultimately display a "long (very long) Middle Ages" that calls into question our modern penchant for periodization.

The collection interrogates our preconceived notions of periodization, literacy, authorship, subjectivity, and a host of other issues. This enormous and enormously learned volume will be of major importance to any scholars working on the individual texts and cultures discussed in the essays. As a whole, the dialogues throughout provide an overarching view of medieval women's literacy and literary engagement as widespread, substantial, collegial, collaborative, and notoriously hard to define.

Mary Dockray-Miller  
Lesley University

