

Katherine Kong. *Lettering the Self in Medieval and Early Modern France.* Gallica 17. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010. Pp. 286. ISBN: 9781843842316.

KATHERINE KONG'S book is an erudite analysis of the deployment of the medieval *ars dictaminis* in the medieval and early modern period to (re)construct and (re)fashion the self. In the age of texting and e-mailing, a study of the medieval art of letter writing seems particularly relevant. (See Derek G. Ross's article "Ars Dictaminis Perverted: The Personal Solicitation E-Mail as a Genre" in *The Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 2009, 39.1: 25-41.) Kong's study covers a vast period of time, from the early twelfth century to the late sixteenth century. She looks in particular at the letters (and other epistolary-themed or influenced writings) of Baudri of Bourgueil and Constance of Angers; Abelard and Heloise; Christine de Pizan and the *querelle du Roman de la rose*; Marguerite de Navarre and Guillaume Briçonnet; and Michel de Montaigne and Etienne de la Boétie. Kong explores how the strict rules of the medieval *ars dictaminis*, rather than constricting the expression of self, opened up a space where rhetorically skilled authors could play with epistolary scripts to experiment "with the boundaries of established subject positions, investing letter writing with creative, transformative possibility" (17). Kong's exploration of medieval and early modern epistolarity fits nicely into the growing body of scholarship on and interest in the history of letter writing. (See, for example, Carol Poster and Linda Mitchell, *Letter-Writing Manuals and Instruction from Antiquity to Present*, 2007; and Joan Ferrante's ever-expanding Epistolae website of medieval women's letters in Latin.)

Chapter 1 looks at Abbot Baudri of Bourgueil and Constance, a nun in the convent of Le Ronceray, who exchanged a number of letters between 1096 and 1106 that, Kong argues, "show how epistolary positions can be deployed to productive effect, creating new and specifically epistolary ways of thinking about and expressing the self" (15). Kong demonstrates how a sequestered nun like Constance could use the scripts of the *ars dictaminis* to explore subject positions not open to her in the convent, that of friend, lover, and learned author.

Chapters 2 and 3 offer nuanced re-readings of the letters of Heloise and Abelard and the epistolary writings of Christine de Pizan. These chapters build on the work of previous scholars to offer new insights into how Heloise and Christine used epistolary forms to authorize their voices and transform their rhetorical, if not their actual, selves. For example, Kong uses Martin Irvine's work on the models for Heloise and Abelard's letters (Seneca and Jerome, respectively) to further her arguments about how Heloise uses letters to perform

a transformation of self from grieving wife to obedient student, at least rhetorically. Kong's analysis of Christine's letters and epistolary works comes on the heels of recent French and English editions of the letters of the "Querelle du *Roman de la rose*" allowing more scholars and students access to the letters Kong analyzes in Chapter 3. (See *Le Débat sur le Roman de la Rose*, trans. Virginie Greene, 2006; *Debating the Roman de la rose*, ed. Christine McWebb, 2007; and the *Debate of the Romance of the rose*, ed. and trans. David F. Hult, 2010).

One issue with chapter 3 is its lack of explicit engagement with current feminist theories. Kong refers to Christine's strategic essentialism without adequately defining her use of this loaded and contested theoretical term and, at times, appears to misuse it. In a similar fashion, Kong argues for Christine's understanding of her relationship with Queen Isabeau as based on sameness and difference which seems to beg for a nod to current theories of intersectionality of race, gender, and class; in particular, here, how differences in social status complicate the relationship between the two women. Nonetheless, Kong does implicitly evoke these theories and adds to a feminist understanding of Christine whose work may "not lend itself to a modern notion of feminism," but who "suggests that what is determinative of identity as a writer is the practice of a set of behaviors, not biological accident" (147).

In the final two chapters of the book, Kong moves to the early modern period and the ways that early modern authors continue to use the medieval *ars dictaminis* to explore constructions of the self. In chapter 4, she examines Marguerite de Navarre's early sixteenth-century correspondence with her spiritual advisor, Guillaume Briçonnet. She looks in particular at how Marguerite's construction of spirituality and self in her letters prefigures "her later work in different literary genres, in which she continues to grapple with spirituality, the effects of rhetoric, and how it might articulate the needs of a pre reform self" (153) and how "letters enable Marguerite to inhabit roles unavailable to her in 'real' life" (172), such as that of humble student. At times, chapter 4 assumes too much knowledge of sixteenth-century politics on the part of the reader, but otherwise it is a fascinating analysis.

Chapter 5 focuses on two sixteenth-century, male correspondents, Michel de Montaigne and Etienne de la Boétie, who use femininity/Woman as a nexus against which to define their friendship. In Montaigne's essay "De l'amitié" (dedicated to La Boétie), he states explicitly that a woman has never achieved true friendship, either with another woman or with a man. But, Kong argues, his primary purpose here is not to denigrate women, but to celebrate his friendship with La Boétie through this rhetorical construction of Other. Both authors

“show how gender [both their own and that of Woman] can be deployed strategically to achieve specific ends” (193), here the construction of ideal male friendship. Ultimately, both men’s writings define “friendship as learned, humanist, necessarily gendered, misogynist, and above all, epistolary” (212).

Although Kong claims that she is not accusing the real Montaigne of misogyny (see note 5, 192), she does offer an interesting analysis of his dedicatory epistles to Madame de Grammont and Michel de L’Hôpital that seems to do just that. Montaigne dedicates La Boétie’s writings to both of them (La Boétie died in 1563 at the age of 32, leaving behind his grieving friend Montaigne). To Madame de Grammont, Montaigne dedicates La Boétie’s love sonnets. To the Chancellor of Paris, he dedicates La Boétie’s poems on civic duty and the obligations of friendship. The differences in the dedicatory letters and poems chosen speak to a possibly real attitude on the part of Montaigne towards women and their ability to appreciate literature and achieve friendship.

Kong states in her conclusion that “[o]ne of the unspoken goals of *Lettering the Self* has been to demonstrate women’s participation in premodern literary letters and specifically in Latin literary culture” (239). Kong’s study achieves this goal and contributes to the ever-growing body of scholarship on medieval and early modern women’s literary production and the obstacles (both rhetorical and social) that they faced.

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