

Bartlett's study is an enterprising and lively book in many ways, and its breezy and energetic style will engage readers with an important body of texts which still remain closed books to many students and teachers interested in the theory and history of women's reading and writing. I welcome the increased attention it will solicit for an area where there is much to be explored, and many of its ideas deserve further discussion. But some of the work that should have been done in this book will also be required: too much of the argument fails to carry conviction or does not advance beyond speculation, and too much of the documentation is inadequate and sometimes misleading. The minor corrections needed are excessive in number: the misquotation of manuscript numbers would, for instance cost anyone relying on the book a lot of lost time, and it is a pity that the reader is not directed to more recent information on the texts and manuscripts of women's late medieval literary culture in Britain. Doubtless pressure for fast publication from theses is the villain of the piece, but it is most regrettable that a book which in scope and enterprise could have constituted a major contribution to the history of women's reading in late medieval England should fall victim to it.

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, 1978); Judith P. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> See Bella Millett, "Women in No Man's Land: English Recluses and the Development of Vernacular Literature in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries," in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 86-103.

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Deery Kurtz, "Mary of Oignies, Christine the Marvelous, and Medieval Heresy," *Mystics Quarterly* 14 (1988), 186-96.

<sup>4</sup> Neil R. Ker, *Medieval Manuscripts of Great Britain* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1941; 2nd ed., 1964); Andrew G. Watson, *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain: Supplement to the Second Edition* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1987). See further a *A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles*. Volume IV, *Early Gothic Manuscripts, II, 1250-1285*, by N. J. Morgan (London: Harvey Millar, 1988); Volume V, *Gothic Manuscripts, 1285-1385*, 2 vols., by Lucy F. Sandler (London: Harvey Millar and Oxford University Press, 1986); Volume VI, *Later Gothic Manuscripts*, by Kathleen L. Scott (London: Harvey Millar and Oxford University Press, forthcoming).



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Constable, Giles, *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought*.  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Pp. 423. 30 illustr.

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As the title of this book suggests, Giles Constable's *Three Studies* is not a volume unified by one systematic thesis but rather three separately developed topics: medieval interpretations of Mary and Martha, the ideal of the imitation of Christ,

and the orders of society. The Preface claims that the common theme will be “the changes in religious life and spirituality in the eleventh and twelfth centuries” (xi), also the focus of Constable’s recent *Reformation of the Twelfth Century (1070-1130)*. However, *Three Studies* actually has a broader scope, stretching back to late antiquity and forward to the early modern period. In doing so, the book loses its historical focus and becomes simply a compendium of references to the three topics, with no discernible overarching thesis.

The longest section (140 pp.) concerns medieval interpretations of the biblical figures of Mary and Martha. A semi-coherent narrative about the two sisters was woven by medieval commentators from diverse biblical passages (including Luke 10:38-42; John 12; Matt. 26:6-12; Luke 7:37-38; Luke 8:2; Mark 14:3-9 and 16:1-11). Mary and Martha of Bethany were the sisters of Lazarus, raised from death by their friend Jesus. According to the medieval narrative, Mary had anointed Jesus during life and death with a precious ointment and was conflated with the sinner, Mary Magdalene, from whom Jesus had cast out devils. Constable, however, is less interested in this medieval “historical” narrative than in Mary and Martha as *figurae*, or allegorical types, in exegetical writing where they represented alternative modes of spiritual existence: Martha was associated with the active life of service, while Mary modeled the contemplative life.

In tracing the history of ideas about the two sisters, Constable emphasizes the presence of varying interpretations and argues only for “changes in tendency and emphasis within a tradition going back almost to the origins of Christian thought” (14). The tendency until the late eleventh century was to see the spiritual roles of the two as complementary or sequential, rather than as exclusive alternatives. Both Augustine and Gregory the Great, for example, saw Martha’s life as the positive temporal necessity which prepares for Mary’s life of eternal good. For such thinkers, “all life on earth was mixed” (68).

Constable posits the “growing prestige of action” (42) in the eleventh century. It was fashionable to describe good women as combining the virtues of Mary and Martha, and male leaders—bishops and abbots—were also praised for combining the practical and the theoretical. The distinction between the two sisters was emphasized primarily in monastic discourse, where Mary as a type of the hermit or monk’s life was preferred to Martha, who represented the secular clergy or laity. Polemicists for the new religious orders like the Cluniacs and the Cistercians also emphasized the merits of Mary’s contemplative over Martha’s active life. However, other theorists such as Innocent III, drawing on Martha’s increased prestige, argued that deeds or works were more praiseworthy in some circumstances. Martha’s selfless charity could seem more meritorious than Mary’s selfish withdrawal from society.

In the late Middle Ages, spiritual writers usually took the mystical Mary as their ideal, while reformers also asserted her superiority in faith over Martha's works. Meister Eckhart was one exception; he reversed the views, seeing Martha's action as close to God. Other devotional writers like Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, Bridget of Sweden, and Jean Gerson argued yet differently for the mixed life. Constable points out that it was not only male religious administrators who referred to themselves as Marthas; the beguines and Sisters of the Common Life also called themselves Martha to emphasize their active lives.

Constable briefly notes a further development in which the legends around each sister became more important than their paired allegorical roles. Mary Magdalene's function as exemplary penitent sinner "all but swamped her representation as the sister of Martha" (122), and Martha herself took on independent prominence as responsible "advisor, administrator and housewife working in the service of men as well as of God" (123).

Thus, Constable's compendium of interpretations shows that the assessments of each sister and of their relationship depended in part on the interpreter and the intended audience for the text. However, this first section of the book is lacking in substantive analysis of the cultural role of representations. To provide such an analysis, Constable would need to engage explicit theories of ideology. He prefers instead to make his observations about meaning incidental to the assemblage of data; his historical survey is not structured around the ideological functions of the semiotically paired figures of Mary and Martha, and its conclusion remains oddly vague and ahistorical: "Every generation, almost since the beginning of Christianity, has tried to fit the story of Mary and Martha to its needs and to find in it a meaning suited to the Christian life of its time. . . ." (141).

Even as an assemblage of data about Mary and Martha, the volume is sadly lacking. It focuses almost exclusively on the exegetical tradition, usually Latin, slighting other narrative traditions such as those found in sermons (where Mary was often a preacher and leader of the apostles) or conduct literature (where different moralizations of the sisters were offered). The drama from the twelfth through the fifteenth century, which Constable ignores totally, developed elaborate scenes about Mary Magdalene, Martha, and Lazarus in which they are portrayed as members of the wealthy and privileged classes, modeling both desirable and undesirable behaviors. Martha's legendary role as dragon-quelling saint of a Provençal cult is also ignored.

Sections Two (on the idea of imitating Christ) and Three (on the orders of society) also offer intellectual history as survey. In tracing ideas of imitation of Christ, Constable's chronological narrative is smoother but predictable. Early Christian interest centered on transcendence of the human, so Christ's "superhuman qualities" (his roles of king, judge and savior) received emphasis.

The cross was a sign of victory over the devil and death, rather than emblem of suffering. Imitation of Christ meant the recovery of the divine image by men. Constable follows Southern and others in positing the twelfth century as a period when identifying with Christ's humanity became more important than his divinity. Devotion to his human participation in man's salvation was reflected in the visual arts by a more naturalistic representation of his human life and suffering on the cross. Human response emphasized the ethical, imitating good deeds and avoiding evil ones. For those in religious orders, imitation involved poverty, humility, and charity. The late medieval concentration on the suffering physical body of Christ also led to a desire to imitate that suffering, if not through martyrdom then through forms of self-discipline.

Part Two ends with an excursus on *The Imitation of Christ*, a text that Constable calls a wholly derivative and utterly typical statement of themes associated with the topic of imitating Christ. Unfortunately, the same could be said about this section of the book. I found nothing new in his treatment and, even more unsettling, there was a striking avoidance of difficult issues of gender that scholars like Caroline Bynum have tackled. While occasionally citing women mystics who exhibited devotion to Christ's passion or body Constable never takes on the controversial question of what it might mean for a female to "identify with" or "imitate" Christ. Nor does he explore the politics of devotional experience within the changing institution of the later Middle Ages.

Part Three, "The Orders of Society," is the briefest section (90 pg.). It begins on a promising note with the comment that although most scholars have focused on the schema of three orders of society (*oratores, bellatores, laboratores*), there were actually numerous models for medieval social structure (252). Constable notes that the very term *ordo* had both social and sacramental meanings, but that "nearly all social divisions involved some measure of ranking and some were clearly hierarchical and sources of a basis of social stratification" (257)—for example, monks were usually placed above laymen. Again, Constable offers a compendium of alternative models, but virtually no historical argument. He is relatively uninterested in women's place within social categories; his conclusion to a brief discussion is that "Women were not excluded from the orders of society, but their role was subordinate to that of men. They existed primarily in relation to men and were subsumed into the orders which were seen as essentially male" (261).

An appendix surveys the existence of a language for *mediocres*, "contrasted with the people described on one side as great, powerful, rich, noble or best and on the other as little, weak, poor, humble, and low" (342). The appendix puts the question of whether this constituted a "middle class" in our modern sense of the term. Although a range of reference is indicated by the sources Constable

assembles from late Antiquity to the Renaissance, the term *mediocris* seems consistently to indicate a socio-economic category—that is, middling between noble/rich and unfree/poor. While I don't disagree with his hypothesis that these patterns of categorization "laid the basis for the later emergence of the modern concept of the middle class" (360), his argumentation is weak.

In sum, this is a book that cannot be recommended for its historical arguments and has severe limitation even as a data base for the history of ideas. Readers of *MFN* will be especially disappointed on the absence of intellectual engagement with gender issues in discussions of these three promising topics.

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Desmond, Marilyn. *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid*. Medieval Cultures 8. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994. Pp. xiii+296.

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In Marilyn Desmond's work, the title, *Reading Dido*, is the key to her thesis, as the gerund emphasizes reading as an active, rather than passive, engagement with a text. Her study of medieval representations of Dido is organized as a series of medieval confrontations with this potentially dangerous and powerful character. But her aim is more ambitious than simply to catalogue the various Didos created by her medieval readers; Desmond also investigates how the cultural authority of the *Aeneid* creates a particular sort of reader. Backed by a powerful tradition of cultural authority, the *Aeneid* of the university has historically addressed an elite masculine reader who bonds homosocially both with the individual male characters of the text and with the masculine ethos it evokes. As Desmond points out, it is this tradition of reading the *Aeneid* like a man that profoundly shapes the interpretation of Dido through the Middle Ages. Yet Desmond does not suggest that this ideal reader remains impervious to the forces of history, and so she is careful to detail the historical position of each of the Dido-readers, beginning with an awareness of the rhetorical posture each assumes when approaching Dido: "Ovid attempts to read *Aeneid* 4 as Dido might; Augustine, for instance, reads Dido as a boy; Chaucer reads Dido as a loveless male narrator of classical stories; Caxton reads Dido as a compiler and a printer as much as a translator . . ." (19). With its focus on the interaction between the *Aeneid* and its medieval readers, Desmond's book is as much about the construction of the reader of Dido as about the Dido who is constructed by that reader.