

of Petrarch in 1473.) And in spite of the fact that Bronfman entitles the longest chapter of her book "Chaucer's Tale Rewritten," she includes a number of Griseldas clearly based on the pre-Chaucerian continental texts, even though she does not always identify the later versions' sources.

The evidence of artistic and literary history and reception is interrupted by two chapters on a very different kind of reception: the modern critical history of Chaucer's tale alone, divided into "The Marriage Group and the Allegorical Griselda," and "The Clerk's Tale as Religious Tale and Political Commentary." (While levelling the discursive playing field between artistic and critical re-presentation could have some interesting postmodern ramifications, they remain unexamined.) These short but rambling chapters—the former only nine pages of text, the latter ten—offer an incomplete overview of the critical history of Chaucer's tale. Although they might provide an undergraduate in a Chaucer survey with a simplified understanding of some major issues in the criticism of the tale, they are too simplistic for graduate students and instructors.

The brief descriptive summaries of revisions of the Griselda story will titillate scholars studying the reception of any medieval version of the story: Bronfman's book provides its greatest service by simply informing the reader of the existence of such texts as Maria Edgeworth's 1805 novella The Modern Griselda: A Tale, Jules Massenet's opera Griselidis, and a wealth of other redactions.

Even though the book's primary function seems bibliographic, its bibliography is confusingly organized. The volume offers a listing of so-called "primary sources" divided into English language versions of the tale, English "analogues" (from 1888, 1893, and 1965!), and selected illustrations. Boccaccio and Petrarch, along with post-Chaucerian non-English revisers of the tale, are exiled to the bibliography of secondary sources; Le Livre Griseldis is nowhere indexed under its own title.

In short, this book cannot serve the needs of any one imaginable student of the Griselda story, and it might mislead some students new to the Griselda story, but its breadth may make it helpful to many readers.

*Edward Wheatley, Hamilton College*

Lynn Staley. *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania

State UP, 1994. xiii +224pp.

Last summer I was a member of the NEH Institute which juxtaposed Chaucer and Langland, reading the *Tales* in conjunction with *Piers Plowman*. It proved to be a far more productive and illuminating enterprise than one would have suspected. But Chaucer, Langland, and Margery Kempe? Not the usual trinity of literary personages that ordinarily springs to mind. Yet in her book, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, Lynn Staley presents a Margery Kempe as artful a literary strategist, as deft a social commentator, and as astute a political and ecclesiastical critic as her two more celebrated contemporaries. Staley asserts that Kempe's *Book* not only testifies to the religious and The third section of the book, "The Image of Ecclesia," utilizes gender to explicate the

social tensions of late medieval life but also to the confrontations and contradictions between the fictions of ritualized order in church and state and the “inherently radical and modern challenge posed through the Wycliffite system of thought” (xii). The tensions inherent in being a woman in a world where traditional values were being tested and altered are laid bare. More than subjective reflection inhabits the *Book*, Staley posits. Rather, Kempe ultimately provides a different model of social and religious community, that is, of community defined in terms of Christian love rather than status and conformity.

*Dissenting Fictions* is organized into four sections. The first chapter, “Authorship and Authority,” introduces the ways in which Kempe scrutinizes the foundations of fourteenth-century community through “strategies of dissent.” Distinguishing between Margery the central character of her book, and Kempe who writes her, Staley thus posits an author who could manipulate the conventions of devotional prose. Screening herself from direct gaze, Kempe composes a reality “that evinces cracks and fissures that belie by their existence the unity of the English body politic” (9). These strategies should not be seen as “Kempe’s timidity, but rather should be taken as a sign of her awareness that truth-telling demands some form of authorial fashioning” (11). Inheriting a tradition whereby female text is mediated and verified by males, Kempe employs the trope of the scribe to strategically signal both authority and her awareness of social constraint. Kempe, however, Staley insists, remains in full control of her text. Like Chaucer, Kempe “found a way to control scribes by writing them into a work, where they function as keys to authorial strategy and design” (36). Through scribes Kempe “can speak the unspeakable, can raise issues best left alone, can detail the process by which Margery threatens a community that exacts a heavy price for nonconformity, and can finally question the very process by which we invest authority in communal bodies (38).

“Sacred Biography and Social Criticism,” the second essay, examines Kempe’s critiques of communal values and practices through her use of body imagery. The picture that emerges is a community that is “stifling, conformist, mercantile, violent, and superficial” (40). Rejecting material profit, Margery is scorned; “diverging from the communal standards encoded in the rituals involving food, clothing, and marriage” (49), Margery discovers a community unwilling to allow for singularity or alterity. By her assumed clothing, the chastity it depicts, and abstinence from meat, Margery marks her distance from nonconformist values. “If the contemporary model for community was founded on the idea of unity, Kempe offers a picture of society as fragmented by tensions” (56). Reading Margery’s nursing of John Kempe in his final illness, Staley points to the discomfort and dislocation that is aroused on the one hand and significance of their idiosyncratic marital arrangement on the other. Moreover, through her depiction of her marriage Kempe “seems to hint at a conception of Christian community that has its foundations in her recognition that, for better or worse, we are bound to one another” (63). The community that rejects Margery sharply contrasts Kempe’s image of community. “Her treatment of Margery is thus intended to suggest the ways in which her identification with Christ forces her to transgress those very boundaries by which society has excised some from its midst” (71). While identifying with the poor, Kempe, author, “an accepted member of a clearly defined and exclusive social group,” the bankers and capitalists of Lynn, “creates a self whose social liminality is a necessary part of a literary fiction” (76). Her analysis is shrewd, highly selective, and dangerous in a society suspicious and insecure both politically and theologically as a result of Lollard dissent.

controversy surrounding the Lollard's and Kempe's exploration of issues of spiritual authority and represents the slow resistance to authority which is "male, hasty, and harsh" (90). While avoiding calling Kempe a Lollard outright, Staley nevertheless indicates the sympathetic resonance that Wycliffite teachings had for Kempe. Further, through the non-chronological placement of the memories of this female sacred biography, "Kempe locates the text, the written record, in the unstable world of feelings and experience, not in a linear realm of didactic truth...[S]ubjectivity is at once its explicitly proclaimed and its necessarily hidden message" (88). Hinting that authority might be located in the self, Kempe presents a God who preempts male authority and authorizes inner (female) experience. Further, argues Staley, the inner life she forges, while potentially threatening to the organized Church, and therefore heretical, increasingly enables her not only to resist control over her person but also to assert her own purposes in conflicts with those same authorities. "What Margery moves toward is a reliance on Christ that finally obviates the need for obedience to any representative of the earthly priesthood" (113). Going well beyond the boundaries that men have established for women, Margery "is at once a textbook exemplar of late female piety and a reminder of the essential unruliness of the subjective, the feminine, and its fundamental urge to master those authorities who seek to contain what is, finally, uncontainable" (117).

The fellowship that forms around Margery points indeed to a Lollard preacher, deriving authority from private relationship with God. In contrast to an unchristian, authority-obsessed structure which controls access to the Scriptures and their meaning, "Margery herself serves as a figure for translation; she translates into contemporary terms the Christ-like life" (123).

Kempe's Lollard sympathies and their attendant resonances of heresy inevitably link her to more political issues. Since, Staley points out, by the fifteenth century heresy and treason were linked, "to be a Lollard was to be a traitor" (127). This linkage between church and state comprises the backdrop for the last essay in the book, "The English Nation." Anchored in the world of English commerce in such major English towns as Leicester, Bristol, York, and London, Kempe's narrative "dramatizes the ambiguities of some of the conflicts of Henry V's England," and explores the fiction of national unity officially "described as unified by language, religion, and mission" (129). An extremely useful contribution of this essay is Staley's reading of the statutes which preclude the English language from national identity and instead promote the link between the vernacular and heresy, a linkage most pronounced during the reign of Henry V. Further, the 1407 constitutions of Archbishop Arundel make "explicitly the assumption that the subject of translation was pertinent to that of sedition" (131). The credo of John Oldcastle highlights the power of the vernacular to affirm the private self.

Kempe is sensitive to the debate about literacy and the use of the vernacular and she "thoroughly muddies the issue of her own or Margery's literacy" (147). Supposedly understanding only her mother tongue, Kempe transcends the boundaries of language, presenting "an image of a Pentecostal church, whose members are bound together by devotion" (151). Staley resists committing herself to definitive comment about Kempe's literacy, just as she finessed the importance of the scribes in the production of the *Book*. Yet if I read the argument of this book about fictions and screens correctly, it presents this woman as author not only metaphorically or symbolically, but actually as well.

Likewise, although Kempe (and/or Margery) escaped execution for Lollard, and Staley hedges her bets, Kempe's pre-Reformation concerns and criticisms are made evident.

In a final essay Staley concludes, "The *Book of Margery Kempe* bears eloquent testimony to Kempe's ability to employ the conventions of her day in ways that allow her to assess the foundations of English Christian society through narrative prose... It makes most sense when juxtaposed with poems like *Piers Plowman* or the *Canterbury Tales* or to later medieval works like the mystery plays" (171). By inquiring into the fictional strategies Kempe employs in her Book, Staley imbricates Kempe's dissent from the social and spiritual world. Each chapter further insists that Kempe "consistently probes the foundation of our need for or belief in community" (198).

While each essay reworks some of the same material covered previously, each provides intelligent, indeed, some of the most sensible, analysis of Kempe and her *Book* that I have read. Staley balances with fluidity and fluency attention to the social, ecclesiastical, and political conditions of the period with discussions of gender without sacrificing close textual readings. She stretches the limits of Kempe's abilities as author and mystic, abilities which feminist readings have already pushed quite far (e.g. Bynum, Beckwith, Lochrie). In short, after reading this book, one will not think about Kempe in the same way again. Further, it cannot help but facilitate teaching Kempe. Indeed, with or without Chaucer and Langland, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* enlightens not only the world of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, but points to another text with which to enter, understand, and critique it.

*Sandra J. McEntire, Rhodes College*