

Diane Watt. *Medieval Women's Writing: Works by and for Women in England, 1100-1500.* Polity Press, 2007. Pp. viii + 208. ISBN: 978-0-7456-3256-8.

THE IDEA behind this book is very interesting. The book blends two philosophies that one might think irreconcilable. First, the book is directed squarely (although not exclusively) at university students. It is a cheap paperback with only 160 pages of text and with a useful annotated bibliography at the end. These points will surely add to its marketability and will surely encourage students to buy and read it. Second, the book includes the kind of close and original readings of texts that a scholar might normally reserve for a journal article or monograph. The fact that Watt has blended these two seemingly separate activities is wonderful to see—why shouldn't students be given the respect of having new and original research directed straight at them? Overall, Watt certainly succeeds in her ambitious task, although at times (e.g., the Introduction) the sheer number of previous scholarly approaches or the sheer number of points demanding discussion can dazzle the reader. On the one hand, this is to Watt's credit in that she has come up with ways to fit so much material into a short book; on the other hand, perhaps a slightly longer book would have allowed more breadth and space. But this is no doubt a small matter and simply a question of personal preference.

The book has six chapters. First, texts concerning Christina of Markyate are studied, i.e., the St. Albans Psalter and the Latin *Life* of Christina. Next is Marie de France and her literary productions. Then chapter three examines various Lives and Legends of women saints, written from the late tenth to mid-fifteenth centuries, and covering the Old English, Middle English, and French languages. One such text was written by a woman, some were written for women, some were commissioned by women, while others were written by and for men. Chapter four studies Julian of Norwich's writings and the writing culture of which Julian was a part. Chapter five focuses on Margery Kempe and her autobiography and suggests that the autobiography may well have been intended to achieve Margery's canonization. The final chapter examines the Paston letters.

The overall arguments are clear. Watt urges that we expand our definition of medieval textual production away from a focus on the single author. This is important for medieval texts in general, and it is particularly important when it comes to texts and women, since medieval women's involvement in the wide world of textuality was always bound to involve collaboration and connections. This collaboration involved a large range of people, such as authors, audiences,

readers, scribes, secretaries, patrons, recipients, and more. Many of these collaborators were men. Watt's argument will make sense to people thinking in terms of the relational nature of gender—what happens to women will influence what happens to men, and vice versa.

Following Watt's argument about collaboration, one can see the wisdom in the choice of case studies. As far as we know, Christina of Markyate did not write anything; on the face of it, she was a woman whose participation in writing was via being written about. But, through her close study of the St. Albans Psalter and the *Life* of Christina, Watt shows how Christina (with her steadfast devotion to old Anglo-Saxon religious traditions) did in fact influence the types of things that were written about her. Although Christina's voice is never unmediated, Christina's actions did seem to prompt the *Life's* author to focus as he did on Anglo-Saxon resistance to Anglo-Norman innovations. Marie de France had quite a different relationship to writing—we could say that she was more an author in the traditional modern sense. But even she was more a translator than an original composer. On close examination, it is clear that Marie de France was aware of the many collaborations and sometimes unwelcome interferences that were inevitably part of medieval literary production, while she simultaneously produced a metamorphosis of language and authority which showed that translation could be as valid as original composition.

Chapter three, in studying such a wide variety of texts, shows that women's engagement with textuality was not limited to reading or writing. Texts studied include Old English lives of women saints and Clemence of Barking's *Life of St Catherine*. The chapter finishes with a solid study of Osborn Bokenham's *Legends of Holy Women*, which indicates how a male author's writings were influenced by his female patrons and readers. The chapter points out the wide literary networks that extended throughout England and beyond. Networks arise when one person borrows someone else's book, certainly. But networks of intellectual connection also arise when one person reads a text whose author has been reading and influenced by another text—such are the networks whose influence on women is yet to be fully explored. The argument of the Julian of Norwich chapter is that Julian may well have been a solitary, but she was certainly not isolated when it came to literary culture. She was part of a thriving culture of texts, authors, and readers. This textual culture was particularly strong in East Anglia, where there was a keen interest in texts about religious topics.

Chapter five, on Margery Kempe, introduces the literary category of the "secretary." As Watt has argued elsewhere, this kind of secretary was one with access to God (in other words, a person who has been entrusted with secrets),

and scholarship needs to expand the definition of literary collaboration in order to give due credit to this activity and role. Finally, complexities of authorship in the Paston letters (sometimes we have men drafting letters for women, sometimes the extent of collaboration in the letters means it is fruitless to look for a single author) simply remind us of Watt's main point—that medieval literary culture inevitably means dialogue, collaboration, and connections. Watt has shown how such seemingly archetypal “unique women” as Julian and Margery were part of broader cultures of collaboration, and she has convincingly shown that inserting women into the literary canon (or, in the case of Marie de France, Julian, Margery, and the Pastons, keeping them in the canon) need not mean replicating the assumptions of that canon. Watt succeeds in her aim of producing an accessible book that has something (indeed, much) for students and research scholars alike.

Elizabeth Freeman
University of Tasmania