IN HER RECENT study of female figures in medieval German clerical and secular discourses, Karina Marie Ash undertakes an ambitious task: to look at the extent to which a wide array of literary sources reveals what the author claims to be an anxiety, unique to medieval German tradition, about women’s preference for chastity and celibacy over their procreative duty and function as wives and mothers. By examining the treatment of two ideals of femininity—the secular and the religious—in an impressive selection of texts (some canonical, others lesser known), Ash finds a tension between the two and argues that the German literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries reflects this tension stemming from the overall preoccupation with female celibate religiosity. The medieval German texts idealize female secular roles and even recast wifehood in a “quasi-religious” way, thus privileging lay models over clerical ones and offering “idealized solutions to mitigate this conflict” (3).

The study should certainly be commended on the amount of primary material it brings under scrutiny. Its fourteen chapters cover such seminal works as Wolfram von Eschenbach’s Parzival and Willehalm, Hartmann von Aue’s Armer Heinrich and Gregorius, the anonymous masterpiece The Nibelungenlied, and numerous late-thirteenth-century romances, as well as religious and didactic texts. The main goal is to illustrate how different texts tackle the controversial issue of female chastity and celibacy, which, despite its theoretical glorification in patristic works, hagiographies, and other religious texts, was nevertheless perceived to be threatening to social order since it inspired women to reject their procreative social roles and the institution of marriage. About the first third of the book addresses this paradox, which then gives way to an examination of how medieval German texts promote secular solutions for women’s religious aspirations, with the final chapters looking at the texts that show or criticize women’s attempts to fulfill both roles at once and therefore promote secular wifehood as the only true feminine ideal.

While the effort to draw attention to something special happening in medieval German discourses on the subject of femininity is commendable, its execution is, regretfully, not without its problems. On page 211, Ash says: “I would like to review some of the ideals of femininity which surfaced in this work” (my emphasis). The italicized phrase and the title of the work, Conflicting Femininities, create an impression of multiple models co-existing side by side in the disputatious medieval German culture. The study indeed looks at several
roles performed by medieval women, but if by “femininities” the author meant motherhood, wifehood, or the rejection of the former or the latter, or celibacy taken separately, these options by themselves are not obligatorily conflicting or adversarial. They all ultimately fall into two larger categories; and there are only two conflicting types, a fact that the author herself consistently (and somewhat repetitively) emphasizes throughout the study, albeit with variation: the secular and the religious, the profane and the sacred, the procreative and the celibate. To examine only two forms of femininity, the one that follows a path of procreation and sexuality and the other that of chastity and abstinence, is a perfectly legitimate task; but the current title produces an impression of complexity that the monograph does not address.

The author frequently expresses her fear of anachronism, such as “anachronistic projections of [modern interpretation of] misogyny” onto medieval material (213). This concern is particularly strongly voiced in the chapter on Ulrich von Liechtenstein’s Frauenbuch and echoed in the conclusion. It is important to remember that the very fact that some pastoral literature addressed the pressures experienced by medieval women does not disprove the intrinsically misogynous nature of medieval society, just as the seeming defense of women played by the male narrator in Ulrich’s Frauenbuch does not obscure the overall misogynist slant of his text that becomes very clear in his final admonition to his female interlocutor. The very heterogeneity of medieval discourses on femininity is there because of and thanks to the ubiquity and pervasiveness of misogyny stemming from male concerns about female sexuality.

The organization and the style of this book deserve to be mentioned as well. The very choice of fourteen chapters raises a question of whether a more wieldy organization principle could not have been devised. A close look at the titles and the length of some chapters only reaffirms this concern. The last three chapters are each six to eight pages long, making one wonder if it would not have been wiser to find common themes and create a larger unit in which they could have been examined more productively. The chapter on Jüngerer Titurel is well written, but strikingly short. The discussion of Ulrich von Türlin’s Arabel is almost nonexistent compared to that of Ulrich von Türheim’s Rennewart, with which it is grouped. The conclusion is the weakest part of the book: barely three pages long, it is very anticlimactic after all the copious work that has led to it. It also reveals the problem with the title discussed above.

The most frustrating part of this study, however, is its deficient editing. In fact, it is so poor that it deserves to be mentioned in this review. The monograph clearly could and should have benefitted from professional editing or,
at least, from an additional pair of eyes carefully looking over it. Spelling and mere editing errors, such as missing and even run-on words (such as on p. 213), are numerous and exceed what one commonly expects in an average scholarly monograph published by a reputable press. There is even a place where a gap is left between the two commas, suggesting a deletion of a word or even a phrase, left unnoticed (14). Some German cities are translated into English in bibliographic citations (e.g., Munich), while others are not (Köln instead of Cologne, Firenze instead of Florence). Another example of lack of proofreading is the strange and, most likely unintentional, gendered lack of consistency in approaching German and other foreign names. While female names with prepositions de and von get reproduced as English of (Hildegard von Bingen becomes Hildegard of Bingen), male names never undergo such a transformation: Heinrich von Veldeke, Caesarius von Heisterbach, and numerous others remain as such. This tendency becomes particularly striking in the second half of the book, from chapter 8 on (e.g., 114, 116, 208–10, 212, 213). Needless to say, these technical deficiencies are puzzling and even frustrating for the reader. In fact, they diminish the valuable contribution of this work by drawing attention away from its argument. To appreciate the latter, the reader has to make an effort to stay focused despite the frequent distractions of the style.

To sum up: by looking at a variety of discourses, Ash’s book draws attention to the medieval German tradition, which is usually not as widely represented in scholarly literature published in English as medieval English or Old French. The strengths of this study lie in the sheer scope of the material examined and in drawing attention to the German side, which appears to exhibit, to use Ash’s own word, “readaptations” not found among its counterparts in other vernacular cultures. Whether the claim about uniqueness of the German literary tradition is accurate or not, ultimately, the true goal of this study is to illustrate and reaffirm that medieval society was vibrant, non-homogeneous, and combative, full of contradictory discourses and riddled with tensions; that is something the book does achieve.

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