MEALE, Carol C. ed. 1993: *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 17. X + 223 pp. (Hardback £ 30.00).

This volume of nine essays, preceded by an *Introduction* by Carol M. Meale, and containing an *Index of names and titles,* belongs to a series (General Editor: Alastair Minnis) which so far has only published on one other occasion (*The Theatre of Medieval Europe: New Research in early drama*, edited by Eckehard Simon) a collection of studies dedicated to a general topic. This collection as the foreword suggests, is the first such volume to focus on issues such as women's literacy, "the historical evidence of women's activities as writers, patrons and readers", and the representation of women in different types of literary texts "within the specific framework of late medieval Britain". The cultural context in which women were reading, writing or being written about is, indeed, particularly emphasized and very well defined in these stimulating essays, which throw much new and fascinating light on the subject.

Thus Judith Weiss draws our attention to real life examples of powerful women (the two Roheses of Monmouth, the Albinis of Arundel) as possible models for "the surprisingly formidable women" who make their appearance in Anglo-Norman romance, in the well documented study with which the volume opens. When dealing with apparently strong-minded heroines - Josiane, Argentille, Ydoine- she does, however, register scrupulously the extent and the limitations of their activities, thus defining such heroines in terms of their power and their weakness within the context of the narratives they appear in.

Another group of essays centre on the relationship between women and the production of religious texts: thus Bella Millet, after an interesting discussion of what *litteratura* really meant in the Middle Ages, argues that ver-

nacular writings derived ultimately from an oral culture, and then proceeds to examine in some detail what can be known concerning the level of literacy/illiteracy of 12th and 13th century English anchorites, especially women recluses. She then goes on to explore which written vernacular texts may have been aimed specifically at such women recluses, in the belief that "there is some evidence to link (them) with the development of vernacular religious literature" in the period under consideration. Amongst the texts she singles out for special attention are the *Ancrene Wisse*, the Saint Katharine, Margaret and Juliana group, *Hali Meidhad*, the *Sawles Ward* and the "Wooing Group", and she likewise suggests that the *puella* for whom Thomes of Hales wrote his *luue-ron* may have been a recluse rather than a nun as has generally been assumed. The author dedicates her final paragraphs to weighing up the *pros* and the *contras* of assigning female authorship to any of the anonymous vernacular religious writings, and to emphasizing the importance of recluses in general as *solitaries* and hence of being readers rather than listeners, and therefore, promoters of the written word.

Similarly, it is Felicity Riddy's contention that the Vernon Manuscript provides substantial evidence for the existence of a certain kind of female readership for which Chaucer's prioress "can be said to function as a metonym" in the 14th century, and that miracles of the virgin and "the things of God" as commented on by such writers as Ælred of Rievaulx, Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton or William Langland, constituted the staple of such reading. She emphasizes the importance of female influence on Richard Rolle, suggests that women may have been responsible for translating some Latin texts into the vernacular and explores in interesting detail the documentary evidence to prove that in the late 14th and early 15th centuries, some women were actively engaged in procuring, lending, giving and bequeathing religious texts to one another. From women readers to women writers, and a thought-provoking examination of the "marginal cultural space" into which Julian of Norwich comfortably fitted herself, the style of her discourse and

the differences between her attitudes and those of Margery Kempe towards their relationship with the external world.

Women as book owners likewise constitute the subject of Carol M. Meale's own contribution to the volume whose aim is to throw light on "the relationship between laywomen and books in the late Middle Ages". This she does by citing evidence from testaments still extant, generally corresponding to noble or wealthy upper-class families, and which may contain the titles of books bequeathed or donated by or to women. The question of women actually commissioning books is likewise dealt with. As is to be expected, a large proportion of such books were devotional, but Arthurian and other romances, above all in French, are also registered. The documentary evidence here amassed points to the popularity among women of Lydgate's writings, but, surprisingly, there are far fewer references to the works of Chaucer and Gower being in female hands. It is necessary, the author suggests at the end of her fascinating study, to recover far more details concerning medieval women's collective and individual lives, if we are "to understand more fully their engagement with literature, and with books in general".

Women as authors, above all in the late medieval period, are the concern respectively of Julia Boffey and Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, the former dealing with women writers in England, the latter with women writers in Wales. Julia Boffey whose objective is to explore the answers to a series of problematic questions relating to medieval women's literacy, the dissemination of medieval texts and the possibility of assigning anonymous writings to women authors, insists on the need for circumspection when dealing with such subjects. She assesses negatively the possible influence exercised by earlier women writers, Marie de France, for example, and the women hagiographers discussed in the essay by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, and when dealing with possible foreign rôle models for English women writers (Saint Bridget of Sweden, Margarete Porete®) underlines the irony of Christina de Pizan's works being disseminated in English by male translators. In this context, she suggests, extreme caution must be used when applying modern notions of

writing, literature and authorship, to medieval compositions, making her point by analysing in most interesting detail the cases of the writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, and then the Paston and Cely letters, in which, respectively, oral transmission and dictation may have played an important part. We are, however, she suggests, on even less safe ground when dealing with anonymous works, it being well nigh impossible "to deduce the genders of those concerned in the chain of composition and dissemination". Even where a female narrator is implied (*The Good Wife Taught her Daughter),* we may be dealing with a case of dramatic appropriateness rather than a real woman author, although Julia Boffey is willing to admit that there is no certain indication that some treatises of a practical kind could not have been composed by women. The question of the authorship of works supposedly narrated by women, *The Flower and the Leaf*, *The Assembly of Ladies*, for example, and including "women's songs" and the "female" love lyrics in the Findern MS., is then discussed in some detail, the conclusion again being that dramatic appropriateness rather than a woman writer may well be the answer. This carefully argued and very convincing essay is closed by a series of references to instances from the late 15th and early 16th centuries in which women's literacy and authorship may be accepted with conviction, above all in the field of the translation of devotional works, and the less devotional productions included in the so-called Devonshire MS., and the author summarises the positive lessons to be learnt from what at first sight, she admits, might be considered a "gloomy concluding note".

"Research in the field of women's poetry in Welsh", Ceridwen Lloyd - Morgan assures us, "is still … in its infancy": her stimulating and informative essay thus represents a valuable contribution to its growth and development. Contrary to Julia Boffey's contention concerning English anonymous poetry, the author sees the experience reflected in some traditional folk-verses as so "gender specific" that she feels that "Much of the published output of women may be hiding behind the "anonymous" label of poetry of this kind". The names of some sixty-six female poets are registered in the history of

Welsh literature, although some of these may be purely legendary (Inseult!), or the pseudonyms of male poets, and only two were active before 1500, examples of their work being in any case generally very limited. The author offers us interesting information concerning these two writers, the 12th. century poet's daughter, Gwenllian ferch Rhirid Flaidd, and especially the 15th. century Gwerful Mechain, as also concerning the transmission, copying and dissemination of their texts and of Welsh texts in general and the confusion arising from the late manuscript tradition. The oral dimension has traditionally, and still is, we learn, important in Welsh (e. g. the *eistedfodd),* and women's compositions may have tended to be restricted to oral transmission which would explain the scarcity of texts by women writers. Another explanation, the author suggests, is the limited access that women would have to training in the strict metres of Welsh poetry, and it can hardly be a coincidence, therefore, that named women poets up to the 17th. century, with the exception of the fascinating Gwerful Mechain (and even she is supposed to have been the lover of a poet), were wives or daughters of male poets. Conditions for composition would be different for women, and Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan cites examples of women poets from later centuries as possible analogues for earlier women writers, whilst pointing out likewise that there were no female scribes before the 18th. century. What the author summarises for us concerning Gwerful Mechain makes fascinating reading, and it is satisfying to learn that not being dependent on a patron for her living (one advantage of the patriarchal system!), she probably enjoyed greater freedom as regards her choice of themes, which is as wide and sometimes wider than that of her male contemporaries. Although conforming to the forms and themes of the male tradition, her work, says the author, is distinguished by the specifically female viewpoint often expressed, and exemplified in this essay, which ends with a spirited and convincing defence of this able, proficient and versatile woman poet whose "tone varies from light-hearted to *angst*-ridden, from biting satire and anger to gentle fun-poking, from the passionate to the devotional", and who undoubtedly

deserves the place in the Welsh Parnassus which male critics up to now have denied her.

Women as religious writers constitute the subject of Jocelyn Wogan-Browne's essay on Anglo-Norman hagiography in the 12th. and 13th. centuries, in which, before studying three hagiographic texts composed by women, a detailed analysis is offered on the one hand, of Anglo-Norman verse hagiography in general, and on the other, of "nunneries and their cultural traditions" in particular, emphasis being laid on the aristocratic nature and connections of these nunneries, a fact of some consequence for a full appreciation of the hagiographic texts which were mainly produced in such places. Some sixty verse Lives, concerning thirty-six saints, have survived in Anglo-Norman, three of which were written by women, two certainly, and the third, probably, nuns: these are the *Vie seinte Audreåe* by Marie (of Chatteris?) the *Vie de seinte Catherine* by Clemence of Barking and the *Vie d'Edouard le Confesseur* by another nun of Barking. These works are analysed in some detail, attention in the case of the women saints, and of Edward's queen, Edith, being paid to what may be attributable in their characterisation to the sex and situation of their author in comparison with earlier or later versions or analogues by male writers: thus, St. Audrey is presented less passively than in other versions, and her virginity seen as "the foundation of a female religious career", a subject of obvious interest to real life Anglo-Norman patronesses and foundresses. An interesting analysis is offered of the distinctive characteristics of Clemence of Barking's St. Catherine, in which emphasis is laid on "its heroine's state of mind rather than her looks" and on a motivating emotional context (including a reference to the term "fin amors") being supplied for the queen's torture. It is a work which, in the opinion of the author, deserves to better known and conceded a higher literary status than has been the case up to now. The Barking *Vie d'Edouard le Confesseur* is likewise interesting on a number of counts, each of which is carefully explored by the author, including a comparison of the nun's text and that of Matthew Paris's 13th. century life of Edward, since both share the

same source: the *Vita* by Aelred of Rievaulx. Especially fruitful is the discussion of their respective treatments of Queen Edith, who is endowed by the nun of Barking with a point of view and a will of her own, as opposed to the static romance heroine envisaged by Matthew Paris. The theme of the Barking text lends itself to an interesting commentary on the medieval debate concerning the "chaste spouse" in lay and ecclesiastical models of marriage, exemplified not only in this text, but also in the different versions of the St. Alexis legend, and the essay closes with a discussion of why, in the light of the value of the texts here studied, more hagiographic texts were not in fact produced by women.

Representations of women as lovers and mothers in Middle English romance are the subject of studies by, respectively, Flora Alexander and Jennifer Fellows. The former dedicates her essay to discussing the question of female sexual passion and active response as reflected in early English romance, and in texts which all have French or Anglo-Norman versions too, emphasizing, for example, in Layamon's *Brut*, a heightened amorous awareness on the part both of Guinevere and Igerne, in comparison with their counterparts in Wace's earlier version. In this context, the author stresses the fact that Layamon insists on Igerne really believing that Uther is her husband, Gorlois, "something not said at all in Wace", but implicit, surely, in Geoffrey of Monmouth's "she naturally believed all that he said and refused him nothing that he asked". The idea of a woman as an exchangeable commodity reflected in 13th. century literature, the author goes on to comment, evidently corresponded to a real life situation, at least among the upper classes, but, as she points out, this conception of woman is criticised in works such as *Floris and Blancheflour* and *Sir Tristrem*, where there is an exaltation of love over riches, and of the sense of companionship which characterises the two pairs of lovers, and a deploring of woman's situation as a mere chattel. Women's sexual inclinations are hinted at, the author suggests, even in religious allegories (Christ the knight has the "fairest" of faces in the *Ancrene Wisse*), and violent female passion is reflected in such works as *King Horn* and *Sir*

Tristrem (Tristan's mother), in contrast to the slowly burgeoning passion of an Ysoude or a Blancheflour. Flora Alexander sees such heroines as Ysoude, Rymenhild, Blancheflour and Belisaunt as strong women who are not only willing to take the initiative in their pursuit of love, but are also willing to die for it if need be, the author analysing in detail the respective romances in support of her contention that in these texts situations are generated "which require the woman to be active", a fact symbolised, for example, in *Sir Tristrem* by Ysoude's calling for the fatal drink, instead, as in other versions, of Tristan or a servant. Flora Alexander draws attention, interestingly, to the active rôle assigned to the heroine's mothers in these romances, as also to the English writers' depiction of male and female lovers as participating in the love experience "on equal terms", and offering each other mutual support and affection. The author warns us, at the close of her stimulating essay, not to confuse fact with fiction, nor the freedom of choice of these literary heroines with that of women in real life, whilst, however, making the surely very significant point that there was obviously "some taste for stories that showed women as resourceful, determined and committed to the pursuit of emotional satisfaction.

It is the aim of Jennifer Fellows' essay "to examine the attitudes towards mothers and motherhood either implicit or explicit" in Middle English romances, by relating them to references to the maternal rôle in non-narrative literature, in order to try to assess to what extent "a distinctive medieval view of motherhood" emerges from these romances". Here again, as in Flora Alexander's study, it is suggested that care must be taken to avoid, for example, confusing "the idealisation of motherhood in the abstract" patent in much devotional and Marian imagery, with attitudes to actual mothers in the Middle Ages, and we are reminded of the ways in which the medieval view of woman was coloured by Scriptural and patristic exegesis: in spite of some conflicting interpretations, such texts seemed to reflect a general consensus concerning the passivity, the sensuality and the uncleanness of women. After insisting that post-Conquest mothers enjoyed very little freedom

insofar as rearing their children was concerned, and giving cogent reasons for the medieval tendency to marginalise daughters, the author examines a number of romances in order to see to what extent real life motherhood is "reflected or endorsed" in such literary texts.

She begins her analysis with the "calumniated wife" group of romances, in which young and recent mothers who are made to suffer by their envious and vindictive mothers-in-law, acquire individuality and moral stature precisely through their maternal virtues, both as defenders and educators of their helpless and fatherless sons. Florence, in *Octavian*, whose contant invocations to Mary as the *mother* of Christ add a spiritual dimension to the story, Emareå, Margaret in *Sir Tryamour*, and Bellyssant and *Valentine and Orson*, whose relationship to her children is depicted in more emotional tones, but who, in fact, as Jennifer Fellows suggests, actually does less for them than the other three mothers. The theme of a father-son separation implicit in this group is likewise the leitmotif of the group of romances concerned with unmarried mothers, who, however, as lovers or mothers of the heroes (Eglamour, Torrent, Degareå and Generydes) are treated sympathetically, varying narrative strategies being employed to justify their behaviour. An interesting analysis is offered of the oedipal implications in romances such as *Sir Eglamour* and *Degareå*, where a lengthy mother-son separation permits an incestuous relationship to be at least conceivable, and some consideration is given to such tales as *Sir Perceval of Gales* and *Lybeaus Desconus*, in which over-protective, or over-possessive, mothers keep their sons secluded from the world. Wicked stepmothers and mothers-in-law are a staple of romance, wicked mothers less so, and for this reason Bevis's mother, at first sight, arouses one's interest; however, as the author quite rightly points out, the whole romance is informed with a kind of gratuitous misogyny, and no real attempt is made to portray this evil woman as a *mother*, and the same may be said of Bevis's wife, Josian. Such romances are, as the author reminds us, essentially son-centred: "in general the mothers of romance heroines are conspicuous by their absence". Older mother-

figures, such as the mothers-in-law, are particularly malicious where younger women are concerned, she suggests, and she sees in Blancheflour's surrogate mother (*Floris and Blancheflour*) a refreshing exception to this rule; another might be found, perhaps, in Belisaunt's mother in *Amis and Amiloun*, who, as Flora Alexander points out (p. 35), is directly responsible for the happy encounter between her daughter and Amis. After a brief analysis of *Lay le Freine*, "the most extended treatment of a mother-daughter relationship in Middle English romance" and a rare example of a work protagonised by a heroine (the original story, of course, was by Marie de France!), the author offers an excellent summary of her findings, which lead her to conclude finally, that the romances provide evidence to suggest that "the medieval period was somewhat more sympathetic to female predicaments and less misogynistic than a study of its clerical writings alone might lead us to believe".

In fine, this volume may be considered as a valuable contribution to a very wide field of medieval studies, offering as it does interesting insights into, and evidence concerning, the socio-cultural backgrounds to women's literacy and their relationship with the written word, bringing to the fore hitherto little appreciated works, such as Clemence of Barking's life of St. Catherine, or writers, such as Gwerful Mechain, and throwing new and thought-provoking light both on the vision of women in their perennial and universal rôles as lovers and mothers presented in the Middle English romance, and on the possible relationship between these fictional portraits and the actualities of medieval life.

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