

MEDIEVAL FEMINIST NEWSLETTER

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

The NEXT ISSUE of MFN (Spring 1988) will focus on grant writing and publishing. Please fill out the enclosed questionnaire and return it to E. Jane Burns by March 1, 1988.

If you have not yet paid your dues for 1987-88 and wish to receive the Spring Newsletter, PLEASE SEND \$2.00 to E. Jane Burns. This is your LAST CHANCE!

Conference on "Gender and the Moral Order in Medieval Society," sponsored by the Medieval Studies Center of Fordham University to be held on March 25-26, 1988, at the Lincoln Center Campus, 60th St. and Columbus Ave. For information contact Thelma Fenster, Medieval Studies Office, Fordham University, Bronx, NY 10458. Register early. Space is limited!

Inspired by the overwhelming turnout at last year's cash bar, the MFN will again sponsor a cash bar and brief business meeting at Kalamazoo. Look for details in the conference program. Be sure to come!

BOOK REVIEW

Geoffrey Chaucer, The Legend of Good Women, trans. and with an intro. by Ann McMillan. Houston: Rice Univ. Press, 1987.

In her introduction to this translation of Chaucer's Legend of Good Women, Ann McMillan focuses her scholarly attention on the poem's place in the tradition of literary catalogues of (in)famous women. Over-viewing this long-lived genre, McMillan identifies two influential classical sources, in Vergil and Ovid, and then discusses the assimilation and extension of classical ideas about women in catalogues by early Christian writers (specifically, Jerome) and later continental poets (Boccaccio and Christine de Pizan). She argues that Boccaccio's De Claris Mulieribus provided Chaucer with both "raw material" and an example of the "torturous reasoning" of a fundamentally anti-feminist male author that Chaucer set out to parody. Her subsequent comments on the Legend itself attempt to support this reading. In the Prologue, she points out various problems with a "straight" reading, such as the framing of the description of the blissful birds in May (ll. 130-170) with allusion to the rapes of Europa and Chloris. In the Legends, she views the levelling of the various heroines into flat, monotonous types of the God of Love's ideal as "ironic"; Chaucer, enemy of "moral absolutes," is both sympathetic with woman's plight and

critical of her weakness in falling victim to the social system that defines chastity as the only proper feminine virtue. Finally, in a brief afterward, McMillan raises the question of how actual women who read the literary catalogues might have been affected by them, and looks to two more Chaucerian characters, Dorigen and the Wife of Bath, for an answer. Again she finds evidence of Chaucer's insight and sympathy: Dorigen tries to follow literary models but is a "fuller and more complex" character for whom we feel sorry; in the Wife, Chaucer treats a "sensitive," "strong," and intelligent woman who speaks for real female human beings who suffer from cultural anti-feminism.

McMillan offers us implicit support, then, for the more or less pro-feminist Chaucer that so many modern scholars have discovered. While readers of the Medieval Feminist Newsletter will be heartened to see that her work attends so carefully to questions about "the woman's point of view," some may also be disappointed that the answers she offers often do not more deeply probe the methodological and theoretical problems of feminist readings of male-authored texts--problems, for example, of determining the significance of "signature" or the sexual politics of authors, of finding the experience of "real" women in the literary representation of female characters, or of understanding the social construction of gender and gendered subjectivity through literary discourse. Her discussion often suggests more interesting issues than it actually goes on to explore. For example, like many modern scholars, she claims that when Chaucer cites his literary predecessors, he is "often undermining the whole notion of transmitted truth and poetic authority" (p. 12). But why is the subject of woman (in Chaucer's poetry as in other canonical masterworks) the site for this subversive venture? (How) can the male author's undermining of poetic authority advance either our understanding of "female experience" or of the relation between poetics and gender? Similarly, McMillan occasionally suggests that Chaucer's male predecessors had motives for their literary misogyny; Boccaccio, for one, found women "threatening," and his work taught Chaucer that "the catalogues reveal more about their authors than they do about their supposed subjects" (p. 25). Why, then, is Chaucer as author exempt from such analysis? Does his catalogue--or his treatment of women elsewhere--really reveal that this male author is free of the concerns and constraints of gender? Without much discussion of the issues involved, McMillan also tends to be casual about the distinction between "Chaucer," a position she seems to identify as a unified set of discoverable intentions, and the characterized "narrator" of the poem.

McMillan's work is clearly that of a well-trained and conscientious scholar, and notes to her introduction are full and useful. Since I am never sure what purpose or audience is served

by "translations" of Middle English (especially of Chaucer's East Midlands dialect, so accessible to serious modern readers), I have not tried to assess the merits of McMillan's rendition of the poem. It is followed by annotated "Suggestions for Further Reading" on both the poem itself and the general subject of medieval women.

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COMMENTARY

The last Commentary column asked how we, as medievalists and feminists, might locate the medieval female voice, given the relatively small corpus of works by women that have been preserved from this early period. What are the implications for the canon? What does this mean for our teaching? Are there alternative strategies? We received two provocative responses. The first, from Professor Joan Gibson of York University, Ontario, pinpoints areas in which investigation might take place. The second, from Professor Deborah Ellis of Southwestern University, Georgetown, Texas, describes how the female voice can be inserted into the standard syllabus in a pertinent and telling fashion.

Professor Gibson suggests that we attempt to unravel the strands of male and female voices, especially in cases where women's vernacular writings are translated into Latin. She suggests that we might look at "the role of male secretaries, scribes or spiritual directors for women writing under obedience," and she would like to see "more study of women's influence on male writers". Is anyone working in these areas? If so, write and tell us how you are approaching the issues, what problems you have encountered, what solutions you might propose.

As for teaching, Professor Deborah Ellis responded that although she has used anthologies of writing by women, she finds it even more helpful "to integrate women's writing into standard syllabi piecemeal, to emphasize a parallel perspective" whenever she can. Specifically, Professor Ellis uses selections from Christine de Pizan's Book of the City of Ladies to parallel Malory, and passages from Margery Kempe when teaching the Prologue to Chaucer's "Wife of Bath." Professor Ellis's students look at the "assumptions about love that Malory makes at the beginning of what Eugene Vinaver calls 'The Knight of the Cart,' assumptions about fickleness and about Guinevere's characterization as a good lover who therefore had a good end." These notions are then compared with Rectitude's opinion of love in The Book of the City of Ladies in an attempt to make sense of Guinevere's inconsistent characterization. In this context Christine's description of male assumptions about female inconstancy and prudence are also considered. (The Book of the City of Ladies, trans. E. J. Richards, Persea Books, 1982 pp. 186-87 and Eugene Vinaver, King Arthur and His Knights, pp. 51-52, 83-7, 114-15, 143, 164-5).