

# MARY MARTIN McLAUGHLIN IN REVIEW<sup>1</sup>

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I began to put together my remarks in honor of Mary Martin McLaughlin thinking I would write about how she re-discovered Heloise. However, in the course of looking online for the elusive but crucial articles Mary published on the subject, I found another fascinating vein of her work, the wonderful scholarly reviews she wrote over a period of some 30 years. So, since Sharan Newman is talking about Mary and Heloise, I have decided to concentrate instead on Mary as a reviewer.

I want to start, though, with a review of one of Mary's books—*The Portable Medieval Reader*—edited together with James Bruce Ross, and published by Viking in 1949. This important collection, first published in the year I was born, is still in print. It was reviewed by Grace Frank of Bryn Mawr College in *Speculum* in the year of its publication (remarkable as that may seem to us today). Frank's review takes the collection very seriously:

This is, of course, a book intended for popular consumption, but the specialist will find plenty of enlightenment and entertainment in it. No doubt, after the manner of his kind, he will quarrel with the choice in his particular field while enjoying the view over the fence into his neighbors' domains.<sup>2</sup>

The review then progresses, predictably, to quarrel with a few choices, but ends:

These details are of minor importance, however. What matters is that both scholar and general reader will find nourishment here, choice morsels likely not only to appease a superficial fancy but to whet normal appetites and make them seek satiety in more abundant rations.<sup>3</sup>

McLaughlin's own reviews shared Frank's intellectual generosity and rhetorical flourish. In 1971, she took on David Luscombe's *The School of Peter Abelard: The Influence of Abelard's Thought in the Early Scholastic Period*, published by Cambridge two years earlier, in 1969, a time spread for scholarly reviews that I find more recognizable! This thoughtful and generous review praises Luscombe's contributions, especially to the study of the transmission of Abelard's works, but offers a trenchant critique nonetheless:

What one misses here and in later chapters is Luscombe's own assessment of the major themes and purposes of Abelard's

theological works; an assessment that would offer a fuller measure of his influence by presenting his teachings not only in the setting of contemporary responses to them, but also in the context of a body of writings that reflects, for all of its fluidity, a remarkably consistent approach to the problems and needs of theological discourse. This lack is the more sharply felt because Luscombe's command of these works, and of the scholarship that has done much to clarify their meaning, is evident throughout his book, as are his own views of the strengths and weaknesses of Abelard's thought. But these views, often implied rather than clearly stated, are sometimes confusingly assimilated to the judgments of Abelard's contemporaries. [...] A well-placed chapter dealing directly with these matters, developing perhaps the summary judgments of his concluding pages, would have enabled Luscombe to formulate and explore the central problems of his study more economically. It would have also mitigated the sense of fragmentation that appears an inevitable hazard of this kind of inquiry and provided the background and balance that his doctrinal teachings would seem to demand.<sup>4</sup>

McLaughlin is yet more critical in her review of Edith Ennen's *Frauen im Mittelalter* (C. H. Beck, 1985), published in *The American Historical Review* in 1987. I was also very critical of the English translation (published under the unfortunate title *Medieval Women*), but I wish I had seen this brilliant analysis before I wrote my review. McLaughlin gets right to the heart of the problem in her opening paragraph:

Surveying women's fortunes in medieval society, Edith Ennen cuts a long path through time, from the sixth to the sixteenth century. In other respects, however, her perspectives are considerably restricted. *Frauen im Mittelalter* is a misleading title for a book concerned above all with German women. After broader views of women's status among early Germanic peoples on the Continent and in Frankish society, Ennen focuses essentially on German lands and only occasionally glances across the Rhine, the Alps, or the North Sea, chiefly for comparative purposes or to touch on obligatory figures such as Eleanor of Aquitaine or exemplary cities such as Paris and Florence. A well-known scholar in medieval German economic and social history, Ennen looks at women in the Middle Ages most closely through the lens of her special interests. Traditional in approach, largely descriptive in method, meticulous in detail, her survey is a mine of information on certain aspects of medieval women's lives and an extensive review of the German scholarship in the areas of her concern.<sup>5</sup>

After a very precise and salient explanation of the problems of historical analysis created by Ennen's choices, the review ends:

In its substance and its concentration on topics dear to German historiography, Ennen's survey seems primarily intended for her



compatriots. Its value for American students of women's history will depend on their response not only to what is offered but also to what is missing in a book hardly touched by the concerns and works of American and English scholarship in this field during recent decades. We miss more than convincing interpretive structures and fresh insights in these pages in which no women speak directly or through the kind of analysis that would let their experience speak for them. Emphasizing important facets of this experience, this useful work also underscores the need for more penetrating examination of the larger problems it poses.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to note here, in this review from 1987, the use of the term "women's history," an enterprise McLaughlin says has already been underway for decades, and through which she makes of Ennen's book a clear challenge for feminist medievalists.

The last two reviews I will cite show how appreciative McLaughlin was of feminist work in women's history, and yet how she held feminist scholars to the same high standards with which she approached the works of Luscombe and Ennen. In 1990, again in *The American Historical Review*, McLaughlin gave a careful assessment of the volume *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, edited by Mary Eler and Maryanne Kowaleski (U of Georgia P, 1988). This review begins upbeat:

Looking at medieval women and power through uncommonly varied lenses, the scholars whose essays are assembled in this groundbreaking collection take us at once beyond the traditional equation of power with a public authority supported by law and force. Although several authors are concerned to define more precisely some major limits imposed on women in those large areas dominated by such authority, all of them seek to identify the kinds of power that medieval women actually pursued and found in numerous contexts, public and private, open and hidden.<sup>7</sup>

McLaughlin summarizes and praises the work of feminist scholars whose names are familiar: Judith Bennett, Martha Howell, Brigitte Bedos-Rezak, Jo Ann McNamara, Suzanne Wemple, Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, Stanley Chojnacki, Susan Groag Bell, Barbara Hanawalt, Joan Ferrante, Elaine Tuttle Hansen, and Michelle Freeman. This is a striking list. Striking also is McLaughlin's conclusion, which, working from Freeman's interpretation of Marie de France, gently but firmly reminds us of the work yet to be done:

The "powers of sisterhood" remind us of an important subject largely neglected here, touched on, in fact, only by Jane

Schulenberg: the powers sought and attained by religious women and their [*sic*] diverse communities. Yet, despite regrettable omissions, this innovative collection succeeds remarkably in its major purpose. By asking when women have been powerful, and how, it helps to provide a new understanding of their lives and work.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, I want to quote one more review, published in *The American Historical Review* in 1997. Here, McLaughlin addresses Anne Clark Bartlett's *Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature* (Cornell UP, 1995). She first places the work in context, citing from David Bell's *What Nuns Read: Books and Libraries in Medieval English Nunneries* (Cistercian Studies, 1995), and then zeroes in on Bartlett's book:

More fundamental to Bartlett's concerns than the quantitative study of these texts are the questions posed, and the possibilities revealed, by women's complex engagement with a vernacular devotional literature written almost exclusively by men and often antifeminist in spirit. Why, she asks, were women of this period such enthusiastic, even avid readers of works whose misogyny ranges 'from the subtle to the vociferous'? She answers by showing how women might read, and read themselves into, texts whose antifeminism was challenged and often diminished by the intrusion of alternative literary conventions.<sup>9</sup>

Then McLaughlin sums up with an appreciative critique that suggests the path of future research:

Yielding to the appeal of theory, Bartlett ends her story rather too abruptly by hailing the "birth" of the female reader and the "death" of the male author. Though she enlarges our understanding of the "participation of English women in medieval literary culture," she also sends some mixed messages of her own. Emphasizing the role of the individual reader, she does less than justice to the significance of these women readers as a collective phenomenon, as a "textual community" not only in the "book revolution" of the later medieval centuries but in the flowering of a new vernacular spirituality. In the formation of this spirituality, it would be hard to say, regarding male authors and women readers, "who followed and who led."<sup>10</sup>

My lengthy quotations show the elegance and intelligence of McLaughlin's critiques of her fellow scholars. They also show how, over the course of nearly half a century, from 1949 to 1997, McLaughlin grew from the compiler of a charming historical reader to a critic able to face up to feminist and even pomo-literary theory with equanimity. What these reviews do—always, always—is to sum up the questions that still need to be faced. They always look forward, never to the past, and this is true whether she is reviewing a powerful male



scholar or a young woman scholar's first book. She always challenges the author and the field in general to think and write for the common good, for the good of the field, not just to scratch some personal, private, intellectual itch.

These reviews cover all but the last decade of Mary Martin McLaughlin's long and distinguished career. The review of *The Portable Medieval Reader* was published when she was thirty years old. She was fifty-two when she reviewed Luscombe's book on Abelard, sixty-eight when she used the term "women's history" to take Ennen to task, seventy-one when she reviewed the collection of essays *Women and Power*, and seventy-eight when she confronted the theoretical approach of Anne Clark Bartlett. In all of these encounters, she speaks with the authority of a true leader in the field of medieval studies. And, she speaks in high places: *Speculum* and *The American Historical Review*. This is especially impressive for a woman who held, for most of this time, no academic post, who had no institutional name to back her up and show how important she was, and who always signed herself simply "Mary Martin McLaughlin, Millbrook, New York."

Maybe that's the most important feminist lesson of all.

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#### END NOTES

1. Originally presented May 2006; International Medieval Congress; Kalamazoo, MI, in a Society of Medieval Foremothers session honoring Mary Martin McLaughlin.
2. Grace Frank, rev. of *The Portable Medieval Reader*, ed. James Bruce Ross and Mary Martin McLaughlin (New York: Viking, 1949), *Speculum* 24 (1949): 615.
3. Frank, rev. of Ross and McLaughlin, p. 615.
4. Mary Martin McLaughlin, rev. of *The School of Peter Abelard: The Influence of Abelard's Thought in the Early Scholastic Period* by D. E. Luscombe (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969), *Speculum* 46 (1971): 525.
5. Mary Martin McLaughlin, rev. of *Frauen im Mittelalter* by Edith Ennen (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1985), *The American Historical Review* 92 (1987): 648-49.
6. Mary Martin McLaughlin, rev. of Ennen, p. 649.
7. Mary Martin McLaughlin, rev. of *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988) *The American Historical Review* 95 (1990): 796-97.
8. Mary Martin McLaughlin, rev. of Erler and Kowaleski, pp. 796-97.
9. Mary Martin McLaughlin, rev. of *Male Authors, Female Readers, Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature* by Anne Clark Bartlett (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995) *The American Historical Review* 102 (1997): 1146-47.
10. Mary Martin McLaughlin, rev. of Bartlett, pp. 1146-47.