

It seems indisputable that for at least a century, most people have found humour antithetic to pathos, so that many readings of the *Legend of Good Women* consequently falsify the text because of the need to produce either a seriously pathetic reading or a wholeheartedly humorous or ironic one. It is no accident, however, that Chaucer insists on treating the heroines with both pathos and humour, and gives little indication which is to be the dominant mode. (p. 326)

One final point concerns the unwarranted absence of a bibliography and the previously-mentioned patchy index. Both of these will frustrate the progress of the readers who would most wish to use the book in this way, and the absence of a bibliography in a book on a work which is still not studied or researched as extensively as it might be seems particularly short-sighted. Although Percival's wide-ranging scholarship is well footnoted, there are very few references in the index, even when the critics are named and actively engaged with in the text (Sheila Delany being a case in point, whose work on 'skeptical fideism', incidentally, comes in for some rather crude interpretation), which means that sourcing Percival's secondary material is made needlessly difficult. However, it must be re-stated that this and other criticisms do not detract from the substantial achievement that *Chaucer's Legendary Good Women* represents. It offers skillful, nuanced readings of the text within broad and thoughtful research on the genres and contexts of the *Legend of Good Women*, and consequently represents a substantial and very welcome contribution to this work's growing library of sustained and informative scholarship.

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## Female Prophetic Writings

*Secretaries of God: Women Prophets in Late Medieval and Early Modern England.* BY DIANE WATT. D.S. Brewer. £35.00.

'*The Book of Margery Kempe* is not only or even primarily an account of her prophecies and vision' (p. 49). This concluding statement to Watt's chapter on Margery Kempe highlights one of the difficulties (to which I shall come later) about an illuminating book which contextualises the lives of four female authors (Margery Kempe, Elizabeth Barton, Anne Askew and Elisabeth Davies) from late medieval and early modern England. The introductory chapter makes a case for the existence in Western Christendom of established traditions of popular piety and specifically female prophecy, for which Watt cautiously argues partial

autonomy from the major male power structures. This tradition of female prophecy yielded, to some extent, independent cultural and temporary (at least in the cases offered in this book) political forces to those who made use of it. By offering case histories which come from different sides of the medieval/Renaissance barrier, by dealing with a marginal and subliterate type of discourse, i.e. that of popular prophecy, and by studying one of those grey areas between history and literature, Watt's study has claims to be original contribution which, for the most part, it effectively delivers. After rejecting traditional schemes of periodization which reflect a masculine view of history, Watt follows with case histories described, and rightly so, as forming part of a discontinuous narrative.

There seems to be a slight discrepancy between what the introductory chapter promises and the actual delivery which follows. For instance, the time span projected, from the early twelfth and the second half of the seventeenth centuries (p. 2), is rather misleading, since, apart from a few references to Christina of Markyate, the first case study centres on Margery Kempe whose book was written in the fifteenth century. More importantly, though, is my query about the appropriate use of the notion of female prophecy with Margery Kempe and Anne Askew. In the opinion of this reader, while the case studies of Elizabeth Barton and Elizabeth Davies are brilliant expositions of the powerful role of female prophecy in early modern England, the contextualisation of the cases of Margery Kempe (especially) and Anne Askew within the frame of female prophecy and its specific discourse is slightly less felicitous.

'In its anxiety to refute charges of heresy and irreligiousness, the *Book* is reminiscent of times of defensive hagiographies like the *Life of Marie of Oignies*, . . .' (p. 49). Together with the introductory quote above, this one hints at the difficulty of framing such an eclectic and complex – in terms of its composition at least – piece of writing as *The Book of Margery Kempe* into one particular form of discourse. Rather than being an important companion piece to her book, this case study serves instead to bring further useful clarification on prophecy in the Middle Ages, and on medieval women prophets in particular. The case of Margery Kempe allows for fruitful discussions on the reception of continental holy women in late medieval England (reminiscent of the contributions to the *Prophets Abroad* volume edited by Rosalyn Voaden, to which Watt contributes a piece), hence providing for her next case studies, the three early modern English women, a link with the late medieval continental tradition of female prophecy. However, Margery Kempe serves as a rather weak cog in this argument. Watt refers to Margery Kempe's revelations, predictions and insights into the piety of a certain local priest as 'these kinds of prophecies' (p. 28) and they have indeed little in common with the influential political prophecies of one of her role models, Bridget of Sweden, and the highly political prophetic accounts of Barton and Davies, for instance. There is no evidence that Margery Kempe knew of the political importance of Bridget's message. When considering the other case studies offered in this book, Margery appears then as the odd

one out, rather than the cornerstone bridging the continental and the English traditions as well as one of the important elements serving in breaking the medieval/Renaissance barrier – Bridget of Sweden and Catherine of Sienna being more apt models for that. It is not that Watt is unaware that she is dealing with altogether different material with Margery Kempe, and her discussion of the heresy trials which are given prominence in the middle of the narrative of *The Book* serves to highlight Margery as the prophet martyr, one who was gifted with spirit of prophecy and who was able during her numerous examinations to teach others. Kempe's prophetic powers were exercised by emphasising the moral state of certain individuals within the church in order to justify another more general type of prophecy, the interpretation of Scripture.

The third chapter deals with an altogether different form of prophecy, one which took national political dimensions, as Elizabeth Barton claimed to have received revelation from God to oppose and prevent Henry VIII's divorce from Katherine of Aragon. While previous accounts of Barton have her defined either in terms of her connections with other figures implicated in this affair, or instead question the authenticity of her revelations, Watt throws new light on Barton's case by considering it as part of the prophetic female discourse which permeated Western Christendom. Elizabeth is represented as a false prophet in the Act of Attainder, as one encouraged by her adherents to feign saintliness in order to persuade others to stand against the monarchy. The political entanglement of her prophetic revelations, their possible appropriation, which might have made a puppet of Barton in the hands of anti-monarchist factions, raise the question of her voice. While the medieval prophet stands in the margin of society and offers from that marginal standpoint her distinct understanding of society's future danger and trappings, the voice of the early modern English female prophet speaks from within, or participates in a process of absorption which features the prophetic voice as speaking from within the boundaries delineated by the values of that society. Barton was in close contact with Syon Abbey, and her prophecies were known to politically influential individuals like the Abbess Agnes Jordan, the confessor of Syon John Fewterer, and the scholar and future martyr Richard Reynolds. Watt then opens a new sub-chapter, a discussion on the popular prophecy and the subversive power of popular prophetic discourse. Although Barton was part of a larger movement with important counterparts on the continent (Joachim of Fiore, Amadeus of Portugal and Girolamo Savoranola) and in England (Joan the Meatless, Elizabeth, the 'Holy Maid of Leominster', and Anne Wentworth, cited by Thomas More in his *Dialogue*), she remains an exceptional figure in England by the fact that she keeps a unique position with regard to her involvement in matters of government. Watt offers an excellent account of the two phases to Barton's career as a prophet, with a first phase beginning in 1525, marked by the acquisition of her spiritual gifts during an extended illness, and marked by public recognition, with her meetings with the King and other significant political and religious figures of her time. The second phase is marked by her political involvement, her links with some of the most learned and powerful King's critics which resulted in her

execution. Watt's reconstructed account is admirable, the more so since all the first-hand evidence concerning Barton's life and revelations have been destroyed. By showing Barton emulating Bridget of Sweden and Catherine of Sienna, Watt depicts a female leader followed by clerics who believed her prophecies and offered to preach them at a time appointed by Barton. In the light of the new evidence offered here in this book, the argument making a puppet of Barton in the hands of unscrupulous clerics is no longer tenable. Elizabeth Barton drew on traditions of popular political prophecy and followed the examples of continental models to become a leading figure of her time and an important mouthpiece for the general expression of fears towards some of King Henry's policies.

While Watt's feat of constructing Elizabeth Barton's prophetic and political voice deserves praise, the following chapter, 'Serpents and Doves: Anne Askew and Foxe's Godly Women', in the opinion of this reader, fails to deliver an equally successful account of Anne Askew. Although not lacking in fascinating historical information on the rise of Protestantism in England, the chapter makes a departure from the original aim of the book by shifting its attention from identifying various forms of female prophetic discourse to representing how John Bale, protestant scholar, perceived the prophetic role played by Anne Askew in the new religious context of the sixteenth century. No doubt the role played by Bale as publisher, editor and commentator of *The first examinacyon of Anne Askew, lately martyred in Smythfelde* deserves (and receives here) careful consideration, but I wonder whether the frame defined by this book is appropriate for that task. It seems to me that Watt, overwhelmed by the complex textual transmission of Askew's text, fails to engage with Askew's voice the way she has with her previous cases. Facts about her life, circumstances which led to her condemnation are less clearly signposted than in the preceding chapter. In my view, Askew's prophetic voice is not very clearly disentangled from the male voice which took such an important part in representing her as a new prophet. Some of Watt's most significant statements account rather for the achievements of Bale rather than Askew, like the following: 'Bale's edition of Askew's text is a work of propaganda, he is only interested in contemporary events in England in so far as they represent moments in his scheme of universal history, and in writing her life as a Protestant martyrology, he is concerned only with what is typical in her character and experiences' (p. 109). Watt ends her chapter by considering the consequences of the inclusion of Askew's *The first examinacyon* in John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*. Again, sadly, rather than recuperating the prophetic discourse of this female visionary from her male publishers and editors, Watt loses herself and her readers into the powerful voices of male religious historians, leaving this reader with the sense that Askew's voice remains still little explored.

Watt makes up for this rather uneven chapter with a pertinent last case study, that of Eleanor Davies, Civil War prophet. In 1633, tracts written by Eleanor Davies were burnt by Archbishop Laud. Davies was brought before the High Commission with charges against her which included, among others, the fact she had dared to interpret Scripture and that she had falsely claimed to have

received prophetic revelation. While Watt insists on Davies's extraordinary prophetic gift (she sees the roles of Christ and of the Virgin Mary as 'precursors of her own role as the true second Eve' [p. 120]), she also puts some of her attention on the means by which she communicated it. Indeed, Eleanor Davies published more than seventy pamphlets between 1625 and 1652, written in a figurative style which blends allegory and biblical exegesis with classical mythology, contemporary politics and autobiography. Davies, voicing a rather widespread idea during the Civil War, was convinced that the end of the world was imminent. Watt provides additional evidence for the resurgence of female prophetic and political discourse in the seventeenth century, with the mention of several other women prophets, like Trapnel and Collins, but she considers Davies' case to be exceptional for the fact she thought, spoke and acted independently (and often provocatively) and that, unlike other women prophets, she came from the aristocracy. Attention is put on Davies' personal involvement with publishing matters: she published both in English and Latin for foreign distribution. The history of the printing of her pamphlets is mixed with that of the making of a free press in England. Her prophetic mission takes a new dimension when Davies takes a strong defence of her brother, Mervin Touchet, who was indicted for sodomy and also for abetting the rape of his wife. The execution of her brother, whom she turns into a martyr in her tract *The word of God*, marks the 'beginning of her prophetic mission to expose the perversion of Charles I's rule' (p. 142). Davies's peculiar prophetic voice is marked also by the fact that, rather than effacing herself as female subject, she reconstructs God as female and, as a Protestant, she regards the Virgin Mary as figuration of the woman prophet.

'Even though they were empowered by the belief that as individuals they were inspired by God, and to varying extents gathered around themselves groups of followers who shared their beliefs and sometimes imitated their examples, the long term influence of the women in this study was often limited' (p. 155). In her Epilogue, Watt explores some of the traces left by those women and offers interesting evidence for their posthumous reputation. Rather than providing explanations for their relative lack of impact, Watt considers instead how several of those lives were often reinscribed, to the detriment of their prophetic quality. This book must be praised for the way in which it sheds light on a neglected aspect of late medieval and early modern English (literary) history, that of female prophetic writings. It would be a mistake to let it pass, once again, into oblivion, as it represents a significant contribution to the expanding field of female religious and textual practice. No doubt Watt's excellent account will be an essential reference for any additional scholarly contribution to the field.

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