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*Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints' Lives in  
Late Medieval England* (review)

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(p. 61), or a manuscript opening is like the Theban history Criseyde leaves off reading (p. 111), or a commentary is like the process of empire-building (p. 129), or a pointing hand in a miniature is like a manicure in the margins (p. 146), the proof of the pudding is simply in how apt the local comparison seems.

Reading texts instead of manuscripts produces scholarly interpretations that have little to do with the ways in which medieval readers encountered their literature. Reading manuscripts instead of texts prioritizes histories of production over the verbal constructs at the center of the literary critical enterprise. *Imaginary Worlds in Medieval Books* seeks to bring literary criticism deeply into conversation with manuscript studies, and even though its conclusions are sometimes debatable, the project is important and worthy. Manuscripts give us more, Rust argues, than insight into the social and material conditions of medieval reading. They form a part of literary consciousness itself, and their physical features are never fully transparent to those—modern or medieval—who read texts in their original forms.

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CATHERINE SANOK. *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints' Lives in Late Medieval England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. Pp. xviii, 256. \$55.00.

*Her Life Historical* is an extremely elegant book, well written and closely argued. Catherine Sanok uses the notion of exemplarity to understand the cultural position of the female saint's life in later medieval England. She concentrates on the fifteenth century and the "individual legend," a subgenre consisting of versions that "circulated independently of large legendaries" (pp. 39–41). In separate chapters she offers extended readings of Osbern Bokenham's midcentury *Legends of Holy Women*, which she takes as an attempt to construct a canon of the female saint's life, and of Henry Bradshaw's late-century *Life of St. Werburge*. She also offers a brilliant reading of Margery Kempe's use of both the Mary Magdalene and virgin martyr legends. These discussions are book-ended by two

readings of Chaucer texts, *The Legend of Good Women* and *The Second Nun's Tale*.

Sanok treats exemplarity as a broadly based cultural and ideological reflex. She associates it with *imitatio* in the devotional, rather than specifically rhetorical sense. Exemplarity becomes a mode of imitating the past, or—perhaps to put the matter more precisely—a way of imagining continuity between past and present as if it were an imitation. Sanok's method is eclectic in the best sense. She draws on Michel de Certeau, Judith Butler, and Homi Bhabha. She also commandeers the phrase made famous by Benedict Anderson, "imagined community," and makes it one of the book's central tropes. In relation to the steadily growing conversation on exemplarity itself, Sanok belongs solidly among those stressing the mode's interest in continuity, as opposed to those who stress its unruliness. At the same time, this is a continuity enacted against a founding break. As she explains, "the central fiction of exemplarity is that ethics are transhistorical, independent of their particular historical moment and social context" (p. 7). Thus, "the mimesis implied in exemplarity . . . works like metaphor: it both affiliates two things and alienates or distances them from one another" (p. 14). A female reader embracing a saint as exemplar does so against the implicit recognition of the saint's sacral and historical distance.

Sanok's interest in *imitatio* leads her to characterize her book as a study of reception. Indeed, one of *Her Life Historical's* many virtues is its lucid, careful deployment of current scholarship on later Middle English book ownership and patronage by women, and related textual matters, both in the second chapter, where she addresses these issues in general terms, and thereafter, as she focuses on individual works. However, the consistent central focus of Sanok's argument is narrower and more delimited. It is what she calls the "exemplary address" that female saints' lives characteristically make to an imagined female community. She concludes her survey of the external evidence with Chaucer's exploration of the "feminine audience created through hagiography's ethical address" in *The Legend of Good Women* (p. 42). She then argues in detail that Bokenham and Bradshaw use that address to envision an alternative form of community based on gender and defined by "devotional literature and practice" (p. 49). This is "a stable community . . . in contrast to the divided political community of the fifteenth century" (p. 83). In Bokenham's *Legends*, "the only English legendary organized by the category of sex" and the period's "best single witness to women's liter-

ary patronage" (p. 51), the main vehicle for this vision is the complex and often topical series of comparisons between his patrons and the saints whose legends he recounts.

Writing in the tense years just before the Wars of the Roses, Bokenham seeks stability in examples of contemporary female virtue. Bradshaw, writing after 1485, seeks stability by establishing a continuity with the distant past, exemplified in the life of the seventh-century Mercian princess and abbess St. Werburge. Her virginity intact throughout her life, in spite of various pressures to marry, and assaults by rapists miraculously turned back, Werburge's corpse remains incorruptible for two centuries, only to be allowed to decay in advance of the Danish invasions, "to protect it from contamination by pagan hands" (p. 101). As Sanok nicely observes, this delayed dissolution is an even greater miracle. In its decaying form, Werburge's corpse serves to protect Chester, and by extension England, from "innumerable barbarike nacions" (p. 102). Both *The Book of Margery Kempe* and *The Second Nun's Tale* provide a convincing counterpoint. Both use the "imitation of a traditional saint" to criticize the contemporary community "by comparing it to the social world depicted in traditional legends" (p. 116). Margery is like Mary Magdalene in receiving full remission for a life of sexual activity and self-regard, and, like her, even more strikingly in her weeping. She is thus able to approach the authority that enables Magdalene to preach, though she is careful never actually to claim it. Sanok reads Margery's reclamation of the state of a virgin as an *imitatio* of Cecilia, one that enables her, like Cecilia, to defy male judges. She then uses *The Second Nun's Tale* as a "vehicle for exploring saints' plays" (p. 166), especially virgin martyr pageants—now all lost. Noting their frequent affiliations with parish guilds, she suggests that they offered themselves as orthodox alternatives to clerical authority. Sanok reads the Second Nun as an "ethical imitation of the legend she tells" (p. 167). Like Cecilia, the Second Nun preaches to a public audience. In the world of the early Church, she recalls that women played an active role, contrasting unfavorably with the constraints placed on them in her own time.

As sometimes happens with tightly argued studies, this one is occasionally fuzzy around the edges. That this imagined female community is so thoroughly superintended by male writers strikes me as a problem, one that Sanok never really addresses, except for a brief acknowledgment at the end of David Aers's critique of similar arguments. I also found her view of fifteenth-century politics slightly formulaic—as if its

disorder had the same paradigmatic valence for those who lived through it as it has come to acquire for modern historiography. She is surely wrong to claim that “the fantasy of a continuous political structure” was “impossible to sustain in fifteenth-century England” (p. 49). How else do we understand the motivation for the War of the Roses, except as competing versions of precisely that fantasy? The century’s recurrent dynastic struggles should not blind us to the other models of national community that emerged or intensified, models of which Sanok herself has now happily offered us an additional, compelling instance.

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SUSAN SCHIBANOFF. *Chaucer’s Queer Poetics: Rereading the Dream Trio*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. Pp. x, 308. \$75.00.

*Chaucer’s Queer Poetics* takes its place alongside other important recent contributions to Chaucer criticism, like those by Glenn Burger and Carolyn Dinshaw, that explore queer sexualities, both as they are represented within individual texts and as they evoke models of reading that disturb comfortable “natural” responses to Chaucer’s poetry. Susan Schibanoff’s book goes further, however, in proposing a “queer poetics” (on analogy to Dinshaw’s “sexual poetics,” p. 13) that informs Chaucer’s writing and extends back to his earliest poetry (most other Chaucer critics working within queer studies focus on the *Canterbury Tales*, especially on the Pardoner). In challenging the traditional division of Chaucer’s career into French, Italian, and English periods, Schibanoff proposes a revisionist trajectory that has Chaucer experimenting with a queer narrator as early as his first major poem, *The Book of the Duchess*; then developing features of that narrator into a provisional, if inconclusive, poetic theory in *The House of Fame*; and finally confidently embodying aspects of a queer poetic in the allegorical figure of a “lesbian” Nature in the *Parliament of Fowls*. Schibanoff thus disrupts the traditional “escape narrative” of Chaucer’s gradual liberation as an English poet of nature, subtly revealing the overlapping significances of terms like “English,” “French,” and “queer,” at the same time introducing a rich and flexible new critical vocabulary for characterizing Chaucer’s art.