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Women in the Middle Ages by Angela M. Lucas (review)

Ute Stargardt

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and concludes that Shakespeare not only uses the power of language but controls it to his purpose, to make rhetoric itself a consolation, a human defense against human suffering.

The final essay, Murray M. Schwartz's "Anger, Wounds, and the Forms of Theater in *King Richard II*: Notes for a Psychoanalytic Interpretation," like Lifson's examines Shakespeare for insights into human psychology; unlike Lifson, however, Schwartz does not require that Shakespeare recognize the significance of his verbal creations. For these reflect "deep structures," unconscious perceptions. Clearly this approach has an affinity with deconstruction: both look through the text rather than at it. The results are sometimes interesting, but are they literary criticism? I am not yet convinced that they are.

DANIEL J. RANSOM
University of Oklahoma

ANGELA M. LUCAS, *Women in the Middle Ages*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983. Pp. xvi, 214. \$25.00.

In the preface to *Women in the Middle Ages*, Angela Lucas limits the scope of her investigation of the status, activities, and contributions of medieval women to three areas—religion, marriage, and letters—as they are discussed, described, or implied in medieval literature. The author defines "medieval literature" in the widest possible sense and examines not only creative literature but such historical documents as wills and charters; treatises on theological, philosophical, and medical topics; and such devotional literature as sermons and homilies. Furthermore, Lucas states that her study will focus primarily on Englishwomen who lived during the Middle Ages from approximately the fifth to the fifteenth centuries, with only occasional references to women in continental Europe.

As the author reminds her audience on various occasions, "Most of the information we have about women in the Middle Ages was written down by men." Many citations from a wide variety of

medieval documents throughout this work forcefully impress this fact on the reader, but nowhere more effectively than in the opening chapter, which traces the origins and the development of the anti-feminist attitudes that generally prevailed throughout Christian medieval Europe from the patristic period to the closing of the Middle Ages and beyond. This chapter nicely ties together the three main sources of medieval antifeminist thought: the classical Greek conception of women's inferiority to men already manifest in Aristotle's writings; the Christian tradition of blaming Eve and her female descendants for the loss of Eden, which grew primarily out of patristic exegeses of the Book of Genesis; and Roman law, "under which a woman was a perpetual minor, subject first to father or guardian and then to her husband." As Lucas convincingly argues, by the twelfth century these traditions had produced a generally accepted and well-entrenched conviction of women's inferiority to men and provided authoritative justification for relegating women to a secondary, inferior role in all private and public affairs—marital, social, intellectual, and religious. As the author correctly concludes, not even the cult of the paragon of all feminine virtues, the Virgin Mary, could improve or change the status of women or attitudes toward them because everyone recognized in Mary the embodiment of an ideal "unattainable by every other woman."

The opening chapter of this book promises a quality of research and analysis that the rest of the work unfortunately fails to uphold. The entire text is only 184 pages long. It is difficult to do justice to a topic as demanding and inclusive as women in the Middle Ages in such limited space, but the author might have succeeded had she observed her self-imposed limitation of confining her study to Englishwomen. She does not do so, however, which presents the most persistent problem of this book. No reader could object to an occasional reference to Continental women, especially if no suitable English model could be found to demonstrate a given point. Yet this is seldom the case, and the author's insistence on discussing Continental women at length to the neglect of Englishwomen of similar or even superior accomplishments eventually becomes distracting.

Extreme examples of this occur in the chapter on women and

letters. In view of Marie de France's possible connections to England, the discussion of her literary accomplishments is perhaps appropriate to the stated subject of this book. But one is less convinced of the appropriateness of a much longer, much more detailed analysis of the artistry of the Italian-French writer Christine of Pizan. On the topic of feminine spirituality Lucas describes the accomplishments of the German mystics at Helfta in some detail while mentioning Julian of Norwich only briefly and omitting any examination of her *Revelations*. Christina of Markyate is never even mentioned, and women like Margery Kempe and the Paston women, whose activities could furnish valuable insights into women's lives under a variety of the topics treated, receive only cursory attention.

Furthermore, the author's discussion of these Continental women reveals the derivative nature of a good deal of her research. Quotations from and paraphrases of secondary source materials almost invariably furnish the support for the author's arguments, forcing the reader to suspect that she may have taken shortcuts in her stated intention of basing her study squarely on an examination and evaluation of primary sources. Such shortcuts are noticeable even in some of the sections of the book dealing with English-women. The all-too-frequent references to such famous studies as Eileen Power's *Medieval Women* suggest that unduly large sections of this work may be mere summaries of earlier works on the same subject.

Analyses of the depiction of women in creative literature at times suffer from similar problems. Mention is made, for example, of Lydgate's *Troy Book* and *The Temple of Glas*, but neither work is examined in satisfactory detail. The bibliography suggests the author's acquaintance with both works, but her conclusion that Lydgate, in spite of his compassionate portrayal of women in *The Temple of Glas*, takes a more clearly antifeminist stance toward women in his other works is not supported by any textual evidence. Moreover it is essentially Renoir's conclusion in his study entitled "Attitudes Toward Women in Lydgate's Poetry." Analysis of other medieval English literature centers almost exclusively on Chaucer's poetry. Although more detailed, it focuses only on a few major

female characters in *The Canterbury Tales* and offers only obvious and safe conclusions.

For the specialist in medieval studies, *Women in the Middle Ages* breaks no new grounds. For the beginning student of medieval history or literature, however, it may be a helpful introduction to the status, activities, and contributions of medieval women. The book is carefully edited, and its precise vocabulary and fluid style make it a pleasure to read. The apparatus—index, bibliography, and table of abbreviations—competently guides the reader to readily available modern English translations of historical documents, treatises, sermons, etc.; to creative medieval literature produced by, for, and about medieval women; and to appropriate secondary source materials.

UTE STARGARDT
Alma College

A. J. MINNIS, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*. Chaucer Studies, No. 8. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer; Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982. Pp. viii, 200. \$47.50.

Chaucer is one of the very few poets of the Middle Ages who can be called a true antiquarian. Among contemporary English writers only John Gower shares anything like his enthusiasm for stories of pre-Christian times, and even Gower does not achieve Chaucer's complex response to paganism: a sharp understanding of cultural differences combined with close emotional sympathy. Over twenty years ago Beryl Smalley described a group of "classicizing" clerics in England during the early fourteenth century, and even earlier Morton Bloomfield had shown that Chaucer possessed a sophisticated "sense of history" about the ancient past. The present book by A. J. Minnis is a useful attempt to extend these two previous and still influential studies.

In his first chapter Minnis goes beyond mere parallel passages to discover wider sources for Chaucer's knowledge of paganism in