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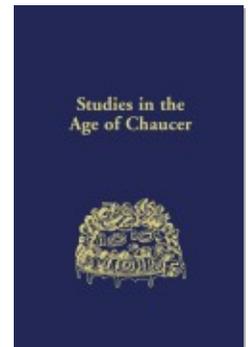
The Worlds of Medieval Women: Creativity, Influence, and Imagination ed. by Constance H. Berman, Charles W. Connell, Judith Rice Rothschild (review)

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Benson follows with a study of the contrast between *The Knight's Tale* and *The Miller's Tale* a "triumph in dialectic" (p. 64) that cannot be contained by the play between the personalities of their tellers. *The Miller's Tale* is too polished, he claims, for a man who breaks down doors with his head. Benson proceeds in similar manner with the fabliaux and the religious tales of the Prioress and the Second Nun. It is curious that Benson does not deal substantially with the Wife of Bath, a real test case: would she have strained too seriously his purpose of playing down dramatic links between teller and tale?

While I find the discussions of the tales themselves flaccid, devoid of new scholarship, and a bit preachy, I cannot understand why the old-fashioned "dramatic theory" is incompatible with Benson's loosely conceived insistence on *The Canterbury Tales* as a drama of style. By refusing to situate the "poetic" of the various tales in a larger medieval generic framework, Benson diminishes Chaucer's power as a master—and as a mordant critic—of established styles in the continental vernaculars. Benson's main point, that Chaucer is "both a good Christian and a good poet," is full of conviction, but is not in itself profound or cogent. Benson has accepted as his forum old-line Chaucerian criticism, without trying to renew it with any of the perspectives of non-Chaucerian, modern criticism that might give thrust to his project: this is strictly an inside job whose main intent seems to win its author a respectable place in a rather dusty hall of fame—a triumph, incidentally, that Robert Frank too generously bestows on the jacket: "It is the freshest and most illuminating treatment of Chaucer since Charles Muscatine." A reader less satisfied than Benson with the parameters of orthodox criticism will find this book parochial and complacent. Indeed, except for occasional references, this book could for the most part have been written twenty years ago.

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CONSTANCE H. BERMAN, CHARLES W. CONNELL, and JUDITH RICE ROTHSCCHILD, eds. *The Worlds of Medieval Women: Creativity, Influence, and Imagination*. Literary and Historical Perspectives of the Middle Ages, vol. 2. Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 1985. Pp. xv, 163. \$9.50 paper.

The dozen papers in this beautifully produced slim volume were first presented at the 1983 meeting of the Southeastern Medieval Association.

Given the conditions inherent in a conference format—brevity of individual papers and narrowness of focus—the collection does remarkably well in offering a rounded view of “the worlds of medieval women.” Though its tendency is weighted toward the religious, the temporal range is tenth through fifteenth centuries (Hrotswitha to Margery Kempe and Henryson) with literary materials drawn from Latin, German, French, Scandinavian, and English.

One’s interest begins at the cover, which features the photograph of a thirteenth-century seal, that of Jeanne de Chatillon, Countess of Alençon. The seal and its social context are explained in a fascinating brief note by Brigitte Rezak, of the National Archives (Paris). In the first paper Katarina Wilson weaves a close argument demonstrating the pedagogically and ethically oriented intentions of Hrotswitha in incorporating scientific learning into two of her plays. Susan Straubhar’s survey of the significant role of women poets in early Scandinavian society and literature was for me one of the most interesting in the collection; one hopes that the author will remind us at greater length of this forgotten tradition.

Charles Connell’s discussion of Héloïse’s letters struck me as an irritatingly trendy version of a banal argument: that Héloïse’s emotional demand for comfort from Abélard constitutes a distinctively feminine viewpoint opposed to Abélard’s distanced orthodoxy (presumably a distinctively masculine viewpoint). On the feminist spectrum Connell occupies the right-wing extreme, characterizing the foregoing as “this essential difference between men and women” (p. 28) and “the basic difference between men and women” (p. 32). The position is problematic for a number of reasons. One is that it shares a premise with sexism and racism (the premise of essential difference). The other is that it ignores the social construction of self and of gender, which has been rather a major topic of intellectual investigation in several disciplines during this century. It is perhaps this ahistoricism which can produce such sentimental anachronism as the hypothesis of Héloïse’s “mid-life . . . crisis of identity” (p. 28—though she was only thirty-two at the time). The Procrustean bed of essentialist theory cuts off (as it were) even the biographical facts: when Connell writes of Abélard’s “choice of career and fame as more important than a caring relationship” (p. 28), he forgets the small matter of a castration, which is what forced Abélard to dissolve his marriage and enter a monastery.

Susan Clark uses Mechtild of Magdeburg’s treatment of simile to explore the German mystic’s self-concept as a writer. Constance Berman’s study of women donors to French monasteries shows the active role women played despite the official attitudes. Though the author does not say so, this is by no means the only instance in medieval culture where ideology quietly

steps aside to make room for practical reality. Larry Usilton's article, "The King's Women and Their Corrodies," sheds light on a little-known but surprisingly extensive social practice: the requirement that British royal monasteries shelter, feed, or otherwise support his male and female servants in a kind of pension scheme. The article includes a list of the king's known female corrodars from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Frances Underhill gives a biographical sketch of Elizabeth de Burgh as an important "model of fourteenth-century female lay piety" and patron of numerous religious and academic institutions.

Sue Ellen Holbrook offers a dual system for discerning order and coherence in *The Book of Margery Kempe*: one structure is a set of four image clusters; the other is the use of liturgical time. I am not sure that this scheme works, inasmuch as Margery's transitions remain subjective and associative and hence not really reducible to any system outside themselves. Moreover, it is not clear whether the author believes that it is the task of criticism to raise all disorder to order: some texts may well be characterized by an incoherency which becomes their most interesting or significant feature. In the last analysis it seems to me that the coherency Holbrook finds in Margery's book is of the kind R. D. Laing finds in the recitals of his patients: possessing a logic of its own though not necessarily that of conventional criticism.

Judith Rothschild has contributed a somewhat tedious piece debating the characterization of two of the *lais* of Marie de France as fabliaux. One would like to see the piece that begins where this one leaves off: What follows from Marie's use of fabliau motifs or techniques? Ann McMillan interprets Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* as a work both ironic in method and moral in intention. It is a balanced appraisal of an important poem which has been oddly neglected in past decades. Susan Hagen's paper on the Wife of Bath breaks no new ground but sensibly challenges Kittredge's 1912 "Marriage Group" thesis in light of contemporary criticism, concluding that "Chaucer was no feminist. . . . He simply knew who painted the lion—and so should we" (p. 136). Edwin Craun's paper on Henryson's *Cresseid* takes up the question of how the protagonist's blasphemy relates to her final self-knowledge; it seems to add little to our understanding of "the worlds of medieval women."

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