



PROJECT MUSE®

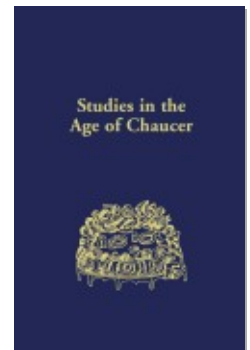
Medieval Women Writers ed. by Katharina M. Wilson, and:
*Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Literary and
Historical Perspectives* ed. by Mary Beth Rose (review)

Ruth Morse

Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Volume 9, 1987, pp. 271-272 (Review)

Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.1987.0039>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/658834/summary>

KATHARINA M. WILSON, ed. *Medieval Women Writers*. Athens: University of Georgia Press; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984. Pp. xxix, 366. \$30.00.

MARY BETH ROSE, ed. *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Literary and Historical Perspectives*. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1986. Pp. xxviii, 288. \$29.95.

Present-mindedness is always with us. Even the most wide-ranging historical study of how the past slowly became the present biases itself according to the winners, to "us" and "here" and "now." Yet it would be falsely deterministic to assert that a leaning, a tendency, an interest must necessarily be the concomitant of bias, the distortion. One of the most striking features of the new concern with women's writing is the way it contributes to larger trends in historical scholarship: the breaking down of current genre categories with a contingent dissolving effect on our perceptions of what counts as literature, the increasingly multilingual and multinational approach which stresses the similarities of writers of the same status in their societies, the encompassing attitude to "popular" or "typical" writing. There are limits, of course, and there is no medical writing in these books (it would be hard to argue for the inclusion of Trotula). It is good to see examples of the *ars dictaminis*; in addition to the inevitable Héloïse, the mystics Hadewijch and Catherine of Siena are represented. Given that each chapter is dedicated to one author, it is understandable that the nuns of Le Ronceray and the Paston women are omitted, and the thin but clear dividing line between dictation and consultation explains the inclusion of Margery Kempe but the exclusion of Christina of Markyate. As Wilson points out in her introduction, the unimaginative provincialism of the present has reinforced the inherited assumption that literature is largely by, for, and about men. The implicit questions posed by these essays (as by Peter Dronke both in his *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* and here, in an elegant study of Castelloza), are, What writing remains worth reading, and Why? and For whom? and How is a canon created? and For whom? One does not have to subscribe to Bloom's anxiety thesis to recognize that one kind of canon is created by writers to define themselves against a self-defining past. A more broadly historical view, which emphasizes style, form, and innovation less and representativeness more promises a different picture, one which perhaps treats the past less instrumentally.

Medieval Women Writers appears, at first sight, to be a modest collection of essays plus extracts suitable for use as a textbook. It is more. Fifteen

chapters span the ninth to the fifteenth centuries; the languages represented (almost all in new translations) are Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, Latin, Occitan, and Spanish; in addition to the authors already mentioned, there are chapters on Dhuoda, Hrotsvit, Marie de France (represented inevitably, but rightly, by the *Lais*), Hildegard, Mechtild, Marguerite Porete, Saint Bridget of Sweden, Julian, Florencia Pinar, and Christine de Pizan. The accent is on love: romantic, maternal, or mystical. Each scholar provides an up-to-date bibliography for his or her subject, making this a book which can be used for undergraduates but which scholars also will wish to refer to, since it surveys the present state of knowledge about its subjects. The standard of the essays is consistently high, and their net effect one which might be described as optimistic: the essayists are enthusiasts, introducing the work of women they know well, and in so doing they introduce a remarkable amount of medieval culture, what we used to call "background." Like Eileen Power's *Medieval People*, this is a book to be read with pleasure as well as profit, and to be recommended not only to the young but also to the nonspecialist. It is a fine example of collaboration.

The other book under review exemplifies the miscellaneous noncollaboration of the collection of conference papers. Despite its title, only two of the essays deal with specifically medieval subjects. Jane Schulenberg's essay on rape, especially of religious, and their possible defenses against it, particularly suicide and self-mutilation, handles a wide variety of sources with sure control. To her survey a useful addition would be Ian Donaldson's *The Rapes of Lucrece*, which takes a more purely literary stance. Janet Mueller, in a jargon-ridden and rather unfocused essay on Margery Kempe, argues for the *Boke* as an autobiography, without thinking hard enough about what that might mean in either generic or psychological terms for a woman of that time and place. Margery appears in both books, to which can now be added a translation in the Penguin Classics by B. A. Windeatt, which contains an excellent introduction placing Margery as a medieval woman mystic. The appearance of these books gives one the sense that the map is being drawn, the sketches filled in. Though there may be no cure for present-mindedness, the diversity of present interests which approach the past helps create complex pictures. The very variety of ancestors which this group or that finds in history is our best corrective.

RUTH MORSE
Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge