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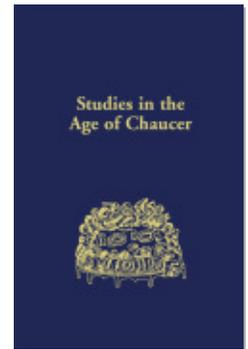
*The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women* ed. by June Hall  
McCash (review)

Kathleen Biddick

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The audience for Lester's book is explicitly defined as "the general reader and beginning student" (p. 3). No knowledge of Old or Middle English is assumed, but Lester writes: "The language was itself the subtlest expression of the whole culture. To understand all its complexities is an impossible task, but to make the attempt immeasurably increases the pleasure and value of a reader's experience" (p. 10). The book is intended to function as neither grammar nor primer, however; instead, it appears to be designed as a supplementary text for those who are learning (or preparing to learn) to read Old or Middle English, serving to increase their appreciation for medieval poets' skilled manipulation of diction and syntax for poetic effect. These ends it serves admirably well, though at nearly forty dollars, it is probably too expensive to assign as a student course-text.

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JUNE HALL McCASH, ed. *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women*. Athens, Ga. and London: University of Georgia Press, 1996. Pp. xix, 402. \$60.00 cloth; \$25.00 paper.

This meticulously edited collection of twelve essays seeks "to explore the varieties and to test the limits of women's patronage" (p. 3). The appeal made by Rita Lejeune in 1976 for a general work on the patronage of medieval women inspired McCash's labor. With its intention to "hear once again voices that might otherwise have remained silent forever" (p. 1), the volume is largely shaped by the methodological concerns of "herstory" that informed feminist scholarship twenty years ago. It constitutes women as historical agents through painstaking work of recuperation of archival sources, both textual and material (visual and decorative arts and architecture), and the recovery of bibliography. Exemplary in this respect are McCash's overview of cultural patronage of medieval women, essays on patterns of women's literary patronage in England from 1200 to ca. 1475 by Karen K. Jambeck, and a survey of the patronage of Plantagenet Queens by John Carmi Parsons. Specific studies of elite women include essays on Elizabeth de Burgh by Frances A. Underhill, Matilda of Scotland by Lois L. Huneycutt, Isabel of Portugal by Charity Cannon Willard and Leonor of England and her

daughters by Miriam Shadis. Essays on the Empress Theodora and on women's role in Latin letters by Anne L. McClanan and Joan M. Ferrante, respectively, offer chronological and geographic perspectives. Madeline H. Caviness's study of women's patronage of the visual arts argues for the blurring of boundaries among patrons, donors, recipients, and users and also emphasizes the strong interest in genealogical projects among elite medieval women. Located as they always were in between their natal and conjugal families, their patronage could refigure genre. Take for instance Matthew Paris's *vita* of St. Edmund, which he translated into a French metrical version for Isabella de Fortibus, countess of Arundel. The Latin hagiography that Matthew renders as romance transforms itself through its dedication to the Countess into a political genealogy commemorating the Marshal rebels to whom Isabel was related through her maternal grandmother.

The intersections between genre, gender, diglossia, and translation at stake in the life of St. Edmund raise important disciplinary questions about the project of this volume. Why the return of herstory (there is no entry for *gender* in the volume's index) in the mid-1990s when the study of gender has made trouble in medieval studies? In his foreward, Stephen G. Nichols emphasizes that "female patronage played a key role in the evolution of the mother tongue from the status of purely informal speech to a stage where, without losing consciousness of its role as discourse, it also functioned as a language, *langue*, in the sense that Latin was a language, *lingua*" (p. xv).

The oxymoronic valence of "female patron" risks going unremarked in this celebration of women's agency. The root of *vernacularity*, as Gabrielle Spiegel reminds us in *Romancing the Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), derives etymologically from *verna*, a houseborn slave (p. 66). The root for *patron* comes from a term in Roman law for one who owns slaves. Thus the concatenated terms, *female patron of vernacularity*, captures the powerful contradictions of medieval diglossia—that is, linguistic distinctions between Latin and vernaculars that produced a "different set of values, behavior, and attitudes and was not simply a form of bilingualism" (Spiegel, p. 66). The staging of the female patron in the prologues to both vernacular romances and histories (whether it be Chrétien de Troyes's Marie de Champagne in *Lancelot*, or Nicolas of Senlis's Yolande in his French *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*), a figure who is both patron and recipient of the work (slave-owner and slave), uses the "female patron" to put into circulation a troubling exchange, the deadly combat for truth-claims between Latin and

the vernacular. The battle over truth-claims between the paternal and maternal tongue are ultimately conservative, since they simply reverse, and do not question, the structures of institutional dominion of Latin literacy. Thus historicized, the question of the “female patron of vernacularity” has paradox to offer.

The contributors, especially Madeline H. Caviness, John Carmi Parsons, and Ralph Hanna III, attempt to grapple with the contradictions of a too easy and unhistoricized assumption of agency for the “female patron,” but they stop short of articulating a crucial theoretical question posed by the volume: How does patronage function as a set of textual and material relations long inflected by gender? Readers who wish to follow through with this question will find suggestive parallels in Helen Solterer’s study of the “female master” in her book *The Master and Minerva: Disputing Women in French Medieval Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Christine de Pizan, a “female master” and a “female patron,” can instruct us about the risks to contemporary medieval scholars of leaving unaddressed the contradictions of agency embedded in the duality of the “female patron.” Christine insisted on calling herself the son (*le fils*) of her father. In so doing she marks the homosociality of genealogy and patronage while at the same time resisting it through disclosure. Such tactics raise questions for the readers of this volume who read it in the “corporate” academy of the late 1990s, in which patronage rules as government and other funding for feminist and queer scholarship and pedagogy becomes increasingly scarce and contested.

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RUTH MORSE. *The Medieval Medea*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996.  
Pp. xvi, 267. \$72.00.

Ruth Morse is a meticulous scholar, and in *The Medieval Medea* she has produced a study worthy of her thoroughness. Hers is a sweeping subject: as she establishes elaborately, the story of Jason and the Argonauts is the earliest secular quest narrative recorded in Western literature. Over it looms the inescapable presence of Medea, constantly (as Morse