

JANE CHANCE, ed., *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996. Pp. xv, 342. ISBN: 0-8130-1391-7. \$59.95.

Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages, a collection of essays based upon a 1991 symposium at Rice University, is devoted to reconstructing the 'aesthetic' of female writing in the Middle Ages. Invoking sophisticated new approaches to feminine discourse as a 'double-voiced' strategy that reacts to the specific ideological constraints that inscribe both culture and writing, these essays explore the relationship between the role of gender and the textual traditions of authority and discursive representation of subjectivity. As such, the volume seeks to repudiate the common charges that women's writing constitutes some of the most 'homogenous' and 'mediocre' texts of the Middle Ages, finding within these texts instead poignant reminders of the extent to which we have perhaps oversimplified and marginalized some of the most interesting examples of our literary and cultural history.

Though Chance's introductory essay is fairly theoretical and wide-ranging, the essays themselves are specific and tightly reasoned, closely analyzing the rhetorical strategies, manipulations, or dissimulations that take place in particular case-studies. Indeed, the articles in this volume are as valuable for their careful readings of otherwise neglected female writers as they are for their theorizing the issue of 'gender in the Middle Ages.' The individual chapters are careful to present accurate portraits of the women they frame. Heloise, Hadewijch, Birgitta of Sweden, Christine de Pizan, Marie de France, Margery Kempe, and Angela of Foligno, among others, speak in these chapters in their own voices. Careful contextualization of these voices within both specific localities and the more encompassing history and tradition of ideas round out the examinations.

The volume is divided into three sections addressing voice, subjectivity, and the experience of the body in gendered writing. Part I, comprised of essays by Catherine Brown, Saskia M. Murk-Jansen, Claire Sahlin, and Earl Jeffrey Richards, examines how the various voices of 'female expression' employed by women writers reflect not so much the enactment of gender stereotypes as they do the deliberate manipulation of gendered rhetorical masks that allow the female writer to speak from various authoritative stances. From writers as disparate as Heloise to Birgitta of Sweden, the 'passive' and 'obedient' natures of the feminine may be invoked as rhetorical devices to countermand and aesthetize the strong authoritative demands they make upon an audience of men. This is an observation that has a great deal of relevance for the section on the construction of female subjectivity that follows, where, as Rupert T. Pickens, Kevin Brownlee, Sarah Beckwith, and Kate Greenspan show, masculine or feminine perspectives can be donned at will to display different varieties of experience. Christine de Pizan, for example, rejects outright the notion of an essentialized feminine nature, deliberately displaying her virtuosity by engaging in an epistolary exchange between male and female writers. Such mystical writers as Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich and Magdalena of Freiberg, too, exploit preconceived notions of female difference as a way of inscribing their own voices and experiences as authoritative

text.

Any conclusions we might retain about women's subjectivity in the Middle Ages are largely belied, however, by the very interesting essays of Part III, which focus on the experience of the body and what the editor calls 'transhumanization' in subjective experience. These essays use the analyses of individual case studies to challenge dominant trends in psychoanalysis and feminist essentialism, insisting on the unique aspects of subjective experience as mediated through both writing and physical body. Highlights include Christina Mazzoni's powerful counter to Lacanian psychoanalysis in her essay on Angela of Foligno; Claire Nouvet's discerning of a new theory of authorship in Christine de Pizan; and Mary Giles' observation that the corporeal nature of Spanish women's mystical experiences reflects not so much an expression of 'the feminine' as it does an exploitation of the affective characteristics of theater.

These essays make a powerful statement against precluding the complexity of subjective experience by overtheorizing it, or what is worse, authorizing the theory to speak *for* the text itself. Such endeavors to identify the feminine may well, in Mazzoni's words, 'silence the very possibility of woman's self representation' (258). Instead, the essays in this final section—and indeed, in the book overall—seek to particularize experience and textuality. This volume is a valuable addition to the critical canon, not only for its insights into 'women's writing,' but for its highly capable and insightful readings of some too-long neglected texts.

LAUREL AMTOWER

California State University, San Marcos