



Reviews

JANE CHANCE, ed., *Women Medievalists and the Academy*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005. Pp. xlvi, 1073, illus. ISBN: 0-299-20750-1. \$85.

As the number of pages would attest, this is a very comprehensive history of women medievalists who have shared in the creation of medieval studies as a scholarly discipline since the seventeenth century, the first scholar given a biography being Elizabeth Elstob (1683–1756), an independent scholar, as are the three other women whose biographies begin the book. Elstob published the first grammar of Old English in the vernacular. The others are Independent Scholars because they had no university affiliation, either as student or faculty. In this way the lives of some women medievalists have come full circle because today, because of the ‘budget constraints’ of personnel departments, some women medievalists find themselves ‘Independent Scholars’ once again. There may have been other women medievalists in the earlier centuries, but they remain unknown. A chronology at the beginning of the work helps the reader situate the women in their historical context, very important for realizing the sweep of the work’s intentions. There are biographies and autobiographies of seventy-two women medievalists, accompanied by portraits or photographs. The collection answers Chance’s question in her Introduction: ‘Can women speak without making crablike gestures and movements either personal or eccentric?’ (xxv). The answer is well documented with notes and an extensive bibliography, including a short bibliography of each medievalist’s published work, making for quite a record of achievement. A list of contributors and an extensive Index completes the book.

Women scholars from many countries are profiled: Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Bulgaria, England, France, Holland, Ireland, Japan, Poland, Spain, Wales, the United States, including a variety of disciplines from lexicography, philology, mysticism, as well as art history, intellectual history, history, languages, literature, archaeology intellectual history, quite a wide spread of fields, where women scholars have made stellar contributions to the growth of the discipline of medieval studies. Within each discipline, the various divisions also include specialists. For example, in the discipline of linguistics, women have contributed studies on Anglo-Norman, Medieval Latin, Old English, Celtic, as well as study of the manuscripts containing the languages. No subdivision of a discipline has been neglected.

The question that forms the collection’s foundation is the question Elizabeth Elstob asks at the beginning of her own grammar of Old English: ‘What has a woman to do with learning?’ For a grammarian of Old English, the question echoes Alcuin’s question to the bishop of Lindisfarne in the eighth century about the monks’

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reading the story of Ingeld, the Heathobard prince, in the monastery's refectory: 'What has Ingeld to do with Christ?' Elstrob's question poses the collision of two equally opposed worlds of her time as she acknowledges a subversive love of learning. The wealth of information in these pages answers these questions and demonstrates the deep commitments women medievalists have made to their work throughout the centuries. The biographies and autobiographies show how creative women have been in finding universities that would train them for the doctoral degree in the first place, and then in finding places that would accommodate these degrees with teaching or research posts.

Arthurians would be familiar with some of medievalists who have been treated in shorter biographies in *On Arthurian Women: Essays in Memory of Maureen Fries*, (2001), edited by Bonnie Wheeler and Fiona Tolhurst, for example, Rachel Bromwich, Helaine Newstead, Gertrude Loomis, Laura Hibbard Loomis, Jessie Weston. They appear here also, honoring their specialty, in more detailed entries.

A necessary corollary to these stories is the gift of long life. If a woman scholar could live long enough, she might see changes brought about by feminism that would accommodate her ambitions. For example, Charity Willard, scholar of Christine de Pizan, could not teach at West Point, which excluded women, when her husband taught there, so she taught at Ladycliffe College, 'outside the gates.' Later years, however, found her mentoring West Point students. Her story illustrates the decisions a woman medievalist had to be prepared to make if she married. Professor Willard turned down a job at Brown University because her husband's commanding officer strongly disapproved. Another illustration of the difficulties encountered in holding a marriage and a career together is sketched in the life of Laura Hibbard Loomis, the second wife of Roger Sherman Loomis. She commuted between Wellesley and New York for several years until she finally gave up Wellesley mainly because of the toll of keeping two households.

The methodologies of presentation make the book fascinating as well. Straight biography of the earlier scholars like Beryl Smalley, Mildred Pope, Helen Waddell, Charlotte D' Evelyn, Eleanor Duckett, and others yield to the variety of styles contemporary medievalists use in telling their stories. Marie Borroff comes to medieval studies in a round-about way; Elaine Bloch concentrates on her study of misericords after her retirement; Jo Ann McNamara emphasizes networking with other scholars; Meredith Lillich tells of her sympathetic mentors and guardians. The individual voice, sometimes with humor and irony, comes through the writing and holds the readers attention. The variety, both of life and style, is a great boon for such a long work. One wants the stories to give a sense of obstacles women medievalists have overcome in order to thrive in their profession. This is a very worthwhile volume.

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