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18.05.08, Classen, Reading Medieval European Women Writers

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Classen, Albrecht. *Reading Medieval European Women Writers: Strong Literary Witnesses from the Past*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2016. pp. 430. ISBN: 978-3-631-67407-9 (hardback).

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Each of the eight chapters that constitute Albrecht Classen's new book offers an introduction to and summary discussion of a different medieval European female writer, spanning from the tenth-century Hrotsvitha to the sixteenth-century Marguerite de Navarre, and deals with a variety of literary genres, in Latin as well as in the medieval vernaculars of France, Germany, Spain, and England. In many ways, the breadth of the subject is both this book's main strength and its Achilles' heel: Classen's multilingual expertise enables him to treat sources that are very seldom if ever dealt with together, but the scope of the monograph does not allow for much in-depth discussion of each writer, or for the introduction of a particularly original argument. As Classen himself states, "in many respect [sic] the present project will not really offer profoundly new insights or introduce us to female writers who have been entirely unknown so far" (38), his aim rather being to present "a literary map with numerous islands populated by meaningful, powerful, insightful female writers...to the new student generation interested in women's issues and literature" (39). The size of this "map" cannot however do justice to regional or chronological specificities, for instance the comparatively important number of female scribes in medieval Germany, the fourteenth-century *nonnenbücher*, or East Anglia as a fertile ground for fifteenth-century women's involvement in writing.

The author is right to note in his review of the relevant scholarship the dearth of scholarly volumes on female writers in the medieval West spanning more than one region, citing Peter Dronke's *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (1984) and Joan Ferrante's *To the Glory of her Sex* (1997) as notable exceptions. He also mentions, in another context, Ann Klinck and Ann Marie Rasmussen's edited volume *Medieval Woman's Song: Cross-Cultural Approaches* (2002) and that of Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace (*The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing*, 2003)--which, though mainly focused on women's writings in Middle English and Old French, sets its essays in a much broader context. One could have however wished him to mention Carolyn Larrington's still-relevant *Women and Writing in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook* (1995), which offers an even wider geographical and generic range of texts than Classen's monograph. Also intended for classroom use, it includes a range of accessible introductions as well as primary texts written by or for women translated from Latin and more nine different European vernaculars, from Old Norse to Middle Welsh, by way of Italian and Spanish.

Classen achieves his ambitious enterprise of offering as complete and varied a picture of female writers throughout the medieval period in Europe as possible, although some chapters are more successful than others. Classen's principal aim in the monograph is to highlight the variety of genres that medieval women adopted in their writings, using this fact to advocate for female writers' better insertion within the literary canon as well as in class syllabi, something he hopes his introductory study will facilitate. His main argument to support the study of women's writings alongside that of men is that "gender difference [in the medieval period] did not matter, at least not in terms of literature" (41), and that it would "be much more productive to view women's (cultural) history not as separate from men's history, but as a kaleidoscopic perspective of a holistic world in which men and women interacted with each other" (338). While he himself acknowledges the irony of drawing such a conclusion in a monograph solely devoted to female writers, he does not manage to resolve the apparent incongruence between this argument and his other stated goal to demonstrate how "women's issues" ran "rather parallel across Europe" (17), and that these women writers "in a way speak to each other, take up very similar concerns and pursue similar efforts" (16). This opposition may explain why the author ends up offering but few passing connections between the different texts. Classen is right to champion the inclusion of more female writers within the medieval canon, and his treatment of relatively lesser known figures such as Leonor López de Córdoba, Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken, or Eleonore of Austria (chs. 4, 6, and 7 respectively) do go in that direction. The other female writers considered--Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim, Marie de France, Julian of Norwich, Christine de Pizan, Helene Kottanner, and Marguerite de Navarre (chs. 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, and epilogue)--have however long since been admitted to the classroom as subjects of individual study or as part of the canon, as their inclusion in recent anthologies of medieval literature testifies.

The first chapter, "The Early Medieval Convent as a Center of Literary Activities: The Canoness Hrotsvit of Gandersheim," offers a good introduction on the political importance of Gandersheim, and the role of canonesses, moving on to a summary of the plot of each of Hrotsvitha's plays. Classen foregrounds Hrotsvitha's self-confident representation as a new-and-improved Terence, and rightly notes the plays' strong emphasis on eroticism. His discussion could have benefited from a more sustained comparison with the hagiographical sources from which Hrotsvitha drew. Indeed, consideration of the generic rules of hagiography may explain the patterns Classen associates with Hrotsvitha's writings, for instance in his claim that "Pelagius does not die from his most unusual punishment, a common pattern in much of Hrotsvit's writing" (73) or that "Abderrahman then orders Pelagius's decapitation, which then, also following the pattern pursued by the poet in some of her plays, achieves the desired affect [sic]" (73). Classen then proceeds to an interesting discussion of Hrotsvitha's often-overlooked non-dramatic works, remarking on the writer's rhetorical strategies of authorization in her prologues to the *Gesta Ottonis* and *Primordia Coenobii Gandeshemensis*.

Chapter 2, on Marie de France as a "Bestseller Author," highlights Marie's extensive influence on later medieval literature and offers a lengthy summary of all of Marie's works. Although Classen mentions Marie de France's connection with the Anglo-Norman court (118), it would have been interesting to develop this point, especially in a chapter whose subtitle reads "A Cultural and Linguistic Mediator in Literary Terms." Chapter 3, on Julian of Norwich, is from the perspective of this reviewer the least successful of this collection, riddled with generalisations and preventable errors: while Classen mentions that Julian wrote two distinct texts, he does not distinguish between them, probably due to his use of Julia Bolton Holloway's edition of the text; the Benedictine convent at Carrow is mistaken for a "convent of St Julian in Norwich" (123); Margery Kempe's book is referred to as "autographical" (138, n.41); Julian's name is given as Juliana on several occasions (131, 134, 135, 139); Julian's mention of the *Pater Noster*, the *Ave*, and the *Credo* is surprisingly presented as perhaps a dangerous move in the context of Arundel's forbidding "the use of the Bible in the vernacular" (141). Classen is on safer ground where he interprets the hazelnut episode, and where he highlights Julian's main strategies to validate her writings. He is also right to emphasize the importance of Julian's role as the interpreter of her own visions.

Chapter 4, on Leonor López de Córdoba's short *Memorias*, starts with a useful reminder of the *convivencia* of the three Abrahamic faiths in medieval Spain, and its implications for gender: female Jewish and Muslim writers hailing from this region predate the first work penned there by a Christian woman. Classen provides a summary of Leonor's eventful life and her recounting of it in the *Memorias*, which she uses as "a platform for her personal defense, self-realization, self-representation, and also her own self-transformation into a mouthpiece of larger ideals and values" (180). Chapter 5 turns to a good general introduction on Christine de Pizan and her various works. Classen rejects the classification of Christine as a proto-feminist, claiming she is "less a 'revolutionary' than a very strong witness of women's power and influence throughout the Middle Ages" (223). Such assimilation of power, influence, and strength, repeated at several points of the monograph--notably in the book's subtitle "Strong Literary Witnesses from the Past"--represents a perhaps slightly outdated gendered valuation of strength.

Chapters 6 and 7 tackle two fifteenth-century noblewomen's translation projects from French into their adoptive German language: Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken and Eleonore of Austria. This is where Classen appears at his best, demonstrating his mastery of the texts and of the scholarly discussion that arose from them. He discusses at length Eleonore's debated authorship of *Pontus und Sidonia*, an attribution that is only made in a printed edition of the text and is absent from the extant manuscript version. Chapter 8, on Elizabeth of Hungary's lady-in-waiting Helene Kottanner, and the latter's account of stealing the Hungarian crown on behalf of her pregnant queen, is similarly engrossing. Classen shows how Helene presents herself as the queen's confidante, as the baby's caretaker and as central to making the young king's coronation possible. What lacks is an explicit analysis of Helene's *intentio auctoris* for her *Memoirs*. Perhaps a little bit out of place in this chapter, but still riveting, is Classen's reflection on female mystics' use of *bricolage* in their writing: "the very absence of an internal structure often represents the fundamental strength of mystical accounts particularly because the mystics were free to experiment with the widest range of genres and literary expressions and did not have to concern themselves with rational, structural issues that were basically in contradiction to their vision" (301).

An interesting aspect that struck this reviewer from reading about these writers' literary careers is that the pre-existence of a writer in the familial structure is a great facilitator for women to start writing. Christine de Pizan's husband was a royal secretary to the French court; Teresa de Cartagena, a fifteenth-century writer Classen mentions in chapter 5, had well-known writers and poets as her uncle and father; Eleonore of Austria followed in the footsteps of her father King James I, notorious for his writing of *The Kingis Quair*; finally, Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken's translations were inspired by her mother Margarethe's own *Loher et Maller*, a translation from the Latin (227), while her uncle and brother were also connected with literary pursuits and patronage. Another point of connection is the sheer number of them who were multilingual, often writing in their adoptive, rather than their mother, tongue. Hrotsvitha writes in Latin; Marie de France's knowledge of Latin, French, and English is well-known; and Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken as well as Eleonore of Austria chose to write in German rather than their native French. Whereas the multilingualism of male medieval writers is a well-established fact, encouraging scholars to breach linguistic barriers in their academic forays, that women writers are too is still often overlooked. This could have been used by Classen as fodder to support his own multilingual enterprise in this monograph.

On the whole, Classen succeeds in demonstrating the sheer variety that constitutes women's writing in medieval Europe. His introductory chapters, intended as they are for students new to the field, constitute useful summaries of the writers' major works as well as some important critical *crucis*. Nevertheless, given the lacunae mentioned above, teachers wishing to recommend this book to their students may wish to assign its chapters selectively.

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