

Book Reviews

Comptes rendus de livres

Jane Taylor and Lesley Smith, eds., *Women and the Book: Assessing the Visual Evidence*

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Taylor, Jane and Lesley Smith, eds. *Women and the Book: Assessing the Visual Evidence*. London: British Library and Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997. 287 pp., 112 illus. Cloth, \$75, ISBN 0-8020-4216-3. Paper, \$29.95, ISBN 0-8020-8069-3.

In her essay entitled "Interpreting Images of Women with Books in Misericords," Wendy Armstead describes an image found in Norwich Cathedral on a fourteenth-century misericord (a bracket attached under a hinged seat in a choir or church stall, which a standing person can lean against). The monumental engraving of Sir William Clere of Ormesby and his wife Denise Wichingham presents a man and a woman standing side by side in an equal position; a husband holds a scroll and his wife a book. A dog, the symbol of faith, lies at their feet (p. 61).

It is a common shrine image. Armstead argues, however, that its interpretation is quite complex. Following the Bakhtinian concept of misericords, she concludes that, although the carver of this image probably complied with the instructions of his client, the result of his work was not simply a realistic depiction of the couple. The misericord belongs to the world of medieval drollery and grotesques inhabited by humans as well as monsters and beasts. It is the world in which a mixture of fantasy, humour and realism suggest a carnival-like suspension of social norms. Therefore, a husband and a wife can be shown as equal. Moreover, in the context of the medieval folk culture, a woman with a book may be as satirical an image as a woman beating her husband. Interpreted as a part of the ecclesiastic culture however, the same image may also be a symbol of virtue, piety and devotion rather than a representation of a literate, educated woman.

As she further analyzes the imagery of misericords, Armstead outlines a series of questions relevant to the explanation of medieval culture: What is the relationship between the medieval imagery and the actual sociological and cultural context in which it arose? Can an image be effectively used to retrieve the past, despite the fact that one can only rarely recreate the circumstances in which it was created? What method of cultural analysis should be used to discover the meaning of a medieval depiction? What is the actual connotation of an image of a woman and can it bear a transcultural meaning outside of its historical context?

Armstead's essay on the imagery of misericords is one of fourteen papers published in the volume entitled *Women and the Book: Assessing the Visual Evidence*. Jane H. M. Taylor and Lesley Smith, the editors of the volume, are well-known scholars of medieval culture. Taylor is a French tutor at St Hilda's College, Oxford. Among her main research interests are fifteenth-century literature and late medieval narrative structures, as well as paratext and reception studies. Smith is an academic bursar and tutor in Politics at Harris Manchester College, Oxford.

Several of the papers published in this book were first presented in 1993, at the St Hilda's Conference on Women and the Book in the Middle Ages, while others were commissioned especially for the volume. The selection brings together contributions by art and literary historians from Europe and the United States. The main focus of *Women and the Book* is the depiction of the relationship between medieval women and their books as reflected in medieval imagery.

Although Armstead's essay examines misericords, other contributors concentrate on the visual evidence found in medieval books, reaching further into the textual sources to support and endorse their analysis. Since medieval books were mostly owned by nuns and the nobility, these two groups are the focus of this study, yet several references are made to depictions of trade women and peasants.

The limited size of the volume and its concentration on European noble ladies and their books may explain why the heretical trends inspired by women, such as Guglielmites or *la mystique courtoise* — the latter a movement that was both religious and literary — are not mentioned. Even more surprising is the fact that only one essay refers to *Beguines*, and indeed the word is not even indexed.

The title of the volume, *Women and the Book*, stresses the relationship between medieval women and their books yet, at the same time, it limits considerably the scope of the contributed papers. One could argue that medieval women (Heloise, Maria de Hout, Matilda (Queen of England), Saint Radegund), often secluded in monasteries or isolated in castles, may have preferred to express themselves through letters rather than books. The question of the book as a form of female expression in the Middle Ages is itself disputable, and an analysis of the female epistolary literature in Middle Ages would certainly enrich our understanding of the subject.

In the introduction to the book, Taylor and Smith address the problem of using extant artifacts to describe a less privileged social group, such as medieval women, that may have rarely been allowed to express itself in books or art. In addition to the questions posed by Wendy Armstead, any scholar looking for clues to interpret gender-specific dilemmas has to determine who created the image and for whom it was intended. How would a picture of a woman created by a woman for a female client differ from one commissioned by a father for his daughter's book of hours (p. 16)?

The editors and contributors are well aware of the difficulty in documenting any assumption made about medieval artifacts. Social and historical circumstances affect the survival of the evidence, and the existing original material is not easily accessible. Therefore, the editors of the *Women and the Book* aim to compile a scholarly record of existing images, that might be used as quantitative evidence for or against any given interpretation of the gender-related

aspects of medieval cultural. The contributors do not pretend to answer all the questions associated with the critique of visual and textual material. They intend, instead, to provoke a discussion that would involve scholars interested in numerous aspects of art and literary history.

The papers collected in *Women and the Book* look at the relationship between books and medieval women from various angles. The volume is divided into three parts: "Images of Women," "Images and Books by Women" and "Images and Books for Women." The first part, "Images of Women," contains four essays dealing with the existing proofs of female literacy. Yet in the context of medieval culture, even the word "literacy" has to be defined. In a paper "Scriba, Femina: Medieval Depictions of Women Writing," Smith re-examines the common modern assumption that abilities to read and write are inseparable. She remarks that there are many medieval depictions of women reading yet very few images of women writing. Hence, the existing visual documents force us to make a distinction between those two skills. After a comprehensive analysis of images of Mary holding a book, Smith concludes that a woman with a manuscript could be interpreted as a symbol of a *theotokos* (God-bearer) and is therefore a depiction of authority and virtue. The metaphorical representation of a woman with a book, therefore, does not necessarily imply female literacy.

Even an image of a woman writing can have a complex meaning. Is the scriba simply copying the words or creating and composing the manuscript? If a writer is a re-creator, is she acting under divine inspiration? In an interesting manner and with a sophisticated sense of humour, Smith compares images of men and women writing and determines that an interpretation of medieval images is impossible without the broader study of textual evidence and socio-historical facts.

One of the examples illustrating the need for an in-depth study of the context, Smith argues, is the difference in the depiction of women writing secular and religious works. The images of Christine de Pizan, often portrayed writing at her desk, include many details of her appearance, her clothes and hats, but also examples of the tools she used: a codex, pens, a knife... The historical accounts of her life prove that Christine was involved in a production of her manuscripts. She physically wrote her works, addressed them to women and employed women to illuminate manuscripts. At the same

time, Christine was seen by her contemporaries as one reduced to writing for a living like a trade woman (p. 27).

In a series of illustrations depicting St Bridget of Sweden, the Saint is shown at her desk, receiving her visions. She passes a completed manuscript to a man, who sends it to a king. In this way, the illuminator made it obvious that male ecclesiastic approval was necessary in the distribution of religious works. Finally, Smith concludes her paper with an "Inventory of Women Depicted Writing." Since the inventory contains only ten entries, Smith offers an explanation: either men did not see women as worth educating, and the women were generally occupied with tasks other than writing; or not enough is known to seek any firm conclusion on women's literacy.

The importance of the text-image relationship in the depiction of medieval women is further emphasized in all the papers contributed to the first part of *Women and the Book*. Arguably, the most interesting among these essays is a paper by Martha Driver in which she attempts to use the visual depiction and the textual evidence to recreate the "collective past" of medieval women. Driver conducts a very detailed analysis of several images of women with books and concludes that, although these images are a well of information on the medieval material world (depictions of clothes, tools, living conditions, etc.), they cannot be treated as a simple photographic representation of reality. The illuminations mirror the culture producing it, together with its conventions and stereotypes. The author suggests that as medieval art depicts its environment from the point of view of the Church or the nobility, it presents a stylistic picture corresponding to the comfort of court life.

Part two of *Women and the Book* contains four papers relating to the images and books made by women. Surprisingly, all papers in this section deal with books produced and used by nuns. It is interesting that such important authors as Christine de Pizan, Marie de France or Julian of Norwich are not mentioned in this part of the volume. The contributors chose instead to focus on the physical production of books rather than on the intellectual process of writing. Thérèse McGuire recounts the story of Herrad of Landsberg and Hildegard of Bingen, two extraordinary medieval women who are believed to have produced manuscripts. Judith Oliver interprets the authorship and evaluates the merit of a naive style of some

gothic *nonnenbuchers* (nuns' books) and Marie-Louise Ehrenschwendtner examines books collected by nuns at St Catherine's Convent in Nuremberg, reflecting on the intellectual and spiritual lives of Dominican nuns. Finally, Kate Lowe talks of the manuscripts produced at the Benedictine convent of Le Murate in Florence.

Despite the different statements made here, the papers present a very synchronic view of medieval religious women. The nuns often served as *scribas*. Textual evidence however, proves that the nuns frequently recreated the text without understanding it. Usually literate in the vernacular, religious women may not have been educated in Latin.

Some manuscripts reproduced by nuns for secular clients were not decorated, as the illuminations may have been commissioned outside the convents. In contrast, the *nonnenbuchers* produced by nuns, for the use of nuns, are very rich in color and are embroidered in gold and precious stones. According to Judith Oliver, they were inspired by needlework and isolated from the secular aesthetics.

All contributions to the second part of the book investigate the rich social and historical context of medieval culture, yet their main focus is not on clichés or types but on specific women. Herrad of Landsberg and Hildegard of Bingen, Gizela de Kerzenbroeck, Mechthild of Hackeborn and Suora Giustina Niccolini were unique individuals; their names survived because, in the authors' opinions, they were conscious of the power of education and the influence it gave them in a male dominated society.

The third and largest part of *Women and the Book* includes six essays on books and images created for women. These papers are the most diverse in style and subject matter. The strength of this part of the book lies in a detailed description of various aspects of the analysed manuscripts; the description is then placed against the broad background of known facts and stimulating scholarly discussions. The contributing authors view various details of manuscripts' illuminations as intellectual documents revealing the spiritual and psychological concerns of medieval women.

An interesting paper on the "Gospel of Margaret of Scotland and the Literacy of an Eleventh-Century Queen" by Richard Gameson can serve as a scholarly example of the iconological, in-depth interpretation of the depiction of a medieval noblewoman. A detailed, verse-by-verse description of the Gospel includes the analysis of the handwriting as well

as the ornamentation used in the artifact. From the book itself, Gameson turns to the historical facts and a hagiographical biography of Queen Margaret to find more proofs of her literacy. He thereby discovers some facts: Margaret's husband commissioned the beautiful ornamentation of the Gospel in honour of his wife's devotion and spiritual superiority (p. 159). In addition to the illuminations, marginal inscriptions also provide details of the cultural use of the artifact; Gameson recalls that the book itself was once used to take an oath. Yet despite this multi-level analysis, Gameson confirms that it is still impossible to determine who produced the book and who originally owned it; one can only speculatively conclude that, in the Middle Ages, female literacy was closely linked to devotional activities and comment on the influence of the church on lay society.

The hermeneutical principle of interest and selection proves very useful in comprehending the medieval past. The contributors to *Women and the Book* share the idea that creators are shaped by the reality in which they live. The interest of the author is determined by the normative historical conditions and the group he or she is addressing; consequently, the problem of authorship and the intended audience is crucial to the interpretation of the artifacts. Anne Rudloff Stanton applies this hermeneutical viewpoint to her analysis of Queen Mary Tudor's Psalter. The manuscript was created in the early fourteenth century for an unknown client. Yet, the imagery present in the selection of texts and illuminations included in the Psalter (for example, a strong focus on motherhood, and a story of adultery redeemed through the devotion to a son) indicates, in Stanton's opinion, a female owner: possibly Queen Isabella, mother of Edward III.

The contributors to this part of *Women and the Book* also respond to the problem of the uncertainty in the interpretation of decorative elements. The authors comment on the fact that if this visual ambiguity provokes an emotional response in a contemporary reader, the images may have also been used in the Middle Ages as a form of emotional influence if not manipulation. Analysing gender responses to the Passion and wounds of Christ, Flora Lewis argues that the sexual connotation often present in the imagery of Christ's wounds influenced and guided female devotion. Furthermore, even the ownership of books had an emotional meaning in the Middle Ages. A portrayal of Mary of Burgundy reading her book

of hours opens a paper on the "Women and Books of Hours" in which Sandra Penketh discusses, among other topics, the notion that the possession of these books does not necessarily imply literacy, but the object may rather be an accessory, a status symbol preserved by women as a valuable treasure.

All the papers in *Women and the Book: Assessing the Visual Evidence* have extensive notes and several are appended with original and translated texts or lists of analysed artifacts. The essays are followed by an index of manuscripts cited and a subject index; 103 illustrations and 9 colored plates give a reader an opportunity to examine and assess the quality of the illuminations.

The place of women in medieval society has provoked a lively discussion in recent years. The impact of gender history on medieval research is unquestionable. Some studies attempt a cross-disciplinary analysis of gender politics, while others limit their focus to specific areas of interest: education, literacy or spirituality. Several periodicals such as *Speculum* or the *Envoi* are devoted in part to the study of medieval women, and academic groups such as the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship greatly contribute to this expanding field. Clearly, the study of gender-related history has advanced considerably since this reviewer studied medieval literature at Jagiellonian University in the mid 1980s.

What does *Women and the Book* contribute then to this developing field of study? While many books focus on textual and gender-related aspects of the medieval history, the strength of this volume lies mostly in its multi-vocal, detailed and honest analysis of the visual evidence. Unlike some other publications, the contributors to *Women and the Book* do not take medieval misogyny for granted, but consider the complexity of beliefs surrounding the depiction of women in the Middle Ages. Furthermore, the book resonates with the idea that the meaning of any material object is not self-evident. Thus the gender identity presented in the volume goes hand in hand with the in-depth analysis of its historical background. The authors engage in a dialogue with the objects as they try to recreate the circumstance in which the books were produced and used. Presenting the artifacts in the sociological and aesthetic context in which they arose, the contributors comment further on the emotional response to books in the Middle Ages and the universality of such a subjective cultural experience.

The book is addressed mostly to scholars of medieval culture and a casual reader may, perhaps, feel alienated by the complicated abbreviations and Latin terms frequently used by authors. The book is not esoteric, however,

and it discusses the visual evidence from the point of view of art and social history, literary theories, and semantics. As such, it can be useful to anyone interested in cultural studies.

John Davis, *The Landscape of Belief: Encountering the Holy Land in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture*

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Davis, John. *The Landscape of Belief: Encountering the Holy Land in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996. 264 pp., 100 illus. + 7 plates. Cloth, US\$65, ISBN 0-601-04373-6.

Americans have always (or at least until very recently) seen their country in theological or quasi-theological terms. The New World has been understood by Protestants as the new Eden, for example, or the new Promised Land. This is reflected not only in the geographical allusions of place names, of course, but also in the historical and eschatological perspectives that have influenced everything from patterns of internal migration to foreign policy. It is a matter of national identity. America has a mission in the world. Or, as John Winthrop put it en route to the Massachusetts Bay colony, colonists had undertaken a divinely ordained "errand into the wilderness."

The mission of these new Israelites has always been to complete what those of old had failed to complete: bringing about the Second Coming, the Messianic Age, the Millennium, the Rapture...or, in the language of recent times, the secular utopia made possible by industrial technology and participatory democracy. Given the centrality of biblical paradigms in America's identity, even when veiled by secular terminology, it is hardly surprising that American artists applied these paradigms directly to the landscapes of both the United States itself and the Holy Land.

In *The Landscape of Belief*, John Davis discusses the latter (though not, unfortunately, the former). Several American landscape painters and photographers worked in Ottoman Palestine during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He mentions archaeologists, evangelists, and tourists as well — mainly because those in the former categories were so

often in one or more of the latter ones as well. Their aim, observes Davis, was to present Palestine as the prototypical, even archetypal, American landscape (which sometimes implied, he argues, a landscape that Americans could not only revere but possibly rule or own as well). These are his main topics in the first two chapters of Part I: "The American Identification with the Holy Land" and "The American Presence in the Holy Land."

In the next two chapters, Davis discusses the technologies used by these artists. In "Panoramic Imagery in the Early Nineteenth Century," he refers to the construction of either buildings in which viewers were surrounded by a circular biblical landscape or "frames" within which the landscape would be unrolled for viewers at special exhibitions. In "Landscape, Photography, and Spectacle in the Late Nineteenth Century," Davis discusses stereoscopes, dioramas (scale models), and even what we would now call biblical "theme parks." Among these was Palestine Park, the most popular exhibit at the St Louis world's fair of 1904. Davis might have pointed out, however, that the vicarious experience visitors sought was nothing new for Christians. The ground plan of Byzantine churches, for example, had allowed even early medieval worshippers to "tour" the Holy Land (the altar representing the Holy Sepulchre, the narthex Bethlehem, and so on).

The same, in a slightly different way, has been true of Catholic churches (which allow "pilgrims" to wend their way along the "Via Dolorosa" as they pass shrines representing fourteen stations of the cross). In fact, according to Mircea Eliade and many others, the same thing is true of sacred places in almost every religious tradition: wherever they happen to be located, pilgrimage sites (temples, churches, synagogues, shrines, festival grounds, tombs of holy people, or whatever) allow worshippers to re-experience sacred events (those associated