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*Reading Memory and Identity in the Texts of
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edited by Margaret Cotter-Lynch and
Brad Herzog

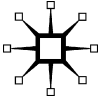
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READING MEMORY AND
IDENTITY IN THE TEXTS
OF MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN
HOLY WOMEN

Edited by

Margaret Cotter-Lynch and Brad Herzog

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*For LaRee, Deverl, and Ginger
Mary-Alice, Jim, and Sean*

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PREFACE

Cheryl Glenn

Sent from the Power,
I have come
to those who reflect upon me,
and I have been found
among those who seek me.
Look upon me,
you who meditate,
and hearers, hear.
Whoever is waiting for me,
take me into yourselves.
Do not drive me
out of your voice,
or out of your ears.
Observe. Do not forget who I am.

—from “The Thunder: Perfect Mind,” Gnostic Gospel¹

“**W**hatever you do, don’t waste your time writing about someone like, um, um, Margery Kempe. *She* was crazy.”

Such was the advice my medieval professor gave me when I was in graduate school, strategizing ways to combine my interests in rhetoric, feminism, and early modern literature. Stanley Kahrl was excited by the prospect of a graduate student exploring medieval literature through a feminist lens, insisting that I read and cite Riane Eisler’s *Chalice and the Blade*.² When I protested, before relenting, his enthusiasm sputtered a bit. It took him a while to realize that *my* feminist tendencies might not automatically lead to *his* choice of subject selection. Nevertheless, he kept his skepticism in check as I conducted trial runs with my feminist readings of various genres and figures, from fabliaux to revelations, from the fierce Grendel’s mother to the submissive Griselda.

My feminist-scholar adventures included rereading the fabliaux (the anonymous “Dame Sirith” and Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Reeve’s Tale” and “The Merchant’s Tale”); the romance and the lai (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Chrétien de Troyes’s “Knight of the Cart,” and Chaucer’s “Franklin’s Tale”); Marian literature (the *N-Town Cycle* of Corpus Christi plays); religious literature (the *Pearl*, *Ancrene Wisse*, the Katherine Group of writings); medieval mysticism (Julian of Norwich’s *Revelations of Divine Love*, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Hildegard von Bingen’s *Scivias* [*Know the Ways*] and *Liber divinatorum operum simplicis hominis* [*The Book of Divine Works*]); and veiled women’s various interventions into religious, literary, and cultural affairs (Heloise’s *Problemata*, Dhuoda’s letters [*Liber Manualis*], Hrotsvitha’s dramas, and Christine de Pisan’s *City of Ladies* and *Book of Three Virtues*).

My graduate-school exploration into the various communities of women populating the medieval territory has sustained me intellectually over the past 20-something years, probably because that journey itself was my destination. As I started reading the texts listed in the previous paragraph, there was relatively little scholarship available to guide me, and most of what was available had been published much earlier, before 1980. Thus, I stopped at any settlement that looked promising, “promising” serving as my rationale for subject selection. Now, thinking back on the early solid recovery work that aided my exploration—work by scholars such as W. Butler-Bowden,³ Edmund Colledge and James Walsh,⁴ Louise Collis,⁵ Peter Dronke,⁶ Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski,⁷ Sharon Farmer,⁸ Dorothy Gardiner,⁹ Frances and Joseph Gies,¹⁰ Etienne Gilson,¹¹ Sister Mary Pia Heinrich,¹² P. Molinari,¹³ and Katharina Wilson¹⁴ (to name a few and omit too many)—I feel indebted. Although most of this scholarship was neither ostensibly feminist nor rhetorical, it provided me the foothold I needed when I began to recuperate medieval women’s contributions to rhetorical theory and performance.

Ironically—or maybe not—most of my medieval publications have centered on Margery Kempe and her Julian-of-Norwich inspiration, text-based literacy practices, autobiography, rhetorical techniques, social influence, religious stratagems, and (what might be labeled) protofeminism. Margery was unusual, to be sure; after all, she has left us with the earliest extant autobiography in English. And she was dramatic, too, to the point of being flamboyant. But crazy? I don’t know. I don’t know that it matters.

Even though Professor Kahrl has been gone for nearly 20 years, I would like to think that despite his warnings to me about women such as Kempe, he would have been energized and amused by my scholarship as well as in awe of how feminist theory could actually open up medieval studies in such relevant and compelling ways. Then he would deny

that he had ever admonished me to stay away from Margery (or that *The Chalice and the Blade* was a must-read). I am smiling as I think back on my studies with him.

What I know for sure is that he would be delighted with this edited collection, astonished that there was so very much still to be known about so very many medieval religious women.

“A New Enterprise”

Wisdom is
 sweeter than honey,
 brings more joy
 than wine,
 illumines
 more than the sun,
 is more precious
 than jewels.
 She causes
 the ears to hear
 and the heart to comprehend.

—Makeda, Queen of Sheba¹⁵

When Margaret Cotter-Lynch and Brad Herzog approached me about their idea for these essays, I was delighted by the thought of such an enterprise. Who would have thought—even 20 years ago—that anyone would pull together such a valuable collection? *Reading Memory and Identity in the Texts of Medieval European Holy Women* invites us to reevaluate the identity of medieval nuns, saints, abbesses, scholars, cenobites, and mystics—women whose lives have for too long been assessed as only marginally important to the shaping of medieval culture writ large. Crucial contributors to that culture were the male authors (Chaucer, Geoffrey of Monmouth, William Langland, Richard Rolle, John Gower, Sir Thomas Malory), who fashioned literature that reflected medieval culture’s values, practices, and identities. The unknown authors of influential works such as *Sir Gawain*, *The Bestiary*, *Pearl*, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, and the Corpus Christi plays might be anonymous, but they were *surely* male. Women authors (save for Marie de France) were unimaginable. Little wonder, then, that the lives and works of medieval holy women have been under-researched and undervalued—that is, until most recently.

Reading Memory and Identity joins the exciting new enterprise of writing medieval holy women into our intellectual history, an enterprise surely facilitated by Mary Carruthers’s landmark *Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*¹⁶ and the more recent *Craft of*

Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200.¹⁷ Other recent work central to this scholarly venture is Rosamond McKitterick's *History and Memory in the Carolingian World*,¹⁸ Eric Jager's *The Book of the Heart*,¹⁹ Allan Mitchell's *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower*,²⁰ and Elisabeth Van Houts's *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe 900–1200*.²¹ The editors tell me that my work on Margery Kempe's "popular literacy" was also important to their vision,²² given that popular literacy was predicated on the art of memory, to wit, of listening, remembering, and saying (rather than reading and writing). Thus, the vision of these editors moves beyond the triangulation of memory, imagination, and imitation in many of the aforementioned studies to investigate how medieval memorial arts—from widely circulating stories of saints' lives to widely quoted scripture—framed and made possible rhetorically savvy discursive representations of female holy identity.

In addition to providing readers keen insights and convincing examples of the ways medieval memorial arts underpinned constructions of identity, Cotter-Lynch and Herzog also—and just as importantly—challenge traditional patriarchal notions of *who* and *what* "counts." For instance, who qualifies as an author during the medieval period? Does someone who relies on an amanuensis? Someone who relies on images and oral recitation to deliver a text? How about an anonymous author? Might such an author ever be female? How does the level of what twenty-first-century readers consider to be formal education influence the answer? And what about the issue of audience? Does a female-only audience even matter? After all, if the audience is composed solely of women, does it have any measure of agency? Or is it merely a passive receptacle of instruction, regardless of whether the rhetor is male or female?

Besides interrogating the criteria for author and audience (*vis-à-vis* the texts in this collection), the editors also confront established principles of what qualifies as an intellectual endeavor, a rhetorical endeavor, a rhetorical practice. Might poetry, translation, hagiography, a miracle collection, iconographic and discursive representations of visions, love lyrics, and autobiographies be eligible? What about a religious work of imaginative literature or an alleged historical account? Or does their eligibility depend upon their having been already vetted by a body of scholarship already devoted to that particular composition, genre, or author? Does eligibility as religious intellectual endeavor depend upon whether the author is male or female, well-educated or (by modern standards) illiterate, aristocratic, or religious? And even if the endeavor meets (or doesn't meet) the criteria rendering it intellectual, what does it take for that religious composition to be considered a rhetorical practice or rhetorical performance? Is that eligibility also tethered to the quantity of previous

scholarly attention given to the performance or practice or to the sex and status of the author? Finally, the editors compel readers to consider the material conditions necessary for the production and circulation of identity expectations and constraints for medieval holy women as well as the conditions necessary for accepting, repudiating, or modifying a prescribed identity, whether that identity is one of gender, class, religious status, or education. Thus, Cotter-Lynch and Herzog tantalize readers with big questions that merit the considered research and writing that all of these essays work in concert to provide.

Sophia!
 you of the whirling wings,
 circling encompassing
 energy of God:
 you quicken the world in your clasp.
 One wing soars in heaven
 one wing sweeps the earth
 and the third flies all around us.
 Praise to Sophia!
 Let all the earth praise her!

—Hildegard of Bingen²³

The nine chronologically arranged chapters composing this collection provide a kaleidoscopic view of medieval holy women, with each chapter offering a distinctive constellation of shared elements: women, religion, memory, texts, visuals, and identity. Mutually supporting, these chapters enrich one another as they simultaneously explain how a medieval woman's identity was shaped by culturally constructed expectations and how her own intellectual, religious, social, and literary contributions emphasized and deemphasized specific qualities of that identity.

As I said earlier in this introduction, Professor Kahrl believed that Margery Kempe was crazy, undoubtedly deterred from taking her seriously by the fact that her holy revelations began postpartum, perhaps during postpartum depression. Female scholars, such as Hope Phyllis Weissman and myself, however, have taken Margery seriously from the start. As Weissman argues, "To diagnose Margery's case as 'hysteria' need not be to trivialize her significance or reduce her *Book's* value as cultural testimony."²⁴ The same strength of argument (she didn't autograph the manuscript; she used an amanuensis; she was a minor figure; she had no followers; she was postpartum) has been used to exclude most of the medieval holy women in this collection from our sustained scholarly attention for too long. With this collection, these women are gaining the

audience they have long deserved. We readers, too, now have access to long-silenced voices, those of medieval holy women. For that, we have the editors, Margaret Cotter-Lynch and Brad Herzog, to thank.

Notes

1. Jane Hirschfield, trans. and ed., "The Thunder: Perfect Mind," in *Women in Praise of the Sacred: 43 Centuries of Spiritual Poetry by Women* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995), 30–33.
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