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Reading Regina: Revisiting the Education of Upper-Class Women In the Middle Ages*

Medieval women have traditionally been considered less educated and literate than their male counterparts. However, a recent gendered analysis of medieval writings and a revisited definition of medieval literacy have led to a surge of new evidence supporting the idea that women in the upper class of medieval society by the fourteenth century were generally well educated and quite literate. Several scholars including P. Sheingorn (2002) and S. Johns (2003) have recently acknowledged that until now, the study of medieval culture and education has neglected women. Johns also stresses that “the recent historiography on medieval women and literacy stress ways in which women participated in the literary culture as a way of pursuing their own strategies” (p. 30). Recent studies, therefore, indicate that women were not only a part of the literary culture of the time, but were using it to advance themselves in ways unimagined in the past. Women in the medieval upper class were well educated, and possibly as literate as upper-class men. Evidence for this includes an analysis of books owned, commissioned, and written by medieval women. Then, by applying specifically to women the revisited definition of medieval literacy found in F. H.

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Bäumli’s (1980) article, “Varieties and consequences of medieval literacy and illiteracy” a more accurate view of women’s education and literacy in the High Middle Ages may be established.

Many upper class medieval laywomen owned books, particularly from the twelfth-century on. These women typically did not own Latin texts. The education of females at this time did not include Latin because of the sacred and scholarly connotations of the Latin language. However, women did own vernacular texts and translations of Latin texts. Women were entrusted with the rudimentary education of their children, and it was common for upper-class women to own books in order to accomplish this task (Bell, 1988, p. 149).

Few attempts have been made to document the number of books owned by medieval women. The first scholar to attempt this, Susan G. Bell (1988), attempted to identify the number of European Laywomen owning books from 800 to 1500 (p. 151). There are 242 documented women who owned at least one book within these centuries. A majority of these women, one hundred and fifty, only owned one book. Fifty of these women owned two to ten books, twenty owned eleven to fifty books, and fourteen women owned fifty-one to two hundred books. The remaining eight women owned an unspecified number of books. These women were identified through rare book library catalogs, medieval wills, medieval inventories of household goods or libraries, and dedications to patrons (p. 152). Many books were inherited by laywomen from other family members. The *Sachsenspiegel*, or *Mirror of the Saxons*, was a collection of Saxon custom laws first compiled in the thirteenth century. Laws found in the *Sachsenspiegel* suggest that books were transferred from mother to daughter. Many women inherited books from their fathers or husbands as well (p. 155). Some suggestion has been made that women’s wills by the thirteenth century reveal a wider female readership than in previous centuries. Books were becoming less expensive, and women were passing their books on to future generations (Leyser, 1995, p. 248).

Women often owned religious devotional literature because it was the least offensive of the literary genres owing to the pri-

vate nature of religious devotion. Of the 242 laywomen identified who owned books before 1500, 75 percent included books of piety among their possessions, and 60 percent owned books of piety written in the vernacular. When only one book could be attributed to a woman owner, the book was almost always a devotional item. Popular devotional texts included Gospels, Psalters, lives of the saints, and Books of Hours (Bell, 1988, p.160). Since women were expected to read devotional literature, but were excluded from an education in Latin which only the clergy and a small group of male lay society had access to, women often owned vernacular translations of religious texts.

One impressive noblewoman and book owner was Isabelle of France. Though she often is remembered for her role in deposing and murdering her husband King Edward II in the fourteenth century, she is now looked to for evidence on female book ownership. One of the foremost scholars on Isabelle of France, Anne Rudloff Stanton (2003), states that forty-five books can be attributed to her collection at one time or another through records of book purchases and transfers. Isabelle's library reflects her changing roles through time as a bride, mother, and ruler (p.229). She owned Psalters in parallel vernacular and Latin text, books appropriate to educating her son, a future king, and the Queen Mary Psalter, which was one of the most luxurious manuscripts of the period (p. 234). Her collecting habits were evidently not uncommon for Frenchwomen of her time, and yet her library rivals those of many English kings(p.228).

Many noblewomen participated in literary culture through commissioning texts and patronage. Some women commissioned books specifically for the purpose of educating their children, such as Psalters, which often served as an alphabet book. Blanche of Castille ordered a Psalter to educate her son, the future Saint Louis, and Isbeau of Bavaria ordered a Book of Hours and a Psalter for her two daughters (Bell, 1988, p. 163). Bell points out that the patron of any work, particularly a woman determining a book for her child's education was empowered by choice:

...The commissioner of a Book of Hours could choose whether to order Hours of the Cross, Hours of Saint Louis, or Hours of the Virgin. A patron could decided where to place the emphasis in the Testaments... A commissioner had to decide which vignettes of the numerous saints to include, and whether or not to concentrate on female saints' lives in a Book of Hours intended for a young girl. (p. 165)

Since noblewomen were taught to read at an early age in order to model themselves on biblical heroines, the mother or patron played a crucial role in defining who the child would become through the texts she chose to put into the books (p. 158).

Female patronage was one of the few ways in which women during the Middle Ages could freely exercise their choice and power. It is likely that female patronage began in the Carolingian period; this trend steadily grew throughout the remainder of the Middle Ages. The most "visible" patrons were noble women who had access to the monetary resources necessary for acquiring books (Johns, 2003, p. 36). Adela of Blois, Adeliza of Louvain, and Eleanor of Aquitaine were all known for their vigorous support and patronage of literature and poetry. Many women in the lesser nobility also supported literature through patronage and were also literate. Constance, the mid-twelfth century wife of Ralph fitz Gilbert, was a patron of the poet Gaimar. She requested translations of at least one history of the crown from Latin to Anglo-Norman (p. 37-38). Many other noble women were patrons of historical writing in particular. The Lombard princess Adalperga, the Empress Judith, Abbess Gerberga of Gandersheim, Duchess Gunna, and Queen Matilda, wife of Henry I of England are just a small selection of the women who were know for their support of historical writings (Nelson, 1989, pp. 151-152).

Patronage of literary works was a legitimate avenue for women to exercise their power in a variety of social and cultural areas. Patronage allowed women to explore new literary forms, affect the popularity and representations of saints and religious figures, and even participate in the production of the literature

itself (Johns, 2003, p. 43). For many women, patronage was a way to surpass cultural achievements of their male counterparts. An account of this is provided by Baudri, the Bishop of Dol. He writes of his patron Adela of Blois, the daughter of William the Conqueror, that patronage is the “one way daughter excels her father-she will favor verses and she knows how to have leisure for books. She also knows how to reward poets: no-one returns empty-handed from her uprightness...she possesses copious powers of composition, and she knows how to distinguish one poem from another” (Leyser, 1995, p. 240).

Women also participated in medieval literary culture through authorship. Many women who did write chose historical forms of writing. Examples of forms of historical writing in which women participated were letters, the computarium, a book in which the names of the dead were written, and the memoria, literature commemorating the dead (Nelson, 1989, pp. 150-151). Many women became involved in writing historical works because they were already historians of everyday life. Janet Nelson describes this situation:

History dealt with the dead as well as the living: just as women by means of funeral rites, and the memoria, linked the living and the dead; as women by their marriages and their pregnancies were both symbols and transmitters through time of the historical identities of families, of kingdoms... so some literate and learned women took on the role, so to speak quite naturally, of historians. (p. 162)

Margery Kempe is an excellent example of a female author during the fifteenth century. She wrote a spiritual autobiography, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, which is beginning to be researched as it deserves. It is a vernacular work in English, and is a source for medieval mysticism, travel literature, and women’s writings. Although Margery was the first woman to write an autobiography in the English language, her Book was not taken seriously until 1934 (Glenn, 1993, p. 500). She was most likely influenced by a combination of written, oral, and memorized texts. Margery also did not physically write her own book; a scribe transcribed her work (p. 499-502). This was not an uncommon

practice for a writer of any gender at the time, because reading and writing were two separate skills during the Middle Ages.

When the three elements of female book ownership, patronage, and authorship are examined, noble women during the Middle Ages appear to be a vibrant, cultured, well-educated, and literate group. However, these women have not been portrayed through history as educated and literate women. This is because the literacy and level of education of women has not until recently been investigated. For hundreds of years it was assumed that women were illiterate and ill-educated, without observing their contributions to literary culture. To be considered literate in the Middle Ages, or to be a literatus, meant that a person knew Latin. Women did not typically know Latin, regardless of their social status. However, there is evidence that a few women did have knowledge of Latin, thus not excluding women completely from a world of law and learning (Johns, 2003, p. 40).

It is very difficult to measure women’s literacy in the Middle Ages beyond making general statements. Many historians have attempted to measure literacy in general, as well as women’s literacy, but a successful method has not yet been found. For example, one historian attempted to measure literacy by the signatures made on official documents. Other historians have counted wills and tried to use book ownership as a means to measuring literacy. One problem with both of these methods is that women are underrepresented in medieval documents such as wills (Hanawalt & Dronzek, 1999, p. 36). In this instance, the successful historian must be a creative historian.

Literate laypeople, especially women, also often had the stigma of a heretic. The Lollards were a heretical sect made primarily up of artisans who regarded reading and literacy as an important skill in order to read the Bible and religious texts without the aid of clergy. The people who participated “in investigations against the sect...regarded literacy as evidence for adherence to the heresy. Literacy was apparently so uncommon among the socio-economic groups which comprised the Lollard sect that many assumed that reading ability could only have been acquired in heretical circles” (McSheffrey, 1995, p. 158-159). Al-

though the Lollards were from a lower social class than the subjects of this research, it is significant to note the ties literacy had to heresy when the literate subjects were not upper-class males.

Bäuml's (1980) article, "Varieties and consequences of medieval literacy and illiteracy" is a landmark study of medieval literacy; he redefines past perceptions and attempts to create new understandings. Bäuml argues that prior definitions of medieval literacy, or the ability to read and write in Latin, "obscures the social function of literacy, since it neglects the use of literacy by individuals who were themselves illiterate or only partly literate in Latin," and the definition "excludes consideration of the complex relationships between Latin and the vernacular languages" (p. 239). Bäuml states that access to the written word is not necessarily equated with an ability to read and write. Instead, it is determined by the need for access to written material to fulfill one's social function and the use of available means of such access, whether it is one's own ability to read and write, or another's. Through the twelfth century, the accelerated spread of literacy among the lay nobility made this access easier, and vernacular literature from the oral tradition appeared. With the increase in vernacular literacy, access to the written word and the ability to read and write was no longer socially distinctive. Instead, what was read became important. Bäuml argues that illiterati, or the illiterate, "who must and do have access to literacy are, in respect to their dependence on the written word for the exercise of their socio-political function, to be classed with the litterati, and can be referred to, for lack of a better term, as 'quasi-literate.'" Additionally, the illiterati are familiar with the Bible and the written vernacular (pp. 244-247).

This redefinition of literacy has serious implications for perceptions of women's literacy and education in the Middle Ages. Latin had become an isolated and solely a literary language by the High Middle Ages. Owing to its isolation, and the importance of the vernacular in everyday life, knowledge of the vernacular was more important and useful than Latin. Those previously defined as illiterate were not necessarily illiterate, particularly if their social function meant they

depended upon the written word, whether Latin or vernacular. Those who had knowledge of the written vernacular rather than Latin had also been categorized as illiterate. Upper-class women fell into each of these categories. They depended upon books to educate their children and pray. These women were around not only their own book collections, but those of their husbands and family. Additionally, a majority of female book-owners owned vernacular texts rather than Latin. The women could typically read the vernacular texts, but were yet again classified as illiterate because the texts were not Latin.

Upper-class women of the Middle Ages were educated and literate, through not by the definition of literacy that has been in place for so long. These women participated in literary activities such as owning books, commissioning books, and writing books. Their involvement in medieval literary culture has been denied for years but is now beginning to be researched. By applying a revisited definition of literacy to the existing evidence of literary activity, a more accurate view of female education and literacy can be established. With further research, new evidence and widespread support may be generated of the true levels of education and literacy of women in the Middle Ages.

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