



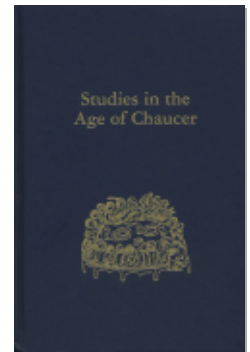
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Introduction

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Introduction

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MOST MEDIEVALISTS WORKING on English literature would now consider Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich “canonical.” These two visionaries’ rise in modern popularity, both in research and in teaching, shows the impact of the last five decades or so of groundbreaking work on women and their diverse roles in medieval English literature. Some scholars might think the surge in feminist scholarship and the canon wars of the eighties and nineties to be done, over, old news. Others would disagree. In fact, beyond these two figures, much of the rest of scholarly exploration on women’s literary culture, especially women and religious writing, doesn’t actually seem to have had the same radical effect on mainstream views of what we should read and how we should read—i.e., the canon and canonical reading practices. Why is this? What is still at stake, so many years later, in continuing the push to decentralize the canon away from male, secular writers? What more is there to learn about how “the other half” of the population shaped medieval literature, and why should we care?

These questions, and this colloquium, arise from the work of the international network on “Women’s Literary Culture and the Medieval English Canon,” which was funded by the Leverhulme Trust from 2015

The editors and contributors would like to thank the Leverhulme Trust, which generously funded the international network “Women’s Literary Culture and the Medieval English Canon,” <https://www.surrey.ac.uk/medievalwomen/> (award no. IN-2014-038) (accessed April 6, 2020). The editors dedicate this colloquium to the recent memory of their mothers, Margaret Proctor Saetveit (June 18, 1952–January 4, 2020) and Patricia Watt (December 28, 1935–December 4, 2019).

to 2017. The network partners met together formally at three events held at Chawton House Library in Hampshire, UK in 2015, Boston University in the USA in 2016, and the University of Bergen in Norway in 2017. The essays included in this colloquium emerged out of the conversations that took place in these meetings, which sought to explore how an understanding of women's literary culture, seen here to include women's roles as writers, patrons, readers, and subjects of texts, can contribute to our understanding of late medieval literature as a whole.¹

The essays here, which focus primarily on works produced in late medieval England, complicate the assumption that women's literary history represents a tradition that is distinct from that of men.² They demonstrate the importance of considering women's engagement with literature when reading the established medieval English canon as it is defined today,³ while at the same time they question the historical validity of the modern literary canon. When we recognize the varied contributions of women, our conception of canonical medieval literature shifts to be more accurate and more historically informed. An understanding of the interconnection of gender and genre is vital to this process. Put simply, shifting the focus onto *women's* engagement with literary texts renders different forms and genres canonical. At the same time, by paying particular attention to late medieval salvific devotional and exemplary literature, including texts written by or for women, the essays in this colloquium also reflect on the contexts of the work of Chaucer and his contemporaries.

In many ways, canon cannot be extricated from gender and genre. From its earliest history the idea of the canon as used in a secular, literary sense (as opposed to its origins in sacred texts) has been deeply connected to gender, inasmuch as the canon began as a vehicle for male fantasy. The eighteenth-century German scholar David Ruhnken first employed the word "canon" to describe alleged teaching lists of the rhetorical genre created by second-century Greek Alexandrian teachers such as Aristophanes; as Ruhnken claimed, "from the great abundance of orators . . . they drew up into a canon at least ten they thought most

¹See Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt, guest eds., *Women's Literary Culture and Late Medieval English Writing*, special issue of *ChauR*, 51, no. 1 (2016).

²For an example of this separatist approach, see Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, eds., *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007).

³See, for example, Stephen Greenblatt, gen. ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Major Authors*, 9th ed., 2 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013).

important.”⁴ Jan Gorak, in his book *Making of the Modern Canon*, explains how, “after the publication of Ruhnken’s book, it became common, if sometimes controversial, to extend the application of *canon* to any list of valuable inherited works.”⁵ Yet the list was a complete fabrication—no such neatly numbered canon has survived from the classical period.⁶ The persistent appeal of the “best-of” canon, however, indelibly changed how literature was organized and controlled over the centuries that followed. Ruhnken’s influence exposes the ways in which scholarly attempts to project a canonical hierarchy on literature of the past more accurately reflect modern desires for an ordered inheritance—via a masculine line—than any kind of historical authenticity.

Such a calculus of male scholars selecting a canon of male authors for their male students to idolize has always been challenged by women’s writing skittering in from the sidelines. While the long-established Norton Anthology *Major Authors* has slowly integrated more and more female authors over the decades, Gilbert and Gubar’s iconic 1985 publication of *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* sought to create its own female canon. Some critiques of this approach are that it excuses the standard canon from including women; that it ghettoizes women’s writing; and that, as Toril Moi argues, such “a new canon would not be intrinsically less oppressive than the old.”⁷ Fundamentally, the Gilbert-and-Gubar (and Elaine Showalter) tactic is not to abolish canons but to work within the system of canonicity, of exclusivity, of evaluation, of good and bad, in and out. As Edward Said states, “a new canon means . . . a new past or a new history and, less happily, a new parochialism.”⁸ One could argue that a canon narrows and makes normative anything it contains. It makes homogeneous the heterogeneous simply by containing it. For many reasons a “women’s canon” represents an imperfect, though perhaps unavoidable, solution.

⁴As quoted in Jan Gorak, *The Making of the Modern Canon: Genesis and Crisis of a Literary Idea* (London: Athlone, 1991), 50–51. See also Rudolf Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship: From the Beginnings to the End of the Hellenistic Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 207.

⁵Gorak, *The Making of the Modern Canon*, 50.

⁶Earl R. Anderson and Gianfresco Zanetti, “Comparative Semantic Approaches to the Idea of a Literary Canon,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58, no. 4 (2000): 341–60 (353).

⁷Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985), 78.

⁸Quoted in Anderson and Zanetti, “Comparative Semantic Approaches,” 355.

Or can we just get rid of canons, of teaching lists of valuable inherited works, of the Norton? Do we need “the” canon? Many scholars dismiss such a utopian desire as naïve. “Doing away with the canon,” Victorianist George Landow comments, “leaves one not with freedom but with hundreds of thousands of undiscriminated and hence unnoticeable works, with works we cannot see or notice or read. We must therefore learn to live with them [canons], appreciate them, benefit from them, but, above all, remain suspicious of them.”⁹ This position draws attention to the differentiation between *canon* as “actively circulated memory that keeps the past present” and *archive* as “passively stored memory that preserves the past past.”¹⁰ It might be counterproductive, if not impossible, completely to dissolve the lines between canon and archive. Yet, as the work undertaken by our international network has shown, trapped in the archive is where we still find so much of the rich history of women’s literary culture. Thus Landow is certainly right to encourage us to be suspicious of canonical borders, a goal shared by the essays in this colloquium. Recovering and reclaiming elements of the archive for the canon, an act performed by several of our authors, demonstrates the “interdependence of the different realms and functions that creates the dynamics of cultural memory and keeps its energy flowing.”¹¹ We see a flux between the canon and the archive constantly pulsing up from the past. Putting pressure on the received canon brings a vitality to literary and historical criticism.

As this colloquium insists, challenging the canon is also a political move. Harold Bloom, whose influential book *The Western Canon* includes three women out of twenty-six canonical authors, writes that “canons always indirectly serve the social and political, and indeed the spiritual, concerns of the wealthier classes of each generation of Western society.”¹²

⁹George P. Landow, “The Literary Canon,” *The Victorian Web: Literature, History, & Culture in the Age of Victoria* (1989), <http://www.victorianweb.org/gender/canon/litcan.html> (accessed August 20, 2018).

¹⁰Aleida Assmann, “Canon and Archive,” in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning in collaboration with Sara B. Young (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 97–108 (98).

¹¹*Ibid.*, 104–5.

¹²Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 33, aptly quoted in Herbert Grabes, “Cultural Memory and the Literary Canon,” in Erll and Nünning, *Cultural Memory Studies*, 311–20 (312). On how dated Bloom’s elegy for the canon would quickly come to seem, see, for example, Pankaj Mishra and Daniel Mendelsohn, “How Would a Book like Harold Bloom’s ‘Western Canon’ Be Received Today?,” *New York Times*, March 18, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/23>

Perhaps no words were more truly written by the man who accrued and hoarded a vast amount of cultural and monetary capital through the perpetuation of that very same masculine, homogenized western canon. Depoliticizing literature and culture (as Bloom strives to do) only benefits those who dominate politically. Whose stories, whose pasts, whose texts are kept outside the canonical gates? When we question the ideologies latent behind hegemonic lists of literature, we also question the vested interests of its shapers that came before our critical interventions. For instance, it is all too easy to use the usefulness of the canon to excuse marginalization based on genre or gender, as demonstrated by this senior scholar's statement:

Melancholy as it might seem, for literary studies a shared canon is a structural necessity. One might continually contest a canon's scope or its boundaries or even its constitution but I don't think one can ever evade its necessity. For that reason current complaints about the hegemony of Chaucer or Middle English poetry itself, in the name of some more equitable, more representative cultural reality, whether that be less "literary" texts like hagiography or the liturgy, or Anglo-Norman or Anglo-Latin tradition strike me as self-defeating.¹³

Rather than viewing gender and genre challenges to the canon as "complaints," they could be seen as opportunities to keep the canon alive, sensitive to our growing knowledge about the literary of the past, and reflecting both historical variety and the variety of modern interests. Indeed, a canon that is static, or has authors resembling only one sector of modern readers, is self-defeating in its own way—and not only because it restricts fresh, deeper understanding of those undeniably important genres and authors that always have and always will stand centered in the canon.

The research in the following pages does its work in the name of a more equitable, more representative cultural reality, and in the process proves the crucial vitality of such nuanced efforts. Women's literary culture, multilingual culture, devotional culture, queer culture: all these challenge the comfortable security of the inherited, patriarchal canon,

/books/review/how-would-a-book-like-harold-blooms-western-canon-be-received-today.html (accessed April 6, 2020).

¹³Larry Scanlon, "Historicism: Six Theses," *FORUM I: Historicity without Historicism? Responses to Paul Strohm*, *postmedieval FORUM* (October 2011), <http://postmedieval-forum.com/forums/forum-i-responses-to-paul-strohm/scanlon/> (accessed August 31, 2018).

showing that to be complacent in the perpetuation of such a canon is to be complicit in the misrepresentation of the reality of a much more varied and interesting literary past. Indeed, as this colloquium reveals, we need to challenge not only the canon, but also our anachronistic modern understandings of reading practices, which often seem to privilege masculinist subjectivity.¹⁴ When women (and men) “read” in the Middle Ages, they did not necessarily do so as isolated individuals, poring silently over manuscripts in the privacy of their libraries or studies. Reading was more often a shared, communal activity, and readers were members of networks who borrowed and loaned books, and bequeathed them in their wills. Literacy was no prerequisite to reading in a culture where books were often read aloud, and where a reader might not be a writer, but could be a listener.

The first four essays interrogate the idea of the canon from a variety of angles, including an analysis of the position of anonymous devotional texts, a rereading of Chaucer’s *The Knight’s Tale* in the light of devotional and mystical writings, an exploration of women and the comic in late medieval texts, and an exploration of evidence of the literary culture of the Paston women in fifteenth-century Norfolk. The final essays consider questions of readership in relation to two important medieval forms: the compilation, and the psalter. The articles presented adopt a variety of methodologies, including empirical research, close readings of literary texts, and manuscript analysis. Particular attention is paid to the significance of gender in relation not only to genre and form, but also to literary reception, and networks and genealogies of readers. A key aspect of our international network is that it promotes and encourages collaborative scholarship. The network meetings included workshops to facilitate group research activities and the writing of collaborative papers. This approach seemed particularly appropriate given the fundamentally collaborative nature of medieval women’s engagement with literary culture.¹⁵ It is fitting, therefore, that one of the essays in the colloquium, and this introduction, are co-authored.

¹⁴See, for example, D. H. Green, *Women Readers in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁵See, for example, Carole M. Meale, ed., *Women and Literature in Britain 1150–1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Joan M. Ferrante, *To the Glory of Her Sex: Women’s Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Laurie A. Finke, *Women’s Writing in English: Medieval England* (London: Longman, 1999); Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women’s Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Diane Watt,

The first essay of the volume, by Laura Saetveit Miles, proposes approaching the modern canon of medieval literature by reflecting on its relationship to some of the most widely circulated medieval vernacular writing, and on how particular genres and readerships—in this case, devotional literature and nuns—might be able to disrupt the oppression inherent in canonicity. This disruption can be seen as metaphorically queering the canon because of devotional prose's refusal to align with the "straight" classifications of the single-author, single-text heteronormativity that currently dictate canonical status. Miles argues that late medieval devotional texts pose a timely challenge to the canon—a queer challenge, in that the genre's instability of versions, the capaciousness of topic, the blurred boundaries between sources, the touching between narrator and reader, are more queer than anything else—and that perhaps queering the canon means becoming aware of the way that texts and their materiality sometimes refuse singularity.

In the second essay, Roberta Magnani and Liz Herbert McAvoy, like Miles, frame their analysis in terms of the queer, in this case focusing on the disruptive queer force of feminine agency and women's visionary writing in relation to the work of Chaucer (the so-called "Father of English Poetry") and the genre of romance. Magnani and McAvoy offer a detailed analysis of Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*, reading the text alongside Mechthild of Hackeborn's late thirteenth-century *Booke of Gostlye Grace*. Magnani and McAvoy identify and explore a female-coded poetics of spiritual flourishing and enclosure within *The Knight's Tale*, and argue for the pivotal role of that poetics in countering the established hegemony of what they term Theseus's necrophilic regime.

Sue Niebrzydowski turns her attention to the comic form in the third essay. She observes that comedy is often marginalized within the canon and that the history of comedy has been de facto that of male comedy. Niebrzydowski observes that medieval comedy often seems to exclude women, except, of course, when women figure as the butt of the joke and the object of a humor that maintains patriarchal hegemony. To some extent this reflects social expectations about women in the Middle Ages: humor was not recognized as a desirable trait. However, this does not mean that it was absent, and indeed Chaucer attributes wit and comic

Medieval Women's Writing: Works by and for Women in England, 1100–1500 (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007); and Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt, eds., *The History of British Women's Writing 700–1500* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

timing to some of his most memorable female figures. However, in history, medieval women do also show their funny side, and Niebrzydowski goes on to offer an analysis of some largely unrecognized examples of medieval women's humor and satire found in the letters of Margaret Paston and *The Book of Margery Kempe*.

Next, in her article exploring the literary culture of the Paston women, Diane Watt reexamines the well-documented evidence of the book ownership and exchange found in the fifteenth-century family correspondence, including the composition and contents of "Sir John Paston's Grete Boke" and the manuscripts listed in John Paston II's library inventory, alongside evidence from wills and other documents, as well as from the letters of the women themselves. While there is still considerable scholarly disagreement about the literacy of the women in the Paston family, they certainly had both devotional and secular books in their possession, and it appears that their reading included works by Chaucer and Lydgate alongside extremely popular texts such as the *Prick of Conscience* and *The Abbey of the Holy Ghost*. Watt suggests that this evidence of the reading of the Paston women can contribute to our understanding of canon formation in the century after Chaucer's death, a century in which chivalric treatises, saints' lives, and devotional prose all circulated widely, often within larger miscellanies and collections.

In an essay that connects in interesting ways to that of Miles in particular, with its emphasis on the importance of devotional prose to the medieval tradition, Denis Renevey examines the representation of female subjectivity in the fifteenth-century English devotional compilation *Disce mori*, paying particular attention to the centrality of the feminine in the text's final part, called "The Exhortacion." In addition to his initial address to a "sustre" (possibly a vowess) named as "Dame Alice," the compiler of *Disce mori* offers an extensive number of exempla that serve to map the feminine as a significant tool in shaping a proper devotional attitude on the part of its readership. By making references to medieval Chaucer and other "canonical" texts in the European tradition, as well as to pseudo-contemporary "olde feble wymmen" who "with perseuerance ouercome many longe pilgrimages," the compiler presents conflicting representations of the feminine that would appeal to, and require serious reflection from, his readership.

To conclude the colloquium, Nancy Bradley Warren's piece examines in detail a single manuscript: Indiana University, Lilly Library, MS Ricketts 28, also known as the Lusser Psalter, which dates to the period between 1420 and 1450. It presents the Psalms from the Vulgate Bible, and other

devotional materials, all in Latin. This manuscript provides a remarkable manifestation of later medieval lay devotion and its afterlives. Warren explores what the material elements of Ricketts 28 reveal about lay devotion in practice, the ways in which devotional practices shape and project familial identities and are imbricated with religio-political affairs from the time the manuscript was created through the early eighteenth century. Her analysis pays particular attention to the ways in which women who interacted with the manuscript throughout several generations perhaps used it to preserve modes of medieval Catholic piety in the early modern period, when Protestantism became the orthodox faith in England. Warren's essay is an appropriate end point for the colloquium because it illustrates so vividly how shifting the focus to women can challenge traditional configurations of the canon, with their restrictive emphases on strictly enforced literary periodization.

Combined, these essays represent not only the recent progress in scholarship on women's literary culture, but also the urgent need for further archival study and for more work on the authorship, and the production and circulation, of medieval texts connected to women. In addition, by expanding our remit beyond the later Middle Ages to include not only later centuries, as Warren has done in her essay, but also those earlier periods in literary history where women's contributions have received far less critical attention, it will become possible in the future to get a fuller picture of the extent to which women's engagements with literary culture changed across the centuries. However, by reflecting mainly upon late medieval women, the colloquium suggests that there existed an important and influential medieval textual tradition, focused primarily on devotional writing and particularly associated with women's literary culture, that is quite distinct, but not detached, from the modern, primarily secular, canon of medieval literature as it is studied in universities in the present day. Thus, a work such as the *Prick of Conscience* was, arguably, at least as central to this alternative medieval "canon" as the poetry of Chaucer or Lydgate. These essays are reflective, then, of a broader move within the field of medieval literary studies away from focusing predominantly on the work of Chaucer and his male predecessors, contemporaries, and successors, to engaging with a more expansive and inclusive body of texts that reflects the diversity of material in circulation in premodern England.