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PETER DRONKE, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (†203) to Marguerite Porete (†1310)*. Cambridge, Eng., and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984. Pp. xii, 338.

*Women Writers of the Middle Ages* is the culmination of Peter Dronke's work on topics that have in the meantime become modish. Many of us, I imagine, first learned about *kharjas* and *cantigas de amigo* from *Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love-Lyric*,<sup>1</sup> and he has published numerous studies about both Heloise and Hildegard.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the only readers who are likely to be disappointed by Dronke's latest book are those who look no further than the first words of the title and expect an analysis of the work and situation of women writers of the Middle Ages. What follows the colon of this double-decker title is the more important part. Like Dronke's earlier investigations, this is a critical study of texts, one which displays all the qualities which have long since established his reputation as the preeminent literary critic of medieval Latin literature: scrupulous scholarship, erudition, range, above all, criticism that is at once judicious and daring, well-considered and personal. Here more than ever before, thesis gives way before suggestive insight. Dronke is interested not in terminating discussion but in initiating it: "The intention throughout is to show a range of testimonies precisely, and to comment on the language, and the articulation of thought and emotion, in a way that may provide a basis for further insights. It will be for scholars in other disciplines . . . to order this evidence within their own framework . . ." (p. ix).

The body of the text consists of seven chapters: the first, fourth, and seventh each cover several authors: "From Perpetua to the Eighth Century"; "Personal Poetry by Women: The Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries"; "From Hildegard to Marguerite Porete." The others each focus on selected texts of four authors: Dhuoda, Hrotsvitha, Heloise, and Hildegard of Bingen. An appendix of freshly edited texts follows (34 of the 44 pages represent Hildegard). The bibliography will prove of enormous value: under each of the primary entries — some eighty-four women from 200 to 1300 — Dronke lists both standard editions and a generous sampling of the secondary literature.

Dronke's light shines on the known and unknown alike. He uses Jean de Meun's translation of the correspondence of Abelard and Heloise to propose an emendation in the first sentence of Heloise's first epistle to Abelard ("Missam ad amicum <nostrum> pro consolatione epistolam, dilectissime, vestrum ad me quidam nuper attulit," p. 304, n. 12). Elsewhere he illuminates less familiar texts. To take examples from chapter 4 alone, Dronke analyzes Constance's witty verse response to Baudri of Bourgeuil and selections from the *Carmina Ratisponensia*, the *Epistolae duorum amantium*, and the *trobairitz*. Tibors's "Bels dous amics, ben vos puosc en vir dir" is one extraordinary poem among many.

The great value of each chapter inheres in the explications of texts. Since much of the material presented will likely be new to many readers, Dronke devotes a large portion of the 227-page narrative to summarizing, paraphrasing, and translating texts. "[E]ach passage considered is given an English rendering, by which I try to suggest some of the shades of meaning as I see them; the translations are intended as an

<sup>1</sup> Second edition (Oxford, 1968), pp. 26–32 (first edition: 1965).

<sup>2</sup> Among his publications on Heloise, note *Abelard and Heloise in Medieval Testimonies*, W. P. Ker Memorial Lecture 26 (Glasgow, 1976). Dronke has truly been a champion of Hildegard: see *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages: New Departures in Poetry 1000–1151* (Oxford, 1970), chap. 5, "Hildegard of Bingen as Poetess and Dramatist," pp. 150–92; "Problemata Hildegardiana," *Mittelalterliches Jahrbuch* 16 (1981), 97–131.

extension of critical interpretation" (pp. viii–ix). The translations must be used in conjunction with the originals, not because the accuracy of Dronke's renderings needs checking, but because it is worth knowing exactly where translation or paraphrase ends and where interpretation begins. In his translation of Hildegard's phrase "in illa," Dronke closes off a potential ambiguity and prints "in that window" (p. 190). As passage and analysis make clear, the window *is* the girl, so this is understandable, and no harm is done, for the Latin is readily available (p. 260). More problematic are cases where the reader must go elsewhere for the original. For example, summing up the whole movement of Heloise's letters, Dronke describes in one movement how Heloise "commends Abelard . . . ; she still feels. . . . Against his edifying picture of her . . . she sets the unedifying, disturbing picture. . . . She wants the world to know her one day not just as the abbess who had once been Abelard's concubine . . . but as one whose sufferings in real life had gone beyond those of Ovid's fictive heroines, and equally as one who even to the brink of the impossible, tried to obey the *dominus* whom she loved" (p. 138). But the last sentence is a summary of Dronke's reading; whether it is also a summary of Heloise's intentions is the question. Though Dronke will probably already have persuaded most readers of the plausibility of his analysis, I would prefer that the demarcation had remained sharper. Likewise, in supporting his "guess" that the "configuration of images" (p. 8) in Perpetua's vision (4.3–7) "was inspired at least in part by Perpetua's reading of . . . *Aeneid*" 2.469 ff., Dronke's italicization of "weapons," "bronze," and "snake" in his translation of Vergil may give readers the impression that these represent verbal echoes. However, only Perpetua's "aeream" has an echo in Vergil ("aëna"); Perpetua has "draco" where Vergil has "coluber," and the poet's "telis" is nowhere to be found in the martyr's list of "omne genus ferramentorum": *gladii, lanceae, hami, machaerae, and verruta*.

Is "there . . . something about these women writers that distinguishes their work from that of men"? On the one hand, Dronke thinks not: "The women writers I was considering showed individuality in . . . different ways, and it was this many-sidedness that I wanted to characterize" (p. x). "Individuality" is the key word; one might well regard this book as a continuation of Dronke's earlier *Poetic Individuality* (see n. 2). Yet while the writers Dronke presents are individual each in her own way — *per definitionem* — they appear to have some traits in common. Now while it is easy enough to see why women's writings might diverge in content and concerns at least sometimes from men's texts, why should they differ in the ways Dronke demonstrates they do, in "language, and the articulation of thought and emotion" (p. ix)? "Often the women who wrote . . . [Latin texts] did not have the opportunity to learn as expert and fluent a Latin . . . ; at times their expression may remain not only unclassical . . . but awkward or unclear; and yet the striving for expression against great odds can also endow texts with unaccustomed, difficult beauties and felicities" (p. viii). Indeed. Furthermore, women's relation to the educational establishment differed from men's in an even more significant regard. Whatever education women received, they did not go on to be masters. They were not personally responsible for seeing to the continuation of the tradition. Women were not bound to precepts by the duty to pass them on. Such constraints may in part explain what "in men's writing" Dronke describes as "apriorism, . . . predetermined postures." In contrast, the women "attempt . . . to cope with human problems in their singularity — not imposing rules or categories from without" (p. x). He knows of no "women of letters" before 1300 to correspond to the " 'men of letters' — occasional writers, virtuosi, professional courtiers or teachers. . . . [W]ith women, the opportunity and the power to write tended to be too hard-won to make an extrinsic relation to writing possible. This may be part of the secret of the most

individual aspects of the texts we shall examine" (p. xi). The point is not how much training the women had — Dronke reminds us that Heloise was already an accomplished literary stylist before she met Abelard, and indeed, the style of her letters follows early-twelfth-century Italian *dictamen* as taught by Adalbert, rather than contemporary French practice (pp. 110 f.)<sup>3</sup> — but the use to which they put that training.

Hildegard of Bingen brings out the best in Dronke, perhaps because she is the most individual of all the figures he has chosen to discuss. She is a Diotima, an Antigone (pp. 195, 196). "Her use of language reflects intimately both her febrile vitality and her exultant sense of the beauty of the physical world, the beauty of music, the beauty that is possible in men and women. Bounded in the nutshell of the Rupertsberg, she counts herself a queen of infinite space . . ." (p. 200). For all the loving attention lavished on Grazida Lizier in the concluding chapter, one senses a falling off after the remarkable Hildegard, perhaps only because there Dronke's purview expands to include several women.

Dronke's light touch with his theoretical framework makes for admirable pedagogy. The attentive reader grows in his or her ability to read as Dronke does — between the lines — and can apply insights gained in one chapter later on. For example, in chapter 3, Dronke describes Hrotsvitha's tactics vis-à-vis her readers at the Ottonian court and in the wider world as "literary coquetry" (p. 72): "in her Preface to the plays . . . she says little of what she really means and means almost nothing of what she says" (pp. 68–69); ". . . her extravagant protestations of modesty have a twinkle about them" (p. 71). What lies behind this? According to Dronke, "Hrotsvitha was aware of double standards throughout the world of her experience. . . . [H]er coquetry takes the form of comically stressing women's weakness, never minimizing it, yet always pointing it in such a way as to foil expectations and paradoxically show women's strength" (p. 73; cf. p. 75). Later, in chapter 6, Dronke need not actually point out the irony in Hildegard's defense of her refusal to exhume the corpse of an ex-communicate: "So we did not dare expose him . . . not at all because we make light of the advice of honourable men . . . but lest we seem to injure Christ's sacraments — with which the man was blessed while still alive — by women's savagery" (p. 197; the Latin, p. 314). Our awareness of the irony and our outrage at the conditions that necessitated it are the stronger for Dronke's restraint. Worked through carefully as it must be, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* is nothing less than a seminar with the master.

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<sup>3</sup> If the "hyperbaton, esp. with such expressions as 'saltem'" (p. 305, n. 34) ultimately proves a characteristic element of Heloise's style, as Dronke suggests, then Abelard must be echoing her when he produces this effect three times in one paragraph (ed. Muckle, *Mediaeval Studies* 15 [1953], 87–88).

RAYMOND EICHMANN and JOHN DUVAL, eds. and transs., *The French Fabliau B.N. MS. 837*. 2 vols. (Garland Library of Medieval Literature, A/16, 17.) New York and London: Garland, 1984–85. 1: pp. liv, 239; frontispiece. 2: pp. xii, 291. 1: \$36. 2: \$30.

THE PRECIOUS Garland Library has provided the nonspecialist with what is easily the best available firsthand access to the medieval French fabliau: 40 characteristic texts (out of a total of ca. 150), in a simple and straightforward edition, with line-by-