

Women authors and women's literacy in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England*

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Compilers of biographical dictionaries of early English women authors, and of anthologies of their writings, have a hard and repetitious time in their coverage of the late Middle Ages. There seems little to say, and most of it has been said already. The temptation to swell the female canon by perpetrating literary hoaxes, and to resurrect supposedly lost *œuvres*; has been powerful; the acclaim enjoyed by the French poems attributed to the mythical Clothilde de Surville, published by a cunning bibliophile in the eighteenth century and reprinted until as recently as the 1950s, stands as an example.¹ But more necessary than the traditional literary-historical task of amalgamating the scattered textual remains left by female authors is some investigation of the different senses in which 'writing women' might have existed in the period, especially in relation to texts such as lyrics, often narrated in the female voice, whose authorship is so notoriously hard to identify. This essay accordingly focuses on some questions concerning this area of definition, and explores the possibility of isolating distinctive features of female literary composition in the centuries which immediately preceded the profound cultural changes brought about by the shift from manuscript to print culture. What kinds and standards of literacy did medieval women possess? By what methods were the compositions of women 'authors' recorded and disseminated, in an age when scribal skills were not automatically concomitant with authorial ones? How is it possible to locate women's writing in a period characterised by anonymity? Only by uncovering exactly what constituted women's writing can we begin to answer the most pressing questions of feminist criticism: 'what does writing as a woman mean, and to what extent does it involve a new theory and a new practice?'²

To begin with the question of available role models for women writing in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries reminds us at the outset of the very small number of relevant names from earlier periods. In one account the

mere placing of the information, at the end of a hierarchical sequence of chapters which sets women after villeins, indicates how little positive detail we possess.³ Clearly, however, those few twelfth- and thirteenth-century English women who identified themselves as authors came from privileged court or convent backgrounds and enjoyed access to education and scholarly circles in which comprehensive literacy and considerable learning could have been acquired. Marie de France tells us that she knew French, Latin and English.⁴ Her surviving literary works – *Lais*, *Fables* and *L'Espurgatoire Seint Patrice* – are of course all in French, but this apparent concentration on a single vernacular may perhaps be misleading. If she is to be identified with the Marie who was abbess of Shaftesbury in 1181, as has been suggested, then her linguistic and compositional skills were presumably also put to use in scholarly and administrative capacities as well as creative ones (perhaps manifesting themselves in forms which were physically ephemeral or whose connection with Marie went unrecorded), but in the face of so little surviving documentation we can reconstruct few of the processes involved in her writing.⁵ Nonetheless, Marie's demonstrable involvement in both religious and secular works remains unusual. The surviving writings of other women who can more certainly be associated with religious milieux are notably pious. One Clemence, a nun of Barking, names herself as the author of a twelfth-century life of St Catherine, and may also have been responsible for a life of Edward the Confessor, produced between 1163 and 1189; a nun from Chatteris composed a life of St Audrey, and Beatrice of Kent, abbess of Lacock, is credited with a life of her predecessor Countess Ela of Salisbury.⁶

We have no indication, of course, that any of these texts were particularly influential or widely known in the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries, or that the fact of their female authorship received any attention. If anything, it is tempting to suspect the reverse. The fourteenth-century English versions of Marie de France's *Lais* of *Le Fresne* and *Launfal* (the second in two redactions – *Sir Landevale* and Thomas Chestre's later *Sir Launfal*)⁷ – do not mention her existence or involvement in their genesis. One or two role models for women authors can however be glimpsed behind other translations which are known to have circulated in reasonable numbers. Different English versions of the compendious gynaecological treatise attributed to an obscure female 'Trotula' from eleventh-century Salerno are extant, and her existence was evidently credited, albeit rather vaguely. As John Benton notes, 'In the Middle Ages a female medical author seemed a believable figure, though one best imagined in an exotic locale.'⁸

Christine de Pizan apparently enjoyed some more public English reputation, perhaps partly due to her son's residence in England in the early

part of the reign of Henry IV, and to her own correspondence with John Montacute, earl of Salisbury.⁹ In view of Christine's efforts on behalf of her sex, it is ironic that all the surviving English versions of her works were as far as is known produced by men.¹⁰ Hoccleve, for whatever reason, saw fit to translate Christine's *Epistre au Dieu d'Amours*, one of the earliest documents in the literary quarrel over *Le Roman de la rose*; and the *Epistre d'Othéa* appeared in no less than three English versions over the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.¹¹ Two translations of the *Corps de polycye* survive, and one of the *Cité des dames*.¹² Caxton, who at the command of Henry VII translated and printed the *Faits d'armes et de chevalerie*, and later produced an edition of Anthony Woodville's translation of the *Proverbes moraux*, names Christine in the epilogues he supplied to both works.¹³ It is surely also significant that the sumptuous British Library Harley MS 4431, a collection of Christine's works which contains examples of her own script and many illustrations of the author at work, should have been in English hands for much of the fifteenth century.¹⁴

Translations of continental devotional texts must also have reminded English audiences of the existence of female authors, and indeed some were made available at the request of women, with groups like the Bridgettine nuns of Syon playing an important role.¹⁵ The *Revelations* of their own St Bridget of Sweden (translated from the vernacular into Latin by Bridget's confessors) appeared in at least seven different English versions, and a translation of some of the writings of Mechtild of Hackeborn may have been prepared for them.¹⁶ The *Dialogues* of St Catherine of Siena (dictated to amanuenses before circulating in various languages) were made available to them in the form of the early sixteenth-century *Orchard of Syon*.¹⁷ In keeping with Syon's brand of female spirituality, although in less specifically documented circulation, English versions of the *Meditations* of Elizabeth [? of Schönau] and of Margarete Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls* constituted further examples of women's compositions.¹⁸

The role of intermediate male spiritual advisers in both translating and disseminating these writings was crucial, and it is difficult to assess the amount of first-hand contact with any of the texts which English women readers, and would-be writers, can have enjoyed. Similar and more disturbing imponderables arise when we try to reconstruct the circumstances in which identifiable women authors actually composed the texts with which they are associated. Christine de Pizan may have been pictured at a desk, 'writing' her works in what to us seems a familiar manner, but her practice (or her artist's depiction of it) is not necessarily representative.¹⁹ Were Marie de France, Clemence of Barking, and other females whose lives and habits are less fully documented than those of Christine 'writing

women' in the sense in which we would now understand the term, or were they 'authors' in some perhaps more remote sense? It has been well observed by Michael Clanchy, and by Bella Millett in this volume, that modern preconceptions about literacy may lead us into false assumptions about earlier periods, and we do well to remember that our notions of what constitutes 'authorship' may similarly need to be revised in a medieval context.²⁰ We talk about 'texts' and 'writings' and 'literature', in terms which all imply the embodiment of material in the form of written letters, but in many cases (most obviously those works which have not survived in autograph copies) we lack certain knowledge that the 'authors' responsible for the compositions ever envisaged them in this way.

The texts connected with Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe are pertinent here. Selections from both feature regularly in modern anthologies of women's writing from the Middle Ages, often in ways which iron out and conceal the significantly different circumstances in which the works were conceived. Two of the most recent editors of the *Revelation* of Julian of Norwich argue for her advanced and comprehensive literacy.²¹ They suggest that she knew Latin and was acquainted with the Vulgate and the works of the Church Fathers at first hand, and conclude that her knowledge of the techniques of rhetoric proves her to have been an experienced author, who probably formulated and wrote out her own account of her visionary experiences. Although we might feel it equally plausible that Julian's familiarity with rhetorical practice should have been acquired as a listener, there remains insufficient detail in the *Revelation* or its manuscripts to sway the argument for her orthographic capabilities either way. None of the surviving copies of the so-called short or long texts is an autograph: the short text survives in one fifteenth-century version which may have been produced in a monastic scriptorium, and the long text (apart from a series of extracts made c. 1500) in a group of much later copies.²² The nature of Julian's writings is such as to indicate long meditation on her experiences, and careful consideration of the manner most appropriate to their recording and publication. Although she apologises for her 'vnlettyrde' and 'leued' state, it seems not improbable that these conventional gestures concealed an ability to 'compose' and 'write', in the manner of Christine de Pizan, in circumstances which we can reconstruct without too much difficulty.²³

The informative prefatory material supplied to Margery Kempe's *Boke* by its successive scribes sketches a situation much more remote from modern experience.²⁴ The one extant manuscript (discovered only in 1934) was produced by a scribe who names himself as Salthows. He in turn copied, directly or at some remove, from a priest's tidied version of the

Women authors and women's literacy

recollections which Margery had previously dictated to an amanuensis. The priest has been termed 'no less than Margery . . . the author of *The Boke*'.²⁵ He describes how Margery's experiences and behaviour convinced 'worthy & worshepful clerkys' of her acquaintance that she was inspired by some divine grace, and persuaded them 'pat sche schuld don hem wryten & makyn a booke of hyr felyngys & hir reuelacyons. Sum proferyd hir to wrytyn hyr felyngys wyth her owen handys, & sche wold not consentyn in no wey, for sche was comawndyd in hir sowle pat sche schuld not wrytyn so soone'.²⁶ Some twenty years after her first intimations of spiritual vision, Margery received divine licence to publish. She was unable to find an amanuensis until a certain mysterious 'man dwellyng in Dewchlonde which was an Englyschman in hys byrth' (perhaps to be identified as her own son) volunteered his services. The scribe visited England with his family and stayed with Margery until his task was accomplished:

Than was þer a prest which þis creatur had gret affecyon to, & so sche comownd wyth hym of þis mater & browt hym þe boke to reden. Þe booke was so euel wretyn þat he coud lytyl skyl þeron, for it was neipyr good Englysch ne Dewch, ne þe lettyr was not schapyn ne formyd as oþer letters ben. Þerfor þe prest leued fully þer schuld neuyr man redyn it, but it wer special grace. Neuyr-þe-lesse, he behyte hir þat if he coud redyn it he wolde copyn it owt & wrytyn it betyr wyth good wylle.²⁷

Margery's reputation was such that the priest dared not communicate with her frequently, and his project was forgotten; the difficulty of transliterating was so great that neither extra light nor a mended pen nor spectacles could help. He advised Margery to visit another man, an acquaintance who knew the first Anglo-German amanuensis and could read his writing. He in turn tried his hardest, handsomely paid by Margery, but wrote only one leaf, 'þe boke was so euel sett & so vnresonably wretyn'. The priest tried once more, and miraculously inspired by divine grace found the work easier; Margery explained obscurities as and when he encountered them, and he was able to complete the task.²⁸

I quote from this account at length because it illustrates in a particularly lively way the easy acceptance, on the part of Margery's acquaintances, of her own inability to make a physical record of her experiences. No one, over the course of the twenty years during which she awaited God's commandment to publish her visions, or during the course of the four or five years during which the priest struggled with the first scribe's handwriting, seems to have suggested the practical solution that she should learn to write. The priest was well aware of the formal and stylistic constraints brought about by the circumstances of dictation, and warns readers that 'Thys boke is not wretyn in ordyr, euery thyng aftyr oþer as it

wer don, but lych as þe mater cam to þe creatur in mend whan it schuld be wretyn.²⁹ A similar complacency seems to have operated in connection with Margery's inability to read. She understands the power of writing, owning a ring with the Latin inscription 'Thesus est amor meus', and dreaming of seeing her name inscribed in 'an howge boke . . . þe Boke of Lyfe', and she learnt by heart the *Veni creator*, 'wyth alle þe versys longyng perto',³⁰ yet when she complains of her illiteracy and God sends a priest to her aid, she is happy to accept his services as a reader over a period of seven or eight years rather than taking instruction in reading from him. The works of Hilton and St Bridget and *Stimulus amoris* and *Incendium amoris*, which she knew, must have been read and explained to her over a number of years.³¹

Margery was able to 'compose', in terms of recalling, organising and commenting upon her experiences, but the business of recording the resulting material for an audience of any size, and of giving it any posterity, depended entirely upon her priest's mastery of the written word. The spectacular feats of memory described by Margaret Aston in connection with the dissemination by females of lengthy Lollard works give pause for thought about compositions which may have been lost to us because of their uniquely oral circulation.³² Like Margery, however, some others were able to transmit their 'compositions' through intermediaries. Visions of purgatory glimpsed in 1422 by a recluse named Margaret were communicated to a priest who wrote them down as 'a Reuelacyone schewed to ane holy womane now one late tyme', and were later copied by the scribe Robert Thornton into one of his collections (now Lincoln Cathedral MS 91). They begin:

Dere brethir and systurs & all oþer trew cristyn ffrendis þat redis this trectyce lystenyng and heris howe a womane was trauelde in hir slep & with a speryte of purgatorye and how þat scho made hir compleynte to hir gastely ffadir and said on this wyse . . .³³

Whom would we describe as the author of this piece? Hardly a 'writing woman', yet it seems unfair to attribute it wholly to the 'gastely ffadir' who first recorded it in written form. We seem in need of a different vocabulary – free from lettered associations – to enable us to describe this unfamiliar set of activities and products.

Conflicting assessments of the general nature and standards of female literacy in this period complicate still further our sense of how women may have 'composed'. Eileen Power's conclusions about the very limited literacy of nuns have proved widely influential.³⁴ More recent surveys of book ownership and bequests, however, indicate at least that many women

Women authors and women's literacy

owned books, whether or not they could read them, while records of women active in the metropolitan book trade in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries corroborate Sylvia Thrupp's belief in the comparatively advanced literacy of the wives of London merchants.³⁵ The ability to read did not, of course, automatically confer writing skills, and the advice about these accomplishments which Caxton translated from Geoffrey de la Tour-Landry's book for his daughters nicely captures the insouciance of an age in which dictation to a scribe or household clerk could solve most problems:

And by cause somme folke sayen that they wold not that theyr wyues ne also theyr doughters wyst ony thyng of clergie ne of wrytyng . . . as for wrytyng, it is no force yf a woman can nought of it but as for redyng I saye that good and prouffitable is to al wymen. For a woman that can rede may better knowe the peryls of the sowle and her sauement than she that can nougt of it, for it hath be preued.³⁶

In this area, though, it seems again that surviving evidence may mislead. In introducing the first volume of his edition of *The Paston Letters* Norman Davis signalled that 'the women of this family . . . were not, or not completely, literate', and cited Margery Brews's clumsy additions and signatures to the letters written for her by household clerks.³⁷ But the second volume includes several autograph letters, and letters with autograph signatures, sent by female members of the family or their acquaintances, comparable to autograph letters from women in the Cely, Stonor and Plumpton families.³⁸ Practice clearly varied (depending perhaps on the availability or handiness of labour): even in the sixteenth century, with its noted female scholars and scribes, Honor Lady Lisle dictated her letters.³⁹ The methods by which material to be copied was transmitted to scribes can now only be guessed at: oral dictation? rough notes on paper or on wax tablets? Information about this might help to reconstruct the processes of composition which generated a valentine poem sent by Margery Brews to John Paston III: 'I beseche zowe þat this bill be not seyn of non erthely creature safe only zour-selfe', begs the fully literate Margery – yet she still employed a clerk to copy the intimate communication.⁴⁰ Such conclusions as we can draw from women's involvement in letter-writing, like the evidence available in fictional sources,⁴¹ indicate that orthographical accomplishment among women was more widespread than used to be supposed, but that it was by no means a necessary prerequisite for an act of composition.

Internal evidence, as well as the testimony of scribes and other independent witnesses, confirms the relationship between particular women and particular texts in most of the cases I have discussed so far. The authors themselves, or their spokesmen, furnish details of name, sex, status

and milieu which enable us to locate female involvement, whatever its nature, in the genesis of certain works. But the task of locating women's writing becomes far harder in the case of anonymous works in which no such helpful factual material is supplied. Orthographic or linguistic criteria here are of little use: even when evidence permits hypotheses about the distance between the original author and the scribe of one particular copy of a work, no attempt can be made to deduce the genders of those concerned in the chain of composition and dissemination. And, arguable though the case may be, stylistic or thematic patterns are hardly reliable guides to the sex of an author.⁴² Scholarly reactions to the range of anonymous texts which feature women narrators furnish acute and sometimes comic demonstrations of the pitfalls which await the eager resuscitator of lost female reputations.

Instructions for women proffered by wives and mothers, for example, sound reasonable enough candidates to swell the range of women's writings in this period. Both *The Good Wife Taught her Daughter* and *The Good Wife Wold a Pilgrimage* are couched in the form of maternal instruction: the good advice concerns the need for regular church-going and observance of the sacraments; behaviour towards family and suitors; domestic efficiency. The female narrator of *The Thewis of Gud Women* points out in more generalised terms the characteristic vices and virtues of her sex.⁴³ None of the three works is distinguished by specific reference to individual women destinataires, however (unlike the fatherly advice of Geoffrey de la Tour-Landry in the otherwise somewhat analogous *Book of the Knight of the Tower*),⁴⁴ and none of the surviving manuscripts provides information about female authorship or even of early female readership. The distinct similarities between *The Good Wife Taught her Daughter* and several parallel male-oriented instructions from fathers to sons complicate the issue by suggesting a kind of androgynous inspiration.⁴⁵ It seems highly likely that dramatic appropriateness rather than actual women authors may have dictated the appearance of female narrators in these instances.

The instruction contained in the hunting poem *Tristram* is of a more specialised nature, and it is hard to imagine why a female narrator should have seemed appropriate to dispense it.⁴⁶ The simple truth may be that its author was a woman, addressing sons or charges. The *Ménagier de Paris* included advice on hunting and hawking in the instructions he compiled for his young wife, and skill in such pursuits was clearly not outside the realm of female competence.⁴⁷ But the automatic identification of the narrator of *Tristram* with the dame Julyans Barnes who is named in the colophon to the poem in early printed editions of *The Boke of St Albans* (RSTC 3308 etc.) is more problematical, and the biographical speculation

which has linked this name variously, and probably spuriously, with a daughter of Sir James Berners of Essex, and a prioress of Sopwell, less trustworthy still.⁴⁸ The first edition of the *Boke* came from the press of the Schoolmaster printer of St Albans in 1486, and was composed of sections on hawking, hunting, coat-armour and the blazoning of arms. Both the hawking and hunting sections conclude with short snippets of advice, sometimes in verse, to do with the courteous and gentlemanly behaviour expected of practitioners of these arts, and Wynkyn de Worde, reprinting the *Boke* in 1496, made further attractive additions, supplying a *Treatise on Fishing* and some more improving advice.⁴⁹ 'Julyans Barnes' has been connected with all the additional material, despite the fact that the only evidence for her involvement in any part of the contents of the *Boke* is the colophon at the end of the *Tristram* poem which reads in the printed editions, 'Explicit Julyans Barnes in her boke of huntyng'. Whether the figure named was actually the author, or merely the owner of a manuscript from which the material was at some stage taken, cannot of course be fathomed.

Whatever her relationship to 'Julyans Barnes', the narrator of the *Tristram* poem, like the different good wives who purvey advice in verse, may conceivably write in her own character. There is no reason to suppose that women did not or could not have access to the kinds of information which these works offer; no certain indication that the authors were not mothers or huntswomen. Texts of a less immediately practical kind, in which the narrators' roles are imagined creations which could never be played out in life, pose rather different problems, and lead to unplumbed areas of literary fashion and precedent. Energetic editorial resurrection of female authors for some of these demonstrates how susceptible the texts are to historical fluctuations in interpretive sensibility. Skeat's grounds for concluding that *The Nut-Brown Maid* (a dialogue between a man and a maiden) was 'almost certainly written by a woman' were quite baldly that 'it would be simply absurd to suppose that a fifteenth-century male poet would give himself out to be a woman; for he would only have been laughed at'.⁵⁰ Modern critical understanding views the adoption of literary *personae* in a very different way.

The histories of a verse *Lamentation of Mary Magdalen*, and of *The Flower and the Leaf* and *The Assembly of Ladies*, which Skeat also attributed to female hands, are instructive. No manuscript copy of the first is extant, but linguistic evidence points to a date of composition some time in the later fifteenth century.⁵¹ It survives in an early printed quarto, from the press of Wynkyn de Worde (c. 1520, RSTC 17568), and in several later collected editions of Chaucer's works, beginning with Pynson's 1526 *Book of Fame*

(RSTC 5068). It is a substantial piece which explores the Magdalen's reactions to the disappearance of Christ's body from the tomb; entirely conventionally, her dismayed devotion is expressed in language and images which recall the modes of secular love poetry (there are echoes of *Troilus and Criseyde*, for example). Early editors mistakenly but understandably attributed the work to Chaucer, thinking it to be the translation of *Origenes upon the Magdalene* which is mentioned in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*.⁵² Subsequent more strenuous linguistic study has excluded the work from the Chaucer canon, but left it available for other claims. For Skeat, it was a 'lugubrious piece' and probably 'the wail of a nun'.⁵³ Its most recent editor singled out among its special features 'the subtle phases of a nature striving to luxuriate in its own capacity for emotion, and satisfy through imagination its own craving for excitement . . . the prevalence of strong personal feeling, restricted within narrow range . . .', and continued 'It has been said that it is characteristic of women to give general statements a personal application, and this is true, not merely of the intellectual, but of the emotional side of their nature, as is shown in the above poem . . .'.⁵⁴ What of the Latin homily, incontestably the work of a man, on which the work is loosely based? What of Chaucer's own related, but lost, translation? Women were certainly much involved in the circulation of stories concerning female characters from the scriptures, but it would surely be a gross over-simplification to assume that they actually composed all the associated texts.

The scholarly history of *The Flower and the Leaf* and *The Assembly of Ladies*, as Alexandra Barratt has shown, reveals similar networks of misapprehension concerning female narrators, this time of secular poems.⁵⁵ Both are unusual in purporting to recount women's experiences (in *The Flower and the Leaf* an outdoor courtly party; in *The Assembly of Ladies* a dream in which petitioning women recount their grievances), but in neither poem is the female narrator's presence particularly obtrusive, and the texts have a wide appeal as semi-allegorical explorations of delicate courtly social problems and as homages to Chaucer. Because details of dress are copiously supplied, however (partly in order to distinguish between the allegiances of the different courtly figures involved), female authorship has been automatically assumed – most publicly by Skeat again, who attributed both to Margaret Neville.⁵⁶ While nothing in the early copies can conclusively disprove such an understanding, it seems more fruitful to view the poems in their generic context, as pseudo-Chaucerian love visions in which discussion of the conflicting claims of chastity and idle pleasure comes plausibly and appropriately from women's mouths, and in which the female perspective may have been devised as an attractive novelty or

Women authors and women's literacy

variation on a theme, even a means by which acquaintance with Chaucer's own experiments in *Anelida and Arcite* or *The Squire's Tale* could be demonstrated. In just such a way the precedent of Chaucer's use of the *Heroides* may lie behind the Ovidian *Lay of Sorrow*, spoken by a woman, which is gathered into one late fifteenth-century manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library Arch. Selden MS B.24) alongside *The Legend of Good Women* and *The Complaint of Venus*.⁵⁷

Similar factors of literary precedent or dramatic appropriateness obscure the extent of female involvement in the composition of lyrics, a genre in which a sub-category of 'women's songs' is often isolated, in both English and continental vernaculars, and yet in which the irredeemable anonymity of texts is most pervasive.⁵⁸ Speculation seems fruitless in the case of anonymous political or religious poems in which words are put into the mouths of recognisable female figures (as in *The Lament for the Duchess of Gloucester*, or the many poems spoken by the Virgin):⁵⁹ anyone might have written them. Particular traditions of lyric writing, in which for instance betrayed maidens lament their seduction by Jolly Jankyn or Sweet Sir John (or their continental counterparts), were so widely and firmly established that the authorship of individual poems is again irrecoverably concealed.⁶⁰ The hint of anti-feminism which sometimes underlies such laments surfaces more crudely elsewhere in women's songs, and those lyrics in which wantons lust after serving men, or in which gossips and ale-wives recount gross jokes, were surely designed as hearty masculine entertainment rather than written by women to present the female point of view.⁶¹ England seems to have had nothing to rival the songs of continental women troubadours,⁶² and even in the realm of non-satirical lyrics in women's voices the facts at any rate remind us that amongst the few identifiable authors are several men. John Shirley copied a *Gentlewoman's Lament* into a manuscript which is now Cambridge, Trinity College R.3.20, noting that it was 'sayde by a gentilwomman whiche loued a man of gret estate', but supplying the running title 'A wommans compleynte made by Lidegate'.⁶³ Humfrey Newton, a Cheshire squire whose commonplace book (Oxford, Bodleian Library Lat. misc. MS c. 66) contains what are almost certainly holograph copies of his own poems, wrote a love epistle as from a mistress to her lover.⁶⁴ A poem like this might be an exercise in novelty written to match a male perspective, like the carol in Cambridge University Library Additional MS 5943 which is copied in alternative 'his' and 'hers' versions, or like the female halves of the several pairs of love epistles which have survived;⁶⁵ the gender of their authors need not automatically match those of their narrative voices.

A closer look at one specific collection of lyrics in the Findern

Manuscript (Cambridge University Library Ff.1.6), whose feminist interest and concentration on women's songs are often canvassed, clarifies some of the points I have tried to raise so far.⁶⁶ The manuscript includes contributions by at least thirty-five scribes, and it was compiled over a number of years. Interspersed among its lengthier contents, which focus noticeably on those Chaucerian and pseudo-Chaucerian texts which deal with women and their role, are four love lyrics written from a female viewpoint.⁶⁷ The coincidental presence of several women's names written in different parts of the manuscript has prompted much speculation. R. H. Robbins's early study of the collection noted its distinctive courtly tone and attributed the copying to a collaboration between 'local women amateurs and professional scribes'. While signalling the status of many of the love lyrics as unique copies, and noting the linguistic evidence which links some of them with the Derbyshire area, Robbins hesitated over committing himself on the question of whether or not these are autographs. Subsequent studies have been less cautious, however, and the woman's view of courtly love apparent in the contents of the collection has persuaded some scholars that the lyrics were both composed and copied into the manuscript by women.⁶⁸

Some clearing of the ground seems necessary here. For a start, of the four lyrics in which women 'speak', one (*What so men seyn*) has a sting in the tail which effectively castigates female 'newfangelness'. Another (*Welcome be ye*) seems to be rather a dialogue in which both sexes participate. None of the four 'female' lyrics appears to me to have been copied by the hands which have written women's names in the manuscript. Two (*What so men seyn* and *My woofull bert*) are copied by the same one scribe, whose hand appears nowhere else in the volume, but as one of the two is the lyric which slyly introduces the subject of women's inconstancy we can hardly make great claims for this scribe's personal interest in 'the woman's view of courtly love'. In fact, the involvement of female scribes in the copying of any part of the manuscript cannot be documented with certainty. In most cases, the hands of the names do not correspond with hands evident anywhere else in the volume. The only exception concerns the names of 'Elisabet Koton' and 'Elisabet fraunceys', which appear at the end of the romance *Sir Degrevaunt* in a hand which would seem to be that of the second of the two scribes who collaborated on copying the text. Do the names identify the two women as the two scribes, or were they rather written in deference to the commissioners or future owners of the copying? We cannot tell.

One further point worth making is that the lyrics are almost all later additions to the manuscript. The present state of the volume is best explained as the product of the amalgamation of stints of copying which were loosely connected, and the subsequent addition to the newly formed

book of sequences of lyrics and short items which were jotted on available blank leaves. Whether by design or accident, the manuscript became a *liber amicorum*, in which many hands added only one or two items. As one would expect in an autograph album, the fillers and additions are short and easily memorable pieces: love lyrics, more often than not, but perhaps through the kind of inertia by which each contributor followed the example of those who had gone before, rather than through any specific desire to voice gender-related concerns. The nature of the manuscript's contents, and the number of female names it contains, must suggest that women read it with interest (perhaps even that they organised its production), but the status of its lyrics as the compositions or the copy of 'writing women' must await further proof.

Part of the difficulty of assessing the evidence for female involvement in the copying or contents of the Findern manuscript arises from the general impossibility of deducing the gender of a scribe from the appearance of a hand. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that so many texts survive in copies made at some remove from the original act of composition. What are we to make of the information about authorship supplied by agents of textual transmission such as scribes? How helpful can it be in locating the writings of women? Some cases, in which the name specified and the nature of involvement claimed are vague and uncorroborated elsewhere, must remain mysterious: such is Shirley's attribution of a *Holy Salutation to the Virgin*, in Oxford, Bodleian Library Ashmole MS 59, to an anonymous ' anchoress of Maunssfeld'.⁶⁹ Elsewhere, rather more information may be supplied. The compiler of the *Ordinarium* for Barking Abbey, for example, writing at the command of the abbess Sibilla Felton between 1394 and 1419, reveals that the Easter dramatic offices for Barking (which he copied) had been revised by a previous abbess, Katherine of Sutton.⁷⁰ In the case of Eleanor Hull, there exists still further documentation, outside the information supplied by a later copyist of her work, to supply corroborative evidence. Her translations into English of a French commentary on the seven penitential psalms, a meditation on the seven days of the week, and some prayers, survive in a copy (Cambridge University Library MS Kk.1.6) in which the scribe notes 'Alyanore Hull drew out of French all this before written in this little book.' We can learn from her will, copied in her own hand, that Eleanor was a fully literate woman, owning and bequeathing books, whose practical involvement in the making of the translations and probable completion of an original written exemplar seems hardly to be questioned.⁷¹

A scribe's attribution of a love lyric in its unique surviving copy (Oxford, Bodleian Library Rawlinson MS c. 86) to a 'Quene Elyzabeth' is more perplexing.⁷² Which Queen Elizabeth, first of all? The portion of the

manuscript in which the lyric occurs dates from the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, and has demonstrable London connections and an evident Yorkist bias;⁷³ the scribe who wrote the note presumably referred to either Elizabeth Woodville or her daughter Elizabeth of York. On balance, it seems more likely that Henry VII's queen should have been credited with appropriate cause for rejoicing in her marriage, but such further testimony to her literary abilities as survives tends to obfuscate rather than clarify. A mortality lyric in which she speaks from beyond the grave tells us little; with reasonable authority it is elsewhere anyway attributed to Thomas More.⁷⁴ But significantly, in one version of the *Song of Lady Bessy*, a eulogistic account of Elizabeth's youth, written probably in the sixteenth century, her authorial and orthographic talents are singled out for comment.⁷⁵ Colluding with Lord Stanley in the composition of letters designed to raise support for Henry Tudor, Elizabeth is able to bypass the security risk of employing a scribe:

You shall not need none such to call,
 Good father Stanley, hearken to me,
 What my father, King Edward, that king royal,
 Did for my sister, my Lady Wells, and me:
 He sent for a scrivener to lusty London,
 He was the best in that citty;
 He taught us both to write and read full soon,
 If it please you, full soon you shall see:
 Lauded be God, I had such speed,
 That I can write as well as he,
 And also indite and full well read,
 And that (Lord) soon shall you see,
 Both English and alsoe French,
 And also Spanish, if you had need . . .⁷⁶

Some reputed association between Elizabeth and the skills of 'writing' and 'inditing' seems to have been operative, but whether it influenced or in fact derived from the attribution in Rawlinson MS c. 86 is harder to unravel. It seems quite possible that this 'writing woman' was actually a creation of fertile-minded scribes.

From the late fifteenth to the early sixteenth century is no great span of time, yet the cultural climates of the two periods are often very differently perceived. One distinguishing feature which is often remarked is the sudden appearance, after 1500, of women whose comprehensive literacy and published *œuvres* qualify them to rank as 'authors' in what has come to be our modern understanding of the term. Lady Margaret Beaufort's

Women authors and women's literacy

literary interests, for example, can be reconstructed in some properly representative way: her library, her letters, the works she patronised or agreed to receive, her scholarly attainments and her own writings can all be studied.⁷⁷ Her interests and capabilities seem to typify those of other women associated with the courts of Henry VII and Henry VIII in the early sixteenth century: Catherine of Aragon, who encouraged humanist learning, who was praised by Erasmus, and who was dedicatee of Vives' *De institutione foeminae christianae* translated by Richard Hyrd (RSTC 24836); Anne Boleyn, whose scholarship and interest in the intellectual climate of reform are signalled in many ways; Katherine Parr, who read and wrote Latin and other languages with fluency, and composed devotional works in the manner of Thomas a Kempis; Margaret More, who translated Erasmus's *Precatio dominica* into English (RSTC 10477).⁷⁸ The translations produced by these scholarly women in almost every case reflect their spiritual interests. They wrote in order that an audience knowing nothing but English should not be denied the spiritual edification available in certain Latin or French texts. The survival of their productions is no doubt partly due to the coincidence of their chronological association with the spread of printing, and with printers and publishers who were anxious to add to their lists reputable works by reputable figures.

In other areas of writing, though, the charting of women's involvement remains as arbitrary as during the fifteenth and earlier centuries. Only through the accidental survival of the so-called Devonshire manuscript (British Library Additional 17492) is it possible to glimpse the less scholarly literary activities of the ladies of Henry VIII's court. Here, in a collection very like the Findern manuscript (famous now for its inclusion of many poems by Wyatt, some of which have fuelled the imaginative reconstruction of his supposed affair with Anne Boleyn), it is fortunately possible to identify three of the hands as those of Mary Shelton, Mary Fitzroy and Margaret Douglas – all at some stage connected with the household of Anne Boleyn.⁷⁹ Mary Shelton's hand, in particular, makes frequent appearances. Sometimes she copies the works of others, as with a sequence of medieval borrowings which may have come from one of the early printed collections of Chaucer's works. Elsewhere it seems that she inserts her own compositions: one poem whose lines contain an acrostic on the letters SHELTON (*Suffryng in sorow in hope to attayn*) ends 'ffynys S / on desyard sarwes / reqwer no hyar / Mary Shelton'; another (*Wel I have at other lost*) is signed with her name. Margaret Douglas writes 'fynis margret' after *Wyth sorowful syghes & wondes smart*, which occurs in a sequence of lyrics which seem to have passed between her and Lord Thomas Howard. Some of the unascribed poems have been attributed, with varying degrees of

plausibility, to other women: a riddle which ends 'A ama yowrs an' has been connected with Anne Boleyn herself.

The Devonshire manuscript is a valuable reminder of the area of unofficial, unpublished female literary accomplishment which we are unlikely to be able to resurrect in other ways. The scholarly translation of devotional works was obviously regarded as legitimate and improving female activity for those with the necessary leisure and resources. To locate other kinds of writing we must often trespass on what was for women, officially at least, forbidden ground. In the manuscript biography of Anne Boleyn compiled by her chaplain William Latimer we find reference to the reproofs which had to be administered to Mary Shelton when it was found that the margins of her prayer book were defaced with 'idle poesies'⁸⁰ – perhaps of exactly the kind with which she filled the Devonshire manuscript; and Vives's *Instruction of a Christian Woman* explicitly forbids the copying of 'voyde verses' and 'wanton or tryflyng songes' into the manuscript notebooks and florilegia which young women are recommended to compile.⁸¹ The apparent burgeoning of publicly approved kinds of women's writing in the sixteenth century only reminds us more acutely of the historical and cultural factors which must have obstructed, for several centuries, the recording or the survival of many other sorts of text.

This restatement of what has been lost may sound a gloomy concluding note, but it has nonetheless a positive lesson. Once we can begin to comprehend the circumstances in which women thought and communicated in the Middle Ages we can understand rather better how to locate and define what they had to say. This process may involve the rejection of traditional literary-historical approaches concerned with the establishment of particular canons, and in their place the formulation of new criteria for tracing and assessing the nature of women's involvement in the surviving literature of the period; detailed investigation of the whole area of patronage, for example, seems rich in potential. I have tried to illustrate some of the circumstances which might be considered at the beginning of such a process: our ignorance of women's educational attainments and the methods in which they composed; the difficulties occasioned by anonymous works or misleading scribal information; the confusing literary precedents which inspire 'women's voices' and female narrators; the moral and social factors which dictated what was and was not appropriate female activity. By all these, as by the more recent sentimental feminism which sought to identify a woman's mind behind every expression of strong personal feeling, we may well be confused. But we may perhaps find hope for the recovery of women's writing in the index entry under 'women' in Brown and Robbins's *Index of Middle English Verse*,

Women authors and women's literacy

where, after directions to 'abuse of', 'deceit of', 'examples against', 'faithlessness of', 'garrulity of', 'lack of discretion in', 'lecherousness of', 'satire against', 'tyranny of' and 'wiles of' (to select from an alphabetical list) we read 'will have their say'. We must trust that they will.

NOTES

- * The subject of this essay was initially suggested by research undertaken in connection with contributions to Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy (eds.), *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English* (Batsford: London, 1990); I should like to thank the editors for the opportunities and the help they have offered. Different versions of the essay have been given at the universities of Cambridge, Kent and London, and at the 21st International Congress on Medieval Studies, University of Western Michigan, Kalamazoo. I am grateful to the audiences for their constructive questions and suggestions, as also to the general editor of the present volume, Carol Meale, for invaluable help.

The following additional abbreviations have been used: *IMEV*: Carleton Brown and Russell Hope Robbins, *The Index of Middle English Verse* (New York: Index Society, 1943); *SIMEV*: Russell Hope Robbins and John L. Cutler, *A Supplement to the Index of Middle English Verse* (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1965).

- 1 Charity Cannon Willard, 'The Remarkable Case of Clothilde de Surville', *Esprit Créateur* 6 (1966), 108-16.
- 2 As phrased by Mary Jacobus (ed.), *Women Writing and Writing about Women* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p. 7. Other works on feminist critical theory which pose the same questions include Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985); Mary Eagleton (ed.), *Feminist Literary Theory: a Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); and Gary F. Waller, 'Struggling into Discourse: the Emergence of Renaissance Women's Writing', in Margaret P. Hannay (ed.), *Silent but for the Word: Tudor Women as Patrons, Translators, and Writers of Religious Works* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1985), pp. 238-56. For further relevant theoretical discussion, see Janet Todd, *Feminist Literary History: A Defence* (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 1988). Surveys of women and their writing in the period which I have found useful include Derek Baker (ed.), *Medieval Women*, *Studies in Church History: Subsidia* 1 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978); Carolly Erickson and Kathleen Casey, 'Women in the Middle Ages: A Working Bibliography', *Medieval Studies* 37 (1975), 340-59; Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (†203) to Marguerite Porete (†1310)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Patricia H. Labalme (ed.), *Beyond their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1980); Rosemary Masek, 'Women in an Age of Transition, 1485-1714', in Barbara Kanner (ed.), *The Women of England, from Anglo-Saxon*

- Times to the Present: Interpretive Bibliographical Essays* (London: Mansell, 1980), pp. 138–82; Retha M. Warnicke, *Women of the English Renaissance and Reformation* (Westport, Conn., and London: Greenwood Press, 1983).
- 3 Nicholas Orme, *English Schools in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen, 1973). See also his *From Childhood to Chivalry: the Education of the English Kings and Aristocracy, 1066–1530* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984).
 - 4 See the prologue to the *Lais*, ed. Alfred Ewert (Oxford: Blackwell, 1944), p. 1 (line 30), and the epilogue to the *Fables*, ed. A. Ewert and R. C. Johnston (Oxford: Blackwell, 1942), p. 62 (line 12).
 - 5 For further bibliography see Glyn S. Burgess, *Marie de France: an Analytical Bibliography* (London: Grant & Cutler, 1977), and *Supplement I* (1986), and the same author's study of *The 'Lais' of Marie de France: Text and Context* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1987).
 - 6 William MacBain (ed.), *The Life of St Catherine*, ANTS 18 (1964); M. Dominica Legge, *Anglo-Norman Literature and Its Background* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), pp. 60–72; Josiah Cox Russell, *Dictionary of Writers of Thirteenth-Century England*, Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research Special Supplement 3 (1936, reprinted with additions and corrections 1967), p. 23. The achievements of 'Muriel: The Earliest English Poetess', described by J. S. P. Tatlock, *PMLA* 48 (1933), 317–21, are resistant to reconstruction. The reputed association of Eleanor of Provence with the romance *Blandin de Cornouailles* (Orme, *Childhood to Chivalry*, p. 162), is now to be discounted; see C. H. M. Van der Horst (ed.), *Blandin de Cornouaille: Introduction, Edition Diplomatique, Glossaire* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1974), p. 62. See also the essay by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne in this volume.
 - 7 M. Wattie (ed.), *The Middle English Lai le Freine*, Smith College Studies in Modern Languages 10 (Northampton, Mass.: Smith College, 1929), and A. J. Bliss (ed.), *Sir Launfal*, 2nd edn. (London & Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1966).
 - 8 John F. Benton, 'Trotula, Women's Problems, and the Professionalization of Medicine in the Middle Ages', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 59 (1985), 30–53, p. 52; Lorrayne Y. Baird-Lange, 'Trotula's Fourteenth-Century Reputation, Jankyn's Book, and Chaucer's Trot', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer Proceedings* 1 (1984), 245–56, and Beryl Rowland (ed.), *A Medieval Woman's Guide to Health* (London: Croom Helm, 1981).
 - 9 J. C. Laidlaw, 'Christine de Pizan, the Earl of Salisbury and Henry IV', *French Studies* 36 (1982), 129–43.
 - 10 See further Angus J. Kennedy, *Christine de Pizan: A Bibliographical Guide* (London: Grant & Cutler, 1984) and Charity Cannon Willard, *Christine de Pizan – Her Life and Works* (New York: Persea Books, 1984).
 - 11 See Thelma S. Fenster and Mary Carpenter Erler (eds.), *Poems of Cupid, God of Love* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), and Curt F. Bühler (ed.), *Stephen Scrope: The Epistle of Othea*, EETS OS 264 (1970), pp. xi–xiii.
 - 12 See Diane Bornstein (ed.), *The Middle English Translation of Christine de Pisan's 'Livre du Corps de Policie'* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1978). For the *Cité* see the facsimile: Diane Bornstein (introd.), *Distaves and Dames: Renaissance Treatises for and about Women* (New York: Delmar, 1978).

Women authors and women's literacy

- 13 A. T. P. Byles (ed.), *The Book of Fayttes of Armes and of Chyualrye*, EETS OS 189 (1932), pp. 5, 291; and the concluding material to the *Proverbes* states that 'Of these sayynges Cristyne was aucteuresse . . .'.
- 14 Sandra Hindman, 'The Composition of the Manuscript of Christine de Pizan's Collected Works in the British Library: a Reassessment', *British Library Journal* 9 (1983), 93-123.
- 15 See Charlotte d'Evelyn, 'Instructions for Religious', in J. Burke Severs (ed.), *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050-1500, II* (New Haven: Conn. Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1970), pp. 458-81, 650-9; Ann M. Hutchison, 'Devotional Reading in the Monastery and in the Late Medieval Household', in Michael G. Sargent (ed.), *De cella in seculum: Religious and Secular Life and Devotion in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1989), pp. 215-27.
- 16 William Patterson Cumming (ed.), *The Revelations of Saint Birgitta*, EETS OS 178 (1929); Theresa A. Halligan (ed.), 'The Booke of Gostlye Grace' of Mechtilde of Hackeborn, *Studies and Texts* 46 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1979).
- 17 Phyllis Hodgson and Gabriel M. Liegey (eds.), *The Orchard of Syon*, EETS OS 258 (1966).
- 18 Ruth J. Dean, 'Manuscripts of St Elizabeth of Schönau in England', *MLR* 32 (1937), 62-71; Marilyn Doiron (ed.), 'Margaret Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*: A Middle English Translation', *Archivio Italiano per la Storia della Pietà* 5 (1968), 241-355.
- 19 See Hindman, 'Christine de Pizan's Collected Works', figure 2.
- 20 M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307* (London: Edward Arnold, 1979).
- 21 Edmund Colledge OSA and James Walsh SJ (eds.), *A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich*, 2 vols. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1978), introduction and chapter VIII.
- 22 Edmund Colledge OSA and James Walsh SJ, 'Editing Julian of Norwich's *Revelations*: a Progress Report', *Medieval Studies* 38 (1976), 404-27, p. 410.
- 23 Colledge and Walsh (eds.), *Showings*, II, p. 285, and I, p. 222.
- 24 Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen (eds.), *The Book of Margery Kempe*, EETS OS 212 (1940).
- 25 John C. Hirsh, 'Author and Scribe in *The Book of Margery Kempe*', *Medium Aevum* 44 (1975), 145-50.
- 26 Meech and Allen (eds.), *Margery Kempe*, pp. 3-4.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 28 *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 30 *Ibid.*, pp. 78, 206-7, 248.
- 31 See further Clarissa W. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The 'Book' and the World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983) and John C. Hirsh, *The Revelations of Margery Kempe: Paramystical Practices in Late Medieval England* (Leiden: Brill, 1989).
- 32 Margaret Aston, 'Lollardy and Literacy', *History* 62 (1977), 347-71, and 'Lollard Women Priests?', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 31 (1980), 441-61,

- reprinted in *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: Hambledon 1984), pp. 193–217, 49–70; Claire Cross, “‘Great Reasoners in Scripture’: the Activities of Women Lollards, 1380–1530”, in Baker (ed.), *Medieval Women*, pp. 359–80.
- 33 D. S. Brewer and A. E. B. Owen (introd.), *The Thornton Manuscript: Lincoln Cathedral Library MS 91*, 2nd edn. (London: Scholar, 1977), f. 250v. The text is reproduced in C. Horstmann (ed.), *Yorkshire Writers*, 2 vols. (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1895–6), 1, p. 383, and by Marta Powell Harley (ed.), *A Revelation of Purgatory by an Unknown Fifteenth-Century Woman Visionary* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1985). See also Marta Powell Harley, ‘The Origin of *A Revelation of Purgatory*’, *Reading Medieval Studies* 12 (1986), 87–91, and (on a similar text) ‘The Vision of Margaret Edwards and Others at Canterbury, 29 July 1451’, *Manuscripta* 32 (1988), 146–52. I am grateful to Dr John Thompson for information and references.
 - 34 Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries, c. 1275 to 1535*, 2nd edn. (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1964).
 - 35 Susan Hagen Cavanaugh, ‘A Study of Books Privately Owned in England, 1300–1450’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1980); Jo Ann Hoepfner Moran, *The Growth of English Schooling, 1340–1548: Learning, Literacy, and Laicization in Pre-Reformation York Diocese* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Sylvia L. Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London*, 2nd edn. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1976). See also Susan Groag Bell, ‘Medieval Women Book Owners: Arbiters of Lay Piety and Ambassadors of Culture’, *Signs* 7 (1982), 742–68, reprinted in Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (eds.), *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1988), pp. 149–87. For women associated with the book trade, see C. Paul Christianson, *A Directory of London Stationers and Book Artisans 1300–1500* (New York: Bibliographical Society of America, 1990), ‘Index of Persons Named in the Directory’, pp. 183–242, and Frances Hamill, ‘Some Unconventional Women Before 1800: Printers, Booksellers, and Collectors’, *Proceedings of the Bibliographical Society of America* 49 (1955), 300–14.
 - 36 M. Y. Offord (ed.), *The Book of the Knight of the Tower, Translated by William Caxton*, EETS SS 2 (1971), p. 122.
 - 37 Norman Davis (ed.), *The Paston Letters*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971, 1976). 1, p. xxxviii.
 - 38 Alison Hanham (ed.), *The Cely Letters, 1472–1488*, EETS OS 273 (1975); Charles Lethbridge Kingsford (ed.), *The Stonor Letters and Papers, 1290–1483*, Camden Society 3rd series 29, 30 (1919); Thomas Stapleton (ed.), *Plumpton Correspondence*, Camden Society 4 (1839). Lady Margaret Hungerford’s ability to write a ‘large, sprawling hand’ is noted by M. A. Hicks, ‘The Piety of Margaret, Lady Hungerford (d. 1478)’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 38 (1987), 19–38.
 - 39 Muriel St Clare Byrne (ed.), *The Lisle Letters*, 6 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); cf. the hands of Katherine Parr, Lady Jane Grey, and the Princess Elizabeth: plates 29, 33, 28 in Alfred J. Fairbank, *Renaissance Handwriting: an Anthology of Italic Scripts* (London: Faber & Faber, 1960).

Women authors and women's literacy

- 40 Davis (ed.), *Paston Letters*, I, no. 415. On female letter-writing more generally, see John Taylor, 'Letters and Letter-Collections in England, 1300-1420', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 24 (1980), 57-70, and Albrecht Classen, 'Emergence from the Dark: Female Epistolary Literature in the Middle Ages', *Journal of the Rocky Mountains Medieval and Renaissance Association* 10 (1989), 1-15.
- 41 The writings of Chaucer and Gower present mainly legendary women, classical or historical, engaged in writing: Dido, Criseyde, Anelida or Canace, for example. See Larry D. Benson (ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), pp. 613 (lines 1354-65), 506 (II, 1218-26), 520 (III, 501-4), 579 (V, 1424-30), 581-2 (V, 1590-1631), 379 (209-352); G. C. Macaulay (ed.), *The English Works of John Gower*, 2 vols., EETS ES 81, 82 (1900, 1901), 1, pp. 233-4 (III, lines 271-306). In a more contemporary setting in Chaucer's Merchant's Tale, May responds to a lover's advances with a letter 'right of hire hand'; see Benson (ed.), *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 163 (IV, lines 1996-2000).
- 42 For useful bibliography on this subject, see Edwina Burness, 'Female Language in *The Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo*', in Dietrich Strauss and Horst W. Drescher (eds.), *Scottish Language and Literature, Medieval and Renaissance: Fourth International Conference, 1984: Proceedings* (Frankfurt, Bern, and New York: Lang, 1986), pp. 359-68.
- 43 Tauno F. Mustanoja (ed.), *The Good Wife Taught her Daughter; The Good Wife Wold a Pylgremage; The Thewis of Gud Women*, *Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae* 61 (Helsinki, 1948).
- 44 Offord (ed.), *The Knight of the Tower*, pp. xxxiv-xlv.
- 45 See IMEV, index, under 'Children'.
- 46 Rachel Hands (introd.), *English Hawking and Hunting in 'The Boke of St Albans'* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975).
- 47 Georgine E. Brereton and Janet M. Ferrier (eds.), *Le Ménagier de Paris* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 143-69.
- 48 See Hands (ed.), *Hawking and Hunting*, pp. lv-lx.
- 49 For a facsimile of the St Albans edition, see William Blades (introd.), *The Boke of Saint Albans* (London: Elliot Stock, 1881), and for de Worde's edition, [Joseph Haslewood] (introd.), *The Boke Containing the Treatises of Hawking: Hunting: Coat-armour: Fishing: and Blasing of Arms [With biographical and bibliographical notices by J. H.]* (London: White and Cochrane; Triphook, 1810).
- 50 The Rev. Walter W. Skeat, *The Chaucer Canon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), p. 110; for the text, see Frank Sidgwick and E. K. Chambers (eds.), *Early English Lyrics* (London: Bullen, 1907), pp. 34-48.
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- 52 Benson (ed.), *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 600 (F text, 428, G text, 418).
- 53 The Rev. Walter W. Skeat (ed.), *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894-7), 7, p. xi.
- 54 Bertha Skeat (ed.), *Lamentatyon*, p. 33.
- 55 D. A. Pearsall (ed.), *The Floure and the Leafe and The Assembly of Ladies* (London and Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1962). Alexandra A. T. Barratt, "'The Flower and the Leaf' and 'The Assembly of Ladies': Is There a (Sexual) Difference?," *Philological Quarterly* 66 (1987), 1-24, deals most crisply

- with the subject of authorship. See also Ann McMillan, "Fayre Sisters Al": *The Flower and the Leaf* and *The Assembly of Ladies*, *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 1 (1982), 27-42.
- 56 The Rev. Walter W. Skeat, 'The Authoress of *The Flower and the Leaf*', *Modern Language Quarterly* 3 (1900), 111-12, and *Athenaeum* 3933 (1903), 340; cf. also his *Chaucer Canon*, pp. 110-11, 139-41.
- 57 K. G. Wilson, "'The Lay of Sorrow" and "The Lufaris Complaynt"', *Speculum* 29 (1954), 708-26. Earlier continental pseudo-Ovidian poems written by women are discussed by Dronke, *Women Writers*, pp. 84-106. On the general question of the influence of the *Heroides*, see Götz Schmitz, *The Fall of Women in Early English Narrative Verse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and Martin Camargo, *The Middle English Verse Love Epistle* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1991).
- 58 See John F. Plummer (ed.), *Vox Feminae: Studies in Medieval Woman's Songs*, *Studies in Medieval Culture* 15 (Kalamazoo, 1981); Patricia A. Belanoff, 'Women's Songs, Women's Language: *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife's Lament*', in Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (eds.), *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) pp. 193-203; Doris Earnshaw, *The Female Voice in Medieval Romance Lyric* (New York, Bern, Frankfurt and Paris: Lang, 1988). Recent investigations of specific lyrics are John Scattergood, 'Two Unrecorded Poems from Trinity College Dublin MS 490', *Review of English Studies* 38 (1987), 46-9, and Alexandra Barratt, "'I Am Rose" Restored', *Notes and Queries* 235 (1990), 270. I am further indebted to an unpublished paper which Dr Barratt gave to the London Old and Middle English Research Seminar on some of the material to be included in her anthology *Women's Writing in Middle English* (London: Longman, 1992).
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- 61 For example, Greene (ed.), *Carols*, nos. 446, 419 etc. On misogynist lyrics, see Francis Lee Utley, *The Crooked Rib: an Analytical Index to the Argument about Women in English and Scots Literature to the End of the Year 1568* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University, 1944), and (more generally) Katharine M. Rogers, *The Troublesome Helpmate: a History of Misogyny in Literature* (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 1966).
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Women authors and women's literacy

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