

Introduction

I saye to the agayne and doubte neuer the contrary that yf it were the custome to put the lytel maydens to the scole and sewyngly were made to lerne the scyences as they do to the man chyl dren, that they sholde lerne as parfytely, and they sholde be as wel entred in to the subtyltes of al the artes and scyences as they be, and peradventure there sholde be mo of them, for I haue touched here tofore by howe moche that women haue the body more softe than the man haue, and lesse habyle to do dyuers thynges, by so moche they haue the vnderstandynge more sharpe there as they apply it.

Christine de Pizan, *Livre de la Cité des Dames* (1405), tr. Bryan Anslay (London: Henry Pepwell, 1521)

yong women, maydenes, shulde be putte vnto scole to lerne vertous thinges of the scripture, wherethorughe thei may the beter see and knowe thaire sauement, and to duelle and for to eschewe al that is euil in manere . . . How be it there be suche men that haue opynion that thei wolde not that her wyues nor her doughtres shulde knowe no thinge of the scripture; as touchinge vnto the holy scripture it is no force, though women medille not nor knowe but litelle therof but forto rede, eueri woman it is the beter that canne rede and haue knowinge of the lawe of God, and forto haue be lerned to haue vertu and science to withstonde the perilles of the sowle, and forto use and excerse the werkys of thaire sauement, for that is thinge aproued and necessarie to alle women.

Le Livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry (c. 1372), anon. English translation, *temp.* Henry VI (1422–61)

The issue which Christine de Pizan and the Chevalier de la Tour Landry are addressing in these two passages¹ is central to the essays collected here: it has to do with women's access to a written culture, and their ability, or lack of it, to use that culture for their own ends, independent of the male authority by which it was sanctioned. The emphasis which the Chevalier places, in the book of instruction he wrote for his daughters, upon the spiritual benefits to be gained from the acquisition of the skill of reading is

Introduction

one which is familiar from the time of Jerome onwards, and which continued to be invoked beyond the chronological period covered by this book.² At the same time the dangers perceived in ‘bokis that speke of loue fables, and of other wordely vanitees . . . of fayned stories and fables, suche as may not cause encrease of science, and is inprofitable vnto the soule’,³ ensured that thinking on the subject of the education of girls and women remained prescriptive: even Christine de Pizan, whose challenge to the prevailing orthodoxy is embodied in her varied output, as well as in her status as a professional writer, recommended that the lives of the virgin saints should form a staple of the reading diet of young girls.⁴ In contemporary fiction, it is this implicit connection made between reading matter and behaviour, the presumption of direct influence, which underlies Criseyde’s response to the suggestion made by Pandarus that she should throw away her widow’s garb and do ‘to May some observaunce’. Replying to him she says:

‘Be ye mad?
Is that a widewes lif, so God yow save? . . .
It sattu me wel bet ay in a cave
To bidde and rede on holy seyntes lyves . . .

(II, lines 113–14, 117–18)⁵

These words, coming as well after Criseyde’s recital to Pandarus of the story of the ‘romaunce . . . of Thebes’ (II, lines 101–5), to which she has been listening with her women, are eloquent enough testimony to Chaucer’s recognition of the moralists’ position.⁶

Nonetheless it is clear that, despite the apparent constraints imposed by such culturally determined thinking, women were able to appropriate religious writings for their own use. To quote the terms suggested by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, there remained a ‘potential for slippage’, whereby meaning became to a ‘significant extent negotiable between reader and text, rather than automatically fixed by the text’; in other words, as in the example of Christina of Markyate and her reading of the legend of St Cecilia, it was possible for women to extract meaning relevant to their own lives and experiences from male-authored texts, as well as from those which they wrote themselves.⁷ Felicity Riddy, in her essay, although she is dealing with material dating from around one to two hundred years later, shares common ground with Wogan-Browne. Developing the idea of there being a spiritual sub-culture amongst women, she demonstrates not only how women supported one another in their spirituality, but also how this sub-culture generated its own texts; for example, the *Revelation* of Julian of Norwich. Riddy’s discussion, and in particular her emphasis upon the oral

Introduction

nature of many of these women's experiences of religious literature, frames many of the most urgent questions concerning women's engagement with literary culture, questions which inform Bella Millett's analysis of the role of women in the development of the English vernacular. Can the definition of literacy as it is applied to men in this period be equally well applied to women? Does it necessarily involve the ability to write, as well as to read? Or is it desirable, as Julia Boffey suggests, that we should develop a different vocabulary, one 'free from lettered associations', to describe women's activities? The difficulties of reconstructing a female *œuvre*, as outlined by Boffey, may in part reflect back upon clerical prescription: the disparagement of 'loue fables' and 'wordely vanitees' no doubt explains in part the paucity of evidence to associate such material with women writers, although acknowledgement must also be made of the difficulties of recording and transmission amongst those who did not automatically possess all the skills associated with literacy.

Different though social conditions in medieval Wales may have been, Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan's demonstration of the apparently considerable time-lag between the composing of much of the poetry by women and its preservation in writing indicates that here, too, women experienced a shutting-out from a written tradition, a point emphasised by the continuing orality of their work. But she also notes the role which modern prejudice has to play in the undervaluing of the contribution and achievements of women, in her forceful observation about their deliberate exclusion from the canon of Welsh poets by the present-day academic establishment. The quality and range of surviving poetry which can be associated with women authors in Wales during the Middle Ages, including as it does erotic and scatological verses as well as expressions of religious devotion, provides what is, in many ways, a striking contrast with the situation across the border. Yet in England, too, women either defied or ignored clerical dictate and formed an important part of the constituency for secular writing, in particular for romance. Judith Weiss explores the potential of women as patrons and readers of Anglo-Norman writing to influence *sens* and *matière* alike, while Flora Alexander investigates the conceptualisation of female sexuality in English romances of a slightly later period, arriving at the conclusion that in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth-century romances she considers, women are seen as participating in love on equal terms with men. The implications concerning audience and reception raised by this conclusion are intriguing: given that the evidence of wills suggests women's predilection for romance narratives (although references to texts in English are few and far between) there is clearly scope to investigate further the connections between the literary

Introduction

representation of women and the historical actuality of their lives, between production and consumption, or reception. Jennifer Fellows's essay, which arrives at a very different conclusion from Alexander's, in that she traces the ambivalence – and the occasional hostility – in attitudes towards women as mothers in a different group of Middle English romances, suggests the existence of another set of authorial imperatives, one governed by the concerns of a patriarchy. The implicit and explicit criticism expressed towards active women who attempt to direct their own fates, as well as those of their (usually male) children, in romances such as *Bevis of Hampton*, and the concomitant sympathy shown towards those who suffer changes in their fortunes passively, paradoxically serves to construct a model of female behaviour which would have been familiar to the religious moralists.

Themes and interests therefore interweave. Certain questions relating to women's engagement with the written word recur across the chronological span, despite the self-evident linguistic and social diversity of medieval Britain. These questions must include that of the freedom and choice open to women to act as their own interpreters of literary authority; to their activities as the writers and consumers of literature; to their status as the subjects of literary representation. The broad contours of a dimly perceived landscape are, perhaps, beginning to emerge. Yet, as with any comparable project, the completion contains within itself the suggestion of a new beginning. It would, for example, be rewarding to compare texts from the same genre, but written by male and female authors, to see whether there is any discernible gender bias in the construction of female characters, or in themes treated;⁸ or to investigate 'particular moments and scenarios' in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of the complex of social, historical and literary influences at work.⁹ For the twelfth century such an investigation could centre around the female literary culture of Barking Abbey, the contents and sources of its library and the connections of its residents with court and political circles; while for the fifteenth century a study of the women of a particular region, such as East Anglia, and their local networks of cultural patronage and political affinity might repay closer attention.¹⁰ If the studies gathered together here provide a stimulus for future research of this kind, they will have fulfilled their purpose.

CAROL M. MEALE

Introduction

NOTES

- 1 See RSTC 7271, and Thomas Wright (ed.), *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry*, EETS OS 33 (1868), pp. 117–19. See also the translation of the Chevalier's work made by William Caxton (1484), in M. Y. Offord (ed.), *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, EETS SS 2 (1971), pp. 121–2.
- 2 See 'Ad Laetam de institutione filiae (398)', in F. A. Wright (ed.), *Select Letters of Jerome* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 345–7; and cf. the discussion in Diane Bornstein, *The Lady in the Tower: Medieval Courtesy Literature for Women* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1983), pp. 18–19. For a discussion of a similar emphasis in theories concerning female education in medieval France see Roberta Krueger, 'Constructing Sexual Identities in the High Middle Ages: The Didactic Poetry of Robert de Blois', *Paragraph* 13 (1990), 105–31, pp. 108–9, and the references cited there. Jerome's precepts are invoked briefly by Juan Luis Vives in the section on reading in his *De institutione foeminae christianae* (1524), written for Catherine of Aragon to guide her in the upbringing of her daughter Mary; see RSTC 24856 for the English translation by Richard Hyrd, published by Thomas Berthelet in London, in 1529.
- 3 Wright (ed.), *Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry*, p. 118.
- 4 On Christine see Charity Cannon Willard, *Christine de Pizan – Her Life and Works* (New York: Persea, 1984) and Angus J. Kennedy, *Christine de Pizan: A Bibliographical Guide*, Research Bibliographies and Checklists (London: Grant & Cutler, 1984). Christine's comments on what constituted suitable reading matter for girls may be found in Sarah Lawson (trans.), *The Treasure of the City of Ladies* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 161; and cf. pp. 68, 88. She and the Chevalier de la Tour Landry both specify the life of St Catherine as being particularly edifying; this is an interesting choice, given that Catherine was learned, renowned for her skill in disputation, and the patron saint of philosophers and lawyers, as well as of young, unmarried girls.
- 5 Quotations are from Larry D. Benson (ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).
- 6 Criseyde's copy of the romance was presumably (all anachronisms aside) in French; but for evidence of Englishwomen as readers of Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes* see below, p. 141.
- 7 On Christina of Markyate see below, pp. 64–5 and 105.
- 8 The *lais* of Marie de France, and the later Middle English translations/adaptations of them (*Sir Landevale*, *Sir Launfal*, and *Lay le Freine*) would be interesting candidates for this method of comparison. Janet Todd's analysis of genre 'as a system of historical and literary expectations and assumptions', in *Feminist Literary History: A Defence* (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 1988), 99–102, p. 99, would be important here.
- 9 The phrase is Jocelyn Wogan-Browne's, as is the following suggestion concerning Barking Abbey. I am particularly grateful to her for discussing with me the ideas which arose from her own work for this book.
- 10 Part of the later medieval history of Barking has been charted by A. I. Doyle,

Introduction

‘Books Connected with the Vere Family and Barking Abbey’, *Transactions of the Essex Archaeological Society* 25 (1958), 222–43. For recent work on East Anglia which would facilitate study such as that outlined here, see Colin Richmond, *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: the First Phase* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and Richard Beadle, ‘Prolegomena to a Literary Geography of Later Medieval Norfolk’, in Felicity Riddy (ed.), *Regionalism in Late Medieval Manuscripts and Texts: Essays Celebrating the Publication of ‘A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English’* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1991), pp. 89–108. Cf. the comments on some female East Anglian patrons and book-owners below, pp. 138, 141, 142–3.

Women and literature in Britain,
1150–1500

edited by

CAROL M. MEALE

Reader in Medieval Studies, University of Bristol

Second edition



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Victoria 3166, Australia

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521400183

© Cambridge University Press 1993, 1996

First published 1993 (in the series Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature)

Reprinted 1995

Second edition 1996

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Women and literature in Britain, 1150-1500 / edited by Carol M. Meale.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in medieval literature: 17)

ISBN 0 521 40018 X (hardback)

1. Women and literature – Great Britain – History. 2. English literature – Middle English, 1100-1500 – History and criticism. 3. Anglo-Norman literature – Women authors – History and criticism. 4. Literature, Medieval – Women authors – History and criticism. 5. English literature – Women authors – History and criticism. 6. Women – Great Britain – History – Middle Ages, 500-1500. 7. Women – Great Britain – Books and reading – History. 8. Great Britain – Literatures.

I. Meale, Carol M., 1953– . II. Series.

PR113.W64 1993

820.9'001'082-dc20 92-11691 CIP

ISBN-13 978-0-521-40018-3 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-40018-X hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-57620-8 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-57620-2 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2005