

Albrecht Classen
The Power of a Woman's Voice
in Medieval and Early Modern Literatures

Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture

Edited by
Albrecht Classen and Marilyn Sandidge

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Walter de Gruyter · Berlin · New York

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The Power of a Woman's Voice
in Medieval and
Early Modern Literatures

New Approaches
to German and European Women Writers
and to Violence Against Women
in Premodern Times



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Introduction¹

To disentangle the highly complex web of tropes and topoi concerning the power relationship between men and women—here mostly understood in regards to cultural, intellectual, literary, and theological terms—from antiquity until today would require a whole library. We might as well say that most literary texts in which male and female characters interact with each other reflect a continuous negotiation process which has required constant adjustments and corrections in the audience's and the protagonists' perceptions, attitudes, and approaches ever since poets have addressed issues pertaining to love, marriage, and conflicts between the genders. In the Middle Ages this was the case beginning with the eleventh century, whereas before almost all texts were written by men for a male audience and primarily dealt with male issues, apart from theological topics, disregarding some, certainly remarkable, exceptions, such as Dhuoda, Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, and Herrad of Hohenburg.² The emergence of courtly literature in twelfth-century Provence and elsewhere also represents the discovery of gender difference as constitutive for the social fabric of the class of aristocrats.³

Not surprisingly, there is a great risk still today of becoming prey to the fallacies of gender stereotypes concerning the Middle Ages and other historical periods, since those who voice a certain opinion about genders tend to react to specific situations or isolated cases.⁴ The more some authors formulate claims about some

¹ I would like to thank Marilyn Sandidge, Westfield State College, MA, for her critical reading of this introductory chapter. Constant Mews, Monash University, Australia, also provided me with valuable feedback. Frau Manuela Gerlof from Walter de Gruyter was a wonderful copy-editor and was kind enough to lend me, so to speak, her diligent eyes.

² Prudence Allen, R.S.M., *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution 750 BC–AD 1250* (1985; Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 1997); Lisa M. Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe: 400–1100*. Cambridge Medieval Textbooks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

³ See C. Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love: In Search of a Lost Sensibility*. The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), discusses this phenomenon in great detail and underscores, above all, that the theme of love, as dealt with by early-medieval writers, primarily concerned ethical and philosophical issues, and not the heterosexual erotic.

⁴ Louise O. Vasvári, "'Buon cavallo e mal cavallo vuole sprone, e buona femina e mala femina vuol bastone': Medieval Cultural Fictions of Wife Battering," *Discourses on Love, Marriage, and Transgression in Medieval and Early-Modern Literature*, ed. Albrecht Classen. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 278 (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004),

conditions or groups of people in the past, the more these opinions are quickly and firmly entrenched, hence ossified and often amazingly inaccurate, when they meet concrete expectations of today. Cristina Segura, for instance, in 1984 characterized the conditions of medieval society in the following way: "it is a society of knights in which women live under totally inferior conditions and are subjugated; [today] nobody perceives any need to write the history of women, just as nobody cares about the destiny of the peasants."⁵ Nothing could be further from the truth, at least as far as we can say by now, more than twenty years later, especially if we consider the enormous progress achieved by medieval feminists and other scholars who investigate gender issues and the social-historical, economic, religious, and literary conditions women lived under.⁶ Charles J. Reid, Jr., in a thorough analysis of twelfth-century canon and Church laws, demonstrates that many commentators offered complex and varying views regarding women's rights, husbands' privilege as *paterfamilias*, and mutual obligations within marriage. Certainly, as Reid affirms, by the high Middle Ages women's legal position had become the hot issue of highly controversial legal discourse and was no longer pre-determined by patriarchal society.⁷ Barbara Newman has warned us, for instance, about re-inscribing gender stereotypes into medieval texts because of a hypertrophic modern feminist agenda: "Through an excess of empathy, an

313–36. Her arguments are certainly convincing, considering the specific selection of her evidence. But in the chapter on domestic violence I will demonstrate where the problem with her approach rests.

⁵ Cristina Segura, *Las mujeres en el medievo hispano*. Cuadernos de Investigación medieval. Guía crítica de temas históricos, 1/2 (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 1984), 10: "Esta es una sociedad de 'caballeros', en la cual las mujeres están en condiciones de total inferioridad y sometimiento; por ello nadie se plantea la necesidad de hacer la historia de las mujeres, como tampoco se preocupan por la suerte de los campesinos."

⁶ Here is not the space to examine the current trends of medieval scholarship on women at large, but it is worth noting that also Spanish scholars, who are often, though unjustifiably so, ignored by Anglo-American feminist researchers, have reached considerably new perspectives regarding women's roles and voices in the medieval world, see, for example, Josep-Ignasi Saranyana, *La discusión medieval sobre la condición femenina (Siglos VIII al XIII)*. Bibliotheca Salmanticensis, Estudios, 190 (Salamanca: Universidad Pontificia, 1997), who examines the profound tensions between theoretical, theological perspectives regarding women and secular attitudes. Often, as Saranyana observes, theologians felt obligated to accept men's and women's equality as God's creatures, but they quickly tended to differentiate again between man as the created being (Adam) and woman as formed being (Eve), as in the theology by Peter Lombard, 68–75. See also *Las mujeres en el cristianismo medieval: Imágenes teorías y cauces de actuación religiosa* Angela Muñoz Fernández (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 1989); for a focused study on medieval German women's literature, see Eva Parra Membrives, *Mundos femeninos emancipados: Reconstrucción teórico-empírica de una propuesta literaria femenina en la Edad Media alemana*. Textos de Filología, 5 (Zaragoza: Anubar, 1998).

⁷ Charles J. Reid, Jr., *Power over the Body, Equality in the Family: Rights and Domestic Relations in Medieval Canon Law* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004). For a review, see Evyatar Marienberg in: *The Medieval Review* (online) 06.09.20.

exaggerated notion of the solidarity of women, we may deny the otherness and diversity of the past; or through an excess of suspicion, an inflated and monolithic view of patriarchy, we may deny our fore Sisters such freedom and self-determination as they possessed The assumption that male-authored texts always re-inscribe these [patriarchal] hierarchies, while female-authored texts subvert them, is itself a regrettable instance of gender stereotyping.”⁸

Nevertheless, a fundamental problem continues to vex historians and literary historians even in the twenty-first century, namely that those who wield the power of the pen also determine our perspective toward the past. Accordingly, most literary histories emphasize those texts written by men but touch upon those composed by women—often utilizing less-fictional genres⁹—only in passing. A major exception to this rule is Peter Dronke’s seminal *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (1984) in which he demonstrates that numerous women indeed enjoyed access to advanced learning and successfully participated in the world of literature, even if they mostly limited their topics to religious and didactic issues.¹⁰ Many scholars have followed Dronke’s lead, either by focusing on mystical writers, such as Mechthild von Magdeburg,¹¹ or on epistolary authors.¹² Noteworthy authors of fifteenth-century German chapbooks, such as Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken, are increasingly attracting attention, but true enthusiasm or conviction still seems to be lacking.¹³

⁸ Barbara Newman, “On the Ethics of Feminist Historiography,” *Exemplaria* 2, 2 (1990): 702–06; here 705.

⁹ Rosamond McKitterick, “Frauen und Schriftlichkeit im frühen Mittelalter,” *Weibliche Lebensgestaltung im frühen Mittelalter*, ed. Hans Werner Goetz (Cologne: Böhlau, 1991), 65–118. For an early, but comprehensive, and truly seminal study, see Peter Dronke, *Women Writers in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). One of the earliest studies, though often overlooked by non-German scholarship, was published by Herbert Grundmann, “Die Frauen und die Literatur im Mittelalter,” *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 26 (1936): 129–61. Consult also the remarkable, unfortunately mostly forgotten doctoral dissertation by Lotte Traeger, “Das Frauenschrifttum in Deutschland von 1500–1600,” Ph.D. thesis, Prague 1943. Now see Anne Lingard Klinck and Ann Marie Rasmussen, eds., *Medieval Woman’s Song: Cross-Cultural Approaches*. Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

¹⁰ Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: a Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (d. 203) to Marguerite Porete (d. 1310)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); see also Prudence Allen, R.S.M., *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution, 750 B.C. — A.D. 1250* (1985; Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997).

¹¹ Sara S. Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book: Gender and the Making of Textual Authority*. The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

¹² Albrecht Classen, “Female Explorations of Literacy: Epistolary Challenges to the Literary Canon in the Late Middle Ages,” *Disputatio. An International Transdisciplinary Journal of the Late Middle Ages*. Vol. 1: *The Late Medieval Epistle*, ed. Carol Poster and Richard Utz (Evanston, ILL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 89–121.

¹³ Ute von Bloh, *Ausgerenkte Ordnung. Vier Prosapen aus dem Umkreis der Gräfin Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken: ‘Herzog Herpin’, ‘Loher und Maller’, ‘Huge Scheppel’, Königin Sibille’*. Münchener Texte und

Contrary to general assumptions about the exceptional nature of these individual female figures who had to struggle hard to carve a small niche for themselves within a patriarchal world, the ten chapters presented here will demonstrate two critical points: 1. these outstanding women writers could only raise their voice because of a much wider range of female authors behind them who were active throughout the entire Middle Ages; 2. it is no longer adequate to search for hitherto ignored or lost female poets; instead the task at hand is to reveal the discursive nature of the gender relationship. In this sense it will also be an important step in our investigation to examine how men responded to various gender issues, whether we are talking about marriage, sexuality, or violence.¹⁴ This would necessitate to incorporate recent findings about medieval masculinity, that is, men's fear of women, their sense of inferiority in face of allegedly nymphomaniac women, and the problematic cohabitation of men and women either in marriage, in larger families, and in social units (city population, farms, and the court).¹⁵ In the present book I will also rely on Dronke's overall findings and use them as a springboard for further investigations, taking into regard mostly German women writers from the late Middle Ages, probing again and again what individual poets and authors had to say about their own reality and opportunities, how they managed to develop their own position as writers, and how they perceived women's positions within society at large, whether as victims or as subjects. Despite the emphasis on German literary texts, however, I will also incorporate evidence from English, French, Italian, and Latin writers in support of the overall arguments because medieval literature has always to be seen in its European context.

It is no longer good enough to recognize individual women writers within the broad canon of medieval literature as isolated, often subjugated cases, that is, to shed light on marginalized voices. Instead, we need to consider the various gender relationships both in their discursive and literary dimensions, and pay close attention to what male and female writers had to say about the social and cultural make-up of their respective societies. After all, language and communication are

Untersuchungen zur deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters, 119 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2002).

¹⁴ See my introduction to *Discourses on Love, Marriage, and Transgression in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, ed. Albrecht Classen, 2004.

¹⁵ See, for example, the contributions to *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler. *The New Middle Ages* (New York and London: Garland, 1997); *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz. *Medieval Culture*, 11 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formation of Masculinity in Late Middle Europe*. *The Middle Ages Series* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003). For more theoretical, at times speculative, though still provocative insights, see Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

social constructs and both reflect the make-up and structure of every society, and determine the social interactions between individuals and groups, hence between genders as well. Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet confirm this observation from a modern perspective: "the dominant ideology and linguistic conventions are not static. They are constructed, maintained, elaborated, and changed in action, and quite crucially in talk. Change does not happen in individual actions, but in the accumulation of action throughout the social fabric."¹⁶ Moreover, our perception of gender relationships both in economic and political terms and within the world of literature, the arts, and of religion, is determined by the "gender order and linguistic conventions [that] exercise a profound constraint on our thoughts and actions, predisposing us to follow patterns set down over generations and throughout our own development" (55). We learn to perceive these patterns and gain the necessary energy to deconstruct such patterns by interrupting their traditional evolution within the history of literature. As the individual studies in this book, focused on specific topics and writers, will illustrate, writing, even in the Middle Ages, was not really gender-specific, whereas modern literary scholarship has, for much too long, employed gender criteria to marginalize, or even exclude, the numerous voices by women writers. With respect to mystical literature, for instance, Kate Greenspan convincingly emphasizes: "Their autohagiographies offered imitable models for all humankind, inspiring their contemporaries, male and female, to strive for transcendence. . . . in autohagiographies as in other medieval religious literature, the sex of the author was ultimately beside the point."¹⁷

Every text and art work has to be evaluated not only by its intrinsic values, but also by its impact on and relationship with its audience, in almost all cases probably consisting of a mixed audience. This has tremendous consequences for the choice of a literary genre, or the mode of speech which a woman writer might select in order to come to terms with her personal concerns and to reach a public willing to listen to her, a profound issue which already Virginia Woolf had formulated in unmistakable terms.¹⁸ But it seems questionable whether the "psychosexual development in western societies leaves women in an uneasy relation to language, their access to public discourse at best limited."¹⁹ There is no clear evidence, at least for the medieval world, that women have always been

¹⁶ Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 53.

¹⁷ Kate Greenspan, "Autohagiography and Medieval Women's Spiritual Autobiography," *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Jane Chance (Gainesville, Tallahassee, et al.: University Press of Florida, 1996), 216–36; here 232.

¹⁸ Quoted from Deborah Cameron, ed., *Language: The Feminist Critique*. 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1998), 49.

¹⁹ Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender*, 108.

forced to transgress strict power limits and cultural taboos in order to participate in the public discourse, as the many examples of outstanding female poets and performers both as figures within courtly romances composed by male poets (Isolde in Gottfried von Straßburg's *Tristan*, Nicolette in *Aucassin et Nicolette*) and in reality document.²⁰ Both the famous tale collection by Boccaccio, his *Decameron* (ca. 1350), and Chaucer's monumental *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1400), but no less Heinrich Kaufringer's numerous *mæren* (ca. 1400–1415), and the countless anonymous late-medieval German and Italian narratives of the same kind, not to mention those in other languages, reflect the intensive, often truly delightful, humorous, sarcastic, ironic, and moralistic discourse between the genders and reveal how much both sides were invited to participate in the debate. In sixteenth-century French literature, for instance, Marguerite de Navarre demonstrated, through the publication of her *Heptaméron*, that women fully knew how to participate in this discourse as well. Certainly, this is a very late example; here nevertheless it is a powerful indication of the deceptiveness of our traditional approach to the gender issues in the premodern period at large.²¹

Even though modern research results indicate that men tend to talk more than women and easily dominate in a communicative situation, and even though traditional power structures at least in the Western world until today reflect a deeply anchored patriarchy, it would be rather problematic to transfer these psycho-linguistic data and the results of political analysis to the historical situation of women in the Middle Ages—a generalization by itself that cannot be accepted by any stretch of imagination.²²

More specifically, it would be erroneous to assume that all male authors pursued a monolithic perspective, representing nothing but male interests, whereas women authors were only arguing for their own gender. There were many different voices, different attitudes and opinions regarding marriage, sexuality, chastity, public influence, social and economic roles, and power structures. More often than not physical violence was dealt with constructively, and peaceful settlements between the sexes were sought after, both among members of the aristocratic and

²⁰ Cora Kaplan, "Language and Gender," 1986, here quoted from Cameron, ed., *Language*, 54–64; here 63. For the radically changing gender situation in late-medieval German literary history, see my *Late-Medieval German Women's Poetry: Secular and Religious Songs*. Library of Medieval Women (Woodbridge, Suffolk, and Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 2004); for recent approaches to so-called women's songs, see *Medieval Woman's Song: Cross-Cultural Approaches*, ed. Anne L. Klinck and Ann Marie Rasmussen. Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

²¹ Elizabeth Zegura, "True Stories and Alternative Discourses: The Game of Love in Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron*," *Discourses on Love, Marriage, and Transgression in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, ed. Albrecht Classen. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 278 (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004), 351–68.

²² Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender*, 114–22.

the peasant class, though often with rather little success. Globally speaking, it would be erroneous to argue that women have always been victims and had little or no influence on their society, and hence also in the Middle Ages; instead our modern assessment of women's writing heavily depends on the selection of texts, on our perceptive filters, on our awareness of different types of modes of speech and writing, and on our concept of what constitutes 'literature' in the first place. With respect to a plethora of hybrid texts produced by late-medieval women, Anne Winston-Allen confirms: "For the most part, these women's texts are not finished literary works or intended as such, but examples of utilitarian record keeping and narrative accounts that were written down 'for the record,' as a witness to current and future generations. Yet, despite all the factual, historical, and financial data contained in them, cloister chronicles are also representations that select out of the everyday certain events to which the writer wants to give particular significance. Although not considered 'literature' in the traditional sense, chronicles are literary fictions just as much as they are 'documents,' a distinction that New Cultural historians have for the most part abandoned as moot, if not meaningless."²³ Of course, there is no doubt that men have traditionally dominated public conversations, both in oral and in written form. Nevertheless, by the same token we need to keep in mind that nineteenth-century feminist struggles to free women from patriarchal rule deeply influenced the intellectual horizon of many literary historians who then projected their contemporary understanding of the gender relationship back to the Middle Ages. Both power structures and the subsequent linguistic distribution of influence are the results of endless negotiations, and a sensitive reexamination of medieval German and European literature in light of these modern observations promises to yield surprisingly far-reaching results.²⁴

The complex situation of medieval courtly, but also urban, literature has become a matter of fact for recent scholarship, which is much more attuned to the difficulty to categorize and identify individual texts and the author's intentions, implied or explicitly stated. In light of these observations there is no doubt that any study of women's participation in the public discourse at a given time has to incorporate male and female voices, which necessitates the study of the interaction between the two genders on the broadest possible scale. I hope to advance this new understanding through multiple approaches, sometimes by examining specific women's voices, then by investigating men's attitudes toward violence committed against women, or by analyzing how individual male poets project their female characters and how women poets discuss cases of conflict between the

²³ Anne Winston-Allen, *Convent Chronicles: Women Writing About Women and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 15.

²⁴ See Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender*, 111–22, et passim.

genders.

When we investigate a culture in which rampant misogyny and deeply-seated fear of the seductiveness of the human flesh were the common topics, such as in the world of the Church Fathers in late antiquity, statements about the genders have to be examined with specially care and sensitivity. For instance, it seems to be highly questionable and not advisable to accept those texts which systematically and viciously attacked women in their performance as Eve's eternal daughters as entirely descriptive and normative when they were really primarily prescriptive, or argumentative. Diatribes directed against women might, at some times, reveal nothing but that the authors rallied against certain social conditions or cultural structures which might even have favoured women.

Misogyny, as expressed in literary documents, is not automatically an indication of women's complete subjugation; instead, misogynist statements reflect men's fear, opposition, uncertainty, and individual insecurity, particularly within a world where courtly love dominates and forces men to submit to ladies who are, in a way, beyond their reach, as James A. Schultz has argued recently.²⁵ In other words, gender itself in its social connotations proves to be a topic of a constructive, dialogic nature, and reveals its discursive quality in light of ever changing interactions between men and women within the world of literature, and, by the same token, in human society at large. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet categorically lend their full support to this observation: "Gender is not something we are born with, and not something we *have*, but something we do . . . —something we *perform*. . . . Sex is a biological categorization based primarily on reproductive potential, whereas gender is the social elaboration of biological sex. Gender builds on biological sex."²⁶ In this regard literary documents reveal much more about the constructed nature of the gender relationship in the past than political or religious texts, normally written for and by members of the ruling class of male aristocrats.

Even though the vast majority of art objects and literary works since time immemorial seem to have been produced by men, nevertheless "female writers and artists did," as Susan L. Smith claims, "utilize the *topos* [of the strong woman] in a few instances, and some of its diverse formulations are spoken in a female voice or addressed to a specifically female audience and question whether the power of women over men is always to be condemned."²⁷ In other words, all social hierarchies are the results of historical processes, which the literary and cultural

²⁵ James A. Schultz, *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 173–188.

²⁶ Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender*, 10.

²⁷ Susan L. Smith, *The Power of Women: A Topos in Medieval Art and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 3; see also Ángela Muñoz, *La escritura femenina. De leer a escribir* (Madrid: Asociación Cultural Al-Mudayna, 2000).

works mirror in a highly complex manner. There are no simple fantasy products, and the less a poet seems to write about concrete conditions concerning the gender relationship, the more his or her text provides access to the audience expectations and projections, and also to the writer's mentality.²⁸

Beyond the primarily hermeneutic expanse of this topos, however, we can also identify female subjects throughout medieval literature who energetically fought for their individuality both in the political and the artistic/literary sphere.²⁹ Although I shall occasionally turn to historically well-known figures, the primary focus of this study will rest on those women who took up the pen and joined the public discourse through their written words. Significantly, even male writers often recognized that they did not want to subscribe to an absolute form of patriarchy and wanted, or were simply forced, to share both their private and public space with women, whether we think of St. Boniface, Peter Abelard, Bernard of Clairvaux, or Meister Eckhart, to mention only a few of the most famous medieval scholars and theologians who closely interacted with women, exerted great influence on them, and were also shaped by their ideas and desires.³⁰

Highly impressive poets and writers such as Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, Herrad of Landsberg, and Hildegard von Bingen had, from as early as the tenth through the early twelfth century, already paved the way for their numerous female successors in the subsequent centuries, carving a specific space for themselves.³¹ With their works they demonstrated that learning, knowledge, and wisdom are not gender-specific and that the world of literature could be as open to men as to women if the power structure allowed them to write.³² Women's influence on and

²⁸ *Europäische Mentalitätsgeschichte: Hauptthemen in Einzeldarstellungen*, ed. Peter Dinzelbacher. Kröners Taschenausgabe, 469 (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1993); id., *Europa im Hochmittelalter 1050–1250: Eine Kultur- und Mentalitätsgeschichte. Kultur und Mentalität* (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2003).

²⁹ Joan M. Ferrante, *To the Glory of Her Sex: Women's Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts. Women of Letters* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997).

³⁰ *Der frauwen buoch. Versuche zu einer feministischen Mediävistik*, ed. Ingrid Bennewitz. Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 517 (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1989); *Women as Protagonists and Poets in the German Middle Ages: An Anthology of Feminist Approaches to Middle High German Literature*, ed. Albrecht Classen. Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 528 (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1991); for a special case study focusing on the famous Heloise, see Constant J. Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France*. With a translation by Neville Chiavaroli and Constant J. Mews. The New Middle Ages (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999). For the considerable influence of male theologians through female mystics, as in the case of Meister Eckhart, see Bernhard McGinn...

³¹ This finds powerful confirmation in Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg's study, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500–1100* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), though she is more concerned with the presentation of female saints than with women's literary voices.

³² Unfortunately, the doctoral dissertation by Eva Parra Membrives, "Escritores alemanas en monesterios medievales," Universidad de Sevilla, 1997, which offers a wealth of theoretical and

participation in secular literature became truly noticeable in the late twelfth century. We could more or less claim the same phenomenon for the public influence, if not political power itself during this period. The "nouvelle parole," as Jacques Le Goff and Jean-Claude Schmitt have called the new discursive interaction between men and women since at least the twelfth century,³³ in particular proved to be accessible to lay and clerical women writers as well. Whereas women's voices had emerged during earlier times only in exceptional cases—or are known to us today only in small traces because the majority of them might not have been recorded in writing—the twelfth century seems to have witnessed a considerable change also with respect to the gender relationship in the world of the arts and literature.³⁴ The increasing use of the vernacular as an acceptable language for public discourse—illustrated by the ruling of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 that sermons were to be preached in the vernacular³⁵—represents a remarkable change in the power structure of the entire courtly society, particularly because the traditional educational institutions lost some of their exclusively authoritative positions and had to compete with an increasing number of individuals and also schools relying on different sets of values and ideals. This claim on power can best be characterized as "control of speech that was played out under the heterogeneous and dynamic social conditions of the later Middle Ages."³⁶ Significantly, this "control of speech" was increasingly contested throughout the medieval period because more and more women also realized the impact which the free use of words both in public and in private, both in writing and on the oral level, had on individual speakers and their audience.³⁷ Christine de Pizan can probably be identified as the most outspoken female writer in the entire Middle Ages, as Barbara Newman, among many others,

pragmatic discussions relevant for our own approaches here, has not yet been published. I would like to thank Dr. Parra for letting me consult her own copy during a short stay at the Universidad de Sevilla as a visiting guest professor, March 2004.

³³ Jacques LeGoff and Jean-Claude Schmitt, "Au XIII^e siècle. Une nouvelle parole," *Histoire vécue du peuple chrétien*, ed. Jean Delumeau. 2 vols (Toulouse: Privat, 1979), 257–79; here 259.

³⁴ C. Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love: In Search of a Lost Sensibility*. The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), claims that the innovation of the twelfth-century intellectual life is intimately connected with the discovery of women's considerable contribution to the emotional life in man's existence, 157: "the most visible reason [for the loss of innocence in the discourse of ennobling love] was the inclusion of women in a social code that until then had been almost exclusively the preserve of men."

³⁵ Herbert Wolf, "Predigt," *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturgeschichte* Werner Kohlschmidt and Wolfgang Mohr. Vol. 3. 2nd ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1966), 223–57; here 227.

³⁶ Susan L. Smith, *The Power of Women*, 15.

³⁷ For an illustration of how much women contributed to the entire (!) history of German literature, see *Frauen in der deutschen Literaturgeschichte: Die ersten 800 Jahre. Ein Lesebuch*. Ausgewählt, übersetzt und kommentiert von Albrecht Classen. *Women in German Literature*, 4 (New York, Washington, D.C., et al.: Peter Lang, 2000).

suggests in her recent study on the allegorical use of Dame Nature.³⁸ At a closer analysis, however, many other medieval women authors and poets knew well how to defend their gender and how to make their voices heard, even if their choice of language and genres seems to be far removed from postmodern feminist discourse and sometimes even appear to embrace patriarchal values and ideals.

Mutatis mutandis, the social and political demarcation line between the two genders has hardly ever been drawn as strictly and distinctly as traditional scholarship had assumed, assigning absolute power and influence to men, and subordination and silence to women. The concept of courtly love—as it had developed since the early twelfth century—deeply undermined the traditional norms of the traditional warrior-class and opened intriguing perspectives toward new gender relations. As C. Stephen Jaeger observes, “We know that lay noblewomen insert themselves into the game of courtship and create the social circumstances in which ‘virtue’ and social rank become interchangeable concepts, so that the old Ciceronian notion of friendship as love of virtue translated into ‘love raises the worth of lovers.’”³⁹ Both emotive and practical issues resulting from new social-economic, but also climatic, technological, and intellectual changes, not to forget legal and moral aspects,⁴⁰ required individuals all over Europe to experiment with new types of interactive communications, especially at the courts where innovative communicative communities emerged which certainly crossed gender lines and forced an opening of traditional power structures.⁴¹ Whereas common and popular arguments held that medieval societies were determined by the large patriarchal family ruled by the fathers, we

³⁸ Barbara Newman, “Did Goddesses Empower Women? The Case of Dame Nature,” *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages* Mary C. Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 2003), 135–55.; Charity Cannon Willard, *Christine de Pizan. Her Life and Works* (New York: Persea Books, 1984); Rosalind Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women. Reading Beyond Gender*. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

³⁹ Jaeger, *Ennobling Love*, 105–06.

⁴⁰ For an extensive, comparative analysis, see Michael Mitterauer, *Warum Europa? Mittelalterliche Grundlagen eines Sonderwegs* (Munich: Beck, 2003), 70–108; he emphasizes, above all, the characteristic role of the marriage model which focused on the married couple, and not on the larger, patriarchal family (ancestors), and the relatively high age of people when they married: “In Europa stellt die Suche nach einem Partner ein wichtiges Element der Jugendkultur dar” (105; In Europe, the search for a marriage partner represents an important element of the youth culture).

⁴¹ Joan W. Scott, “Gender: a Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1053–75; Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 234–37. See also the contributions to *Speaking in the Medieval World* Jean E. Godsall-Myers. Cultures, Beliefs and Traditions. Medieval and Early Modern Peoples, 16 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003); for an overview of communication in the Middle Ages, see Horst Wenzel, *Hören und Sehen, Schrift und Bild: Kultur und Gedächtnis im Mittelalter* (Munich: Beck, 1995). For a discussion of dialogues, see 245–52.

have recently learned that the conjugal family, which provided women with many more avenues to exert themselves, was more often the case than not.⁴² This difference in perception has far-reaching consequences for gender relationships both in economic-political terms and with respect to women's power to speak up in public, to write, and to create art, literature, and music.

It would be impossible to determine when precisely the ancient attitude toward women, at least as far as the Church Fathers and their followers were concerned, describing women as nothing but the representatives of the flesh—men were regarded as the representatives of the spirit—gave way to more open-minded attitudes, subsequently treating women as individuals first, and as sexual beings only second. It seems rather doubtful, however, to accept official statements by members of the clergy as truly representative of the social conditions under which women lived during the early Middle Ages. On the contrary, a careful analysis of the relevant statements by Tertullian, St. John Chrysostom, St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, and St. Augustine, among others, would also quite easily reveal the discursive character of their treatises and sermons, which might make them serendipitously precursors of the late-medieval *querelle des femmes*.⁴³ Unfortunately, our concrete knowledge of women and women writers in the early medieval period is fairly limited because, as Lisa M. Bitel underscores, we “continue to study what the tribal historians wrote, although we know that they forgot to bring along their women.”⁴⁴

Based on what we can learn from courtly literature since the twelfth century, we can affirm that women increasingly enjoyed considerable respect in public and in turn quickly learned how to participate in the game of love which was predicated on the conflicts and exchanges between the genders.⁴⁵ The fact that love itself was regarded as a problematic phenomenon that required intensive discussions and

⁴² Danièle Alexandre-Bidon and Didier Lett, *Children in the Middle Ages: Fifth-Fifteenth Centuries*. Preface by Pierre Riché, transl. by Jody Gladding. The Laura Shannon Series in French Medieval Studies (1997; Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 53–54; see also Peter Fleming, *Family and Household in Medieval England*. Social History in Perspective (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 6–18.

⁴³ See the text selection, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, ed. Alcuin Blamires, with Karen Pratt and C. W. Marx (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 50–82. For the long-term tradition of this *querelle*, see Margaret L. King, Albert Rabil, Jr., “Introduction to the Series,” in: Laura Cereta, *Collected Letters of a Renaissance Feminist*. Transcribed, transl., and ed. by Diana Robin. The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), vii–xxv.

⁴⁴ Lisa M. Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe*, 268.

⁴⁵ This is perhaps best expressed in Ulrich von Liechtenstein's famous *Frauendienst* (ca. 1255) where the protagonist organizes a huge tour of tournaments, himself disguised as Lady Venus, thereby giving courtly ladies the highest rank in his own game. See Jan-Dirk Müller, “Lachen - Spiel - Fiktion. Zum Verhältnis von literarischem Diskurs und historischer Realität im ‘Frauendienst’ Ulrichs von Liechtenstein,” *ibid.*, *Minnesang und Literaturtheorie*, ed. Ute von Bloh and Armin Schulz, et al. (1984; Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2001), 1–38.

explorations signals that both genders were intimately involved in the public discourse about the meaning of eroticism and love.⁴⁶ In so far as misogyny in medieval literature has to be treated with the grain of salt, particularly because it would have been more a source of highly dialectical discourse involving both sexes than a truly deeply-seated hatred of women,⁴⁷ we need to probe further women's position within this debate. This is not to deny that medieval culture was characterized by strongly patriarchal features, yet such a starkly black-and-white picture tends to blend out more of the details than to give us a true idea of concrete conditions.

In particular, as has often been observed, mystical visions and prophetic revelations experienced by a growing number of religious women since the twelfth century also turned out to be a major vehicle for women to claim their own status within the world of Christian religion and hence also within their society. But these revelations did not only provoke deep admiration. They also caused many male theologians, such as Lamprecht of Regensburg (fl. ca. 1250), to wonder aloud how it was possible that unlearned women could achieve such deep insights into the Godhead. In a way, we observe here a fertile development of the gender debate triggered by women's contention that they could be as much graced by God as men and that abstract learning was not the *conditio sine qua non* for a religious vision and, subsequently, for the creation of a written text. In other words, mystically influenced women not only explored innovative approaches to the Godhead through individualized visions, but they also challenged the male power structure, and forced their contemporaries to join them in an intensive discourse concerning political influence for women within the religious and the public sphere.⁴⁸

The history of medieval literature offers profound insights into an ongoing debate about gender, about competing concepts of what constitutes an individual, and therefore also about contrasting tropes of women as bearers of power and women as the idols of courtly society. Indeed, literary interaction between men and women has as much to do with the rise of courtly society freeing itself from the traditions of the old warrior mentality at least since the eleventh century, as with the development of new power structures both at the courts and in the

⁴⁶ For a pertinent text selection, see *Eroticism and Love in the Middle Ages*, ed. Albrecht Classen. 5th ed. (1994; New York: Forbes, 2004).

⁴⁷ Alcuin Blamires, *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); see also Catherine Brown, *Contrary Things: Exegesis, Dialectic, and the Poetics of Didacticism. Figurae* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Sarah Kay, *Courtly Contradictions: the Emergence of the Literary Object in the Twelfth Century. Figurae* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

⁴⁸ This has been studied by Peter Dinzelbacher in numerous publications, see, for example, *Mittelalterliche Frauenmystik* (Paderborn, Munich, et al.: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1993), 31–46.

cities.⁴⁹ Not surprisingly, during the period from the patristic period (fourth century) until the twelfth century, the trope of the powerful woman was a negative battle cry for male clerics who were afraid of losing their influence over society. The high pitch by Bernard of Morval, better known as Bernard of Cluny, in his hysteric criticism of women in his poem "De contemptu mundi" (middle of the twelfth century) indicates the degree to which this poet was aware of major changes affecting the male position within his society. He obviously realized, as we may argue *ex negativo*, that the patriarchal power struggle against the emergence of a society in which discourse, negotiations, and arguments invited both men and women to exchange opinions in public, to discuss their differences and similarities, and to accept contrastive concepts, attitudes, and value systems as essential for the further development of the literature at the courts and in the cities, was basically lost.⁵⁰ Bernard might have also relied on a satirical approach, playing with the rhetorical tradition, especially because his statements about women seem excessive and almost absurd to a point where laughter would set in:

Woman is foul, burning to deceive, a flame of fury, our first destruction, the worst portion, the robber of decency. O cruel sin! She expels her own seed from her womb, and in a depraved series she cuts off the fetus which has been brought forth, casts it away, kills it. Woman is a serpent, not a human being but a wild beast, and she is not even faithful to herself. She is the murderess of her own flesh and blood, in fact the first of her kind; she is more savage than an asp, more furious than madmen.⁵¹

Even though members of the clergy throughout the medieval period tried to build space between themselves and the female sex, such vehement and vitriolic language as used by Bernard could not have been accepted as serious even among the most ardent misogynists. He went so far as to reject even the origin of all mankind, woman's womb. As John Balnaves observes, "Heloise and Hildegard of Bingen, as well as Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, and, at least implicitly, Marie de France, expressed acceptance of the view that women were subordinate to men, but for none of them did it entail inferiority in intelligence, morality or spirituality."⁵² This is convincingly confirmed by Ronald E. Pepin, according to

⁴⁹ Leo D. Lefebure, "Authority, Violence, and the Sacred at the Medieval Court," *Violence in Medieval Courtly Literature*, ed. Albrecht Classen (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 37–66.

⁵⁰ Susan L. Smith, *The Power of Women*, 31–33.

⁵¹ Ronald E. Pepin, *Scorn for the World: Bernard of Cluny's De Contemptu Mundi: The Latin Text with English Translation and an Introduction*. Medieval Texts and Studies, 8 (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1991), Book 2, 509–15.

⁵² John Balnaves, "Bernard of Morlaix: The Literature of Complaint, the Latin Tradition and the Twelfth-Century 'Renaissance'." Ph.D. dissertation, Canberra, Australian National University, 1997, ch. 4; here quoted from the online version at: <http://www.prosient.com.au/balnaves/johnbalnaves/dissch4.asp>; <http://www.prosient.com.au/balnaves/johnbalnaves/dissmain.asp> (last accessed on Feb. 23, 2007).

whom the fact that Bernard “found such exaggerations at all funny, that he invented (and borrowed) such a mordant vocabulary, suggests that our poet recognized satire’s conventional antifeminism and sought to rival the contributions of his predecessors.”⁵³ Quite similar conclusions can be drawn from Andreas Capellanus’s treatise *De amore* (ca. 1190),⁵⁴ where the highly misogynist tirade in the third book is intriguingly matched by the extraordinarily positive description of intelligent, educated, and rhetorically thoroughly schooled women in the first two books. This suggests that Andreas primarily intended to provoke his audience and satirically played with the anti-women tropes espoused both by the church fathers and medieval religious writers such as Bernard of Cluny.⁵⁵

Indeed, traditional misogyny, though continually used throughout the centuries by the representatives of the Church, lost much of its theological luster and ideological viciousness, and transformed into a significant topic of literary discussions involving authors of both genders, whether we turn to courtly love lyric, courtly romances, or verse narratives in rhymed couplets. What happened in public discourse during the high Middle Ages was not the radical reversal of the topos of the powerful woman as a hateful proposition directed against the female gender, but instead its translation into a point of discussion every intellectual was familiar with, without rejecting its multiple, if not even contradictory, implications any longer.⁵⁶

As Thelma S. Fenster and Clare A. Lees confirm, “a defense of woman alone can put the more general conversations about women circulating in the Middle Ages into the particular shape of a debate, and not only because of the chronological precedence of accusatory literature.”⁵⁷ Even though misogyny as a narrative strategy at times experienced a remarkable invigoration, such as in the case of Jean de Meun’s continuation of the *Roman de la Rose*, the evolution of an increasingly secular society in which women shared much more of private and public power, deconstructed the clerical agenda underlying traditional misogyny and transferred it to the area of ludic debate.⁵⁸

⁵³ Ronald E. Pepin, *Scorn for the World*, xvii.

⁵⁴ Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*. With Introduction, transl., and notes by John Jay Parry. Records of Civilization in Norton Paperback Editions (1941; New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1969).

⁵⁵ Albrecht Classen, *Verzweiflung und Hoffnung: Die Suche nach der kommunikativen Gemeinschaft in der deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters*. Beihefte zur Mediaevistik, 1 (Frankfurt a. M., Berlin, et al.: Peter Lang, 2002), 53–107.

⁵⁶ Susan L. Smith, *The Power of Women*, 51.

⁵⁷ Thelma S. Fenster and Clare A. Lees, “Introduction,” *Gender in Debate from the Early Middle Ages to the Renaissance* Thelma S. Fenster and Clare A. Lees. The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 1–18; here 4.

⁵⁸ See my introduction and the various contribution to *Discourses on Love, Marriage, and Transgression in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, ed. Albrecht Classen. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and

Whenever we come across literary statements about gender, however, we also need to keep in mind that those voices are mostly fictional and do not necessarily represent factual statements or reflections of social realities. As Monica Brzezinski Potkay and Regula Meyer Evitt observe: "Andreas Capellanus's courtly ladies, then, do not primarily portray women his readers encountered, nor does the Wife of Bath realistically depict a fourteenth-century English bourgeoisie. Female characters in medieval texts on the whole do not so much reflect historical women as an idea of the feminine."⁵⁹ Nevertheless, just as in modern times, literary reflections of gender debates seem to shed light both on the actual discourse taking place in public, and provide the latter with the general framework for further investigations. To be sure, neither Andreas Capellanus's *De amore* nor Bernard of Cluny's *De contemptu mundi* were reflections of actual intellectual exchanges that took place in public. Yet, the considerable popularity that both authors enjoyed over the next centuries demonstrates that their treatises appealed to a wider audience, provoking and entertaining them with their often outlandish claims and opinions, but also inviting debate, controversy, challenges, and opposition.

However, in order to gain access to this literary discourse about gender which raged throughout the Middle Ages, affecting both the Church and the schools, both the courts and the urban society, we also have to accept a different definition of literature, which includes many religious, didactic, scientific and other types of texts in which women either expressed themselves or in which they were examined through the lense of male perspectives.⁶⁰

Not surprisingly, for example, many male authors expressed specific opinions about the types of texts that should be available for young female readers, such as Vincent of Beauvais (1184/94–ca. 1264), Giles of Rome (1243/47–1316), Thomasin von Zerclaere (after 1285–ca. 1259), Ulrich von Liechtenstein (ca. 1200–ca. 1275), and Hugo von Trimberg (ca. 1230–ca. 1310).⁶¹ Nevertheless, as the vast corpus of mystical texts, mostly composed by female writers, suggests, these prescriptive guidelines did not necessarily offer an absolute framework for women's education and literature.⁶² It would seem speculative to regard such didactic approaches as

Studies, 278 (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004).

⁵⁹ Monica Brzezinski Potkay and Regula Meyer Evitt, *Minding the Body: Women and Literature in the Middle Ages, 800–1500*. Twayne's Women and Literature Series (London, Mexico City, et al.: Twayne Publishers, 1997), 4–5.

⁶⁰ Brzezinski and Evitt, *Minding the Body*, 194–95.

⁶¹ Susanne Barth, *Jungfrauenzucht: Literaturwissenschaftliche und pädagogische Studien zur Mädchenerziehungsliteratur zwischen 1200 und 1600* (Stuttgart: M & P Verlag für Wissenschaft und Forschung, 1994), 62–96.

⁶² Ursula Peters, "Vita religiosa und spirituelles Erleben. Frauenmystik und frauenmystische Literatur im 13. und 14. Jahrhundert," *Deutsche Literatur von Frauen*, ed. Gisela Brinker-Gabler. Vol. 1 (Munich: Beck, 1988), 88–109. With respect to Margarethe Ebner, Peters observes, 107: "Das Schreiben ist hier Movens der Rekapitulation spiritueller Erfahrungen und zugleich verstärkendes Medium der

the norm prevalent at that time, because otherwise these authors would not have felt a need to formulate their statements about girls' recommendable reading material. More important, these aforementioned authors, and probably many others, deemed it necessary to outline rules and guidelines for their educational system, hoping thereby also to influence the power relationship between men and women.

A remarkable example of a powerful narrative by a highly influential woman is provided by the *Memorias* (memoirs) composed by the Andalusian noblewoman Leonor López de Córdoba (ca. 1412). These at first sight seem to be determined by religious and perhaps also political intentions, but at closer analysis they demonstrate that they are a literary forum for the writer to establish her own identity within society by means of the written word.⁶³ In this sense, writing here emerges as one of the most effective tools to position oneself within the public struggle for influence, reputation, esteem, and power. Moreover, in this context the difference between fictional and non-fictional does not have any real significance, especially if we consider the public function of this text, obviously appealing to a mixed audience, aiming for influence on the political structure, and establishing an individualized medium for Leonor to formulate her basic thoughts, concerns, and ideals.⁶⁴ As Lia Vozzo Mendia argues, "en el momento mismo en el que escribe su texto Leonor tiene nuevamente algo que ver con el poder femenino, el reconocido y evidente de la reina y aquel otro subterráneo de las intrigas de las damas de la corte. Dentro de este universo en el que las mujeres cuentan o pueden contar mucho, Leonor lucha con todas las armas que tiene a su disposición para ganarse, a su vez, una posición que le permita ejercer un poder efectivo sobre el real" (in the same moment when she writes her text, Leonor achieves something new which is connected with female power, the recognized and evident power of the queen and the subliminal power which the ladies of the court achieved

Begnadung" (Here, writing proves to be the motivating force to recapitulate the spiritual experiences and concomitantly the intensifying medium for the gift of grace).

⁶³ Lia Vozzo Mendia, *Leonor López de Córdoba. Memorie*. Biblioteca medievale, 20 (Parma: Pratiche Editrice, 1992), 27–28, emphasizes that the *Memorias* "en el contexto en que se producen, adquieren un valor especial, proponiéndose como símbolo de una vida vivida . . . con la firme convicción de poder ser sujeto de su propia historia" (in the context in which they are produced, they acquire a special value, offering themselves as a symbol of a lived life . . . with the firm conviction that she can be the subject of her own history). We will observe the same phenomenon with respect to the memoirs by Helene Kottannerin and the quasi-mystical discourse by Margery Kempe in the respective chapters. For Leonor's text, see Reinaldo Ayerbe-Chaux, ed., "Las 'Memorias' de doña Leonor López de Córdoba," *Journal of Hispanic Philology* II (1977–1978): 11–33.

⁶⁴ Lia Vozzo Mendia, *Leonor López de Córdoba*, 27–28; Albrecht Classen, "Literary or Not? The Fictionality Debate in Autobiographical Writings by a Fifteenth-Century German Woman Writer: Helene Kottanner's *Memoirs*," *Medieval Perspectives* 19 (2006): 64–90.

through intrigue. In this universe in which the women speak or can speak much, Leonor fights with all the weapons at her disposal to gain, through her own voice, a position that would permit her to exercise an effective power over the real world).

Undoubtedly, male writers by far dominate the surviving corpus of medieval literature. Nevertheless it would be erroneous to accept the traditional concept of medieval society as one in which women were entirely subdued, subordinated, and muted subjects, when in many cases the opposite could be claimed depending on the circumstances and individual cases. Both in the world of marriage and in the political sphere, women and men learned to interact with each other, though the negotiation process was continuous and required numerous adjustments and modifications according to the influence of the individual, the family background, and the person's social status.⁶⁵ Apart from many powerful queens and other high-ranking noble women who held significant power positions within or through their families, women of lower social rank could also assume a wide variety of functions, such as Ela, countess of Salisbury (1189–1261), who bought the privilege from King Henry III to hold "the powerful, lucrative and highly political public office of sheriff of Wiltshire."⁶⁶ However, the contemporary chronicles hardly mention her, and then, alas, mostly only as "a footnote to the deeds of her husband, William Longespee, . . . , and of her son, William, who died on crusade in 1250."⁶⁷ Although these important functions did not directly translate into literary and artistic expressions, such historical observations invite further investigations as to women's actual voices within the literary discourse.⁶⁸

Before we move on, let us consider briefly some of the best known medieval queens or duchesses who commanded full respect both as lords and as women,

⁶⁵ For a diverse range of historical and social-critical approaches pertaining to this issue, see *Women, Marriage, and Family in Medieval Christendom: Essays in Memory of Michael M. Sheehan, C.S.B.*, ed. Constance M. Rousseau and Joel T. Rosenthal. Studies in Medieval Culture, XXXVII (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998).

⁶⁶ Christine Owens, "Noblewomen and Political Activity," *Women in Medieval Western European Culture*, ed. Linda E. Mitchell. Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, 2007 (New York and London: Garland, 1999), 209–19, here 209; Jennifer Ward, *Women in Medieval Europe, 1200–1500* (London et al.: Longman, 2002), 119–32.

⁶⁷ Owens, "Noblewomen and Political Activity," 210.

⁶⁸ Krueger, *Women Readers*, xiii. She add the noteworthy comment: "But the richly ambiguous texts . . . suggest that the genre also records and fosters critical resistance. Even as they espoused an ideology of courtliness that cast women as object, Old French courtly verse romances created a discursive space for debate about gender issues. The implied female public and the inscribed women readers of Old French verse romances are the fictional traces of voices in a dialogue whose words are lost. These fictional inscriptions may be viewed as the indirect precursors of the historical women who actively rewrote the masculine plot of desire." (xiv)

whether we think of the German Empresses Kunigunde, Gisela, and Agnes, of the Spanish Queen Urraca, the English Queen Eleonore of Aquitaine, or Queen Isabeau of France.⁶⁹ As Kimberly A. LoPrete concludes, with specific reference to Adela of Blois (ca. 1067–1137), but also taking into account other eleventh- through thirteenth-century female rulers, “To remove lordly women from the history of women by casting them as honorary men thus occludes the social dynamics inherent in a political system grounded in the demographics of lordly families that regularly and routinely produced some women whose traditional activities as daughters, wives and widows placed them at the centre of public affairs.”⁷⁰ Adela’s case powerfully illustrates that the public discourse was not only gender-oriented, but instead also allowed for the significant differentiation between individuals and their political position irrespective of their sexual identity. In LoPrete’s words again: “The powers of medieval noblewomen were those of lords. The extent to which lordly powers had a private domestic core as well as a public political face is the extent to which women as females could be viewed as legitimately wielding powers of command over others and intervening in public events without sinning against either the socio-political or the gender logic of their day.”⁷¹

It seems reasonable to conclude from these glimpses into the past that this space of political freedom also made it possible for women to pick up the pen and to write love poetry, verse romances, hagiographical texts, to mention just a few relevant genres. Eleanore of Aquitaine might be a good case in point, although she was not a poet per se. Her intensive patronage, however, both of poetry and the visual arts, indicates the extent to which political power could indeed translate into literary power.⁷²

In fact, recent scholarship has been enormously successful in uncovering more and more texts by medieval women writers. Concomitantly, we also begin to establish a much more diversified perspective on how male authors regarded the other gender, often treating their female protagonists with considerable respect and even admiration.⁷³ Many times we can discover that medieval authors directly

⁶⁹ *Frauen des Mittelalters in Lebensbildern* Karl Rudolf Schnith (Graz, Vienna, and Cologne: Styria, 1997); *Medieval Queenship* John Carmi Parsons (1993; New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998).

⁷⁰ Kimberly A. LoPrete, “The Gender of Lordly Women: the Case of Adela of Blois,” *Pauns or Players*, 90–110; here 110; see also *Aristocratic Women in Medieval France*, ed. T. Evergates (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Kimberly A. LoPrete, *Adela of Blois, Countess and Lord, c. 1067–1137* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2001).

⁷¹ LoPrete, “The Gender,” 110.

⁷² See the contributions to *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women*, ed. June Hall McCash (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996). For Eleanore, see 6–8, 36–37, 127–31, et passim.

⁷³ Again and again, specialized studies have demonstrated the far-reaching self-confidence and

challenged shortcomings within their society, especially conflicts and a variety of forms of violence specifically affecting women. The more preachers attempted to reject women as the arch-seductresses of men, as the absolute incarnation of the flesh, and hence as the weak entrance gate through which the devil was capable of entering men's souls and minds, the more the admittedly relatively few voices by female writers demonstrated their strength and energy in overcoming the clerical barriers and in claiming a stake within their own society.⁷⁴ However, we would revive another stereotype if we assumed that all medieval women pursued the same goals and embraced their own gender as the all-consuming hermeneutical category relevant for their personal lives. In other words, each writer, whether male or female, has to be seen within her or his social context, age bracket, geographical and political framework, intellectual and religious upbringing, and personal experiences.⁷⁵

Moreover, medieval women were surely not fending for themselves in a losing battle against overarching patriarchy; they did not find themselves in a stark polarity poised against men, and therefore perhaps on a lost post, verging on slavery. Christine de Pizan's political arguments and energetic defense against male stereotypes reverberated throughout the fifteenth century, but she was not the first, and certainly not the last, powerful woman writer. She also enjoyed considerable support by many male contemporaries, such as Jean Gerson,

assertiveness of medieval women writers, such as Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, see Eva Parra Membrives, "Convención estética como medio de menajeación. La mujer literaria en los textos medievales femeninos," *Tradición e innovación en los estudios de lengua, literatura y cultura alemanes en España. Actas del I Congreso Hispalense de Germanistas*, ed. Grupo de Investigación Filología Alemana (Sevilla: Kronos Universidad, 1998), 259–67; ead., "Deseos y seducción. Imágenes de sexualidad y erotismo en *Gongolfus* y *Calimachus* de Roswitha de Gandersheim," *Philologia Hispalensis* 15 (2002): 7–21.

⁷⁴ María Milagros Rivera Garretas, *Textos y Espacios de Mujeres (Europa, siglos IV–XV)* (Barcelona: Icaria, 1995), 211: "a partir de la experiencia un tanto desigual, las mujeres han pensado el mundo y han escrito sus obras de otra manera" (based on completely different experiences, the women have thought about the world and have written their works in a different way); for surprisingly different perspectives among fourth- to sixth-century poets regarding Eve, see John Flood, "A Source for the depiction of Eve in the Early-Modern Period: Biblical Latin Epic of the Fifth and Sixth Centuries," *Pawn or Players?*, ed. Christine Meek and Catherine Lawless. *Studies on Medieval and Early Modern Women* (Dublin and Portland, OR, Four Courts Press, 2003), 18–35. See also Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages*. *Conjunctions of Religion & Power in the Medieval Past* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003).

⁷⁵ Mercedes Borrero Fernández, "La mujer en la Edad Media. ¿Una historia de la marginalidad?, *Las mujeres y el mal*, ed. M. Palma y Eva Parra (Sevilla: Padilla, 2002), 65: "En las mujeres de la Edad Media no existe uniformidad, salvo, quizás, en un plano muy teórico, y esta uniformidad teórica refleja sólo unos estereotipos muy primarios creados por las bases ideológicas de esa civilización" (among medieval women we don't find uniformity, except, perhaps, on a very theoretical level, and this theoretical uniformity only reflects some stereotypes of the lowest kind created on the ideological basis of that society).

Chancellor of the University of Paris. As Barbara Newman observes, "Her labor pangs as a writer are to issue in transcendence and eternal memory, in a sublimation of maternity that proceeds from the same feminine Nature who gave her a female body in the first place."⁷⁶

Furthermore, throughout the centuries we find male writers who either idealized women or defended them against male aggression both within their own works and in public. Some of the greatest literary masterpieces from the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries are intimately predicated upon the deep love between men and women, both being members of the court. Both Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes, both Hartmann von Aue and Wolfram von Eschenbach, both Andreas Capellanus and Juan Ruiz, both the *troubadours* and the poets of the *stil dolce nuovo*, both the Latin poets whose songs are collected in the *Carmina Burana* and the numerous Middle High German *Minnesänger* (love poets) whose texts are anthologized, for example, in the famous *Manessische Liederhandschrift*, testify, though in a myriad of approaches, how much courtly society relied upon the concept of love which found its profoundest expression in men's deep admiration, respect, but also fear and disgust of women.⁷⁷ In other words, public discourse on gender relationships was carried out within the universe of courtly literature. Here we find male writers idealizing courtly ladies, and also poets who harbored deep suspicion of powerful women. Here we come across female voices strongly defending women's right to accept or to reject a lover. And it is here where the dialectics of gender relationships receive their most eloquent literary expression.

This is not to ignore highly disturbing power struggles, obvious patriarchal structures, women's general disadvantages at the courts and in the political sphere because they were always treated as different, and forced to defend their outreach, their literary efforts, and their demands on political influence almost always all by themselves.⁷⁸ Similar to the Jewish population, medieval women were always relegated to the status of a minority despite the mostly balanced gender statistics. By the same token, however, we have bemoaned the supposedly entirely miserable position of medieval women within political, administrative,

⁷⁶ Barbara Newman, "Did Goddesses Empower Women?," 155; see also Prudence Allen, R.S.M., *The Concept of Woman*. Vol. II: *The Early Humanist Reformation 1250–1500* (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 565–610.

⁷⁷ This finds its perhaps most vivid expression in the genre of women songs (*Frauenlieder*, *chansons de toile*) popular throughout the high Middle Ages. See, for example, *Frauenlieder des Mittelalters*. Zweisprachig. Übersetzt und herausgegeben von Ingrid Kasten (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1990); now see also *Songs of the Women Trouvères*, transl. and introd. Eglal Doss-Quinby, Joan Tasker Grimberty, Wendy Pfeffer, Elizabeth Aubrey (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001).

⁷⁸ See the by now classical study on this topic – at least within the Spanish-speaking world – by Maria-Milagros Rivera Garretas, *Textos y espacios de mujeres (Europa siglos iv–xv)* (Barcelona: Icaria, 1990).

theological, and military circles for just too long, and have neglected to nuance our perspectives by considering women's intellectual life within their own spheres. We need, in other words, to retrieve hitherto ignored literary, artistic, and chronicle sources which explicitly speak of, to, and about women in order to do justice to their actual role within society. Whether the female voice within the literary discourse actually undermined and challenged the patriarchal paradigm within medieval courtly society remains to be seen. But we can already observe that, despite a fairly difficult situation for women during the medieval past, they were neither abject pawns nor absolute power players.⁷⁹ Roberta L. Krueger, discussing Old French courtly romances, emphasizes, for instance, that "The female reader who projects herself into romance is often entrapped by her literary encounter. If she identifies with the feminine identity created by the text, she becomes an object of male desire or of exchange between men."⁸⁰ But she hastens to add, quite correctly: "the problematic women readers so often depicted in courtly fiction might be viewed as both inscribing and inviting historical women's possible resistance. . . . Fictional representations of women as readers and spectators may also portray women who question courtly conventions."

Many women were independent enough to go on extensive pilgrimages, at times even on their own, though mostly in groups and accompanied by one or several males. The dangers were numerous and real, whether these women were attacked by robbers or rapists, whether they wandered off their path and faced death by hunger and thirst, whether they were endangered by wild animals or inclement weather, but the number of female pilgrims was, after all, astounding.⁸¹ In the subsequent investigations I will discuss one of them in greater detail, Margery Kempe, because her interactions with the public, her journeys, and her search for mystical illumination powerfully translated into literary self-realization.

A most significant example of how much women, especially courtly ladies, were regarded as central to the public discourse at least since the twelfth century, can be found in Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* (ca. 1210).⁸² In his famous excursus

⁷⁹ See the various contributions to: *Pawns or Players?*, ed. Christine Meek and Catherine Lawless. Studies on Medieval and Early Modern Women (Dublin and Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 2003), especially the introduction, 7.

⁸⁰ Roberta L. Krueger, *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance*. Cambridge Studies in French, 43 (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), xii.

⁸¹ Diana Webb, "Freedom of Movement? Women Travellers in the Middle Ages," *Pawns or Players*, 75–89. See also Marta González Vázquez, *Las mujeres de la Edad Media y el Camino de Santiago* (Santiago de Compostela: Xunta de Galicia, n.d. [1989 and 2000]); Albrecht Classen, "Die Mystikerin als peregrina. Margery Kempe: Reisende in corpore – Reisende in spiritu," *Studies in Spirituality* 5 (1995): 27–145.

⁸² Gottfried von Straßburg, *Tristan*. Nach dem Text von Friedrich Ranke neu herausgegeben, ins Mittelhochdeutsche übersetzt, mit einem Stellenkommentar und einem Nachwort von Rüdiger Krohn. 2 vols. (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1980).

in which he focuses on 'huote,' or control of the individual's honor and morality in public, the poet discusses the various perspectives on women since the time of *Genesis*, and reaches a conclusion at the end that deserves our full attention especially in the context of our discussion of gender as a matter of discourse.

Gottfried confirms that woman is the pinnacle of all creatures here on earth, but he uses an amorphous language with which he does not simply sing a praise of the female sex. On the contrary, the poet identifies women's accomplishments when their desire for honor triumphs over the physical conditions as the perfection of humanity (17986–991). However, Gottfried does not continue the ancient clerical tradition of condemning the temptation of the flesh because of its physical needs, as Bernard of St. Cluny, for example, had exemplified in his poem *De contemptus mundi*. Instead, he argues that both aspects, mind and body, need to be treated equally and fairly, particularly because both are fundamental for the human existence. He encourages women: "daz sî den beiden rehte tuo / und sehe ietwederm alsô zuo, / daz daz ander dâ bî / von ir iht versûmet sî" (17992–996; that she do justice to both and make sure that neither part be neglected because of the other).

Absolute attention to public honor would unfairly do injustice to the legitimate needs of the body (18000–002). In fact, a woman emerges as a role model for all people if she achieves this highest goal to embrace, without any discrimination, both joy/love and sorrow: "mit liebe und mit leide" (18004).⁸³ Obviously, Gottfried here translates the body and public honor into more abstract concepts, the former referring to the physical and individual needs, the latter referring to the spiritual and public expectations.

If woman can embrace and realize "mâze" (18010; moderation), then she would have accomplished the almost impossible: "Ezn ist al der dinge kein, / der ie diu sunne beschein, / sô rehte saelic sô daz wîp, / diu ir leben unde ir lîp / an die mâze verlât" (18015–019; there is nothing as glorious in the world upon which the sun shines as the woman who has handed over her life and her body to moderation). Although "mâze" seems to be almost elusive as an ideal, nevertheless the poet assumes that women are in a position to achieve this ultimate goal, and in this respect they assume a role model for men as well.

⁸³ See the fundamental study by Ingrid Hahn, "das lebende paradys. (Tristan 17858–18114)," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 92 (1963): 184–95; for a recent close reading, see Tomas Tomasek, *Die Utopie im 'Tristan' Gotfrids von Straßburg*. Hermaea, Germanistische Forschungen, Neue Folge, 49 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1985), 181–83; the question of how much Gottfried here formulates an enormously invigorating praise of women and allows them to be treated as equal partners in the quest for the utopia of human happiness, however, is hardly considered here. The secondary literature on *Tristan* is vast and continues to grow at an astounding pace. See the journal *Tristania*, the latest volume, XXII, having appeared in 2003.

Gottfried does not address traditional didactic values for women, such as humility, modesty, chastity,⁸⁴ but rather presents an innovative ethical ideal of human life, best incorporated by his female protagonist, Isolde. Not surprisingly, the poet challenges those critics who continue to identify all women with evilness and associates them to a dangerous seductive force, inherited from their arch-mother, Eve. On the contrary, Gottfried advocates a concept of human life, especially realized by noble women, in which both the physical and the spiritual constitute essential parts of a harmonious whole. This in turn would make this person to be loved by the entire world (18024). By contrast, if women struggle against their own corporeality, hence against their sexuality and gender identity, they would lose this love altogether and undermine their value as members of the human race: "wer sol die minnen über daz? / diu selbe ir lîp unmaeret / und daz der werlt bewaeret" (18028–030; who would love her who hates her own body and shows this to the world?). The opposite, of course, easily also might be the case, as the poet emphasizes: the detestable woman who only pursues her physical desires, neglects the law of moderation, and who has, for instance, many lovers, would be rejected by most people in courtly society (18043–044).

Gottfried is most concerned with inner values and the kind of person who knows how to achieve peace with himself or herself without listening to the demands of immoderate, inconsistent, and material-oriented people: "Ein wîp, diu ir wîpheit / wider ir selber liebe treit / der werlde zuo gevalle, / die sol diu werlt alle / werden unde schoenen" (18051–055; a woman who loves/accepts her own femininity in order to be in unison with the world ought to be honored and praised by society). This also implies a new level of partnership and equality within marriage, and elevates the woman out of the realm of traditional misogyny and patriarchal thinking into a sphere where gender loses its divisive character and transforms into an element of simple distinction between two people within one unit.⁸⁵ In fact, true happiness ("lebende paradîs," 18066, living paradise) within marriage can be found if the female partner freely grants her love without any false limitations (18060–066). But according to Gottfried, Isolde is not the only woman who would be the source of love. Men only need to search long and hard to come across an ideal woman, another Isolde (18110–114), an experience which then would create a new source of absolute, almost divine, happiness for both of them.

This glorification of Isolde, almost like a new Madonna, does not reify her and move her out of the world of living things, as some critics might charge, especially since she does not serve simply as an instrument through which Tristan might

⁸⁴ These were addressed by many contemporary writers, such as Thomasin von Zerclaere, Hugo von Trimberg or Ulrich von Liechtenstein, see Susanne Barth, *Jungfrauenzucht*.

⁸⁵ Tomas Tomasek, *Die Utopie*, 185.

gain his personal happiness. In fact, she proves to be the perfect example of how all people ought to behave, neither denying the basic needs of their bodies, or their self, nor rejecting the social demands on her personality and honor: “weiz got si müezen alle / stigen in ir werdekeit / mit micheler arbeit” (18006–008; by God, they will all grow in personal honor when they strive hard).

Very deliberately and resolutely, Gottfried frees women from the ancient stereotype of being Eve’s daughters, of being helplessly subject to lustfulness and immoderation, and victims of their own physicality (flesh), insofar as they gain recognition in *Tristan* simply by assuming their own responsibility, by embracing their individuality, and by establishing the most important balance between body and spirit.⁸⁶ The same ideal also ought to be achieved by men, and Tristan proves to be as much challenged by the narrator’s projection of his ideals as his beloved is. Nevertheless, as I will demonstrate later, Gottfried clearly favors Isolde over Tristan, and he unequivocally projects her as the true protagonist in the romance, at least from the time on when she has to undergo the ordeal with the hot-red iron.⁸⁷ In the “huote”-excursus, to be sure, Isolde, and with her all noble, honorable women, is freed from the ancient accusation of following Eve’s footsteps and being a victim of her own corporeality. As the narrator emphasizes, Isolde, who represents the new rose in paradise, displays no thorns, shows no any anger, and knows how to be herself in a most loving manner, giving freely of her “triuwe unde minne” (18086; loyalty and love).

In other words, Gottfried specifically argues that Isolde, the ideal female character, has emerged as a role model for all people, including all men, and deserves greatest respect for the absolute harmony in her self, in her relationship with society, and in her love for Tristan, the catalyst for her own personal development.⁸⁸ The opposite strategy can also be observed in medieval courtly poetry, especially when male poets utilize the female voice, such as in Neidhart’s songs, where the obvious intention is not to ridicule women, but to criticize the

⁸⁶ Marion Mälzer, *Die Isolde-Gestalten in den mittelalterlichen deutschen Tristan-Dichtungen: Ein Beitrag zum diachronischen Wandel*. Beiträge zur älteren Literaturgeschichte (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1991), 221–23. For political perspectives on Isolde the mother and Isolde the daughter, see Albrecht Classen, “Matriarchy versus Patriarchy: The Role of the Irish Queen Isolde in Gottfried von Straßburg’s ‘Tristan’,” *Neophilologus* 73 (1989): 77–89.

⁸⁷ Albrecht Classen, “Female Agency and Power in Gottfried von Strassburg’s *Tristan*: The Irish Queen Isolde: New Perspectives,” *Tristania* 23 (2005): 39–60.

⁸⁸ This observation, however, also needs to be seen in light of Gottfried’s anthropological perspective according to which the ideal woman discards her female character and assumes a male nature: “swâ sô daz wîp ir wîpheit / unde ir herze von ir leit / und herzet sich mit manne, / dâ honiget diu tanne” (17979–982; when woman sheds her femininity and her female heart, and loves the man, then the pine tree will produce honey). Yet the subsequent section illustrates that the poet truly talks about the individual character development irrespective of the gender, arguing for the establishment of an inner balance between body and honor, or between the individual and the social aspect.

ethical and moral decline of chivalry by projecting satirical images of members of the peasant class. In those cases we easily detect unmitigated misogyny, unmistakable reification of woman as a sexual object, and even woman's demonization because of her alleged nymphomaniac weakness.⁸⁹ The other tendency pertains to the world of religious women who are seen as the true representatives of the Virgin Mary and thus as the earthly redeemers of Eve.

To expand on this context we also ought to refer to the vast corpus of mystical literature which might be dominated by medieval women writers, but suffice here to remind ourselves of the highly complex interaction of voices between the mystic and the Godhead, subsequently also between the mystic and her confessor, and finally between the mystic and her public audience. In other words, irrespective of the individual cases in medieval literature, it always proves to be extremely difficult to identify the one voice all by itself, whereas the nature of gender debates always requires the consideration of polarities, tensions, and differences.⁹⁰

The subsequent collection of articles, most of them at first developed on their own and for separate occasions as conference papers, but subsequently considerably expanded and revised and now hopefully forming harmonious parts of a global concept, pursues the argument that this particular female space within the medieval world can also be explored through a careful investigation of literary and non-fictional texts where women speak up both as the actual authors and as their protagonists.⁹¹ Although the present introduction offers a sweeping overview of the key elements in the theoretical approach to gender discourse, I will revisit and reexamine these fundamental issues in each chapter once again, which will allow me to deepen and widen the complex sweep concerning women's voices, men's responses, the interchange between both groups, and to grasp the dialogic, often polyphonic communication extending far beyond the simple division between the two genders. Many women enjoyed tremendous and far-reaching influence and respect, despite the vehement misogyny and the blatant patriarchy which dominated medieval society—at least within the official sphere of the courts,

⁸⁹ Jan-Dirk Müller, "Männliche Stimme – weibliche Stimme in Neidharts Sommerliedern," id., *Minnesang und Literaturtheorie*, 233–44 (orig. 2001).

⁹⁰ Angela Muñoz Fernández, *Mujer y experiencia religiosa en el marco de la santidad medieval*. Colección Laya, 2 (Madrid: Asociación Cultural Al-Mudayna, 1988), 119–20: "Como se puede ver, la Virgen María es merecedora por sí misma de un estudio particular fecundo en conclusiones ya que la universal proyección de su imagen en todos los estratos del cuerpo social se ha interpretado como una promoción de la consideración femenina dentro de la sociedad" (As we can see, the Virgin Maria deserves to be studied on her own merits, especially in light of the conclusion that the universal projection of her image in all strata of the social body can be interpreted as a promotion of how women are regarded within society).

⁹¹ *Women as Protagonists*, ed. Albrecht Classen; see now Carlyn Dinshaw and David Wallace, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

knighthood, the Church, and the scholars. Both male writers and their female counterparts reflected this fascinating situation either by allowing female characters to speak up and to defend their own positions, or by transgressing traditional literary genres and resorting to marginal or more specialized textual genres, such as memoirs, travelogues, cookbooks, religious poems, and scientific texts.⁹²

As in so many cases, everything depends on the perspective, whether we turn to female convents or to the intimate domain of marriage, whether we consider queens who were in charge of the government during their husband's absence or sometimes after his death, or to urban women who succeeded in establishing their own business and resolutely rejected attempts by male family members and/or neighbors, if not the city council or the guild, to impose their restrictive rules on them.

We would not face any difficulty in detecting numerous cases where the very opposite was the case, that is, absolute rule by men, whether in the convent (supervision by an abbot and the confessor) or in the family, whether in the workshop or in the city hall, whether at court or on the farm. Nevertheless, the polarity of these perspectives does not allow us to gain a true understanding of the discourse between the two genders, although it has been the dominant viewpoint for a long time among scholars and the public alike.⁹³ This volume combines articles most of which were originally written as conference presentations addressing this very issue, and subsequently extensively elaborated, but they all support each other in one way or the other, being interlaced by the common theme focused on the gender discourse, the power struggle between the genders, and the surprising observation that women in the Middle Ages were not simply chattel, that they had a voice of their own, and knew how to balance male power through numerous strategies, both open and subtle. Although the approaches that I will pursue vary considerably, they have one important denominator in common: in each chapter I argue that medieval women (writers) had space available for

⁹² Cf. Joan M. Ferrante, *To the Glory of Her Sex*, 1997.

⁹³ See, for example, the studies collected in *Liebe – Ehe – Ehebruch in der Literatur des Mittelalters*, ed. Xenja von Ertzdorff and Marianne Wynn. Beiträge zur deutschen Philologie, 58 (Giessen: Wilhelm Schmitz, 1984); the various contributors to *Las sabias mujeres: Educación, saber y autoría (siglos III–XVII)*, ed. María del Mar Graña Cid. Colección Laya, 13 (Madrid: A.C. Al-Mudayna, 1994), nicely illustrate the extent to which medieval women had access to education. In *Frauen Literatur Geschichte: Schreibende Frauen vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* Hiltrud Gnüg und Renate Möhrmann. 2nd, completely rev. ed. (1985; Stuttgart: Metzler, 1999), the editors assume, as their basic premise, that Virginia Woolf's image of the "creaking door," which signaled the arrival of other family members in a living room or some other place and forced the writing woman to hide her text, would be representative of the entire history of women's literature (Introduction), but the situation in the Middle Ages was very different, at least much more complicated, or, to use the key term for the entire study, much more 'discursive.'

themselves; that they were able to fill this space with their own words; and that they knew very well how to utilize a wide variety of genres as literary tools in their effort at self-realization. This applies both to such self-assertive authors as Marie de France and Christine de Pizan and to most mystical writers, such as Hildegard von Bingen, Mechthild von Magdeburg, Hadewijch, and Marguerite Porete (Porette), whose major concerns were directed at self-effacement to make room for the Godhead. But their apophatic discourse catapulted them subsequently out of their marginality into the center of the exchange with the Godhead, thereby entirely reversing the traditional concept of authorship and of a writer's status.⁹⁴ Mechthild von Magdeburg reports, for instance, how God explains his choice of her as His mouthpiece: "Wherever I bestowed special favors, / I always sought out the lowest, most insignificant, and most unknown place for them. / . . . / It is a great honor for me . . . / That the unlearned mouth, aided by my Holy Spirit, teaches the learned tongue."⁹⁵

The spectrum of writers dealt with in the subsequent articles extends from Hildegard von Bingen to Marie de France, from Margery Kempe to a late-medieval/early-modern German author of a famous cookbook, Anna Weckerin. But there are also discussions of how violence against women was treated by numerous writers throughout the Middle Ages, both male and female. Although many authors, especially those who composed *fabliaux* and similar genres—including the *Decameron* by Boccaccio, the *maeren* by Heinrich Kaufringer, and the *Heptaméron* by Marguerite de Navarre—present a number of ghastly cases of domestic violence, violence as such is regularly condemned and treated as a serious danger for the well-being of the entire society. Violence within the domestic sphere could also affect husbands, and some poets certainly dealt with this problem as well, offering criticism and formulating severe warnings against the perpetrators.

When domestic violence against women is condoned and even finds approval among male writers, then we are normally dealing with comic, erotic, often also pornographic literature.⁹⁶ This kind of violence and its narrative treatment seem to be surprisingly similar to those phenomena that likewise characterize our modern society. In this sense, my discussion of domestic violence (mostly in

⁹⁴ Jennifer Summit, "Women and Authorship," *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women Writing*, 91–108, here 95.

⁹⁵ Mechthild von Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, transl. and introd. Frank Tobin. Preface by Margot Schmidt (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998), Book II, ch. 26, here p. 97.

⁹⁶ For a thorough discussion of one (but only one!) perspective, see Vasvári, Louise O., "'Buon cavallo e mal cavallo vuole sprone, e buona femina e mala femina vuol bastone': Medieval Cultural Fictions of Wife Battering," *Discourses on Love, Marriage, and Transgression in Medieval and Early-Modern Literature*, ed. Albrecht Classen. *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, 278 (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004), 313–36.

medieval German literature) serves to sensitize us to the fact that such scenes were also included in courtly and non-courtly texts during that time, and that male writers mostly voiced severe criticism of women's mistreatment and repeatedly predicated their tales or romances on this problem—perhaps as a teaching tool. In this sense I would disagree with Marilyn Migiel in her criticism of Boccaccio's *Decameron* “that violence against women emerges when the very possibility of women's empowerment does. The stories of the *Decameron* imply that if women gain power, their power must remain limited, by violent means if need be.”⁹⁷ Migiel mentions, for instance, the poor scholar who severely suffers from life-threatening mistreatment at the hand of his beloved widow, but she seems to accept this form of violence as fair retribution, whereas the man's violence in response to her is severely condemned. The real emphasis, however, rests on the proper relationship between men and women, and on the warning against wrong behavior, irrespective of the gender roles. This also applies to the most notorious tale in the *Decameron*, 9.9, where an extreme form of violence is exerted against the wives, but the narrative still does not condone violence. Instead, as Migiel correctly underscores, “This is a story about a misguided interpretation of Solomon's advice; it reveals the perpetrators of violence against women to be indiscriminate readers and thinkers.”⁹⁸

Intriguingly, literary analysis can take us a considerable step further in a critical assessment of women's power position within their own society during the Middle Ages and the early modern age. Insofar as Boccaccio basically gives more credit to women than to men, he highlights the need for communication between men and women and invites his audience to reflect upon the meaning of violence and its dangers for the community at large, an issue most medieval poets were deeply concerned with.⁹⁹

A careful reading of a variety of medieval narratives, written by male and female authors, both from the early and the late Middle Ages, indicates the extent to which our modern understanding of medieval women's lives and roles are strangely blurred by mythical concepts, often determined by nineteenth-century notions of women's suffering and subjugation during the preceding centuries. Difficult conditions for women during the age of the Baroque and the Enlightenment, or the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, cannot be simply adduced as evidence for the actual situation for women in the Middle Ages. Negative examples of women's mistreatment can always and easily be matched by positive examples, and in most cases those writers who focus on

⁹⁷ Marilyn Migiel, *A Rhetoric of the Decameron* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 149.

⁹⁸ Migiel, *A Rhetoric of the Decameron*, 155–56.

⁹⁹ Albrecht Classen, *Verzweiflung und Hoffnung*, 2002.

violent behavior against women can be identified as the sharpest critics of the patriarchal system. In "Violence to Women, Women's Rights, and Their Defenders in Medieval German Literature" I try to deconstruct a number of modern myths about medieval women, and offer a critical reading of Hrotsvith of Gandersheim's presentation of outstanding female characters in her dramas and religious narratives. I will also investigate the idealization of Enite in Hartmann of Aue's *Erec*, and the thematization of suffering women in Heinrich Kaufringer's fifteenth-century tales, among others.

In my study of Margery Kempe's *Book* I suggest that literary quality does not depend only on the ability to express oneself in an eloquent and sophisticated manner and to project a fictional world, but also on the flexible command of various genres. In this respect, Margery proves to be an amazingly skillful writer because she demonstrates throughout her *Book* how easily she could transfer from one type of literary discourse to another. This approach seems to lend itself particularly well for further investigations of mystical literature, especially of those texts composed by female authors. The application of a variety of genres also indicates the ease with which Margery could operate within the literary tradition that she evokes not through the integration of concrete quotes or paraphrases of learned treatises, but instead through the intriguing exchange of modes of speech, literary and non-literary styles, compositional elements, and other narrative techniques and strategies.

This approach is complemented by a study of fourteenth-century Southwest-German Dominican *Sisterbooks* in which whole communities of nuns endeavored to formulate their own mystical experiences or to partake in those of their fellow-sisters. Whereas here the generic approach in all contributions seems to be similar, if not identical most of the time, the collective of writers emerges as one the most fascinating phenomena in late-medieval literature. Although we have learned to identify the medieval convent as a center of education, study, and research, and also of the arts, not to mention a place of religious practice, its primary goal, these *Sisterbooks* beautifully illustrate the extent to which whole groups of monastic women could find access to the literary voice by means of individual, but ultimately communally shared mystical experiences. This corpus of texts strongly suggests that medieval convents deserve to be studied much more closely than before as the intellectual framework for lively, spiritual, productive, and self-exploratory exchanges realized by means of the written word.¹⁰⁰ As Anne Winston-Allen now observes, "If women more than men were drawn to trances,

¹⁰⁰ Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists. The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1997); Susan Martik, *Malen, Schreiben und Beten: Die spätmittelalterliche Handschriftenproduktion im Doppelkloster Engelberg* (Zurich: Zurich InterPublishers, 2002).

visions, and radical asceticism—or, at least, to depicting them in their writing—it may have been because these phenomena opened avenues of influence that were not otherwise available to them. Indeed, visionary phenomena and radical asceticism could elevate female mystics even above priests by placing them in direct relationship with God.”¹⁰¹

Significantly, male courtly poets also recognized the profound relevance of gender discourse and more often than not gave credit to their female protagonists. Both in the case of Hartmann von Aue’s *Erec* and in Gottfried von Strassburg’s *Tristan*—in each Middle High German text this aspect is considerably more pronounced than in their Old French sources—the central female character each time emerges as absolutely essential for the male hero’s personal development who ultimately realizes, as does his wife, that only mutual respect and public recognition of the partner guarantees happiness for the individual and for society at large. Erec grows into full adulthood and maturity only after he has almost lost and then regained Enite, and their intellectual and emotional development intimately depends, as both realize after their life-threatening experiences in the second part of the romance, on their ability to find to each other, to accept each other, and to embrace each other as equal partners in marriage.

Isolde, on the other hand, for a long time seems to be only Tristan’s student in matters of love and constantly requires his advice when conflicts with her husband, King Marke, emerge. But ultimately, when the situation for both lovers grows desperate and basically becomes impossible, Tristan can no longer grow spiritually, and proves to be an almost statuesque and passive figure, whereas Isolde emerges as the true heroine, or as the veritable member of the community of the noble heart. She is the one who woefully but courageously accepts her destiny at the side of the unbeloved husband, without enjoying the support of Tristan, and she is given the highest credit by the poet for her deep sense of love and pain. Tristan, on the other hand, seems to get confused by the intricate situation of this love relationship. Once he has departed, his mind gets diverted and his heart seems to be divided, unable to accept fully and truly the dialectics of courtly love, predicated on the dialectics of happiness and sorrow. In this sense, both Hartmann and Gottfried project greatly impressive images of their female protagonists and elevate them to the highest possible position within the world of love (*Tristan*) and marriage (*Erec*).

Epistemologically speaking, mysticism proved to be the ultimate challenge for the human creature in the exploration of the ‘Other.’ One could demonstrate this

¹⁰¹ Anne Winston-Allen, *Convent Chronicles*, 207–08. She identifies these women’s turn to visionary experience—if that is what we might call it, and not the other way around—as a “route to speech. Generally, the social groups affected by a loss of status tend to be the most conscious of alternative modes of expression, linguistic registers, and the power of language” (208).

in the case of many different authors, but here I focus on Hildegard von Bingen who was one of the first, and also one of the most powerful prophetic writers of her time. Her *Scivias*, and many of her other texts, contain most astounding images of the Godhead and describe in fascinating detail how the individual—the mystic Hildegard—was confronted with and welcomed by the totally ‘Other’ through a spiritual revelation. The study of her spiritual accomplishments in comparison with the literary successes by Marie de France is included here because it illustrates once again how much mystically influenced women were empowered by their visions to come forward and to relate their experiences to their audiences. These experiences, in turn, provided the basis for political, social, at times even military influence (as in the case of Catherine of Siena, Bridget of Sweden, and Joan of Arc whom I do not discuss in particular here), and made it possible for women such as Hildegard and Marie to transgress perceived or real power barriers established by the male authorities between female writers and the written word.

Hildegard von Bingen—perhaps better identified as a prophetic author than a mystic—powerfully defended women's positions and perspectives as much as her secular contemporary Marie de France. However, neither woman harbored a particular ‘feminist’ agenda and did not radically insist on women's rights in aggressive opposition to men at large, as some of their modern-day sisters have done. Instead, through the composition of their texts, by claiming access to the written word, and by insisting on their own right to address the public either as a poet or a teacher and preacher, both Hildegard and Marie demonstrated how much women, at least since the twelfth century, could also enjoy the status of widely recognized and admired authors.

Whereas Hildegard drew the authority for her writings from her prophetic visions and her status as leader of her convent of Rupertsberg near Bingen, Marie consciously referred to the classical literature and also to her oral Breton sources to legitimate her own creative productivity. In her *Lais* Marie taught fundamental lessons about love, marriage, loyalty, honor, and idealism, and in her *Fables* she provided profound insights into morality, ethics, the political system, and the principal rules of social cohabitation. Hildegard, on the other hand, revealed her religious visions, related her mystical experiences, preached to people about the divinity and the proper quest for the Godhead, and also offered amazing explanations about the human body, the causes of sickness, sexuality, and medicine.

Surprisingly, although neither woman achieved any major political rank or influence on the rulers of their time, they both boldly assumed a highly esteemed, though not always uncontested position within their society—especially in Hildegard's case—thereby dispelling a favorite modern myth about medieval

women's allegedly miserable life conditions, subjugation, muteness, and lack of education.

We can also find an additional example from the world of heroic poetry. By the way how the figure of Queen Helche, wife of the Hunnish ruler Attila, in the anonymous heroic epic *Dietrichs Flucht* (second half of the thirteenth century), among many others in medieval German literature, is portrayed, we can be certain that male poets had little hesitation to project the most powerful queens in their texts, queens who determined the destiny of their country and the lives of the male heroes through their political decisions, their material wealth, and their resolution in defending the good cause against treachery, disloyalty, and betrayal.¹⁰²

Quite a similar situation emerges in the memoirs of the fifteenth-century Helene Kottannerin, who comparably to the Andalusian author Leonor López de Córdoba, resorted to the written word to come to terms with her own life, and to reflect upon the political situation of her time in which she was intimately involved as the chambermaid of the Hungarian queen. Although seemingly composing nothing but a chronicle account, Helene obviously succeeded in transcending the mundane description of the difficult events when the Hungarian nobles tried to force the widowed Queen Elizabeth to marry the Polish king, although she was pregnant with her deceased husband's child and trusted that the latter would eventually assume the Hungarian throne. Helene's most dramatic relation of how she stole the Hungarian crown and thus assisted Elizabeth in triumphing over her opponents, then her personal reflections, and her intriguingly subjective reading of events and the individual power players indeed confirm that here we are dealing with a literary text as well. These *Denkwürdigkeiten* easily prove to be considerably more than just a factual account; instead Helene transforms them into a document of noteworthy literary quality.

Quite another case, outside the scope of our study, though highly illustrative for our overall argument, proves to be the French chronicle by the nun and later Abbess Jeanne de Jussie (1503–1561) who discussed the introduction of the Protestant Reformation in Geneva and many other political matters affecting her convent and the Catholic Church at large. Being highly critical of the Reformation, she set down to compose her chronicle in 1532 and completed it in 1545 in Annecy, covering the years 1526 to 1535, during the governance of the Abbess Pernette de Montluel de Châteaufort. This is "only" a chronicle, but it reflects the enormous degree to which clerically trained women, at least at the end of the Middle Ages, were in a position to join the public discourse and to claim their stake in such a

¹⁰² *Dietrichs Flucht*. Textgeschichtliche Ausgabe Elisabeth Lienert and Gertrud Beck. Texte und Studien zur mittelhochdeutschen Heldenepik, 1 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2003), 4667, 4682, 4824, et passim. Helche's role gains even more preponderance in other heroic epics, such as *Rabenschlacht*.

significant written work, whether they resorted to the vernacular or to Latin.¹⁰³ There is no doubt that Jeanne de Jussie was only one of many at her time, especially as convents were of greatest importance for women as centers of learning and study.

Once again, we certainly deal with nothing but a chronicle, but within the spectrum of discourses, this proves to be critical for our new approach to women's writing as well since we will observe that women resorted to many different genres to express themselves, whether they intended to create literary or non-literary texts. Other genres preferred by women writers would be letters, mystical accounts, instructional texts, including herbals and cookbooks, whereas fictional texts in the traditional sense of the word were much less written by women, as far as we can tell today.¹⁰⁴

As different as these various female authors, their perceptions, insights, and language turn out to be, and as unusual perhaps the sometimes almost exorbitant praise of female characters by male authors might seem to us today, they demonstrate an enormously diversified range of voices in public discourse on gender throughout the Middle Ages. The subsequent chapters, though from a variety of perspectives, shed new light on many different approaches to the gender issue and demonstrate that medieval women enjoyed considerable influence on the creation of and concrete access to the literary word.

Whereas most medieval male writers expressed some form of misogyny, we also discover some among them who energetically defended women against numerous charges against them. The paradox of literary discourse with and about women clearly signals that traditional assumptions about male dominance of medieval literature and the alleged absence of female writers must be discarded. While a wealth of new scholarship produced over the last two decades easily confirms this observation, many desiderata remain, especially with respect to late-medieval German women writers, and also with respect to non-fictional writers. The rediscovery of medieval female voices not only considerably widens our perspectives and deepens our understanding of a past age, but it also forces us to reconsider and redefine the basic concepts of what we mean by 'author,' 'poet,'

¹⁰³ Jeanne de Jussie, *Kleine Chronik: Bericht einer Nonne über die Anfänge der Reformation in Genf*, transl. and ed. Helmut Feld. Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für europäische Geschichte Mainz. Abteilung abendländische Religionsgeschichte, 40 (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1996).

¹⁰⁴ Even this perspective can no longer be fully maintained, see Albrecht Classen, *Late-Medieval German Women's Poetry: Secular and Religious Songs*. Library of Medieval Women (Woodbridge, Suffolk, and Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 2004); cf. *Medieval Woman's Song: Cross-Cultural Approaches*, ed. Anne L. Klinck and Ann Marie Rasmussen. Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

and 'literature.' In this sense, our study of medieval women writers leads to many different implications intimately connected with our broad field of investigation, the humanities, based on the written word. This should not come as a surprise, however, since most human activities are predicated on the fundamental binary opposition of male and female, here disregarding the many curious cases of inter- and transsexual identities. In this sense we would entirely misread medieval culture if we left out at least one half of it, the world of women. Not only were they present most of the time, but they were also highly vocal and knew how to express themselves and how to come to terms with their individual needs and desires. Intriguingly, this can now be confirmed, as the following chapters will demonstrate, in the case of medieval and early-modern German, and, in a few cases, English, Latin, and Anglo-Norman, literature.

As the collective of women's voices studied here clearly indicates, the paradigm of medieval culture as a world in which women were entirely subjugated and made into pawns at the hands of their male contemporaries requires considerable adjustment, modification, if not complete rejection, as a growing body of parallel research in various medieval languages and literary genres, not to speak of other disciplines (art history, music history, history, etc.) indicates.¹⁰⁵ This is not say that medieval women enjoyed full equality, respect, and admiration—both this and the very opposite would be generalizations that could not be upheld against thorough analysis. The laws of the Church and the secular authorities continued to treat them as second-class citizens, and the public opinion, again determined by male voices, identified women as the source of all evil.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, as the various approaches to this topic contained in this volume demonstrate, opposition to this stereotypical viewpoint was loud and clear. There was much public discourse throughout the high and late Middle Ages representing a picture of men and women interacting with each other, offering challenges, opportunities, responses, support, and also deep respect.

¹⁰⁵ The contributors to *Women and Medieval Epic: Gender, Genre, and the Limits of Epic Masculinity*, ed. Sara S. Poor and Jana K. Schulman. The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave, and Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England: Palgrave, 2006), confirm this observation by analyzing the role assumed by the female figures in a wide range of medieval epic poems next to, if not sometimes above, the male protagonists.

¹⁰⁶ Eva Parra Membrives, "Criminalidad y perfidia femenina. El mal y la mujer en autores y autoras del medioevo alemán," *Las mujeres y el mal*, 187–207, demonstrates, however, that numerous medieval German women writers insisted on women's innocence and actual victimization at the hand of men. She concludes, with tongue-in-cheek, 207: "Quizá, si una mujer hubiera escrito la *Biblia*, hubiéramos sabido que, en realidad, fue Adán quien deseó, tentado por la serpiente, morder la manzana, pero acusó a la inapetente Eva de ello, condenándola como culpable para toda la eternidad" (Maybe, if a woman had written the Bible, we would have known that in reality it was Adam, tempted by the snake, to pick the apple, but he accused innocent Eva for it, condemning her for all eternity as the culpable).

I will rely on a fairly flexible definition of literature and at times resort to a broad concept of text production and narratives, but this will also free us from traditional categories developed by literary historians that are almost entirely oriented toward the social and cultural conditions in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries which in turn were predicated on the cult of the genius and the purely creative, innovative, that is, fictional, writer.¹⁰⁷ The gender discourse has much to do with the power over the word, and by freeing ourselves from these traditional concepts of the literary text we gain access to many heretofore forgotten or ignored women writers, and we can also realize how much the gender discourse took place both at the courts (courtly romances) and in convents, both in the urban spaces (plays) and on travel routes (verse narratives), both in public and in private at many different social levels.¹⁰⁸ Intriguingly, this discourse in the Middle Ages also involved some of the best male writers who often emerge as strong defenders of women's causes.¹⁰⁹ In order to come to terms with these sometimes even dialectic aspects within the gender discourse, I will offer additional and further discussions of the theoretical underpinnings concerning the gender discourse in each of the following chapters.

I would like to dedicate this book to the steadfast and loving companion in my life, my wife and best friend, Carolyn.

¹⁰⁷ See also my study "Literary or Not? The Fictionality Debate in Autobiographical Writings by a Fifteenth-Century German Woman Writer," 2006.

¹⁰⁸ The association of literary genres with social classes and sites cannot be really upheld and only serves as a reflection of where a majority of such texts were performed.

¹⁰⁹ Alcuin Blamires, *The Case for Women*; from a considerably more black-and-white perspective, see Katharina Fietze, *Spiegel der Vernunft: Theorien zum Menschsein der Frau in der Anthropologie des 15. Jahrhunderts* (Paderborn, Munich, Vienna, and Zurich: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1991). See now *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1988).

Chapter One

Violence to Women, Women's Rights, and Their Defenders in Medieval German Literature¹

I. Fact or Fiction, History or Myth?

Let us revisit some of the key aspects explored in the introduction, deepen our understanding of the theoretical and pragmatic aspects, and apply them to specific cases in medieval German literature. One of the common notions (myths?) about women in the Middle Ages, which used to be shared both by the general public and scholarship alike, pertains to their social, political, military, and economic position below men within a patriarchal system. According to this view, women were considered either as chattel, malleable objects in the hand of their fathers, husbands, brothers, and other male relatives, or as venerable, god-like creatures, that is, either as Eve or as Mary, both in the religious and courtly-erotic context. Another wide-spread opinion relates to women's deplorable experience of violence at the hand of their husbands and fathers because early-medieval society, then also the Church, had given husbands the absolute right to physical punishment, the so-called *munt* in Middle High German.² Moreover, medieval women had, as we can read in countless handbooks and lexica, allegedly few opportunities in medieval society to express themselves, and they had only two significant options available to them in life, either to enter a convent or to marry, to be bride of Christ or to be a wife in real life. If women ascended to the royal throne, then it was only as their husband's consorts, entirely dependent on his

¹ I would like to express my thanks to my dear colleague and friend, Professor Karen K. Jambeck, Western Connecticut State University, for kindly reading this chapter, offering most welcome constructive criticism.

² For a much more complex perspective, see *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Erler, Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1988), for practical examples, however, of how much wives were suppressed during the Middle Ages, see Joachim Bumke, *Höfische Kultur. Literatur und Gesellschaft im hohen Mittelalter* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1986), vol. 2, 465–66.

good-will, and that of his barons, and if urban women managed to establish their own workshops within a city, then they were still subject to severe control mechanisms set up by the guilds.

Correspondingly, the Middle Ages were the “Dark Ages” for women’s history,³ and the long-term struggle for women’s liberation began only after that period.⁴ Women’s subjugation under men’s control is then commonly identified with the wide-spread witch-craze which resulted in sweeping persecutions and executions of hundreds of thousand of innocent female victims all over Europe far into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It hardly needs to be pointed out that the witch-craze had fairly little to do with the Middle Ages; instead it was a specific phenomenon of the early-modern age with the rise of modern state characterized by its centralized administration and legal system. But for modern myth-making, the most horrible treatment of women—as witches—proves to be convenient and facilitates the creation of a simple black-and-white perspective regarding women’s past; this also in conformity with the common notion of history as a constantly progressive process according to which we can only look back today and shudder about the barbaric and brutal treatment of women in the past.⁵

If women, in their role as nuns, turned to writing, and reflected upon their mystical experiences, these could be explained as outlets of hysterical passions, and for a long time such works did not gain the same status as men’s theological writing characterized by logical thinking and rationality, normally acquired through a university education, which was systematically denied to women.⁶ By the same token, if literary historians are hard pressed, they would ‘happily’ admit that we know of no female writer who accomplished anything similar to the grand poetry of their male contemporaries, such as Chrétien de Troyes, Hartmann von Aue, Gottfried von Straßburg, Wolfram von Eschenbach, Dante Alighieri, Giovanni Boccaccio, Francesco Petrarch, and Geoffrey Chaucer. The poetry by the *troubairitz*, the *Lais* by Marie de France, and the treatises and allegorical narratives

³ For a sensitive and comprehensive treatment of the mythical notion of the ‘Dark Ages,’ see Lucie Varga, *Das Schlagwort vom “finsternen Mittelalter”*. Veröffentlichungen des Seminars für Wirtschafts- und Kulturgeschichte an der Universität Wien, 8 (Baden, Vienna, et al.: Rudolf M. Rohrer, 1932).

⁴ This is poignantly expressed by Barbara Becker-Cantarino’s seminal study, *Der lange Weg zur Mündigkeit. Frau und Literatur (1500–1800)* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1987). Unfortunately, Becker-Cantarino begins her analysis only with the late Middle Ages and the age of the Reformation. In terms of the history of women’s literature, however, these historical demarcations do not always make much sense since social, economic, and political structures relevant for medieval women’s lives continued far into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

⁵ See the excellent critical review of feminism and gender studies within the academic context and with a focus on Medieval Studies by Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), esp. 19–29 and 128–52.

⁶ For a thorough critique of this perspective, and for a detailed investigation of women’s convent literature, see my chapter on the *Sisterbooks*.

by Christine de Pizan would represent exceptions to the rule. The same would apply to the powerful visionary, teacher, preacher, and leader of her convent, Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179) who, though highly influential and admired by many of her contemporaries for her mystical visions and scientific knowledge, was seemingly a marginal phenomenon and did not significantly alter the overall situation of women. In short, medieval society was, according to these general opinions, fundamentally a patriarchal society in which men ruled and women obeyed. If we hear of women speaking up, such female voices can be assumed as to be the products of male writers, such as in the *chansons de toiles*, or women's songs, in Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale* or in his *The Wife of Bath's Tale*.⁷

Are we talking about historical facts or medieval myths? Might medieval women have had a sonorous voice after all, or were they allowed to play only a small trumpet, as Hildegard von Bingen dialectically formulates in one of her mystical accounts?⁸ Caroline Walker Bynum already had warned us to be wary about women's depiction by male writers: "the stories men liked to tell about women reflected not so much what women did as what men admired or abhorred. . . . It is crucial not to take as women's own self-image the sentimentalizing or the castigating of the female in which medieval men indulged."⁹ Intriguingly, if we examine the political, economic, and even military records, we observe many different conditions for women, depending on their social class, their individual abilities, the cultural context, and so forth.¹⁰ Nevertheless popular and even scholarly notions about medieval women have continued to follow many of these stereotypical images outlined above and now have also made their way into the *World Wide Web* which sometimes proves to be more detrimental to the academic study of the Middle Ages than beneficial to its cause.¹¹

To deconstruct quickly just a few of the gross misunderstandings about women in the Middle Ages, the witch-craze, as mentioned above, did not come into full

⁷ *Medieval Woman's Song: Cross-Cultural Approaches*, ed. Ann Lingard Klinck and Ann Marie Rasmussen. Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); *Frauenlieder des Mittelalters*. Zweisprachig, ed. and trans. Ingrid Kasten (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1990).

⁸ Margaret Wade Labarge, *Women in Medieval Life. A Small Sound of the Trumpet* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1986), 20–23, 100–02, 104, et passim.

⁹ Carolyn Walker Bynum, "Religious Women in the Later Middle Ages," *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. Jill Raitt, Bernard McGinn, and John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 121–39; here 136.

¹⁰ Joan M. Ferrante, *To the Glory of her Sex: Women's Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts*. Women of Letters (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), offers one of the best investigation of women's actual power base and range of influence in the Middle Ages. See also *Power of the Weak: Studies on Medieval Women*, ed. Jennifer Carpenter and Sally-Beth MacLean (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

¹¹ See, for example, http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/british_social_history/73685 (last accessed on Feb. 23, 2007).

effect until the end of the fifteenth century and is much more closely related to the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation than to the medieval Church, not to mention the emergence of the early-modern state with its interest in flexing its juridical muscles particularly against the innocent victims decried as witches.¹² We know of many exceedingly powerful queens, duchesses, and other aristocratic women who either ruled all by themselves or enjoyed extensive freedom in exerting their own power along with their husband.¹³ In the world of urban life, craftsmanship was not exclusively controlled by men, rather there were many women working in the textile industry, as cobblers, goldsmiths, merchants, apothecaries, and even as bankers, nurses, and doctors.¹⁴ Albeit

¹² H. R. Trevor-Roper, *Religion, the Reformation and Social Change. The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, and Other Essays*. Harper Torchbooks, 1416 (New York: Harper & Row, 1967; 1969); Gerhild Scholz Williams, *Defining Dominion: the Discourses of Magic and Witchcraft in Early Modern France and Germany*. Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Civilization (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); Peter Dinzelbacher, *Heilige oder Hexen? Schicksale auffälliger Frauen in Mittelalter und Frühneuzeit* (Zürich: Artemis, 1995); Britta Gehm, *Hexenverfolgung im Hochstift Bamberg und das Eingreifen des Reichshofrates zu ihrer Beendigung*. Rechtsgeschichte und Zivilisationsprozess, 3 (Hildesheim: Olms, 2000); Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages*. Conjunctions of Religion and Power in the Medieval Past (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), 225–319, convincingly demonstrates that male writers increasingly demonized women's spiritual, ecstatic, and transgressive experiences and dramatically argued in favor of exorcism in most cases of religious enrapture. Whereas medieval writers still tended to accept the possibility of divine inspiration, in the late Middle Ages the belief in mystical experiences experienced a radical decline and was effectively replaced by a hostile attitude toward women, logically leading to the witchcraze. For the role of the early-modern state in the witchcraze, see Ketzer, *Zauberer, Hexen: Die Anfänge der europäischen Hexenverfolgungen*, ed. Andreas Blauert. Edition Suhrkamp, 1577 (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1990).

¹³ John Carmi Parson, *Medieval Queenship* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993); from an art-historical perspective, see Ingrid Sedlacek, *Die neuf preuses. Heldinnen des Spätmittelalters*. Studien zur Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte, 14 (Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 1997); Pauline Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith: Queenship and Women's Power in Eleventh-Century England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997); see also Edith Ennen, *Frauen im Mittelalter*. Dritte, überarbeitete Aufl. (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1987; orig. 1984), 125–33.

¹⁴ Martha C. Howell, *Women, Production, and Patriarchy in Late Medieval Cities*. Women in Culture and Society (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986); Labarge, *A Small Sound of the Trumpet*, 1986; P. J. P. Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c. 1300–1520* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1992); William Chester Jordan, *Women and Credit in Pre-Industrial and Developing Societies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993); Bruce L. Venarde, *Women's Monasticism and Medieval Society: Nunneries in France and England, 890–1215* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1997); Marilyn Oliva, *The Convent and the Community in Late Medieval England: Female Monasteries in the Diocese of Norwich, 1350–1540*. Studies in the History of Medieval Religion, 12 (Woodbridge, Suffolk, Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 1998); for the concept of the convent as "Gesamtkunstwerk," see Albrecht Classen, "The Medieval Monastery as a 'Gesamtkunstwerk.' The Case of the 'Heideklöster' Wienhausen and Ebbsfort," *Studi medievali* XLIII, II (2002): 503–34.