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Autor: Perry, Lucy

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*WRITING RELIGIOUS WOMEN : FEMALE SPIRITUAL AND
TEXTUAL PRACTICES IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND,*
EDITED BY DENIS RENEVEY AND
CHRISTIANIA WHITEHEAD

This collection of essays presents a case for “female vernacular theology” to be recognised as a sub-category of “Vernacular Theology”, a category heading that “enables a far larger body of texts than the usual group of four or five Middle English mystics to be incorporated within the canon of Middle English religious literature”. The editors’ introduction situates the essays in the context of the evolving discussion (of the last two decades) of gender and medieval spirituality. The focus of these essays is clearly defined as female medieval spiritual practice in its intersection with medieval textual practice, in the recognition that gender is now too broad or eclectic a field to be the single unifying force behind a collection of essays. This volume’s contribution to the gender debate is its primary interest in “the relation of women to religious books, both as writers, as receivers, and as often contentious objects of representation within them”. Thus, the title *Writing Religious Women* embraces texts written by women, for women, or representing women.

The wide-range of texts treated (*Ancrene Wisse*, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the revelations of Julian of Norwich, religious lyrics, *Speculum devotorum*, Robert Grosseteste’s *Château d’amour*, and Marguerite Porete’s *Mirror of Simple Souls*) is revealing, demonstrating how such a volume was needed to bring some of the less familiar texts out of obscurity, which in turn provides for a fresh approach to the more familiar texts, as their context is at one and the same time extended (to vernacular textual practice) and contained (in the arena of female spirituality). This process of extension and containment can be witnessed in the titles of the four distinct thematic sections: “The Influence of Anchoritic Spirituality upon Later Lay Piety”, “Carthusian Links with Female Spirituality”, “The Representation of Femininity in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Religious Poetry”, and “Veneration, Performance and Delusion in *The Book of Margery*”

Kempe". It is such critical precision that lies behind the editors and contributors' success in providing focused and well-structured theoretical discussion on gender and spirituality with implicit questioning of the restrictions of the canon of Middle English religious literature.

Contributors include Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou, Marleen Cré, Samuel Fanous, Naoë Kukita Zoshikawa, Richard Lawes, Anne McGovern-Mouron, Bella Millett, Denis Renevey, Rebecca Selman, and Christiania Whitehead.

Lucy PERRY

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