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Introduction: *Medieval Women in their Communities*



DIANE WATT

THE resolution to produce a volume of essays on the subject of women in the Middle Ages requires little justification. It is impossible to deny that the growth disciplines of women's and gender studies have had their impact on research and teaching on the Middle Ages. This fact is attested to by the constantly expanding circulation of the journal *Medieval Feminist Newsletter*, and by the existence of both the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship (a US based organization) and the Gender and Medieval Studies Group (largely, although not entirely, made up of British academics).¹ As Allen Frantzen states in an article which appeared in 1993 in a special issue of the periodical *Speculum* devoted to studying medieval women, 'If writing about women was once an innovation, it is now an imperative.'² Four years before the publication of Frantzen's piece, the growing interest in the connected subjects of medieval women and communities was illustrated when *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* brought out an issue headed *Working Together in the Middle Ages: Perspectives on Women's Communities*.³ That volume includes studies of women in religious communities, fictive chivalric communities, brothels, craft and trade communities and guilds, and in the medical profession. It provides an extremely useful starting point for those interested in the topic of medieval women and their communities, but clearly there is scope for much more work to be done. The present book is a further contribution to this developing field.

1. Community and its Implications

'Community' is often used in very specific contexts and the significance given to the word should warn us against using it without fully considering

its implications. To give just some examples of its recent applications: Benedict Anderson has formulated the expression 'imagined political community' to explain the phenomenon of nationalism;⁴ Stanley Fish talks about 'interpretive communities' when he theorizes about the source of meaning;⁵ and Brian Stock has coined the phrase 'textual communities' in his account of the transformation of oral and written traditions in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.⁶ Despite such specialized usages, community is still often taken more generally by historians of the medieval and early modern periods to mean a group of people living in a given locality, often, but not necessarily, tied by bonds of kinship – the population of a village, town, region or country. Yet, as the historian Miri Rubin explains, even in its most general application, 'community' also carries certain connotations:

Community, like all coins for social and political explanation is and has always been discursively constructed and is always laden with aspirations and contests over interpretative power. Community is neither obvious nor natural, its boundaries are loose, and people in the present, as in the past, will use the term to describe and to construct worlds, to persuade, to include and to exclude.⁷

Even beyond the specific usages mentioned above, 'community' has ideological implications which go both hand in hand with and beyond its socio-economic and geographic senses.

For Rubin, one of the principal difficulties with the word 'community' is that it carries with it certain implications of social unity: 'community conjures a moral economy based on close interaction and clear attitudes between small and great, through deference, patronage, or struggle. Thus community operates as a measure of well-being . . .'.⁸ While, as Jennifer C. Ward's essay on English noblewomen in this volume rightly stresses, feudal bonds, hospitality and patronage all functioned to draw together local communities, Rubin is surely correct to suggest that such an image of rural harmony is often artificial – competition and conflict are inevitable characteristics of any community, modern or medieval. Communities are marked by exclusion as well as inclusion, and some communities in western Christendom, such as Jewish communities, can in fact be characterized as communities of outsiders – a point made by Cynthia Kraman in her chapter on the *Merchant's Tale* and *Song of Songs*.

Membership of a community is often seen to imply a shared identity, but a point which Rubin emphasizes is that 'identity can never be

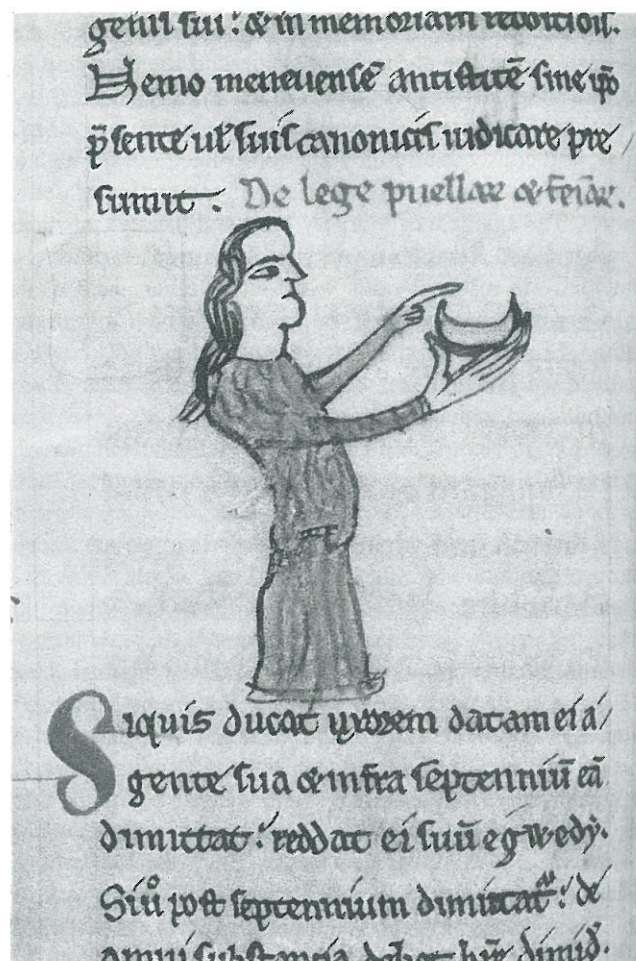


Illustration from MS Peniarth 28, f.17 (by permission of the National Library of Wales). This illustration appears at the start of the section on women in a Welsh law book. The existence of a separate code for women suggests that they were perceived as marginal to their community.

constituted through a single or overarching affinity – whether gender, class, or age – but rather at the intersection and the changing dynamic negotiation of these and other positions in the world.⁹ To put this another way, identities are sites of complex and sometimes conflicting differences; and consequently they are constructed not through a single static community but through the overlap and interaction of networks of communities. The example of Margery Kempe illustrates this point quite clearly: in her *Book*, Kempe's identity emerges from various aspects of her life which are often at odds with one another, such as her sex, economic position, race, and vocation. Kempe is woman, wife, tradesperson, English pilgrim and visionary, and not only her *Book*, but also the little we know of her history, indicate the sheer diversity of the communities of which she was part. We might also note that in her imitation of Christ, Kempe deliberately associated herself with those on the margins of the community or in marginal communities, such as the mad, the poor, and lepers.

Margery Kempe's *Book* might also be described as indicating a very different sort of community altogether, and one which might be seen as a specifically female 'textual community'. Stock has shown that both heretics and reformers used literacy 'to structure the internal behaviour of the groups' members and to provide solidarity against the outside world'.¹⁰ In order to vindicate her often controversial piety, parallels are drawn, by Kempe and her scribe, between her life and devotions and those of St Bridget of Sweden and Mary of Oignies, and references are also made to mystical texts like Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*, Richard Rolle's *Incendium amoris*, and the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Stimulus amoris* or Nicholas Love's translation of the *Meditationes vitae Christi*, and to authorities such as Elizabeth of Hungary and Julian of Norwich. These works are part of a literary culture which, although not exclusively female, is, as Felicity Riddy has argued, shared by nuns, anchoresses and pious gentlewomen; 'a textuality of the spoken as well as the written word'.¹¹ It might be extended to include devotional works written specifically for a female audience, for example *þe Wohunge of Ure Lauerd* (discussed here by Susannah Mary Chewning), *Ancrene Wisse* and *Sawles Warde*, and also texts like the N-Town Mary Play, which would, as J. A. Tasioulas suggests, have had a particular appeal to women. The secular and ecclesiastical communities in which Janet Wilson's study locates *The Book of Margery Kempe* are not, however, dominated by women, but by men. Indeed, only the first five essays in the volume are concerned primarily with communities of women as such.

The relationship between these medieval communities and modern feminist notions of collectivity is one which should be considered, before more general conclusions can be drawn about women's position within medieval society as a whole.

2. Feminisms / Women / Communities

The editorial of the special issue of *Signs* on women's communities in the Middle Ages opens with the statement, 'For modern feminists, community is a valued concept and an acknowledged goal. In our decision making, we work towards consensus; in our world-view, we strive for inclusiveness; in our social lives, we seek group support and comfort. In all these actions, those of us who are Western feminists move against the individualism of our culture.'¹² This view is reiterated in the introduction to a recent volume of essays, *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature*, in which the editors, Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson claim that 'it remains the case that a feminist politics must ground itself in some sort of idea of collective identity.'¹³ Evans and Johnson point out that twentieth-century feminism had as its foundation 'an essentialist notion of "sexual identity": an identity which would allow women to organise themselves politically as a unified group to combat male oppression'.¹⁴ Collectives played key roles in the formative early years of Women's Liberation in particular, and the importance of community has been emphasized by feminist theorists, historians, critics and writers.¹⁵

One basic problem with a feminist rejection of hierarchy and individualism as patriarchal instruments of oppression seems to be that even, or perhaps especially, the most separatist of notions of women's collectivity define women in terms of sexual sameness, and consequently also in terms of sexual difference: women are still defined in relation to men. More recently, feminist theorists have started to wonder just how useful it is to assume that women constitute a unified group, a 'natural' community, simply because they are women. Can we take it as read that women have a common identity? In her important study *Gender Trouble*, in which she attacks the reductive opposition of biological sex to socially-constructed gender, Judith Butler stresses the limitations of an approach which essentializes or naturalizes the category of 'woman'.

If one 'is' a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive . . . because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.¹⁶

In other words, the assumption that 'woman' is a transhistorical, transcultural category, is one which can and should be questioned. Concerning the matter of women's communities and women's collectives, Butler further contends that 'identity categories often presumed to be foundational to feminist politics, that is, deemed necessary to mobilize feminism as an identity politics, simultaneously work to limit and constrain in advance the very cultural possibilities that feminism is supposed to open up.'¹⁷ From a political perspective, it seems that it is crucial that feminists attempt to acknowledge and accommodate difference.

If feminists have themselves critiqued the problematic utopianism of women's collectivity, it is none the less valid to ask if there is any evidence of similar idealism in the Middle Ages. Certainly, women religious, whether nuns or anchorites, lived in all-female and sometimes isolated communities, yet even the most autonomous of these (such as the convent of Helfta, the subject of Rosalynn Voaden's essay in this volume) remained under the authority of monks and priests. Other medieval women came together in religious groups such as beguinages, studied in this collection by Penelope Galloway, which were not under the direct control of the Church. Galloway describes the beguine communities as 'a unique system of female solidarity', but they enjoyed only a certain degree of independence. In secular society the situation seems to have been much the same. Even the outspoken and fiercely independent laywoman Margery Kempe was answerable to her spiritual fathers. As Evans and Johnson observe, there is no historical evidence to suggest that there was in the Middle Ages any sort of 'political programme committed to a struggle against all forms of female subordination'.¹⁸ It follows therefore that, if the women's groups of the late twentieth century had medieval foremothers, there were nevertheless no women's communities in the radical feminist sense. Of course this does not mean that medieval women did not either form or play important parts in other sorts of collective groups and it is the purpose of this volume to explore more fully some of the complex and diverse

relationships between women and their communities in pre-modern Europe.

3. *Notions of the Community in the Middle Ages*

Clearly, recent scholarship such as that by Rubin, challenges Jacob Burckhardt's assertion that in the Middle Ages people had no sense of themselves as individuals, that medieval man was 'conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation – only through some general category'.¹⁹ Just as it would be a mistake to think of the Middle Ages as a unified and discrete period in history, so it is naïve to assume that medieval people had no conception of individuality, subjectivity, and identity.²⁰ None the less, the editorial of the 1989 special issue of *Signs* seems to reveal the influence of Burckhardt's thinking when it argues for continuity between the community experience of medieval people and that of modern feminists:

In the medieval West, people sought association with one another through a wide variety of communities; monasteries for men and women seeking the contemplative life, guilds for persons engaged in the same craft or trade, parishes for Christian worshippers, nucleated villages for rural dwellers, and many other such forms of public association. For medieval people of all ranks and regions, cooperation and association with others was a basic fact of life . . . Even medieval writings – philosophical, literary, and religious – emphasised community. Political commentators spoke of the community of the realm (*communitas regni*), and social commentators conceived of their entire world as a community, dividing their 'Christendom' into three co-operating groups of those who pray, those who fight, and those who work (*oratores, bellatores, labores*) . . . By examining the history of women's communities during an age that strongly espoused ideals of community, we have sought to gain insights for our own very different, but also very similar struggles . . . But all of these stories and experiences reflect on the abilities of women in the past to form sustained, autonomous, strong communities, and in so doing, they speak to modern feminists working towards new forms of women's community and women's cooperation.²¹

The assumption that medieval people had a much stronger sense of their communities is in itself dubious, reflecting as it does both the naïve preconception of idyllic social harmony attacked by Rubin, and the optimism expressed by early feminist writers. However my primary

concern here is whether we should accept without question the assumption that women were included unproblematically within medieval communities.

An enquiry into the status of women within medieval communities might begin with medieval definitions of community.²² According to the MED the vernacular word *communité* was more restricted in meaning than its modern equivalent.²³ The Middle-English *communité* has a range of political, socio-economic, legal and metaphorical definitions which include, amongst others, 'the people of a country, city', 'the third estate', 'the House of Commons', 'a religious community or brotherhood', and 'a guild'. All of the citations given date to the late fourteenth century or the fifteenth century; prior to that period the Latin term *communitas* was widely used, especially in formal, technical contexts.²⁴ Evidently women might theoretically be included in certain usages, for example in phrases such as *the communité of the peple* ('the totality of the people, all the people'); *the communité of mankind, of the worlde* ('all of mankind'). Furthermore, communities of women certainly existed, convents and beguinages being the female equivalents of male religious brotherhoods.

None the less, many of these medieval usages, including some of the most general, may actually exclude women altogether. To give an example, recent scholarship has debated the extent to which women professionally involved in the trades and crafts were granted guild membership. Galloway's point that the guilds decreased the labour opportunities for women is relevant here. While some were admitted to the franchise, it seems that this was largely because they were wives or widows of guild members, and even in those areas of production dominated by women, such as silk working, they only rarely seem to have formed their own professional bodies.²⁵ Even when women were included in medieval notions of community, their position was often completely subordinate. To take another example, the earliest citation recorded in the OED of *community* meaning 'the body of those having common or equal rights or rank, as distinguished from the privileged classes; the body of commons; the commonalty' is Barbour's *Bruce*, the Scottish historical chronicle written c.1375. In the *Bruce*, all Scots, no matter their class, ethnicity, ages or gender, are portrayed as part of a 'fictionally unified "community of the realm"'.²⁶ In the imaginary world of the text, political conflict *within* Scotland does not exist. The text functions to persuade the masses, serfs as well as freemen, of the importance of defending Scotland's independence, yet the peasants in

particular stood to gain very little from this cause. Likewise, the poem constitutes women as political subjects, but only within the patriarchal system in Scotland. Their rights and interests as women are certainly not defined in the *Bruce* or furthered by the poem's ideology. The idea that women are included in the 'community of the realm' is illusory.

A point which is made by both Jane Cartwright and Patricia Skinner is that the circumstances of many women, such as members of impoverished communities like the Welsh convents, or widows and lone mothers who found themselves marginalized in the community as a result of economic hardship, are seldom fully or reliably documented. As Cartwright notes, had it not been for the bishop's licence of 1530 granting a nun from an Augustinian house in England permission to transfer to the 'stricter' Cistercian house of Llanllugan in order to lead a more holy life, one might have formed quite a different and much more negative impression of religious communities in Wales. The strength of the hostile reactions of men, both lay and religious, was evidently a factor in determining the success of some of the communities of women discussed here. In contrast with the situations described by Cartwright and Skinner, the cluster of essays in this volume focusing on the Norfolk area reflects the considerable amount of evidence which has survived from this region: Ward and Tasioulas give us telling insights into aspects of secular life in East Anglia at the end of the Middle Ages, while Wilson characterizes the locality as one riven by controversy in which Kempe's singular piety was regarded with ambivalence. To sum up then, we must not only weigh up the usefulness of various types of sources, and be careful to avoid sliding between modern and medieval usages, but also be aware that women may often have been perceived as marginal to or outside medieval communities.

4. Medieval Women in their Communities

The subject of this book is a large one. The title chosen for it, *Medieval Women in their Communities*, is in many ways over-optimistic. The volume does not provide, or attempt to provide, an account or overview of women in every sort of community in the known world, or even throughout Christendom, in the period 500–1500. Rather, this anthology of interdisciplinary essays is intended to fill in some of the gaps in our knowledge by providing detailed small-scale studies of women as members of a whole range of different types of communities. In this

collection a wide variety of communities and women from a range of backgrounds are discussed: in terms of regionality, women from the geographical areas which correspond roughly to modern Wales, England, France, Italy, and Germany are included; in terms of religious beliefs, Jews as well as Christians; in terms of social and economic conditions, rich and poor, religious and secular, noblewomen and commoners are represented. Although one study looks at evidence from as early as the ninth century, for the most part the book concentrates on the period between 1200 and 1500. These essays all consider women's historical experience to be distinct from men's, but they are not restricted to a single theoretical perspective or methodological approach. Certainly, not all the contributors to this book would necessarily describe themselves as feminist, although it might well be argued that any current scholarship about women is informed, either directly or indirectly, by feminism. The two main academic disciplines are history and literature, but in a number of the essays these two fields of study overlap considerably. The contributors are all specialist researchers in their own fields: they use different methodologies, ask different questions, and formulate their conclusions from their own points of view.

While research on women's religious life in the Middle Ages has flourished in recent years, Jane Cartwright's essay on medieval Welsh nuns covers an area which has previously been neglected by scholars. Cartwright examines the surviving historical and literary evidence of convent life in Wales, arguing that the relative dearth of establishments for religious women (there seem to have been only four convents at most) may be an indication of national patterns of female devotion: rather than seeking a life of virginity and claustration, Welsh women tended to express their piety within a domestic context. There is reason to think that few noblewomen in Wales were in a position to found convents or offer extensive patronage to their inmates, and it is unlikely that other less formal alternatives, such as beguinages, hospitals, and anchorites' cells were available to those who felt drawn to a religious vocation. In other words, women in Wales would have had less opportunity to join a religious community than women elsewhere. Cartwright cites examples of *Cywyddwyr* poetry, which illustrate that Welsh poets perceived nuns as a corruptible commodity, as evidence of the low esteem in which the convents and their inhabitants were held. Unfortunately no writings by medieval Welsh nuns themselves survive, so the picture which we receive is necessarily distorted: very little is known about their education, social status, or devotional life.

Fortunately the convent experiences of religious women in other parts of Europe are better documented. Marie-Luise Ehrenschtndtner's study, while narrower in scope than Cartwright's, concentrates on one crucial and much disputed aspect of life within a women's religious community – the level of education of nuns. Ehrenschtndtner restricts her analysis to the Dominican convents in the former German province of Teutonia. Her research reveals that although divine services were sung or read in Latin, outside the church the everyday language spoken by the nuns was German. Many nuns may not have understood the services, and the surviving records indicate that there were only a few Latin books in the convents and that many liturgical texts were translated into the vernacular. While the nuns were not denied the opportunity to become literate in Latin, it was not deemed necessary. This situation contrasts with that of the Blackfriars, with whom they had close contact, who had responsibilities in terms of preaching and pastoral care (the former activity being forbidden to the sisters), and who were constitutionally required to learn Latin so that they could study theology. Yet despite these apparent limitations on their education, the Dominican nuns were learned in the vernacular and some wrote devotional works; thus they played an important role in the development of a tradition of vernacular spirituality.

The subject of Rosalynn Voaden's chapter, the community which flourished at the convent of Helfta, near Eisleben in Saxony, in the closing decades of the thirteenth century, takes up the theme of the prevalence of the vernacular in women's communities, but reveals a rather different situation to that described by Ehrenschtndtner. The Helfta community, a centre of women's spirituality and education, was evidently much more autonomous than the Dominican convents in Teutonia, and within it some of the nuns appropriated roles traditionally restricted to the male priesthood. It was in Helfta that the three visionaries, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Mechthild of Hackeborn and Gertrude the Great, composed accounts of their visions; works which comprise some of the most vivid and influential writings by medieval women. These texts are the more remarkable because no male scribes were involved in their production; instead the nuns seem to have worked together offering each other inspiration and emotional sustenance as well as practical assistance. Voaden contends that the mystical discourse of Mechthild of Hackeborn and Gertrude the Great, with its focus on the Sacred Heart in particular, is distinctive both in its incorporation of images of biological femaleness (as opposed to the

more common devotional idealization of socially-constructed feminine characteristics, found for example in the metaphor of Jesus as mother), and also in its emphasis on the importance of the community as a sanctuary and a place of mutual support. Mechthild of Magdeburg, in contrast with the other two visionaries, was not raised in Helfta but entered the convent late in life after living as a beguine. Her different background may explain her more conventional humility, her greater dependence on male spiritual advisors, and the greater sense of isolation conveyed in her visionary writing.

The beguinages of northern France in the period 1200–1500, especially Douai and Lille, are discussed by Penelope Galloway. The beguines, who took no vows, did not live a strictly cloistered existence or follow a single rule, and often continued to hold property; they cannot be described as a single movement, and the problem of definition is such that it is often difficult to decide on the basis of the historical records whether or not a given establishment should be described as a beguinage. Galloway is particularly interested in the interaction between the beguinages and the religious and secular communities in which they were located, and she suggests that their popularity (which is so remarkably greater than the popularity of convents in medieval Wales) is related to the development of urban society. None the less, Galloway questions the assumption made by some historians that the interventionist role played by the rulers of Flanders and Hainault indicates that the beguine convents were fostered as a practical solution to the problems faced by urban communities containing large numbers of single women and widows. While they were also important as a means of maintaining civic obedience and preventing itinerancy, beguinages were undoubtedly founded primarily for spiritual reasons. Although beguinages may have provided refuges from the sort of 'conjunctural' poverty discussed later in this volume by Patricia Skinner, many of the women entering them seem to have been far from destitute. Looking at the social backgrounds of those who joined the beguine houses, it becomes clear that members of the ruling families were amongst their recruits. None the less, although the involvement of noble lay patrons such as the countesses Jeanne and Marguerite, of Flanders and Hainault, is particularly significant in their growth, beguinages relied on the support of members of the lower orders in the communities in which they arose, and on the championship of men as well as women: therefore gender appears not to be such a crucial factor in the patronage of women's communities as it is often thought.

Informal communities of religious women of a somewhat different

nature are the subject of Susannah Mary Chewning's chapter on the anonymous thirteenth-century Middle-English devotional text *þe Wohunge of Ure Lauerd*. The context of the *Wohunge*, like that of the more well-known *Ancrene Wisse*, is almost certainly one of anchoritic piety. According to Chewning, those who joined these semi-formal, semi-secluded communities were discouraged from forming close relationships with other religious, whether men or women, and encouraged instead to direct their thoughts and emotions towards God alone. The mystical content of the *Wohunge* places it in the continental tradition of women's writing to which the nuns of Helfta made such an important contribution. Chewning does not contend that the *Wohunge* was authored by a man – indeed in her view the sex of the author is incidental – but rather that the voice of the text, and the very mode of mystical expression itself, is feminine. In her analysis of language and subjectivity in the *Wohunge*, Chewning draws on post-structuralist ideas and terminology, and in particular the work of Judith Butler and of the French feminists Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Monique Wittig. The seemingly conflicting desires of the mystic to experience obliteration of the self in order to achieve union with the divine and to express in writing that which is by its very nature inexpressible – the mystical experience – and the potentially transgressive nature of such a project are explored with reference to theories of the *chora*, *l'écriture féminine*, abjection, and the lesbian.

A combination of traditional medieval scholarship and post-structuralist theories of sexuality (in particular the work of Kristeva and Jacqueline Rose) similarly inform Cynthia Kraman's reading of Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*. The most strikingly original aspect of Kraman's approach is her discussion of the influence of the rabbinical commentary on *Song of Songs* on Chaucer's text. Despite the prevalence of anti-semitism and widespread 'ethnic cleansing' in Western Europe in the Middle Ages, the Christian and Jewish intellectual communities were not isolated from one another – Kraman points out that in the twelfth century Troyes was the seat of one of the most prominent medieval scholars, Rabbi Rashi, as well as of the Cistercians, and that the latter consulted Rashi's school on theological questions. Kraman posits the notion of 'communities of otherness' – communities not necessarily of individuals connected by geographical, vocational or ideological identity, but of marginalized 'representations, texts, concepts, cultural groups'. She suggests that the others in the *Merchant's Tale* are the female body, the sexual body, the landscape,

and the *Song of Songs* and its Jewish commentaries,⁴ and that these others function in the *Tale* to simultaneously define and destabilize the Christian world-view with its emphasis on the inferiority and subjugation of women and the idealization of virginity. In brief, Kraman argues that the Christian world consigned the body to marginal communities (women, Jews) which then fed back into the centre.

The notion of marginality is again crucial in Janet Wilson's analysis of the fifteenth-century *Book of Margery Kempe*. Wilson contends that the *Book* constructs Kempe as a figure who enjoys a marginal status in the ecclesiastical and secular communities with which she comes into contact. Through Wilson's sensitive negotiation of its dual perspective, our attention is also drawn to the marginal status of the *Book* itself as both socio-historical document and literary text. While the text testifies that Kempe's religious devotion caused social disruption, polarizing both churchmen and the devout laity into those who opposed her and those who gave her their support, external sources indicate that within Kempe's home county of Norfolk there existed an underlying tradition of tolerance of religious diversity; a tolerance which may have manifested itself in lenient attitudes towards issues such as women's teaching. Certainly Kempe herself seems to have become something of a focus of dissent amongst her supporters, some of whom may have been radical clerics, and the *Book* was clearly written in response to her own experiences of persecution. If the *Book* represents Kempe's followers as showing an interest in mystical revelations as a means of personal reformation within existing social and ecclesiastical structures, the possibility remains that Kempe's ambiguous status within East Anglian society may reflect something of a full-scale crisis of faith in that area.

Eastern England in the later Middle Ages is examined again in Jennifer C. Ward's chapter on the relationship of the English noblewoman with the community in which she lived. For her purposes, Ward defines community as 'the village or town where the noblewoman resided and over which she often exercised lordship', but as Ward notes, in this context community can also be understood both in the narrower sense of the household, and more broadly to mean either the localities surrounding the lady's residence, or to indicate social circles and groupings. Rather than simply exploiting the land and the labourers, the nobility had a vital role to play in providing business for traders and purveyors and employment for local people. Hospitality was an important responsibility for the nobility, and they were significant benefactors of religious houses, parish churches and charities. The part

played by noblewomen within the community is less a reflection of their gender than of their social status; none the less, in their husbands' absences or after their deaths, noblewomen often acted as the head of the household, and certain community activities such as almsgiving and intercession seem to have been expected of them *as women*.

Drawing in particular on her findings from southern Italy in the period 800–1200, Patricia Skinner reassesses the stereotype of the impoverished woman, reliant on the charitable donations of her community for her survival. As was noted earlier, Cartwright's scepticism about the transparency of her source material is shared by Skinner. Once more, it is difficult to get a clear picture when the community or sector of the community in question (in this case the poor) was not thought to be significant enough to have its existence documented. In questioning the assumption, shared by modern historians and medieval biographers of kings and church leaders alike, that widows and lone mothers in particular were more likely than men to experience poverty, Skinner proposes that a variety of factors, social, economic and legal, contributed to depriving women of the means on which to live. Like Ward, Skinner notes the importance of almsgiving as an appropriate activity for the devout noblewoman, but (again like Ward, and also Cartwright), she has discovered little evidence to suggest that women were particularly concerned to provide specifically for other women rather than for the community as a whole. Skinner's findings illustrate the extent to which women were not only subordinate, inferior and vulnerable, but also a case apart. They reflect one social reality – the lack of power, the lack of control over their own lives which women often experienced within medieval communities.

J. A. Tasioulas's contribution to this volume centres on the portrayal of the Virgin Mary's childhood in the N-Town Marian Plays, a late medieval mystery cycle which probably originated in East Anglia. Medieval drama provided an important focal point for community activity in late medieval urban societies. Although the pageants and plays of the later Middle Ages were presented by the male-dominated guilds (and might thus be seen as an expression of masculine supremacy), women would certainly have made up a large proportion of the audience, and female types do appear in some of the narratives. The Virgin Mary, of course, represents the cultural construct of ideal womanhood. Explaining the complex and often contradictory traditions about the Blessed Virgin's birth and childhood which were in circulation in the Middle Ages, and which also reflect contradictions inherent in

medieval notions of women, sex and childbirth, Tasioulas shows that Mary is depicted in these plays as the *puella senex* ('aged female youth'). The significance of the Virgin Mary as a role-model for women is an area of contention in medieval scholarship, but Tasioulas believes that as a child who possesses all feminine virtue and adult gravity, women of all ages might identify with the N-Town Mary. While emphasizing the didactic function of the N-Town Plays, Tasioulas disputes the suggestion made by previous scholars that they were written for a women's religious community. The Virgin Mary is not equated with one single aspect of society and unlike *Ancrene Wisse* or *Be Wohunge of Ure Lauerd*, the N-Town Plays do not confine their appeal to cloistered or enclosed women.

Women themselves formed a community of outsiders or otherness in so far as they were often *perceived* as outside or marginal to their communities. If women were often excluded from medieval concepts of community, or seen as both 'other' to the community and part of a community of otherness, it is something of a paradox that one woman, the Blessed Virgin Mary, should stand apart in Christian thought as an exemplar for the community, and indeed for humanity as a whole. Yet this paradox lies at the heart of another: the paradox that women were both *marginal to* and *essential to* medieval communities. Women represented half the population and half of the work force in medieval Europe, and, as the studies in this volume show, they had vital roles to play in the communities in which they lived.

Notes

¹ Information about the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter*, the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship, and the Gender and Medieval Studies Group can be obtained from Lesley Johnson, School of English, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT. In the USA, information about the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* and the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship can be obtained from Regina Psaki, Department of Romance Languages, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403.

² Frantzen, 'When women aren't enough', 445.

³ *Signs* 14.2 (Winter 1989).

⁴ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

⁵ Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*

⁶ Stock, *Implications of Literacy*, especially 88–92.

⁷ Rubin, 'Small groups', 134.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁰ Stock, *Implications of Literacy*, 90.

¹¹ Riddy, 'Women talking about the things of God', 111.

¹² *Signs*, 255.

¹³ Evans and Johnson, *Feminist Readings*, 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ See, for example, Fairbairns *et al.*, *Tales I Tell My Mother*, 3.

¹⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 3. See also Scott, 'Gender', and the essays in *Speculum* 68 (1993).

¹⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 147.

¹⁸ Evans and Johnson, *Feminist Readings*, 3.

¹⁹ Burckhardt, *Civilization of the Renaissance*, 81.

²⁰ See, for example, Aers, *Community, Gender and Individual Identity*, especially 1–19; Aers, 'A whisper in the ear of early Modernists'; Benton, 'Consciousness of self'; Bynum, 'Did the twelfth century discover the individual?'; Eco, 'Living in the new Middle Ages'; Morris, *Discovery of the Individual*; Patterson, *Negotiating the Past*; and Patterson, 'On the margin'.

²¹ *Signs*, 255–6.

²² For a full discussion of medieval notions of community, see Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*.

²³ MED, s.v. *communitate*; c.f. OED, s.v. *community*.

²⁴ *Dictionary of Medieval Latin*, s.v. *communitas*, Reynolds comments that 'Just as the word *communitas* and its derivatives were used very widely, with a range of meanings which apparently needed little or no definition, so the values they embodied were too fundamental to need much spelling out.' Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, 3.

²⁵ See Kowaleski and Bennett, 'Crafts, guilds, and women in the Middle Ages'; and Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle*.

²⁶ Goldstein, *Matter of Scotland*, 192. See also Watt, 'Nationalism in Barbour's Bruce,' especially 104–6.

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