

Writing by Women in Later Medieval England

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Ann Kettle

The two works under review are on broadly the same subject - writing by women in later medieval England - but could not be more different and are therefore difficult to compare directly. One author is an historian, the other a literary scholar. One book is directed at a popular, the other at a specialist academic, audience. One has no foot or endnotes and a very short bibliography, the other has the full scholarly apparatus, with an 18-page bibliography and footnotes that, at a rough calculation, amount to nearly a third of the whole text. One is concerned solely with placing a selection of letters written by women in their social context, while the other propounds a theory on the whole nature of women's literate practice in late medieval England.

Anne Crawford's collection of 123 letters written by women in the later middle ages follows the pattern of her earlier *Letters of the Queens of England, 1100-1547* (Stroud: Sutton, 1994), with the letters preceded by explanatory material, but the organisation is rather more complex and the introductions to the letters lengthier and more generalised. The earliest letter dates from 1130 and the latest from 1506. The thirteenth-century letters are mainly from women members of the royal family or aristocracy; surprisingly few of the letters date from the fourteenth century and a large majority of the letters are from the fifteenth century. Letters from the three great collections of family correspondence predominate: the Plumptons (7 per cent), Stonors (13 per cent) and Pastons (32 per cent). As more letters from Margaret Paston survive than from any other medieval woman, it has been necessary to impose a limit of six letters from any one woman to avoid unbalancing the collection. It is significant that only nine letters written by women to women are included and no letters appear to have survived of women writing to their sisters.

The letters are arranged according to the relationship of the recipient to the writer of the letter. There are five 'family' chapters on women and their parents, women and their brothers, women and their lovers and husbands, women and their sons and women and their kinfolk. The longest chapter contains letters between women and their patrons, friends and servants and is divided into letters from patrons to clients, letters to equals and letters from clients to lords and patrons. There is a final brief selection of letters from women religious, of which most are petitions to their patrons. There are advantages and disadvantages in this novel and interesting way of categorising the letters. It should be possible, for example, to compare the way in which women wrote to their fathers during this period; in practice, however, there is an odd gap between thirteenth-century letters to members of the royal family and fifteenth-century letters of daughters to their gentry fathers. A considerable disadvantage is that letters from the same women are separated and this can lead to repetition when explaining the context of the letters.

Since most letters were dictated and are businesslike in tone - no purely 'social' letters survive - an attempt has been made to select letters where it is perhaps possible to identify the views, thoughts and feelings of the women themselves. As most of the letters are very short and to the point, the detection of emotion is not easy and even expressions of love, as the editor admits, are likely 'to be no more than convention, based on favourable first impressions, shared interests and hope'. (p. 66) Anger and indignation come through more clearly in some of the letters, such as that from Elizabeth Clere to John Paston, relating almost verbatim her encounter with a tenant whose rent was in arrears (pp.148-50), or Margaret Beaufort's letter to Sir John Paston, a letter which was 'not one that any man in his right mind would have wanted to receive during the reign of Henry VII'. (pp. 189-90) Another unusually vituperative letter was that written by Joan Armburgh to John Horell, circa 1429-30 in which she threatens, in very colourful language, to arrange his execution.(pp. 199-201) More 'womanly' is the sympathetic letter written by Elizabeth de la Pole to Sir Robert Plumpton in 1501, which the editor says 'must stand for thousands of others written by women, expressing affection and support to a member of their network at a time of particular trouble'.(pp. 212-213)

The rarity of letters expressing genuine emotion reveals the difficulties facing the editor. Although this volume makes available in modern English letters published previously in editions inaccessible to the general reader, together with a handful of unpublished letters from the records of Chancery, this is not, as the publishers claim, 'an invaluable reference source for historians'. The introductions to individual letters are admirably concise and the links between them skillfully handled but the lack both of full references to the sources of some of the letters and of footnotes to explain technical points does present something of a problem in using the letters.

The book does, however, live up to its description as 'a fascinating introduction for the general reader' to the concerns and social milieu of aristocratic and gentry women in the later middle ages. The lengthy introduction makes some interesting points about the way in which letters were written, the forms of address, the problems of dating and the use of seals as a means of authentication, but it then widens into a general description of the education of girls, marriage and widowhood as necessary background to the letters. For the most part, a number of complicated matters, such as the laws of inheritance, are explained with commendable clarity but the letters themselves become almost incidental to an account of the condition of

women in later medieval England: an impression reinforced by the eleven illustrations of women's activities, including pastimes which 'are rarely mentioned in anything as serious as a letter'.(p. 27) There is much here to entertain and instruct the general reader with an interest in the middle ages and occasionally the letters themselves can surprise even professional historians with their freshness and immediacy.

While using similar source material and agreeing on the central importance of the family, Krug, unlike Crawford, has a thesis to propound on the subject of 'women's engagement with the written word in late medieval England'.(p. viii). She draws on a body of theory, mainly from social anthropology, to contest the feminist idea that in the middle ages 'women took part in text-based activities as expressions of *female* insurrection against male-dominated social forces'.(p. 4) Her central argument that women took part in literate culture through membership of families - in the widest sense of social groups - seems eminently sensible to an historian who might, however, wish that some of the ideas could be expressed in a more straightforward fashion.

As a literary scholar, Krug is concerned with historical sources as texts and is not primarily interested - as Crawford is - in the contents of letters. Letter writing is 'the most easily adopted mode of active, textual production' (p. 29) but Krug, as a literary scholar, is concerned with historical sources as texts in general, more than just with letters written by women. She aims to cover 'a range of disparate text-based practices, including literary patronage, dictation, memorisation and recitation' (p. 8) in order to demonstrate 'how literate concerns were shared in local and family circles'.(p. 13) This ambitious agenda is supported by an extensive knowledge of both printed primary sources and the secondary literature; the footnotes and bibliography are mines of useful information.

Women's daily involvement with writing is explored by means of four case studies. The first two concern individual women, Margaret Paston and Margaret Beaufort, while the other two look at women's literate practice within two religious communities, the Norwich Lollards and the Bridgettine community of nuns at Syon. The chapter on Margaret Paston's epistolary relationship with her husband and sons begins with the contrast between her inability to write and her respect for the written word, demonstrated by her advice to her son to remember his father's advice to keep safely his 'wrytyngs and evidens'.(p. 17) It is argued that Margaret began writing in response to her 'familial situation'.(p. 64) Her husband expected Margaret to write to him during his absences and her letters to him helped to establish her authority and identity within the family. With the death of her husband, however, Margaret was forced 'to confront the male-dominated basis of her literate practice' (p. 53) and change her strategies when writing to her sons. This new interpretation of familiar letters is intriguing, although the conclusion that Margaret came to understand how writing could change her life is not entirely convincing.

The chapter on Margaret Beaufort's literate practice concerns the ways in which she 'responded to an aristocratic/familial dynamic in which women acquired literate skills as part of a broadly patriarchal system'.(p. 67) This chapter is concerned less with letters (although some interesting points are made about the significance of the language used in Margaret's correspondence with her son), than with women's ownership of books and familiarity with literary texts; and more specifically with Margaret's patronage of William Caxton. Although Margaret was at the centre of an élite community of scholars her lack of Latin excluded her intellectually but, as an act of charity, she was able to make texts available in the vernacular through her patronage of the print trade.

The first of the reading communities, or 'families', to be examined is the Norwich Lollards and it is argued that the women members of the sect had in common 'a sense of the importance of written texts and of "study", even if they were unable to read for themselves'.(p. 117) The involvement of the women Lollards of Norwich with textual culture is shown to be life-bringing and "'having" God's word [in your heart, in your home] was more important than understanding it'.(p. 152)

The second reading community, the nuns of Syon Abbey, was more orthodox. Attention is drawn to the contradiction that saw members of a monastic order embracing poverty while owning valuable books. The nuns of Syon were expected to be living images of St Bridget and 'reading too was construed as an act of

visual perception and reflection'. (p.168) The nuns 'heard' God by 'seeing' his words. The particular nature of the involvement of the nuns in literate culture was helped by the fact that they were recruited from social circles in which book ownership by women was taken for granted. Writers associated with the order were encouraged to produce reading material and devotional exercises to help the nuns manage 'the disjunction between their secular, familial experiences and the demands of life in the monastery'.(p. 188) The author concludes by asking why, since growing numbers of women were busy becoming literate at this period, so few of them produced literary texts themselves. The plausible answer is that women engaged with literate culture in a personal, familial context and it simply did not occur to them to write for a wider audience. Indeed, as Krug points out, 'The dominance of men in late medieval England, the inequality of access to education, and the expectation that women would be subordinate to men are facts about the past that will not go away'. (p. 212)

Three examples of the way in which the authors interpret the same letters will serve to illustrate their different approaches to women's writing in later medieval England. A charming letter from a Paston wife to her husband about their first pregnancy, containing a witty postscript linking a ring which she had given him as a remembrance with her swollen stomach is wrongly attributed by Crawford to Margery Brews, Margaret Paston's daughter-in-law. For Crawford this letter is simply an example of a woman happily exaggerating her size in order to get a new gown from her absent husband. For Krug, however, the correct attribution to Margaret Paston is vital, because her pregnancy demonstrates both her compliance with social norms and her contribution to her husband's prestige. The letter becomes, 'like the ring, like her body, a remembrance for her husband that has explicitly extrinsic meaning'.(p. 36) A letter from Margaret Paston to Sir John Paston about the siege of Caister Castle in 1469 is interpreted by Crawford, together with his 'tart and defensive' response to her suggestion that he should seek help by writing to powerful patrons (pp. 123-4), as an example of the strained relations between Margaret and her eldest son. Krug goes further and claims that Sir John's reply represents his 'repudiation of her faith in the supreme power of written documentation'.(p. 61) The final letter in Crawford's collection is a petition from the abbess of Denny to John Paston. Crawford sees this plea for financial help from an impoverished house as a 'good example of a family connection with a local convent among the nuns, which paralleled the continuing patronage of a particular house by generations of a family of benefactors'. (p.251) Krug cites the same letter in her conclusion as an example of the way in which women were acquiring literate skills. According to Krug, the abbess of Denny recognised the written word's ability to eliminate physical distance, since she asked Paston 'to consider how we be closed within the stone walls and may not otherwise speak with you but only by writing'. (Krug, p. 207; cf. Crawford, p. 252) These examples serve to show that, whereas Crawford's text engages with the surface of these letters, Krug's examination of such documents presents the reader with new insights into the complexion of literate practice within these communities.

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