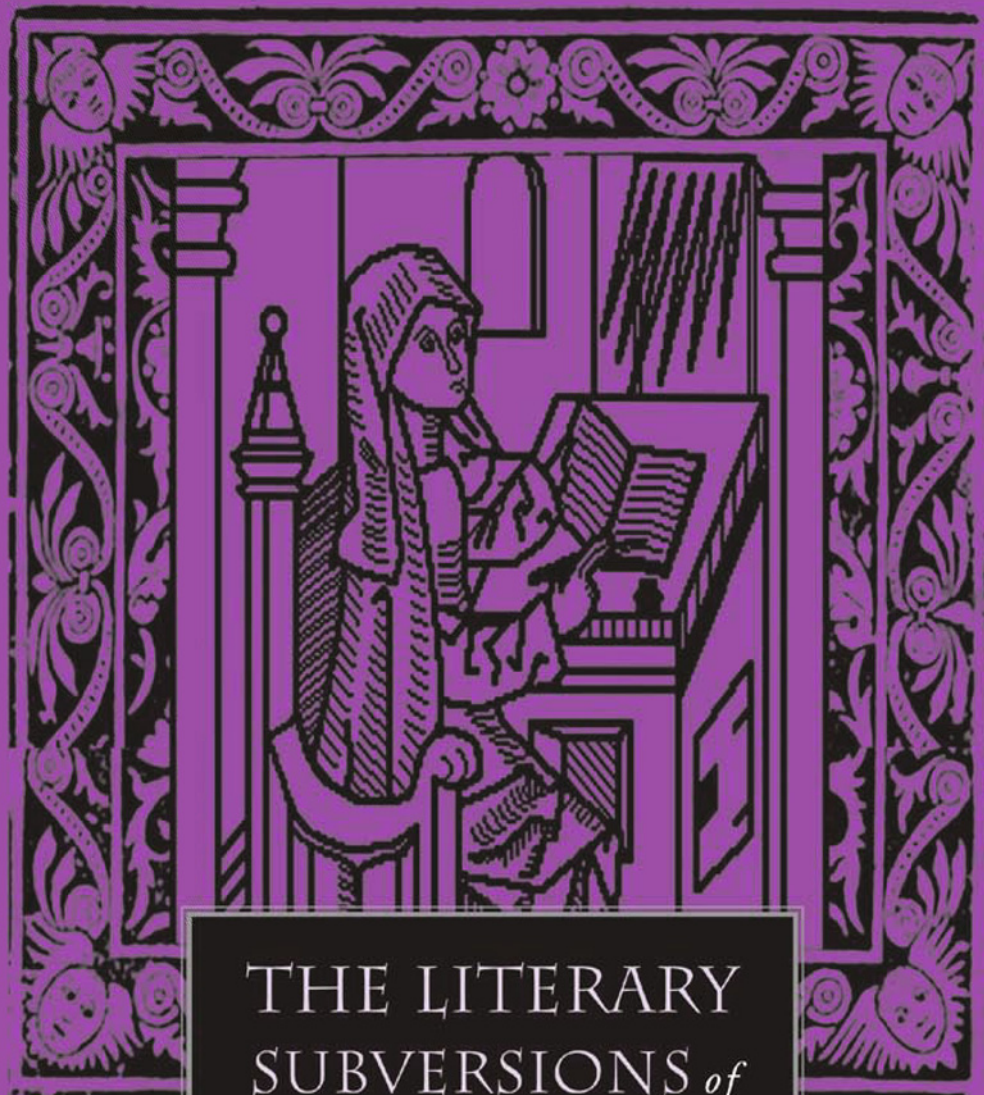# THE LITERARY SUBVERSIONS *of* MEDIEVAL WOMEN

Jane Chance

THE NEW MIDDLE AGES

BONNIE WHEELER, *Series Editor*

The New Middle Ages is a series dedicated to transdisciplinary studies of medieval cultures, with particular emphasis on recuperating women's history and on feminist and gender analyses. This peer-reviewed series includes both scholarly monographs and essay collections.

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"Diversification threatens a subversion of the tradition."
—Mary Wollstonecraft

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES OF THE MARGINALIZED

How might postcolonial theory illuminate the psychology of female alterity? Caught between two cultures, one dominant and controlling and one passive and controlled, women suffer marginalization similar to that of the colonized because of gender difference. That is, alterity arises because of a tension between the subject and what Judith Butler has termed a "constitutive outside" that anticipates the position of the colonized within postcolonial theory. According to Butler, "The subject is constructed through acts of differentiation that distinguish the subject from the constitutive outside, a domain of abjected alterity (conventionally associated with the feminine, but clearly not exclusively)."[1] So also, as members of a single culture, those colonized experience being conquered or inhabited by another culture, or they emigrate into a new and alien culture; either way, the marginalized are displaced into minor status. Raphael Patai, in *The Arab Mind*, defines this state precisely as one of failure of cultural identification:

> "Marginality" denotes the state of belonging to two cultures without being able to identify oneself completely with either.
>
> An individual becomes "marginal" if, after having been born into a culture and enculturated into it in a more or less normal fashion, he becomes exposed to another culture, is attracted to it, acquires a measure of familiarity with it. . .and strives to become a full-fledged carrier of it—an endeavor which, in most cases, never completely succeeds. The marginal man suffers from his inability to feel completely at ease or "at home" in either culture. . . .Marginal man is marginal, not because he is unable to acquire the intellectual thought processes of the culture to which he wants to assimilate, nor because he is unable to free himself of the thought processes of the culture on which he has

turned his back. He is marginal because *emotionally* he is unable to identify with either of the two cultures.[2]

Similarly, women identify with the marginalized culture of the feminine in which they feel most at home, most familiar, but that identification carries with it dissonance, alienation within a patriarchal culture that insists on continuing primacy. In a note later in her same essay, Butler uses the analogy of the colonized and the colonizer for the relation between the feminine subject and the domain she inhabits—an analogy borrowed from Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. In this situation, at the "height of the revolt," according to Memmi, "the colonized still bears the traces and lessons of prolonged cohabitation (just as the smile or movements of a wife, even during divorce proceedings, remind one strangely of those of her husband)."[3] For Butler, the analogy of the trace of the husband's presumed domination of (or at least influence upon) the wife identifies "the feminization of the colonized," or the colonized as feminine, "where the colonized is presumed to be the subject of men, *and* the exclusion of the women from the category of the colonized subject."[4] While the boundary between the colonizer and the colonized endlessly reduplicates, through the binary opposition of male/female it also simultaneously encodes a limitless process of female marginalization.

Butler's example from Memmi also offers an opportunity for a fresh approach to gender difference as an example of the alterity produced by colonization. In commenting on an awareness of the broader significance of the postmodern condition in particular, Homi K. Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, remarks on the "epistemological 'limits' of ethnocentric ideas" as the "enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices—women, the colonized, minority groups, the bearers of policed sexualities."[5] Marginalization by gender, nation, race, and class within a culture, ongoing and never ending, results in the loss of articulation of meaning in everyday life and, therefore, requires continuing opposition, or subversion.[6] For Butler, the constitution of the subject by power does not "cease at the moment the subject is constituted, for that subject is never fully constituted, but is subjected and produced time and again."[7] In line with this explanation, Bhabha suggests that, for minorities, the "social articulation of difference" requires a "complex, on-going negotiation" to attempt to legitimize "cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation."[8] What Bhabha means by "cultural hybridities" are "these 'in-between'

spaces" that "provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovate sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself." Because "interstices" map over and even displace "domains of difference," they are important for the negotiation of "the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value."[9]

Out of a whole consisting of "parts" of difference, whether racial, class, or gender, then, subjects can form either within the interstices or beyond the whole, according to Bhabha. But as subjects how do they oppose the act of marginalization? Bhabha himself poses the following question, from which a postcolonial feminist theory might appropriate a beginning: "How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable?"[10] An example of resistance that Bhabha provides as an answer, even if extreme, exists in slave resistance through homicide, infanticide, and self-mutilation, as presented by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in *Within the Plantation Household*.[11] Implicit within this answer is the potentiality for empowerment, by necessity, to be antagonistic. But does this antagonism hold for feminism as well? Here Bhabha, in defining the role of feminism in the clarification of society as patriarchal and gendered, reveals its approach as "making visible the forgetting of the 'unhomely' moment in civil society" to trouble "the symmetry of private and public which is now shadowed, or uncannily clarified, by the difference of genders which does not neatly map on to the private and public but becomes disturbingly supplementary to them."[12] What is private should be the home, which may be displaced or relocated for the colonized—and, therefore, "unhomely"—but that may also be true for the alien public domain; because of gender difference, the private home for women also can constitute an ironically "unhomely" space.

While Bhabha is most concerned with national difference and concomitant social expressions of the locations of culture, within the context of postcolonial theory, a minor literature may also express difference—of gender, race, and class. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari observe, in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, that a minor literature (that is, not the literature from a minor language but a minority literature within a major language, such as Czech Jews writing in German) is in

its singularity political and possibly revolutionary. The three features of a minor literature are, first, a means of recuperating territory ("The impossibility of not writing because national consciousness, uncertain or oppressed, necessarily exists by means of literature"); second, a wholly political nature; and, third, a collective value, in that in a minor literature the "scarcity of talent" makes even one author's enunciation take on a "collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation."[13]

A minor literature need not necessarily apply only to displaced peoples within a culture. Medieval women inscribed a minor literature in several senses, regardless of whether "minor" reflects the writing of a minority, which medieval women certainly were; or writing in a major language, such as Latin, in which their contributions were relatively fewer in number than those of ecclesiastical male writers, although recent scholarship has demonstrated how plentiful they were[14]; or writing in a linguistic tradition that was both patriarchal and gendered and, therefore, by necessity representative of their authority in a minor voice within that language.

Women writing in the Middle Ages encountered two languages in their attempt to write, because "writing" during most of the early and high Middle Ages meant "in Latin," the so-called lingua franca. Certainly medieval women writers were not necessarily literate, that is, they might not have been able to read Latin, much less write in it, which was particularly true for women authors beginning with the affective tradition of the mendicant movement in the thirteenth century, dependent as it was on itinerancy and the oral tradition of preaching. However, even if women authors were able to write in Latin, this lingua franca did not necessarily function for them as a passport for entry into an elite fraternal community in which all members shared one language and equal status. Instead, Latin served as a barrier to that oneness of community and as a constant reminder of their gender difference and their status as second-class citizens. For medieval women authors, belonging to two cultures almost invariably meant attaining a position as a monastic or beguine within a male-dominant church—they were colonized or policed as a subgroup by a hierarchy of priests and confessors, bishops, archbishops, and popes.

Beyond the falsity of Latin as a lingua franca for literate women, the Latin language in the Middle Ages built into itself an implicit misogyny, and a concomitant gender difference, through the patriarchy that controlled the writing process. The words for "man" and "woman," "male" and "female," easily sum up the gender differences upon which such

medieval misogyny both culturally and theologically rested. According to Isidore of Seville (ca. 570–636) in his monumental and much-copied *Etymologiae*, the ancients called women *vira*, female for *vir* (man), rather than *femina* (female), a word related to that portion of the *femores* (thighs) that signifies her biological difference.[15] Isidore explains that "the two sexes are differentiated in the strength [*fortitudine*] and weakness [*imbellicitate*] of the bodies," so that man (*vir*) boasts a greater force (*vis*) than woman (*femina*): "hence also the word 'strength' [*virtus*]—or, man is so named because he controls woman [*feminam*] forcefully [*vi*]. In contrast, woman [*mulier*] gets her name from 'softness' [*mollitie*], or as it were 'softer,' *mollier*, with a letter taken away or changed."[16] What is "taken away" in women—to acknowledge the misogynistic tradition inherited later, in the twentieth century, by Freud—is the penis of the male as much as "a letter," as if the words for the nature of woman define her ontology on the basis of her sexuality and corporal form. Yet the physical difference between men and women as defined by Isidore supports a social purpose, for weak women must obey strong men in order that the species be reproduced: "Thus there is the greatest strength [*virtus*] in man [*viri*], and less in woman [*mulieris*] so that she might be forbearing to man; otherwise, if women were to repel them, sexual desire might compel men to desire something else or rush off to another sex."[17] Further, Isidore adds, she is also *femina* (female) from the Greek, *fos* (burning force), given her intense sexual desire, a function of her lust, greater than that of man, and akin to the animals, so that excessive love (*amor*) in antiquity is gendered female when applied to the male through the use of the word *femineus* (effeminate).[18]

The perceived domestic and sexual roles of men and women in the Middle Ages also manifest a gender difference, ultimately reinforced by the Fall of Man, that strips women of agency: according to Isidore, the active role of the father (*pater*), the head of the family (*paterfamilias*), in procreation represents an accomplishment (*patratio*); his semen leads to conception and then growth (*crementum*), making men creators (*creatores*).[19] But the mother (*mater*) has a passive role, Isidore notes, borrowing from Aristotle: from her something is made, as if from matter (*materia*), "while the father is the cause."[20] As the first woman, Eva (in English, Eve) is indeed "life" (*vita*), but also, when Isidore reorganizes the letters of her name, "woe" (*vae*).[21] The origin of being born, coming to life, Eve also causes death through the fall of Adam, and, hence, "because woman is often the cause of man's welfare," she is the also the "cause of his disaster and death (which is called woe [*vae*])."[22]

The misogyny of the church fathers, buttressed as it was by the Latin language in gendering the female to represent corporal desire, restricted male access to women and, therefore, women's autonomy, especially when women occupied ecclesiastical roles. This cultural construction pervades the pronouncements of the church fathers, who echo St. Paul. St. Jerome (ca. 342–420), seizing upon Paul's declaration in 1 Corinthians 7 that "it is good for a man not to touch a woman," acknowledges in *Adversus Jovinianum* that "by mere touch the peculiar nature of man and woman is perceived, and the difference of sex is understood."[23] The necessity to flee from women, or from their carnal bodies, according to Jerome, prevents men from being burned by their touch. Best, then, says St. John Chrysostom (ca. 347–407) in *Homily 9 on St. Paul's Epistle to Timothy*, for women to be modest and decorous in dress, appearance, and, most importantly, speech, and, drawing on Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians, also for women to "learn in silence" and not speak in the church, that is, not speak "of spiritual matters."[24] Certainly Paul, and John Chrysostom after him, wants women not to teach but only to learn, for "[in] this way they will show submission by their silence."[25] The nature of females is to be talkative; through speech they deceive as Eve did Adam, say both Paul and John Chrysostom. And with this, Paul and John Chrysostom arrive at the punch line: woman was created for man, who was formed first, and therefore man should rule over her.[26] Specifically, Jerome finds, woman's inferior steadfastness and lack of perseverance suggest she should not preach; thus, "the evangelical role is assigned to men."[27]

Throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages, antifeminism leaked into all forms of writing—ecclesiastical, theological, legal, scientific, medical, philosophical, and, most especially, literary, as R. Howard Bloch defines the "register" in his essay "Medieval Misogyny" (1987).[28] Whatever the perceived nature of woman in the Middle Ages—as quarrelsome, proud, demanding, or anxious in her speech—for Bloch, "the reproach against women is a form of reproach against language itself—'that which is said by the mouth.' "[29] Irrational when speaking, she *becomes* language itself, so much so that "the misogynist speaks of the other in terms that bespeak otherness, and this through the voice of the other."[30] Further, for women to represent themselves, to have agency, was regarded so pejoratively that it was perceived as a type of insanity: according to Stephen Harper, "Since female autonomy was abhorred as unnatural and even mad, the causal connection between madness and indiscipline was

reverted, so that insane women were described as 'ungovernable' or 'unrulable.' "[31] Debates about women surfaced in every country in the Middle Ages, from Anglo-Saxon England to early modern Spain,[32] but they were always propelled by the misogyny of the church, and a masculine church at that.

Given this early and continuing tradition of a colonized culture of medieval women, what surprises is that women authored their own texts at all, and, when they did write, created a voice of their own, not reflective of the patriarchal culture in which they inscribed. Yet fairly recently, beginning primarily in the twentieth century, scholarship on medieval women has corrected misogynistic scholarly stereotypes that accompanied the earliest editions and treatments of medieval women writers. More detailed studies have grouped women by nationality, city, or community as a determinant influence and appropriate form of classification.[33] In beginning to understand medieval women's networks of reception and dissemination as part of their own literary tradition, scholars have also examined the ways in which women influenced others' writing[34] and commissioned, inherited, or bequeathed books by others.[35] Approaches to the individual writer have, finally, singled out the medieval woman writer as a distinctive and worthy literary, historical, and religious subject, whether Hrotsvit of Gandersheim in the tenth century or Anna Comnena in the eleventh-twelfth centuries[36]; Heloise or Hildegard of Bingen in the twelfth century[37]; or, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, among a host of others, Christine de Pizan,[38] the mystics, and Margery Kempe[39] or the Paston women and the Rožmberk sisters.[40] Most importantly, medieval women writers have been read more postcolonially in relation to intercultural situations and the problem of national boundaries. For example, scholars have recently examined gender difference in twelfth-century poet Marie de France through the lens of postcolonialism.[41] With the emergence of print culture in early modern France and England, debates over female literacy and the rise of nationalism came to involve women writers such as Marguerite de Navarre, Christine de Pizan, Elizabeth Cary, and Aphra Behn.[42]

Within the general tradition of literary criticism on medieval writers, it has not always been clear how women writers fit into the canonical (which is to say, patriarchal) literary traditions. As Susan Schibanoff reminds us, "What is still crucial for us to examine now is how and why some female readers resist immasculation and others succumb to it, for our literary texts and traditions remain largely male-made."[43] Some

recent scholars have amply rehearsed the necessity for literary subversion on the part of medieval women writers, who created their own "spaces for self-expression within a masculine literary tradition."[44] Feminized resistance to patriarchal domination surfaces most explicitly in the gendering of genre. Medieval women authors for the most part ignored the favored masculine literary genres of the heroic epic poem,[45] didactic or learned poetry, and social satire. Heloise in the twelfth century took up the epistle, as did a range of women who were both royal and secular.[46] Her contemporary Marie de France popularized the Breton lay, or short courtly romance, and the fable.[47] The thirteenth-century *trobairitz* appropriated the courtly vernacular lyric from the troubadours.[48] In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Marguerite Porete, St. Catherine of Siena, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe turned to the mystical and confessional, or autobiographical, work.[49] Around the same time, borrowing from Boccaccio, Dante, and Petrarch, Christine de Pizan made the allegorical visionary poem her own.

Recent feminist criticism, in its attempt to identify the woman writer's voice in the Middle Ages, has additionally theorized the very nature of language itself as double (aside from the two languages of Latin and the mother tongue), a vehicle for gender acculturation that privileges patriarchy and silences women and, therefore, of course, whatever individual voice might be designated as other and authentically female. Monique Wittig observes that when women characters enter texts, they do so through crablike speech, moving sideways,[50] a description in itself a handy tool for recognizing heteroglossia, a technique offered by Laurie Finke in *Feminist Theory, Women's Writing*. Finke opts for a theory of "complexity," based on chaos theory, in the cultural productions of society—such as individuals, genders, class identities, and written texts—which "maintain and refashion them."[51] Rejecting the monolithic voice of patriarchy, Finke defines a methodology sensitive to the historical moment and place, "as well as to the heterogeneity of socioeconomic formations, the intersecting and competing interests of different groups, and the hegemonic practices that work to smooth over or to suppress these conflicts."[52] Accordingly, Finke's feminist theory of complexity—dialogic, double-voiced, reflective of the culture and the self, as denoted in Bakhtin's concept of "heteroglossia"—means that "another's speech in another's language" has to express "(the speaker's) intentions, but in a refracted way."[53] Second, the theory has also to acknowledge history as the product of a suppression of conflict and discord, overpowered

oppositions—put elegantly, the "textuality of history and the historicity of textuality."[54] And third, its chief characteristic is what Finke calls the "noise" of history, referring to Michel Serres's concept of "anything that survives as part of the message, but which was not part of the message when sent," that is, what Alice Jardine defines as alterity, that which is "troped" feminine.[55] Another metaphor, used by Finke, is Michel de Certeau's term "poaching," that is, "those strategies that parasitically undermine hegemonic cultural practices and enable the disempowered to manipulate the conditions of their existence. . . Poaching is neither straightforward conformity nor rebellion but a dialogic and destabilizing encounter between conflicting cultural codes."[56]

How to recognize heteroglossia in the marginalized texts of the Other is more difficult, primarily because "double-voiced" language, for Finke, "calls into question the fiction of authoritative or monologic discourse," with any expression "always inhabited by the voice of the 'other,' or of many others, because the interests of race, class, gender, ethnicity, age, and any number of other related 'accents' intersect in any utterance."[57] As a result, for the women writers throughout the history of literature—Finke compares thirteenth-century *trobairitz* and women mystics with the feminist discourses of Mary Wollstonecraft and the fiction of Kate Chopin in the nineteenth and twentieth century—the words of the oppressor have to be turned against the oppressor himself to empower the marginalized Other or, in the words of Bakhtin, "take[n] into new contexts, attach[ed] to new material, put. . .in new situations in order to wrest new answers from it, new insights into its meaning, and even wrest from it new words of our *own* (since another's discourse, if productive, gives birth to a new word from us in response)."[58]

The strategies thus far identified by feminist critics as used by medieval women share a denominator in their implicitness within the text, varying in nature from encoding to ventriloquism and "bodytalk." Encoding embeds the text strategically with literary codes such as symbolic images and rhetorical features such as understatement, elision, irony, and hyperbole to effect a "poetics of silence."[59] Ventriloquism endows women's female characters with concealed means of exercising power.[60] Such female characters exhibit a "bodytalk" ("resistant doubled discourse"): one discourse both social and cultural and reflective of repressive gender systems; the other discourse the embodied female voice that disrupts and riots.[61] As a