

The translation, as the prominent medievalist Rossell Hope Robbins points out in his Foreword, may be helpful even to Middle English specialists: few will be familiar with the obstetrical terms, and the names of herbs from artemisia to wallwort that make up the prescriptions. But the translation is not consistently accurate. The list of errata shows that Rowland checked over her translation of the small section of the manuscript that is in Latin, and discovered a few errors. Had she looked again at the larger Middle English portion, she might have asked herself some of the following questions. Why translate "caste" as "give birth" in the clause "sometimes all of the womb moves up to the stomach, causing the woman to have a great desire to give birth" (p. 139), when both the context and the most probable meaning of the word in the fifteenth century suggest the translation "vomit?" Why translate "gomes ycloue" as "gums stuck together" (p. 75), when "split gums" is just as valid a translation, is possible (how do gums stick together?), and is a common enough condition? Why translate "cercle" as "opening of the anus," and then alter the rest of the sentence to fit, in "Their urine is bright red, and sometimes dull red, and a kind of dark redness appears under the opening of the anus" (p. 115)? *The Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following clearly applicable quotation from Sir Thomas Elyot's *Castel of Helth* (1539), under *circle* sb., definition 8: "In urine, being in a vessell apt therunto to be sene, are thre regions. . The hygh-est region is the cerkle." The translation should read, "Their urine is bright red, and sometimes dull red, and rather dark red above, under the circle." That is, in the lower part of the examining glass, the urine is bright or dull red, but just below the two-thirds level it is dark red.

There are other mistakes. "Ayenst nyght ix sithes or x on a day" (p. 110) is not "nine times a night or ten times a day" (p. 111), but "before nightfall, nine or ten times a day." "Yeve to þe women two þerof & oþer two of þe decoction of rede chiches" (pp. 70 & 72) is not "give the

woman *either* 2 ounces of this *or* 2 ounces of a stew of red chick-peas" (pp. 71 & 73), but "give the women two ounces of this *and another* two of a stew of red chick-peas." But these and other errors, and the printer's errors such as the omission of the sign for ½ in the prescriptions on several pages, would be of vital importance only to a reader intent on trying out the cures. Caveat: the mortality rate among medieval women was high.

The main contribution that *Medieval Woman's Guide to Health* makes is pioneering. It gives us access to an apparently representative medical manuscript of the late Middle Ages, intended for women to use in caring for the medical needs of other women. The Introduction puts that manuscript in its place in the up and down history of women in medicine. The editor makes no claims to completeness in her history, in her bibliography, or in her reading of gynecological manuscripts in Middle English. Much research remains to be done in the field, and her decision to publish the manuscript without waiting for further, perhaps far off, advances is a wise one. Her service is to give readers of several interests an introduction to some very interesting material.

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**Read This Only to Yourself: The Private Writings of Midwestern Women, 1880-1910.** Elizabeth Hampsten. *Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982. Pp. 256.*

"The Private is political," one of the slogans of feminists in the seventies, is now reverberating through the halls of academe to effect a change in the disciplines of English and History. As these have been elaborated, respectively valoriz-

ing the high tradition of epic poetry and poetic drama (read Homer, Milton and Shakespeare) and the political manoeuvres of kings and governments, women have been invisible. Not that women have been neither writing nor doing, but rather their activities have been mainly carried out within the domestic sphere. The documents they have left have been either hidden from view or peripheral to the mainstream, women's autobiographical utterances, for instance, most likely being found in the "non-artistic" categories of memoir, reminiscence, diary or other disjunctive forms than in the canonical autobiography. A decision by an English scholar or a historian to study these unpublished writings, to centre their research in fact where women's realities have been situated, involves a swerve in the discipline to accommodate these new insights. The literary canon is challenged while this recentring requires new historical methodologies to record the ephemeral, methods which will in turn be adapted by literary scholars. That this is a fruitful approach in sensitive hands and offers new understanding of the art of writing is made eminently clear in Elizabeth Hampsten's book on the private writings of American Midwestern women, *Read This Only to Yourself*.

In the last few years there has been a growing interest in studying women's diaries and letters, but most of the material published on the subject relies on excerpts from or analyses of autobiographical writing by *famous* women whose work has found its way into earlier publication. I am thinking in particular of Moffatt and Painter's *Revelations: Diaries of Women* (1975) or Jelinek's *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* (1980). Hampsten's study differs from these in its basic premise focussing on everyday writings - letters to friends and relations, jottings in a notebook - by *working-class* women. Not only have the lives of this group of women gone unnoticed in the literary sphere (for, as Hampsten points out, few members of this class have become published writers while there is a tradi-

tion of American working-class male literature), but also in the historical realm, for the archivist has been reluctant to put "historical value" on many of these documents by collecting them. Hampsten's first task has been to locate papers by women frequently still in the hands of the family who had treasured them over the years, unread. They remain fragmentary, offering few clues to the entire life story of their author.

Her primary objective is to describe the lives of these women, to document the material conditions of existence in a pioneer agricultural community, for most of the writings date from the period 1880 - 1900, though they range over a fifty-year span 1860 - 1910. This she does through a thematic grouping of women's concerns ranging from "Housing and Indians" to female sexuality, selfconsciously further privatized within the correspondence by the phrase written in one of these letters, "read this only to yourself." On this subject, as Hampsten demonstrates, women have had much to say albeit covertly, exchanging information about birth control, abortions, and other such subjects which doctors refused to talk about. In the last three chapters, the approach is changed to follow instead the unfolding of four specific lives of very different women for whom a body of information is available. This dual perspective contributes immensely to the value of the book, which offers thus both comprehensiveness and depth.

Rather than enumerate in detail Hampsten's findings about the facts of women's lives, I should like to explore the implications of two other hypotheses governing this book which are both highly original and bear witness to the literary training of the author, notably Hampsten's initial preoccupation with literary theories of regionalism and her search for a women's style of writing. This latter is an important element in Hampsten's desire to avoid a purely quantitative approach to her subject, one which she criticizes in other studies of the pioneer westward trek through the private papers of its

members. Her attentive awareness of the use of repetition for intensity, of the difference between figurative language used naturally and used self-consciously, is key to her discussion of sexuality, a subject the quantitative approach found curiously absent. This is a "literature of omission," Hampsten heads one of her sections, which reveals itself as much in what it does not say, as in what it does.

Significantly, one of the major omissions is the one which started Hampsten on her quest, namely a sense of regional identity. One of the major currently held theories about Western writing emphasizes its regional sensibilities, its aim to map out a geo-metaphysical terrain for the imagination to inhabit. The contribution of such women writers as Willa Cather to this regional sensibility, charting the vast expanses of the mid-west prairie and its ethnic diversity, encouraged Hampsten to seek the sources of this literary impulse in an earlier phase of writing, in pioneer diaries. Her material has almost exclusively focused on that available in North Dakota where she has read everything she could put her hands on. While she has been able to read the outlines of the regional myth in men's diaries in entries about the dangerous cold, snow and wind in winter and the risks of fire, drought and tornadoes in summer which pit man against a great environmental force, women's diaries proved to be myopic. They map an inner terrain of unexpected evenness. It is difficult to distinguish in these writings between locations as diverse as pioneer farm or boom town or eastern city, so closely do the women concentrate on describing a domestic round or on recapturing the conversation of friends. More people's names occur in their diaries than in those of men in the same area, a fact Hampsten ascribes to their tremendous loneliness which also accounts for the stylistic feature of dialogue so often encountered within letters. In writing, these women are creating a substitute for a human voice. Most of them had followed husbands west, not chosen for themselves a new life as pioneer. Their energy

went to reproducing the society they had left and in filling in the void of human companionship. The lack of perspective which Hampsten isolates, the preoccupation with detail unsupported by generalizations of time and space, binds together all the women's letters and diaries blurring class or occupational differences. In this respect the farm wife, the pioneer doctor, the college professor, the cook in the prospecting camp near Edmonton all write about domestic chores, their colds and headaches, the difficulties of existence in a house with no floors, the risks of death in childbirth, in a straightforward manner. Hampsten speculates that some of the evenness of tone in face of such difficulties, the matter of factness in face of catastrophe, may be a way of affirming themselves, of accepting the inevitable with dignity, or of asserting the success of their lives because women are rewarded for being able to establish an ordered existence in face of chaos.

On the other hand, as she convincingly reveals, the intensity of women's emotions is rarely revealed here as in high literature, advertising or other public modes of writing through figurative language, a sort of aesthetic framing. Their writing is elliptical and difficult to decipher, but strong feeling may be perceived through the pattern of action in a diary as in the case of the young woman who, after making love with her beau, had an increase of energy for the housework she must do next day as a servant. The repetition of this sequence several times furnishes Hampsten with her interpretive clue. Lack of adjectives, adverbs, subordinate clauses as a stylistic feature are added to the lack of perspective and distance characteristic of these women's writings, a combination which Hampsten finds different from similar writing by men. While men she suggests are always aware that writing is a form of public declaration and write to make distinctions in importance between events, women on the other hand write for entirely opposite reasons, "to assert a pattern and to blur distinctions between recurring and unique events." (p. 68). However, some of this

blurring results from ambiguous feelings about events and very real difficulties in fitting language, behaviour, personal relationships, and physical conditions to a coherent pattern. Examples of this predicament are to be found in the writings of some women who earned an education for themselves. Their upward mobility made them more open to the counselled mode of writing with stylistic embellishment. Johanna Kildahl, who supported herself towards a Ph.D. in biology, hides what the plain unvarnished facts in her narratives indicate to have been anger and suffering under the cloak of joking satire, while another expert in indirection, Fanny Quain, who through hard work became the first women doctor in the territory, embellished her narratives with figurative language and visionary scenes masking her own and her mother's anger. In different modes from short story to newspaper chronicle, Quain rewrote the story of her mother's westward trek and her own birth - the first child born in a frame house - three different times. As Hampsten shows, the more direct the narrative, the more factual, the greater the rage and sorrow. High style and indirect narration become vehicles for masking emotion. A poetry of fact thus sings out from the least pretentious of writings, to be valued despite the lack of connectives or sentence divisions.

As I have tried to indicate, Hampsten's book is interesting reading for the very wealth of detail it offers on the individual women's lives and for the subtlety of Hampsten's analysis of their writing styles. It is also thoroughly researched against a broad canvas that includes all the private writings of men in the territory and popular manuals on writing for those in need of self help. Thus her analysis is properly a differential one of male/female writing styles which adds greater weight to her assertions of the specificity of female writing, its focus on an inner terrain. It is this conclusion which makes Hampsten's book of relevance to those interested in women's diaries in any geographical location. This fact, as well as the frequent crossing of Canadian boun-

daries by the figures she discusses - Fanny Quain's mother came from New Brunswick to North Dakota as a bride, while Maud Lampman and family moved north to the Klondike to seek gold - should make *Read This Only to Yourself* of vital importance to the growing body of people interested in Canadian women's private writings.

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**Daughters of Time: Women in the Western Tradition.** Mary Kinnear. *Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982. Pp. 228.*

In *Daughters of Time*, Mary Kinnear, of the University of Manitoba, has sought to explain what it was to be a woman in the successive historical societies which have formed the Western Tradition and what the experience of women in those earlier societies means to Western women today. She has attempted to examine traditional concepts and periods in history "from the point of view of women who lived then." She has "[described, analysed, and assessed] the roles of women at various times in Western history, in those European and North American societies which inherit traditions forged in Greece, Rome and Palestine." And she has done this "to discover the social, economic, cultural, and political foundations for the status of women in modern times."

Limitations have had to be accepted and distortions must inevitably occur. Developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are stressed. The "encyclopedic approach" is sacrificed to "the need to produce a coherent account with an orderly argument providing some clues to women's position in the West today." Thus, in approaching past societies, the author has