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## Review Essay: Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Medieval Woman's Visionary Literature*

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interpretations. He depends heavily on the work of several of his forebears, most notably Rich Southern, David Bevington, Glynne Wickham, and Stanley Kahrl. He occasionally takes issue with one of them on the staging of some aspect of a given play (e.g., with Bevington on the idea that the *Play of the Sacrament* ended with the action and audience moved inside a church [75]). Tydeman's genuine contribution lies, I believe, in his juxtaposition of alternative explanations, and in the logical and meticulous way he examines these often overlooked texts, occasionally reading line by line in light of his considerable learning not only as a scholar, but as a modern director of medieval plays. He staged some cycle plays in Bangor Cathedral in March 1972. Tydeman is at his best in his discussion of the logical problems presented to a director by all the scatological activity in *Mankynde* (33), and when he pretends to be a citizen of York in 1468, watching the annual Corpus Christi Cycle. Such serious attention accorded these plays reveals the frequently unacknowledged skill and ingenuity of the medieval playwright and producer. Tydeman's book will prove useful both to the literary historian and student of the history of dramatic production.

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Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Medieval Woman's Visionary Literature*, Oxford University Press, 1986.

This anthology offers major selections from twenty-eight women who wrote between the second and the fifteenth centuries. Included are plays, lyric poems, prose narratives of visions, personal letters, sermons, and works of "visionary autobiography." Many of the authors are little known; ten appear for the first time in English translation.

This anthology of major selections is a textbook for use in advanced classes, but it is really much more. Assembling in one place medieval writings by women, it benefits students who may not be specialists in medieval devotional literature. The anthology provides access to some very interesting writings in medieval life and letters as well as the history or literature of women. Everything such readers will need is provided in the book: a full critical and historical introduction and comprehensive bibliography, section and author introductions, and notes of commentary and explanation. In providing such help to the reader, Petroff reveals her long-standing interest in this literature and shares her enthusiasm with the reader.

Almost all of the surviving literature by medieval women is devotional, and Petroff shows that the visionary writings are of special interest. In

visionary experience, women found both authority and a voice. Their writings reveal that "creative fulfillment through writing might be bound in the religious as well as the secular world." To my own surprise these writings show women as "active agents in the transformation of their society" (21). Many of the women represented here were leaders in religious communities, popular preachers, or reformers; they reflected their times but also could be "thinkers on the cutting edge of new developments in the church" (21). They were literary innovators. Unlike those in more formal or learned modes, their texts tend to be "subjective, repetitive, nonanalytical, ahistorical, preferring the concrete to the abstract, and the formulaic to the self-consciously literary style." The women "use the vernacular languages to express complex subjective states directly, forthrightly (by medieval standards), and precisely" (48-49). The women often found themselves isolated or alienated from others, involved in "the discovery of the self" and at the same time seeking to transcend the self in mystic otherness. I found especially powerful St. Ultimà of Fenza's Fifth Sermon, "Discourse on Weeping and Lamentation." She had met with strong opposition in her work to establish a convent near Florence. She writes,

The garden in which the color of the rose was predominant now is all a dark bramble. . . . I was planted in charity, but now I have been pulled out of that ground, and my roots are dried up, and every fruit has been made impossible for me. . . . When I think back on what I have lost, I recall with great pain that for which I was destined, and my heart shatters, thinking that I am plunged in error. I am far from my homeland, and I find myself among foreigners.

(248-49)

Petroff's book makes a little-known literature accessible conveniently, even richly. Is her book likely to revise scholars' as well as students' ideas about women in medieval times? It did for me.

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Alan Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England, Modes of Reproduction, 1300-1840*, Basil Blackwell, 1986.

In this attractively written book, social anthropologist Alan Macfarlane demonstrates the existence of the "companionate Malthusian marriage