Reading Families: Women’s Literate Practice in Late Medieval England.

Reading Families argues that women became increasingly involved in literate practices in ways intricately bound up with their familial relationships and social positions in the later medieval period. Rebecca Krug’s project to analyze women in their everyday lives and to locate them firmly in their historical contexts resists modern feminist impulses to read medieval women’s literacy as always antagonistic to patriarchal systems. This book’s contribution to gender studies brings together a range of material relevant to literary studies, history, and religion. The detailed investigation of women in four different case studies successfully articulates how the pressures of medieval religious and political institutions weighed heavily on the decisions women made in their daily lives. Krug does a splendid job in discovering the link between the textual activities in these four diverse scenarios and offers scholars a new framework for understanding the various motivations behind women’s literate practices.

Krug’s first chapter looks at Margaret Paston’s letters to her family in order to show how these letters functioned in Margaret’s life as a way to adapt to her family roles as a wife and mother. Being married to a lawyer, John Paston, influenced the style and content of Margaret’s writing as she began to develop her own textual habits. In particular, Krug argues that John’s use of writing as legal evidence capable of affecting reality caused Margaret to assimilate the same perspectives into her own writing. Krug’s overall argument applies in a straightforward manner to the Pastons’ writing circle, since Margaret’s letters were produced in a strictly familial setting without any clear display of resistance against her status in the household. Krug’s consideration of Margaret’s epistolary writing establishes a solid foundation for the following chapters, where paradigms begin to shift out of overly tidy boundaries.

Krug’s thesis expands in the second chapter to include Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII, a woman whose political presence mattered at least as much as her private, familial one. As a result of her influential status, undercurrents of female resistance to institutional structures
regularly seep through, despite the book’s effort to concentrate on less reactionary motives for participating in book culture. Krug discusses the impact the Book of Hours had in shaping Margaret’s later interest in reading, especially the ways in which the “inscriptive impulse” to write names and family events into her book both “served patriarchal ends” and “gave women license to ‘document’ themselves and their lives in potentially liberating ways” (76). Of even greater significance is Krug’s explanation of Margaret’s participation in the printing trade, given her financial circumstances and political prominence as the king’s mother. Her behavior seems both a reaction to and an engine for major social changes in England, as Krug herself acknowledges. Excluding Margaret’s rare ability to exert political power as a woman in the Middle Ages leaves an imbalance in a discourse that might otherwise address the relationship between Margaret’s reactionary and non-reactionary reasons for commissioning the printing of both popular and devotional texts. Nevertheless, Krug contributes alternative possibilities for considering the personal impetus behind the literate practices of aristocratic women who could afford to own books and use them for their private and domestic education.

Chapter 3 addresses the familial and spiritual role of Lollard women at Norwich who, as members of a revolutionary religious group, seem at odds with Krug’s desire to not look at women as resisting social structures, and this tension can be felt throughout the section. This case study focuses not on the particular knowledge of Lollard women or the extent of their literacy, but the reasons why they valued the written word. The centrality of marriage in Lollard teachings and the emphasis on “priviness” as part of the daily lives of this community allowed women to engage in textual activities pertinent to their spiritual formation. This study cleverly shows how Joan White, Hawisia Moon, and Margery Baxter conform to the social standards of their Lollard community, but what Krug does not fully account for is their dissent from the larger, stronger Catholic patriarchy controlling their culture. However, despite this narrow focus to her argument, she produces much insightful commentary on the importance of “the spiritual effects of communal study” (152) for the three women she discusses and for the entire Lollard group at Norwich.

The final chapter, and the highlight of this book, focuses on Syon
Abbey and the literate nuns living there from its inception in 1415. This chapter makes the flexibility of Krug's central point fully apparent as she moves from the biological family of the Pastons to progressively more spiritual families, culminating in Syon. In this discussion, Krug considers the convent’s religious family to be the most influential factor shaping the reading practices of the nuns. These women read as an expression of their obedience to God, and in imitation of Saint Bridget, the patron saint of the convent. More specifically, Krug thinks that the social constituency of the abbey, formed by members with aristocratic backgrounds, encouraged the accumulation of reading material for these women to help them adjust to a monastic life increasingly characterized by isolation. She beautifully illuminates the role books played in the convent as a means for living exemplary lives sanctioned by the dominant Catholic institution.

The broad range of examples in Reading Families testifies to the validity of its call for scholarship to rethink the current characterization of women's literacy as radical and transgressive. Even though highlighting transgressiveness often proves useful and meaningful in scholarship, this book helps readers find other values in female experiences with literate culture. Krug’s strict adherence to the realities of these women’s historical situations contributes to our understanding of medieval women’s literate practices on their own terms, and not on terms conforming to today’s standards for female textual practices.

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In his expansive study of medieval and early modern texts, ranging from courtly romances to women’s mystical writings to cookbooks, Albrecht Classen