

Women Written Discourse in the Middle Ages¹

"It is love alone that gives worth to all things."

-St. Teresa of Avila-

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Abstract

In this article, I shall present the following issues: First, an account of writing by women during the Middle Ages will be provided. Second, a survey of some women's writing characteristics will be specified. Based on this analysis, the development of a 'woman's voice' during this era is described. In sum, the study will reveal that religion, patriarchy, mystical visions and misogyny had not only influenced deeply women's writing, but had either constrained or facilitated an exceptionally female point of view in writing.

Key words: written discourse, feminism, patriarchy, female mystics

الملخص

في هذه المقالة، سأقدم المسائل التالية: أولاً، سأقدم سرد لكتابه المرأة خلال العصور الوسطى. ثانياً، سأقدم تحديد مسح لبعض خصائص الكتابة النسائية. وبناء على هذا التحليل، سأقدم وصف تطور "صوت المرأة" خلال هذه الحقبة. وباختصار، سوف تكشف الدراسة أن الدين، والبطيركية، والرؤى الصوفية وخداع المرأة لم تؤثر فقط على الكتابة النسائية بعمق، ولكن سهلت في تقييد وجهة نظر استثنائية حول المرأة في الكتابة.

الكلمات الدالة: الخطاب المكتوب، النسوية، الأبوية، الصوفيات الإناث

1. Introduction

Interest in initial traditional women writers is becoming gradually documented. It was widely believed that almost no medieval women were educated. In spite of that, empirical facts show that women writers who are no longer well-known today played surprisingly varied roles in the literary field throughout the human race. Dronke (1996: VII) affirms that "*the value of trying to locate and understand the writings of women from these centuries is more evident today than it was even twenty years ago.*" Whether or not the system benefitted from it, *women not only getting back a position in history, but they were also re-establishing their roles and constitutional rights in this area of religion.*² The documents collected in this paper deal with early modern female authorship during the late middle Ages, ranging geographically from Spain to Britain and Arabian Peninsula. All over the world, a small number of women came to public attention having the status of writers throughout the era starting from the sixth to the fourteenth centuries. Here are some names one may be familiar with, but you're likely to come across a few you were not acquainted with formerly: Al Khansa', Teresa of Avila and Tudor Women. In particular, they focus on two major themes: the creation of female spaces or communities and women's appropriation of existing and emergent literary genres. I have

² It is to be remarked that the study of women in the Middle Ages almost immediately showed the way to a overabundance of research on Christian mysticism for the reason that women in this paper were mystics, those who tried to find how to dish up God as well as attain *unio mystica* with God during their existence. In reality researchers made known the roles of women in religion throughout the world. For more details see Sharma and Young's writings on *Women on World Religions* (1987), and *Feminism and World Religions* (1999), Charles H. Long and Joseph Kitagawa's *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives* (2001), Jennifer Lawler's Encyclopedia of Women in the Middle Ages (2001), Katharina M. Wilson and Nadia Margolis *Women in the Middle Ages: An Encyclopedia* (2004) and finally Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (2001) just to name a few.

focused on texts that have a famous autobiographic or literary or intellectual interest, i.e. texts in which women tell how they understand themselves and their world, or construct imaginative worlds of their own.

It is unfortunate to affirm that women religious have often been charged with being neurotics, hysterics, and narcissists whereas males with analogous experiences are hardly ever subject to the same level of criticism. These female mystics have been predominantly made fun of all through the previous centuries and transferred to categorizations of mental illness.³ This paper stresses that a great number of females mystics tried to attain the topmost desire given to them inside the restrictions of their environment, mainly that of amalgamation with God in their life span, and that they followed this aspiration in the course of their practices, understandings, existences, and organizations.

Without a doubt, medieval religious culture promoted the extent of contribution underwent by lots of women, individuals whose mental powers as well as resourceful aptitude were if not limited inside the constraints of those ways of life. It is also claimed that female mystics⁴ could not automatically do with being violent or pathological personality types, and that these women needed to enhance themselves to the uppermost level

³ Theorists like Simone du Beauvoir (1908-1986), Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) and Henri Legrand du Saulle (1830-1886) not hold with female mystics because they behave like mad people who suffering from mental illnesses even when they did not show turbulent signs.

⁴ Teofilo F. Ruiz (2002: 48) states that mystic experience may produce the sensation of emanation which is felt as an upward and outward movement towards oneness with God. Immanence has social dangers in that it may be one of two traditional forms of heresy, that of “autotheism” or the sense that the individual himself is God.

doable, so as to motivate themselves entirely inside the cultural structure of Christian martyrdom and the search meant for spiritual amalgamation with God. In other words this review interprets the personal exercise of activity practised by these women as a result of their abilities to demonstrate the spiritual faith and structures of their times, in particular that of an individual correlation with divinity.

2. The writings of St. Teresa

One of two "Doctors of the Church" named in 1970, 16th century Spanish religious writer Teresa of Avila⁵ entered a convent early, and in her 40s founded her own convent in a spirit of reform, emphasizing prayer and poverty. She wrote rules for her order, works on mysticism, and an Autobiography. Because her grandfather was Jewish, the inquisition was suspicious of her work, and she produced her theological writings to meet demands to show the holy foundations of her reforms.

The writings of St. Teresa's collection of her religious teaching⁶ focused mainly on three major areas: her autobiography, the Way of Perfection, and the Interior Castle. Among her famous writings left, mystical works such as: "*Camino de perfección*" (between 1569-1576), "*Castillo interior*" or "*Las moradas*" (1577) and *Conceptos del amor de Dios* dealt specially with the spiritual world⁷. Besides Theresa wrote also lots of poems and kept an extensive correspondence, of which more than 400 letters were preserved.

⁵ Teresa of Avila (March 28, 1515 - October 4, 1582) who is a Medieval Saint and Reformer, is also a doctor of the Church.

⁶ Teresa, whose position among writers on mystical theology is exceptional, is considered among the leading writers in the *Mystical Literature* of the Catholic Church. She managed to express her private experiences in contemplative prayer [*oración mental*]

⁷ < <http://fr.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?> > [Accessed 10th June 2014].

Her writings were translated within many languages. She expressed her private experiences in contemplative prayer [*oración mental*] and managed to exploit a metaphor of mystic prayer as watering a garden “*I know by frequent experience that there is nothing which puts the devils to flight like holy water.*”⁸ (St Teresa, *The Bookmark of Teresa of Ávila*,) Below is a

SPANISH	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
<p><i>“Nada te turbe, nada te espante, todo se pasa, Dios no se muda La paciencia todo lo alcanza quien a Dios tiene nada le falta solo Dios basta.”⁹</i></p>	<p>[Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing make you afraid. All things are passing. God alone never changes. Patience gains all things. If you have God you will want for nothing. God alone suffices.]¹⁰</p>

short poetic fragment:

In this poem St Teresa expresses her deep religious attitude vis-à-vis human beings. Such position about emptiness stands for the absence of something or of anything specific, or of being nothing.¹¹ The term “All” is an expression whose meaning indicates “The Creator” or “The Supreme Mind” being often described to be the ruler or creator of the universe. It denotes major mystical notions of ultimate reality. It is often characterized as being androgynous, i.e. genderless, possessing both masculine and feminine qualities. It is advisable for human beings to be patient so as to be able to

⁸ St Teresa, *The Bookmark of Teresa of Ávila*.

⁹ Original poem published in Teresa of Avila’s works, Ed. Cerf, p. 1242; Poésies.

¹⁰ “Poem IX”, in *Complete Works St. Teresa of Avila* (1963) edited by E. Allison Peers, Vol. 3, p. 288

¹¹ <http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Teresa_of_Avila> [Accessed 25th May 2014].

put up with delay, or pain without becoming irritated, or to persevere peacefully once confronting troubles.

The historical study of epistolary¹² discourse is an attractive issue in itself as, besides adding to our understanding of earlier period linguistic phases of human being languages, it widely opens a window on the tradition of letter writing and reading of past ages and the socio-cultural authenticity they are rooted in. It offers a very useful way of rebuilding habits of communicating both in the public and the personal areas. From the linguistic diachronic attitude, letter writing is a remarkably pleasing item of study because epistolary discourse is may be the most primeval form of declaration?

The most important part of Teresa's mystical thought all the way all her writings is the liking of the soul in four phases (*The Autobiography* Chs. 10-22)¹³: The first, or “*mental prayer*”, is that of devout contemplation or concentration; the second is the “*prayer of quiet*”, in which at least the human will is lost in that of God by virtue of a charismatic, supernatural state given by God; the “*devotion of union*” is not only a supernatural but an essentially ecstatic state in which there is absorption of the reason in God, and only the memory and imagination are left to ramble; the fourth is the “*devotion of ecstasy or rapture*,” a passive state, in which the feeling of being in the body disappears¹⁴.

3. Women Writers in Later Medieval England

Recently, scholars working on women's writing in Renaissance England have attempted to examine an extensive variety of texts created by women.

¹² Written or expressed in the form of letters

¹³ *The Autobiography* (Chs. 10-22)

¹⁴ *Corinthians 12 : 2-3*

Medieval Women's Writing¹⁵ is a major new contribution to our understanding of women's writing in England (1100-1500). The most comprehensive account to date, includes writings in Latin and French as well as English, and works for and by women. Women such as Marie de France, Clemence of Barking, Julian of Norwich, and the Paston women are discussed in conjunction with the Old English lives of women saints, The Life of Christina of Markyate, and the legends of women saints by Osbern Bokenham. Key questions were about women's written discourse:

- i. Who were the first women authors in the English canon?
- ii. What do we mean by women's writing in the Middle Ages?
- iii. How can studying medieval writing contribute to our understanding of women's literary history?

The nuns of Syon Abbey, were supposed to be existing descriptions of St Bridget and “*reading too was construed as an act of visual perception and reflection*”¹⁶. These nuns’ participation in literate culture was due to the fact that they were recruited from public sections in which book possession by women was accepted. Thus, reading material not only improved and but also lent a hand to the nuns to cope with “*the distinction between their secular, familial experiences and the demands of life in the monastery*”¹⁷. On the whole, one can state that even though women were busy becoming literate during this era, they produced very few literary texts as a

¹⁵ See, for example, the following site for more details
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_the_Middle_Ages>

¹⁶ Krug, R. (2002: 168)

¹⁷ (Ibid: 188)

consequence of men's superiority which denied them from equality of access to education.¹⁸

Womanhood offered a way to explore forms of feminine power, such as intercession and mediation, which can occur in a secular context, but the most established avenues to authority for women were spiritual. Both Teresa De Cartagena and Dayle Seidenspinner-Nunez¹⁹ demonstrated that religious traditions offered practical models and abundant material for women to make claims not only to authority but also to political and social significance.

The first known occurrences of “manhood” in the 1200s and early 1300s, on the other hand, were theological and it was often paired with “godhood” or “godhead” to denote the two aspects of Christ’s nature. “Motherhood” and “fatherhood” came into use later, appearing in the fourteenth century. In both cases, the earliest uses of the terms were religious particularly for women writers; this reimagined concept of motherhood with its connection to the most powerful female spiritual figure provides a model for authority that can be modified in useful ways.

¹⁸ The feminine audience of religious literature concerned for the most part of women religious and laywomen from the nobility and gentry, and, in the fifteenth century, from the business elite. These women created associations that made possible the exchange and sharing of books but attempted to control women's critical responses to the text.

¹⁹ Teresa De Cartagena et Dayle Seidenspinner-Nunez. (1998). *The Writings of Teresa de Cartagena*

4. Women Writers in Arabian Peninsula

Even though most of the pre-Islamic poetry has been in short supply²⁰, the existing part of the packaging contains biographies of thirty-eight women poets, the majority of whom are not referred to in other sources. Scholars claim nowadays that pre-Islamic poetry incorporated incomprehensible poetic diction, broad diversity of subject matter inside the poem itself and persistent allusions to historical occurrences.

The most prevalent and familiar question in the interpretation of Arab women inside the Western-speaking society is that they are revealed as being exploited. Al-Khansa²¹ is without doubt integrated in this discourse. Her works are complex and multifaceted in Arabic but in English translation are made easy in exclusively gendered ways into “esteem” images of the Arab Woman Other. The discourse related to Al-Khansa as a literary figure in Arabic confirms this by converting her from a self-confident, challenging but conservative spokesperson of the Arabic literary standard into a “hysterical” and exceptional Arab woman, who is in be incompatible with the Arab literary tradition. She is also known by the poetic nickname ‘Al Khansa’ standing for ‘the snub-nosed one’, earned and used in her existence. The few narratives that deal with the first part her of life are related to social surroundings in which her linguistic gift and sharp braininess became obvious. It was throughout her adulthood that her

²⁰ The project of gathering together the pre-Islamic poetry and writing it down began only in the eighth century and masterpieces collected were exclusively those of men, a few selection of women’s poetry was included but much of this material has been lost.

²¹ Tumadir bint Amru al-Harith-bint al-Sharid, better recognized as Al-Khansa’, the courageous poetess of the seventh century, famous for her eloquence and open bravery, continues to this day to be a myth in Arabic academic archives.

brothers' death was a sign of the beginning of her poetic vocation, which went on well into the era of Islam.

Medieval sources represent Ah Khansa character like someone who has an outstanding will, a strong personality and competitive spirit. Her godliness stimulated her sons with religious commitment prior to their going into battle in support of Islam. Once four of them passed away, Al Khansa' said on her devotion that they would be given the recompense of martyrs after that she would encounter them in benefitting from compassion after death. A short excerpt from one of her elegies is underneath:

ENGLISH	SPANISH TRANSLATION
<p><i>"The herald of the dead announces the loss-making Of the most generous mean, Sakhr; And he cried it so loud That far and wide he was heard. It wounded me so painfully That in my misery I looked like a drunken person Every morning when I awaken, The first rays of the sun remind me of him And every evening when the sun sets I mourn for him.</i></p>	<p>[<i>"El herald de los muertos anuncia el deficitario Del medio más abundante, Sakhr; Y él gritó él tan ruidosamente Que lo oyeron lejos y de par en par. Me hirió tan doloroso Eso en mi miseria que parecía una persona borracha] Ada mañana cuando despierto, Los primeros rayos del sol me recuerdo él Y cada tarde en que los sistemas del sol Estoy de luto para él.</i></p>

From this genre of women's elegy from the classical period, Al Khansa' was only able to urge her listeners to actions of collective duty regarding the unlucky and deprived, but also could claim for the reputation and merit of her tribe and her family. She is best known for her poems in free verse in which she records thirty years of mourning over Sakhr, with whom it appears that she was very intimate. The small number of narratives that tackled her early life speaks about social circumstances in which her linguistic talent and distinct cleverness turn out to be evident. In all, she continues to be an example of feminine, familial and poetic talent in Arabic literary background.

5. Common Observations

In literary discourse, women writers were resonating their sufferings. Why were women excluded from education? Was gender an acceptable cause? What sorts of literature did they read, and write? It is old-fashioned to speak of 'feminism' in the Middle Ages, but is it reasonable to perceive a 'woman's voice', or an exceptionally female point of view in writing by medieval women? Did women write about equivalent subjects as men? Were they interested in gallantry and fighting? Were there prohibited subjects for women authors? How does this cultural context affect women's writing (and reading)? Much of the surviving writing by women is religious, in particular accounts of mystical visions. It is important nowadays to inquire about the motives which pushed both the Church and patriarchal medieval society to keep a tight rein on or smooth the progress of women's reading and writing?

The women's motivation for writing seems rarely to be for the most part literary: it is often more urgently vital than is widespread among men writers, it is a response springing from inner needs, more than an artistic or

didactic attachment. They were discarding the belief that women's voices are a shame and public humiliation. There is, more often than not in men's writing, absence of apriorism, of prearranged positions; for instance, there are efforts to deal with human difficulties in their specificity, i.e. seeking answers that are fitting and trustworthy existentially- as a result women of the period, "*look at themselves more concretely and more searchingly than many of the highly [gifted] men writers who were their contemporaries. This immediacy can lend women's writing qualities beside which all technical flawlessness is pallid*". Writing, which offered a break from a gender-determined role, became a vehicle for new ideas and models. This pioneering stage in women's writings brought a genuine experimentation for the reason that it not only defends their specific needs but also makes stronger women. It might challenge the patriarchy and be in favor of restructuring within the impenetrable area of the family circle.

While writing about her mystical practice, Teresa puts in plain words to her readers how Alcántara gave support to her in being familiar with her faith "*This holy man enlightened me about everything and explained it to me, and he told me not to be grieved but that I should praise God and be so certain that all was from His Spirit that with the exception of the faith nothing could for me be truer or more believable*".²²

Although religious and vernacular sources helped form her concepts of apophatic or imageless-ness prayer, Teresa could not thoroughly reject the

²² *Life* 30. 5

significance of images in prayer. Teresa was dealing with some very complex spiritual issues that could almost certainly cause the suspicion of conflict. By doing so, Teresa carefully kept away from her descriptions of mental prayer and avoided triggering doubt.

Women played a passionate and active function in all fields of society throughout the Middle Ages, even if these roles have recurrently been disregarded both in education and in common ideas. It is not astonishing that religion offered equal opportunity for all chiefly for women. Women were writing in isolation from the customary literary practice and from each other. One can notice that the place of women in the medieval Church was strangely vital and has been (until very recently) to a certain extent misapprehended. From the beginning of Christianity, religious women were nuns, abbesses, or canonesses. They were fervently praying, teaching, and writing at the same time as their male counterparts did. Lots of these women were in no doubt with the monastic life as it offered both an attractive choice to marriage and a chance to be independent even while dependent on the Church.

Conclusion

Women, in reality and creative writing, have been active and transforming factors. Their writings were less illustrative, less aggressive and maybe as a result less known. Free verse rapidly expanded within the Arab world while men and women teamed up to this innovative literati type. Supporting their feminism is nowadays the opportunity of a further objective for themselves, but a chance for a different type of world in favor of both men as well as women. What is required today is to focus more on to work of art that are relevant to the lives of women rather criticize. For example, neuroscientists'

new tools can be used to investigate the human psyche and computer-assisted imagining machines can determine activity in the brain. This objective of this paper was undertaken in order to add yet another piece to the puzzle of human experience, and to demonstrate how female writers assume positions of innovation in written discourse in a world marked by extreme gender inequality.

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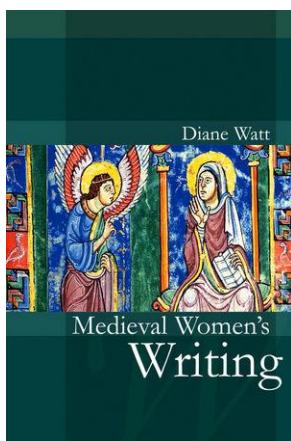
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Appendix



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