

Diane Watt



Medieval Women's  
**Writing**

# Medieval Women's Writing

Works by and for Women in  
England, 1100–1500

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DIANE WATT

polity

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First published in 2007 by Polity Press

Polity Press  
65 Bridge Street  
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press  
350 Main Street  
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-07456-3255-1

ISBN-13: 978-07456-3256-8 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 11.25 on 13 pt Dante  
by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd., Hong Kong  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

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## Acknowledgements

*Medieval Women's Writing* is a book that I have wanted to write for a long time. Years of studying, learning, teaching, listening and conversing lie behind it; the writing was, of course, just the final stage. The debts I have accumulated are so many that it is not possible to acknowledge all of them here. Nevertheless, it is a pleasure to identify some individuals and organizations that have made this book possible. I would like to thank Jocelyn Wogan-Browne for her generous support and encouragement, and Karen Cherewatuk for the help she gave me in the project's earlier stages. Amy Appleford, Ruth Evans and Nicholas Watson shared work with me prior to publication, from which I benefited greatly. For the opportunity to present research that went into this book, I would like to thank Raluca Radulescu, Bob Hasenfratz, Glenn Burger and Steve Kruger, Emma Campbell, Anke Bernau and David Matthews, and Liz Herbert McAvoy and Colman O'Clabaigh. In Fall 2005, I had the good fortune to be awarded the Charles A. Owen, Jr Distinguished Visiting Professorship in Medieval Studies at the University of Connecticut. The graduate class I taught there enabled me to explore some of the ideas in this book with exceptionally motivated and lively students. Special mention must be made of Josh Eyler, Erin Lien, Nadia Pawelchak, Becky Perry and Britt Rothauser. Thanks also to Bob Hasenfratz for inviting me to Connecticut, and for doing so much to make me feel welcome. I should also mention my doctoral students working on medieval literature at Aberystwyth University, past and present, especially Liz Herbert McAvoy, Malte Urban, Robin Gilbank and Janet Gunning. I extend a general thanks to all the Masters and undergraduate students over the years who have shared my love of medieval women's writing, for our lively discussions and for their perceptive and sometimes hilarious observations, which often enabled me to see old texts in a completely new light. I am grateful to the Department of English Literature at Aberystwyth University and the Arts and Humanities Research Council for enabling me to take a year's study leave in 2006, thus making possible the timely completion of this book. I would also like to

thank Sally-Ann Spencer, formerly commissioning editor for literary studies at Polity, for inviting me to write the book in the first place, and especially her successor, Andrea Drugan, for seeing it through to realization with such enthusiasm, patience and professionalism. The anonymous readers for Polity and assessors for the Arts and Humanities Research Council offered engaged, thoughtful and constructive criticism at various stages of this project, from inception to completion. Heike Bauer has been here throughout to discuss ideas, to read and to comment upon my writing, to suggest new perspectives and to offer me much needed reassurance. I can never thank her enough. Patricia Watt has, once again, been a careful reader of my work. Clare A. Lees also read the draft manuscript, made many useful suggestions and was incredibly compassionate in her criticisms. In the final stages of the writing of this book, Clare and I shared many ideas, and, indeed, the afterword arose directly out of one of our conversations. It is through knowing her that I have gained new insights into how collaboration and feminism work, and work together. This book is, therefore, dedicated to Clare.

## A Note on the Texts

In this book, accessibility has been one of my primary concerns. My target audience includes undergraduate students as well as postgraduates and scholars working in the field of medieval English literature, as well as those interested in women's writing in later periods, and in literary history, and specifically feminist literary history. The medieval works I discuss here are written in Latin and French as well as Old and Middle English. I have therefore decided, wherever possible, to quote from my sources in modern English, either using readily available published translations, or providing my own translations or modernizations. However, in order to preserve some sense of the original languages, and to enable some attention to linguistic detail, wherever I quote at length I also provide the original text following the translation. In addition, I quote and discuss the original language in the text of my argument where it is crucial to a specific point that I am making. I have followed these practices whatever the language of the original text because I do not want to imply a linguistic hierarchy or to make any assumptions about the linguistic training of my readers. Only limitations of space have prevented me from quoting in translation *and* in the original languages throughout.

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# Introduction

When did women writers first enter the English literary tradition? This apparently straightforward question is impossible to answer simply because it is the wrong one to ask. Women's writing in the Middle Ages, especially prior to the fourteenth century, remains peripheral not only to conventional masculinist accounts of the literary canon but also to feminist (re-)constructions of *women's* literary history. The relative dearth of texts identifiable as by women and the lack of biographical information about medieval women writers have contributed to this tendency. Other factors include the often religious (and thus 'non-literary') content of surviving works, the problem of writing not in the medium of English, and the question of authorial agency in medieval culture's different models of the relationship between composition and writing. This study, which examines women's writing produced in England, primarily in the period between 1100 and 1500, and written in the three literary languages of the period, Latin, French and English, aims to stand as a corrective. The very existence of a 'tradition' of women's writing in the Middle Ages is still in fact widely contested. This applies especially to the marginalized Anglo-Saxon period, which, although chronologically outside the scope of this study as a whole, is considered in terms of the continuity of influence of the Old English saints' lives and in relation to questions of their reception. Most medieval women's writing was religious in content and so the primary focus here is on devotional texts – specifically saints' lives and visionary and mystical treatises – although more overtly literary works, as well as personal letters, are included. Atypically of studies of women's literary history, women's writing is here interpreted broadly to include both writing *by* women ('women-authored'), such as Marie de France, Clemence of Barking, Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe and the Paston women, and writing *for* and *about* women ('women-oriented'), such as *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, the St Albans Psalter and the legends of women saints by Osbern Bokenham. A central argument of this book is that the drawing of a firm distinction between these types of texts does not necessarily stand up to scrutiny:



that female patrons, audiences, readers and even subjects can contribute to the production of texts and their meanings, whether they be written by men or by women. In other words, only an understanding of medieval textual production as *collaborative* enables us to grasp the nature and extent of women's engagement with and contribution to literary culture.

This introduction addresses two central questions. The first is: What can studies of medieval women's writing contribute to our understanding of women's literary history more broadly; in other words, in what ways can they challenge pre-existing exclusionary paradigms and help to construct new enabling ones? The second question is to what extent medieval notions of 'authorship' are useful when considering women's writing. As we will see in the next section, feminist scholars have made the case for extending the definition of women's writing to include a range of texts not typically considered women-authored. The scope of this book differs somewhat in emphasis in its inclusion of women-oriented texts alongside original compositions by women, translations, compilations and a range of texts that are the product of collaboration between a female 'author' and male secretaries. Furthermore, at the end of the final chapter on the letters of the Paston women, I specifically examine the problems with trying to identify the 'gender' of a narrative voice. Underpinning my selection of authors and texts is the conviction that writing cannot be understood in isolation from its intended and/or actual readership or audience, an audience that for some of these texts may be not exclusively female but male or mixed. In addressing the question of authorship, I explore the ways authors and readers/audience work together to produce meaning. Ultimately the blurring of the distinction between women-authored and women-oriented texts that I trace could be extended to other medieval texts, from conduct books to romances, and to a broader range of devotional material produced for and read by women, including manuscripts and miscellanies known to have been owned by women. Importantly, the insights that emerge from this study might usefully be extended to women's writings of other (earlier and later) periods.

## Women's literary history

Women's literary history, and more specifically the tracing of an *English* tradition of women's writing, has its own history and politics. The starting point for the search for a women's literary history is usually taken to be the publication of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in 1928.<sup>1</sup> In this extended essay, Woolf lamented what she perceived to be the absence of

women writers throughout literary history. The recovery and recuperation of texts authored by women and the controversial attempts to establish an alternative women's canon of English literature are closely associated with Anglo-American feminist writers and critics. Key formative works were (to name only a few): Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, Ellen Moers's *Literary Women*, Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own* and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*.<sup>2</sup> More recent articulations and reformulations of the debate include Janet Todd's *Feminist Literary History*, Margaret J. M. Ezell's *Writing Women's Literary History*, Joan M. Ferrante's *To the Glory of her Sex*, Laurie A. Finke's *Women's Writing in English* and Jennifer Summit's *Lost Property*.<sup>3</sup> Numerous anthologies make available some of the primary texts discussed in these studies: one of the most influential being Gilbert and Gubar's *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*.<sup>4</sup> The first edition of *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* famously characterizes the medieval and Early Modern period as the 'Dark Ages' of 'the female imagination'.<sup>5</sup> Although the earliest of these feminist literary histories do not address women's writing in the early and pre-modern periods, some of the more recent publications make this lacuna the specific focus of attention.

In recent years, a great deal of research has been undertaken successfully to identify female authors and their works and to explore the extent of their impact and influence in their own time. An increasing number of surveys of women's writing extend back to at least the high Middle Ages.<sup>6</sup> Yet as Jennifer Summit has also shown, the notion of the lost female author was, *from the beginning*, an integral part of the conceptualization of the English literature: that at the very point it was first formulated in the later Middle Ages and the Early Modern period, the woman writer, even when highly visible to contemporaries, was already always constructed as absent from the literary tradition. According to Summit:

The idea of the 'lost' woman writer can be traced to the medieval and Early Modern periods, in which 'the woman writer' emerged as a unified cultural category through her perceived opposition to literary tradition. This is not to argue that women writers were thereby removed from literary history – to the contrary, they are present to a surprising degree at the key sites at which 'English literature' is first invented. But they enter these sites as emblems of loss and figures of a literature that tradition fails to enshrine.<sup>7</sup>

Yet Summit's conclusions cannot simply be transported back to even earlier periods where the absence of women writers is even more

pronounced. In a key essay first published before *Lost Property*, Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing argue that both Anglo-Saxon religious historian Bede and twentieth-century Anglo-Saxonists have conspired in their representation of Cædmon's *Hymn* as the 'birth' of English poetry, to exclude completely his patron, Abbess Hild, from this originary narrative.<sup>8</sup> Here the omission of women's involvement in cultural production is the product of 'forgetting' rather than a more symbolic negation, but it is as a result possibly more destructive in its consequences. The 'problem' of women's writing in the earliest eras of the history of writing in England is a very real one, even if here, as in later periods, it is partly a matter of (mis-)perception.

Summit's study, which cuts across the medieval/Early Modern divide, takes as its starting point the latter part of the chronological range covered in this book. The most important aspect of Summit's contribution is that she adds a gendered dimension to our awareness that the construction of the literary canon emerged from a growing sense of a national and linguistic identity. My primary focus here is not, however, on the early construction of the literary canon itself and how women fit into it, but rather on what sort of women's writing and women's engagement in textual production existed in the later medieval period. That is, I am interested in what sort of tradition of women's writing can be traced. My approach is then perhaps pragmatic rather than highly conceptual, but I am also interested in why this tradition is often overlooked, and what an understanding of it might contribute to our understanding of feminist literary history per se. Ezell's ground-breaking work, *Writing Women's Literary History*, offers a nuanced analysis of the ways pre-existing, evolutionary models of women's literary history exclude writing by women produced before the eighteenth century. Ezell makes the case for prioritizing archival research over theorization; in other words, for allowing the theories to arise out of the empirical evidence. She also argues for less restrictive preconceptions about the trajectory of women's literary history and indeed about what counts as women's writing and about the reality of early and pre-modern women's lives, education, levels of literacy, and social isolation and integration. As Ezell points out, we should not assume that women's literary history mirrors that of men, and that the same period and genre boundaries apply. It is crucial that, for the earlier periods, we have more enabling and elastic definitions of authorship (to include pseudonymous, anonymous and collaborative texts), and of literary production (to include privately circulated and uncirculated manuscripts and domestic or household texts as well as more widely disseminated or professionally published works). It is equally

crucial that, while we may legitimately look for an articulation of women's interests, we do not approach women's texts with the expectation or requirement that they will be proto-feminist, politically radical and alienated. In other words, we have to be attuned not solely to similarities and consanguinity but also to differences and discontinuities.

Critics working specifically within the field of medieval women's writing have made parallel claims and constructed similar arguments to those working with material from later periods. In an influential essay entitled '“Mothers to Think Back Through”: Who are They?' Sheila Delaney launches an attack on a strand of criticism that seeks to resurrect Christine de Pizan's reputation as a champion of women and women's rights, rather than to offer an impartial assessment of her privilege and conservatism within her own social and historical context.<sup>9</sup> Disabling stereotypes, not only about the disempowering potential of medieval antifeminist images of women, but also about women's illiteracy, lack of education and cultural isolation – stereotypes that misrepresent those women writers whose existence is acknowledged as necessarily exceptional rather than representative – have been successfully challenged and refuted.<sup>10</sup> Notably, the greater awareness of the need to represent writing in languages other than English for the early period has enabled a better understanding of the range of female-authored texts. A vivid illustration of this is the inclusion of Marie de France in the third edition of the *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (2007). Critics such as Alexandra Barratt, Julia Boffey and Laurie A. Finke have debated questions such as whether certain anonymous texts should be (re-)considered as female-authored, and also whether definitions of what constitutes women's writings in medieval England should extend to translations and compilations by women, and even translations by men of texts authored by women in other languages and cultures.<sup>11</sup> Such approaches can seem essentialist and it is equally crucial that we have a more developed understanding of literary communities and networks and that we acknowledge that women can be involved in literary production in a range of other ways, as scribes and annotators, for example, or as patrons and book-owners. Extending our definitions of women's writing further, as did Carol M. Meale in the early 1990s, to include writing that is produced for and read by women enables a more subtle understanding of women's engagement with medieval literary culture.<sup>12</sup>

This book does not act upon all the recommendations put forward by feminist critics theorizing the early periods of women's literary history, but it does accept their validity. In concentrating primarily on the period 1100–1500, I apply this thinking to an already well-known body of work and do

not challenge accepted definitions of the late medieval period. I do not extend my range of reference into the English Renaissance, even though the applicability of the medieval/Early Modern divide to women's history is one that I have questioned elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> Equally, although reference is made in this book to Anglo-Saxon work, I do not attempt to address fully the specific problems for women's literary history raised by writing in Old English. Indeed it is perhaps a particular limitation of this study that it only partially engages with the already marginalized Anglo-Saxon period. This is an area that has already been considered by Lees and Overing in *Double Agents*, but it is important to see this work as only a starting point. Whereas, according to the *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, there are 'no texts in the Old English period that have been definitively identified as composed by women', Lees and Overing are more circumspect, observing that 'texts written by women are few and far between'.<sup>14</sup> Their analysis, which looks at Latin texts, including letters, historical records and legal documents, alongside Old English texts such as saints' lives and riddles, is theoretically and methodologically distinct from but nevertheless broadly complementary to my own. Due to the scale of the project undertaken, this study does not attempt to offer a fully comprehensive survey of the entire range of writing by and for women in Middle English, or in the late medieval period, or of women's engagement with manuscript and book cultures more generally. Notable omissions from this book are anonymous texts for which an argument of female authorship can be made, and translations by men of works of Continental women writers – specifically Christine de Pizan (c.1364–c.1431), who was popular in England in the century after her death, but from the evidence seems to have been particularly widely read by men.<sup>15</sup> Also excluded is Joan of Arc (1412–31), who certainly has strong connections with English culture. Indeed this book as a whole is largely and self-consciously insular in its scope. While it is crucial, for example, that we should not ignore the debts the English women visionaries owe to Continental European mystics, these have hitherto been emphasized at the expense of exploring specifically English traditions. But a focus on the English tradition has its casualties. Two English women translators who are not discussed, but whose existence and works must be acknowledged, are Eleanor Hull (c.1394–1460) and Lady Margaret Beaufort, countess of Richmond and Derby (1443–1509). The former was a pious gentlewoman who served in the household of Henry IV before retiring to a religious community. She translated two French devotional works (a meditation on the days of the week and a commentary on the Psalms) into English prose. The latter was mother to the future Henry VII. She trans-

lated part of Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* and the *Speculum Aureum* or *Mirror of Gold*. Margaret Beaufort was deeply engaged in humanist scholarship and extended her patronage to John Fisher, bishop of Rochester, and the two early printers, William Caxton and Wynkyn de Worde.

Constraints of space have meant that I have also not been able to include one of the most well-known and widely studied Middle English texts written for women, *Ancrene Wisse* or 'The Guide for anchoresses'. Also excluded from consideration are the works (*Hali Meidhad* or 'Holy Virginity', and *Sawles Warde* or 'The Custody of the Soul') which, together with the legends of Katherine, Margaret and Juliana, make up the 'Katherine Group', and a related set of texts known as the 'Wooing Group'. *Ancrene Wisse*, for example, vividly illustrates the importance audience plays in the composition and revision of a text. Originally written for three female recluses, it clearly addresses them and their situation (although it is fascinating to consider what it misses out, as well as what it includes). Subsequently the work was altered for a larger community, and versions of the text exist which are aimed at readerships quite different from that originally inscribed or implied. *Hali Meidhad* ('Holy Virginity'), and *Sawles Warde* ('The Custody of the Soul') share the spiritual concerns of *Ancrene Wisse*, especially its advocacy of almost complete withdrawal from the world, self-discipline and moderation. Questions that emerge are to what extent these texts actually would have appealed to and catered for real women, and to what extent they might be constrained by their inherent antifeminism (for which they are indebted to their Latin sources and models). The lyrical treatises on the love of God that make up the 'Wooing Group' provide us with further and rather different examples of the sort of devotional works that female recluses would have read, and that would have provided inspiration for their contemplative practices. Discussion of texts such as these would strengthen rather than undermine the arguments I put forward here. But while this study makes no claims to be definitive or exhaustive, what it does is offer a broader understanding of women's writing of the period in general and a detailed analysis of the specific (already widely studied and thus in some sense canonical) writers and texts under discussion.

## Medieval women as authors?

The biographical and personal nature of, for example *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, *The Book of Margery Kempe* and the Paston letters, provides



us with a wealth of information about the lives of some of the women in this book. This information is sometimes, although not always, supported and supplemented by surviving historical records. Yet many of the women in this study, including Clemence of Barking and Julian of Norwich, remain elusive figures. Marie de France is another case in point, and it is useful to examine the arguments surrounding this figure in order to explore more fully the issue of female authorship. The only evidence external to the manuscripts of 'Marie's' poems that supports her existence comes from her contemporary Denis Piramus. Writing around 1180 in the court of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine, Piramus talks about the popularity of the *lais* of 'Lady Marie' amongst its men and women, which cause great praise to be heaped on her.<sup>16</sup> Various theories about Marie's identity have been proposed: one popular one is that Marie was the illegitimate daughter of Geoffrey Plantagenet, count of Anjou, and thus Henry II's half-sister. This Marie was born in France and was abbess of Shaftesbury between 1181 and 1216, and her life seems compatible with Marie de France's writings and vice versa. Three works are generally attributed to Marie de France: the *Lais*, the *Fables* and *Saint Patrick's Purgatory*. Her authorship of a fourth, an early thirteenth-century French translation of the Latin *Life of St Audrey* is widely contested.<sup>17</sup> However, it is important to remember that doubt remains not only over Marie's identity but also about whether even the first three works were all written by the same woman.

This enduring doubt is a key point: Marie de France might usefully be thought of in terms of what Michel Foucault has called an *author-function*. According to Foucault, the author is a function of discourse which 'permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others'.<sup>18</sup> Certainly, the 'discovery' of Marie de France coincides with the emergence of the idea of the 'literary' author that Foucault traces back to the Early Modern period.<sup>19</sup> It is as if Marie de France were *invented* to fulfil a need for a specifically female author at this transitional moment in literary history; certainly, her 'discovery' seems rather fortuitous. But to think about Marie de France in terms of the author-function rather than as an author is not necessarily any more constructive than to dwell on doubts about her authenticity without any firm evidence to support the case against it. In an important response to Roland Barthes's 1968 essay 'The Death of the Author', in which Barthes famously called for a focus on the reader rather than the author, Nancy Miller makes the following claim:

The postmodern decision that the Author is Dead and the subject with him does not, I will argue, necessarily hold for women, and prematurely forecloses the question of agency for them.<sup>20</sup>

Miller goes on to observe that because 'women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production, that men have had' their relationship to textuality and authority is itself necessarily distinct.<sup>21</sup> From the perspectives of current feminist criticism and of women's literary history as it is constructed today, with its dearth of early women writers, the need for the *named* female author – whether Marie de France, Clemence of Barking, Julian of Norwich or Margery Kempe – necessarily remains very much alive. Yet, as Summit puts it, 'the modern idea of the author as a single, creative individual holds limited relevance for medieval textual culture . . . and limited application to the writings of medieval women'.<sup>22</sup> I will argue below that our definitions of women authors and women writers needs to be flexible enough to embrace a whole range of possibilities in terms of textual production, including translation, compilation, collaboration (especially in relation to visionary and devotional writing and hagiography) and patronage. In this respect our definitions need to extend far beyond the author-function described by Foucault. Thus, for example, while Foucault suggests that letters do not have an author, in the sense of an author-function, it is imperative that any study of medieval women's writing should be wide-ranging enough to include correspondence such as that of the Paston women.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, in all of these cases, the role of the reader remains crucial.

If the idea of the author also has a history and a politics, then understanding what the author and authority meant in the Middle Ages and how these concepts related to women is essential. The criteria of originality that is so central to post-Romantic definitions had no relevance to medieval definitions of authorship, quite the contrary. God was considered the ultimate *author* or *auctor*, and the Bible was the source of all written authority or *auctoritas*. Author could also mean 'writer' but it was associated with the classical writers and the patriarchs of the Church, in other words with writers and thinkers of long ago, who were inevitably male.<sup>24</sup> Anonymous medieval texts were often ascribed (and those by known writers were often re-ascribed) to such august figures from the often distant past. Similarly medieval writers gained credibility for their own work by positioning it in relation to ancient authorities. Paradoxically women writers, such as Julian of Norwich or Margery Kempe in the book of her life, who were excluded



from authority because of their sex were, as visionaries, also able to appropriate authority for their work by claiming that it was the product of divine inspiration. Julian of Norwich declared in her *Vision*: 'But because I am a woman must I therefore believe that I must not tell you of the goodness of God, when I saw at the same time that it is His will that it should be known?'<sup>25</sup> Indeed, writers of other kinds of religious and devotional texts, such as Clemence of Barking in her translation of the *Life of St Catherine* or Marie de France in *Saint Patrick's Purgatory* defer to God in order to justify their texts.

Even male medieval scholars, poets and writers did not see themselves as authors but described themselves as lesser figures, as scribes, compilers and commentators.<sup>26</sup> One named late medieval male writer whose work is examined in this book, Osbern Bokenham, introduces his *Legends of Holy Women* in the conventional terms of the academic prologue tradition. At the same time he situates himself in relation to other medieval writers (in Latin and in English), including most famously, Geoffrey Chaucer, and also, I argue, John Gower. Nevertheless, Bokenham's collection of female saints' lives is of course a work of compilation. Clearly this does not mean that Bokenham's work lacks what we would now call originality. Indeed, it is exactly because the hagiographic genre is so formulaic that the innovations made by an individual writer become noteworthy. Bokenham's input is evidenced not only in his prologues but also in the choice of lives (some of which reflect the choice of his patrons) and the retelling of the lives themselves. The medieval definition of the writer as compiler was one that could be fairly readily appropriated by women (more so than that of the role of commentator, with its explicit or implicit assumption of clerical learning). Marie de France, for example, represents her *Lais* and *Fables* as compilations, at least in part. As such, Marie's poems are the articulation of the memories, words and texts of others. Tellingly, the *Lais* are described by Marie in her Prologue to the Harley manuscript as based on her recollection of *lais* she had heard, which were themselves 'composed' by others 'to perpetuate the memory of adventures they had heard';<sup>27</sup> in other words they are memories of memories. The *Purgatory* even incorporates the voices and memories of the dead. Yet this does not necessarily make Marie's poems derivative and lacking innovation or what we would now think of as originality. Julian of Norwich, in her earlier *Vision Showed to a Devout Woman*, depicts her role as that of compiler, bringing together the revelations that God had granted her. However, in her later *Revelation of Love* she is far more assertive, offering her own extended commentaries on and interpretations of her showings, although these also she ascribes to divine grace.