

Katherine Kong, *Lettering the Self in Medieval and Early Modern France*. Gallica 17. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010. viii + 275 pp. index. bibl. \$105. ISBN: 978-1-84384-231-6.

Lettering the Self marks the latest entry in the Gallica series published under the Brewer imprint. For a series that has primarily published studies examining more traditional genres of medieval French literature, this new volume dedicated to medieval and early modern letters presents a rich examination of French epistolography and addresses a critical yet frequently overlooked aspect of medieval writing.

Ambitious in its breadth, Kong's study is organized into five chapters, with each chapter's analysis dedicated to a set of epistolary exchanges read within its cultural and intellectual context. Beginning with the early medieval period and proceeding chronologically, her discussion includes the twelfth-century correspondence of Baudri of Bourgueil and Constance of Angers followed by that of Heloise and Abelard; the fifteenth-century debate letters arising from Christine de Pisan's participation in the *querelle du Roman de la rose*; and, representing the early modern period, Marguerite de Navarre's correspondence with Guillaume Briçonnet and Michel de Montaigne's with Étienne de La Boétie.

Framing Kong's discussion of these letter sets are three fundamental research questions: "What was a medieval letter? How do we read it? What might it tell us about the medieval self?" (10). In exploring these questions, Kong argues that while the seemingly rigid dictaminal prescripts outlined in medieval *ars dictaminis* structured the form and stylistics of correspondents' letters, it also enabled them to experiment with, challenge, and, in some cases, transform the socially determined subject positions ascribed to them. In analyzing Baudri's and Constance's amorous verse epistles, Kong describes how these writers engaged in a form of epistolary play, adopting different epistolary scripts and registers in ways that exemplify the flexibility and creative possibilities of the epistolary genre to disrupt scripted positions and forge new ones. Likewise, in Abelard and Heloise's exchanges, we witness how the apparently perfunctory salutation comes to signal the changing contours of their social relationship and how their messages effect, over time, an inner spiritual and emotional transformation.

Kong also examines how writers could achieve an agency and authority not easily accessible via their publicly assigned roles. Analyzing Christine de Pisan's *L'Épître au dieu d'Amours*, the *querelle du Roman de la rose*, and her petitionary letters to the Queen of France, Kong illustrates how Christine strategically enlists

the legitimizing effects of the epistolary genre and its conventions. By exploiting the epistolary scripts and gendered subject positions available to her through letters, Christine successfully introduces an epistolary voice that authenticates her authority as a writer while simultaneously challenging gendered stereotypes and advancing her anti-misogynist agenda.

Where the first three chapters evidence how letters could be used to present alternative representations of the self, the remaining chapters examine how correspondents used their letters to cultivate spiritual and social experiences. Through her close reading of Marguerite's correspondence with Guillaume, Kong traces how what originates as Marguerite's search for spiritual quietude evolves into a form of spiritual practice, motivating an intellectual and meditative consideration of the inner self. In a similar vein, Kong demonstrates how Montaigne's celebrated friendship with de La Boétie was experienced, constituted, and cultivated through letter-writing. In both cases, Kong traces how the epistolary form and themes examined in the early letters of these two sixteenth-century humanist writers would shape the poetics and topoi of later literary projects, most notably Marguerite's monumental *Heptaméron* and Montaigne's famous essay "De L'Amitié."

In responding to the framing questions Kong poses, this book achieves what it sets out to do. My only concern is with how it introduces as new the argument that medieval and early modern letter-writers strategically used epistolary convention and scripts to heighten their message's rhetorical effect. Those scholars examining the rhetorical and discursive elements of early modern English letters (e.g., James Daybell, Lynne Magnusson, and Frank Whigham to name but a few) have already begun to illustrate how male and female letter-writers creatively employ epistolary scripts to mitigate differences of gender, power, and status to achieve their rhetorical ends. Some acknowledgement of this existing scholarship at the outset would better situate this study and underscore how its findings contribute to this established and engaging conversation.

What is new and valuable about Kong's work, however, is how she illuminates the impact of epistolary writings on the formation and expression of agency and selfhood. By analyzing the epistolary output of featured writers in the context of their more publicly recognized literary writings, she highlights the literary value of these letters as forums in which writers experimented with the dialogism of letters to explore a diverse range of subjectivities, voices, and issues. For scholars working in the area of medieval women's writing, Kong's study also demonstrates women's creative engagement with and development of the epistolary genre for personal and political ends. As a whole, this study not only brings to light an often neglected realm of French literary culture but also offers new insights into medieval epistolarity and the performativity of letters in expressing the pre-modern self.

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