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Katherine Kong, *Lettering the Self in Medieval and Early Modern France*. Woodbridge, U.K. and Rochester, N.Y.: D. S. Brewer, 2010. vii + 275 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$105.00 U.S. (hb) ISBN: 978-1-84384-231-6.

Review by E. Bruce Hayes, University of Kansas.

In *Lettering the Self in Medieval and Early Modern France*, Katherine Kong offers the latest exploration of the medieval and early modern epistolary tradition, a rich field of scholarship that has developed considerably over the past two decades and focuses on such issues as gender, performance, and the construction of identity through the medium of the epistolary genre. Contributions range from Elizabeth Goldsmith's important collection of essays, *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature* to the more recent volume *Women's Letters across Europe, 1400-1700: Form and Persuasion*, edited by Jane Couchman and Ann Crabb.^[1] Kong's project is an ambitious one, as she undertakes on her own to examine a period of almost five centuries, from the early twelfth to the late sixteenth centuries.^[2] Taking on such a vast array of letter writers is admirable, and she backs this up with fine close readings of both Latin and French texts. Other than the lesser known correspondence between Baudri of Bourgueil and Constance of Angers (chapter one), all of the other writers whose letters she analyzes are canonical: Abelard and Heloise (chapter two), Christine de Pizan (chapter three), Marguerite de Navarre and Guillaume Briçonnet (chapter four), and Montaigne and La Boétie (chapter five). This requires familiarity with a vast body of scholarship, in addition to the wealth of primary sources Kong investigates. I confess that I am better placed to comment on Kong's work on Marguerite and Montaigne than on the medieval authors she is looking at, a problem encountered by many scholars in an age of specialization where one struggles to keep abreast of scholarship in a single field, let alone the multiple fields at play in Kong's work.

Kong's study begins with a survey of the *ars dictaminis*, the "highly rule-bound medieval discipline of letter writing" (p. 2). It is her contention that "despite its prescriptive nature, the *ars dictaminis* actually invited experimentation...rules invite play and transgression" (p. 10). This highlights a key argument of *Lettering the Self*: letter writing is presented as a type of performance that provides a certain amount of agency for women to construct an identity and participate in intellectual exchanges. This leads to an assertion, frequently made by scholars of medieval and early modern studies, that these acts of transgression lead to "distinct ways of thinking about the self" (p. 10). Kong also emphasizes the "quasi-public" nature of letters which provided women the chance to participate in public discourse from which they would otherwise be banned. There is no question that women played a central role in the development of the epistolary genre, as it was one of the only forms in which they were permitted to express themselves.

Because these female writers were so "rule-bound," the scholar's burden is to tease out extremely subtle acts of transgression in an attempt to show how conventions were challenged in this highly conventional genre. Kong demonstrates a careful, studied approach in her examination of these texts. At times, this caution leaves the reader wishing that Kong would push her investigation further in describing what exactly is changing in these epistolary

performances. Still, *Lettering the Self* provides the reader with a wealth of examples coupled with judicious analysis.

The first two chapters of *Lettering the Self* deal with monastic exchanges, the first between the lesser-known Baudri of Bourgueil and Constance of Angers, he a bishop and she a nun, and the second between the renowned tragic couple, Abelard and Heloise. In each instance of epistolary exchange, the male takes the lead in the correspondence, but what captures Kong's attention is the paradox of the delicately forceful ways in which these women respond to their male counterparts. While obliged to show deference and demonstrate humility, both because of gender hierarchies and the conventions of epistolary exchange, these women are still able to create space for themselves in which they subtly attack existing conventions. As Kong explains, "letters become a field of unexpected, if limited, agency for women" (p. 42). Refusing to "answer in kind," these women dispute claims and make demands of their own. Kong's focus is on the performative aspect of these letters, a specific medium that allowed an "exercise of voice [by female writers]...setting the stage for increasingly greater exercises of authority" (p. 52).

An example of a greater exercise of authority is to be found in Christine de Pizan's epistles, most famously in the role she played in the debate over the merits of the *Roman de la Rose*, a debate that took place from 1401 to 1403. Kong also discusses briefly Pizan's *Epistre au dieu d'Amours* and *Epistre a la royne*, but Pizan's participation and performance in the *Rose* debate are the most compelling aspects of this chapter. Kong focuses on the ways that Christine de Pizan "draws attention to her status as a woman and employs it to gain leverage, claim a questionable humility, silence her detractors, authorize her claims, and stage a specific writing persona" (p. 126). In criticizing the blatant misogyny of the *Rose*, Christine is engaging in a gendered self-fashioning that draws attention to her position as a woman, one that is decidedly paradoxical, as she portrays herself both as a weak woman and a learned reader, an unskilled rhetorician and an accomplished writer. Kong maintains that Pizan uses her gender strategically and that the complex identity construction contained in her letters ultimately points to a new valuation and understanding of the self.

Kong next turns her attention to the important correspondence between Marguerite de Navarre and Guillaume Briçonnet, maintaining that "Marguerite's participation in this epistolary collaboration shaped her later writing" (p. 153). While traditionally scholars have viewed this correspondence as Briçonnet providing Marguerite with spiritual guidance, Kong is more interested in the "collaborative nature of their correspondence" (p. 181). As she notes, Marguerite's initial request for help from Briçonnet is mitigated by two imposing hierarchies which would have rendered a face-to-face exchange nearly impossible, notably gender and social position, with each correspondent occupying a different position in these categories. Whether these powerful hierarchies could be navigated only through the medium of letter writing is perhaps not entirely evident, although it is certainly true that the epistle format allows additional time and space with which to negotiate the requirements of gender and class. Again, Kong is drawn to the paradoxical side of the correspondence, as both writers exchange familial metaphors, acting as both parent and child, roles they claim both for themselves and for the other. After a brief and somewhat incongruous digression into Marguerite's poem, *Dialogue en forme de vision nocturne*, Kong returns to her central contention that Marguerite's letter writing shapes her entire writing career. These letters are clearly of great value to Marguerite, possibly an important source for her writing and very likely for her religious beliefs.

While the rest of *Lettering the Self* centers on male-female exchange, with a particular emphasis on the strategies women use to navigate the hierarchical and gendered conventions of letter writing to find increased agency and authority, it is somewhat surprising that this study concludes with the male friendship and epistolary exchange, such as it is, between Montaigne

and La Boétie. Situating this famous friendship in the medieval epistolary tradition is not without certain challenges. First, there is no direct epistolary exchange between the two friends, although Kong sets one up with La Boétie's verse epistles on the nature of friendship dedicated to Montaigne, followed some twenty years later, long after La Boétie's death, with Montaigne's response in the *Essais*. Kong's argument here is, in part, rather bold: "Montaigne's development of the *Essais* is deeply influenced by this friendship [with La Boétie] and the epistolary genre. More than being a means to express their friendship...the letter is a means for its very existence" (p. 191). Her first assertion is unquestionably true and well-documented, but saying that the epistolary genre is essential to the existence of this friendship is less evident. Stating that their friendship is "a relationship that is first and foremost textual" (p. 231) is not the same as saying that it is primarily epistolary. Are all exchanges of texts to be viewed as epistolary? Perhaps, but this is not an obvious conclusion to reach, and there are moments in this chapter where it feels like the author is reaching, such as the assertion that "La Boétie's letter-poems define friendship as...above all, epistolary" (p. 212). Finally, Kong's exploration of La Boétie's and Montaigne's misogynistic and male-centered conception of friendship would have benefited from Gary Ferguson's provocative study of "De l'amitié." [3]

Lettering the Self in Medieval and Early Modern France presents an ambitious project that relatively few would dare, taking on canonical and lesser-known writers spanning a period of almost half a millennium. Kong is at her best when doing close textual readings where her careful attention to word choice, verb usage, syntax and rhetoric leads to interesting insights about these letters, many of which have previously been studied extensively. She concludes that "the goal of this study has been to interrogate some of the structures shaping the composition of letters—language, rhetoric, genre, and the conventions of epistolary practice—and how they are used to express what for lack of a better term might be called a self" (p. 235). Self-fashioning, agency, and performance, all within the context of gender identification and the epistolary genre, form the central areas of investigation in this study. It represents a useful contribution to medieval and early modern studies, as well as gender and performance studies. Kong is to be applauded for her careful scholarship and solid erudition.

NOTES

[1] Elizabeth Goldsmith (ed.), *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature* (Boston, Mass.: Northeastern University Press, 1989); Jane Couchman and Ann Crabb (eds.), *Women's Letters across Europe, 1400-1700: Form and Persuasion* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate Press, 2005).

[2] As Kong notes, the approximate date of the correspondence between Baudri of Bourgueil and Constance of Angers is 1096–1106, while the first edition of Montaigne's *Essais* was published in 1580.

[3] Gary Ferguson, *Queer (Re)Readings in the French Renaissance* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate Press, 2008). Kong does reference Ferguson's article, "Perfecting Friendship: Montaigne's Itch," *Montaigne Studies* 9(1997): 105–120, in a footnote.

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