Were there women authors in the Middle Ages? The answer depends on which term we consider to be in question, ‘women’ or ‘author’. The burden of proof has long rested on the former, following the assumption that medieval authors were exclusively men. Accordingly, nearly every major work believed to have been written by a medieval woman – including the letters of Heloise, The Book of Margery Kempe, and many works by Christine de Pizan – has at various times been attributed to a male author. More recently, however, the term ‘author’ itself has come into question, as some scholars have asked whether authorship – at least in its familiar, modern sense – could be said to have existed in the Middle Ages at all. The author holds a privileged status in literary studies; more than simply a work’s writer, the author carries an ideological function as the figure around whom ideas about literary tradition, authority, and creativity are organized. Yet what counts as an author has been historically variable.¹ The idea that authors were the sole originators of their texts is a relatively recent one, supplanting earlier models that invested those origins in divine or historically remote sources; likewise, the modern idea of the author as a single, creative individual holds limited relevance for medieval textual culture, in which many texts were collaborative, anonymous, or adopted as common property. Those who study literature by medieval women find themselves facing a critical quandary: is it possible to speak of medieval women authors if the ‘author’ did not exist in the Middle Ages?

This chapter will argue that it is, but not under modern definitions of the author as an original, self-expressive individual, which have limited application to the writings of medieval women. The often collaborative nature of medieval textual production makes it difficult to assign sole responsibility for a text or texts to individual women, while the notoriously unstable conventions of naming in medieval manuscripts belie modern efforts to identify female authors by name; the author we know as Marie de France, for example, never actually names herself as such, and it is unclear whether a single
woman wrote all of the works attributed to her. Rather than indicating that there were no female authors, such conditions indicate the need for an understanding of authorship that can take into account the range of medieval women’s authorial activities. To this end, it is first necessary to revise the question with which we began, to ask instead: in what sense was authorship understood to exist in the Middle Ages, and to what extent could the concept apply to women?

What is a medieval author?

Authorship held a variety of meanings in the Middle Ages within different institutional and cultural contexts. In scholastic settings, medieval grammarians employed the term *auctor* as a marker of doctrinal authority, signifying an ancient theologian or approved classical writer who commanded deference and obedience. The *auctor*’s status emerged through a system that linked *auctoritas*, authority, to tradition, defined as a stream of continuous influence by its root *tradere*, to pass on. This is the understanding of the *auctor* to which Christine de Pizan refers in the well-known opening of *The Book of the City of Ladies*, when, reading in her study, she envisions ‘a series of authors’ (‘moult grant foyson de autteur[s]’) who appear to her ‘like a gushing fountain’ (‘comme se fust une fontaine resourdant’). This fountain of authors derives its authority not from originality but from an affiliation with the past that renders individual authors virtually indistinct from one another. In medieval literature, the fountain has a long history representing tradition as an inexhaustible source that flows through individual writers. But as well as offering a powerful image of *auctoritas*, the scene in Christine’s study also marks the distance between the *auctor* and the living writer. For while the ‘autteurs’ in Christine’s vision are joined through the force of tradition, no living writer could hope to attain equivalent status or authority. Chaucer, for example, frequently uses the term ‘auctor’ to refer to his sources, but he never applies it to himself, assuming instead the more humble role of the ‘maker’, or ‘compiler’. So too Christine finds herself ‘stupefied’ (‘comme personne en etargie’) by the fountain of authors, but hardly inspired or invited to join their exalted ranks herself.

The contrast between the ancient *auctor* and the living writer is visible in the relation each bears to the actual, material practices of writing. The *auctor* as pictured in Christine’s vision of the ‘foyson de autteur[s]’ is abstracted from the material realities of writing; his authority has no beginning or end and appears to stand outside of time. For living writers, in contrast, the act of writing was bound up in the wider social and historical networks of
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patronage, scribal reproduction and circulation. Those networks undermine the apparent autonomy of the auctor, by revealing that literary works owe their survival less to the continuous influence of a disembodied tradition than to the human acts and accidents that govern their reproduction and circulation at every stage of their history. By the same token, no medieval writer could unilaterally declare him- or herself to be an auctor without the support of the multiple agents and acts of textual transmission through which writing gained cultural authority.

Where a writer like Chaucer continually registers his distance from the auctores because he writes in the vernacular rather than Latin, the position of outsider is heightened for Christine because, as a woman, she is excluded from the scholastic institutions of literacy and learning through which the auctores emerged. Yet, as Christine’s example shows, women could and did achieve high levels of literacy despite that exclusion. While Christine surpassed the literacy of most medieval women, a growing body of research indicates that female literacy in the Middle Ages was more common, and assumed a greater variety of forms, than has been previously imagined. The medieval definition of literacy measured only the ability to read Latin, and was therefore restricted to the clergy. Yet many medieval women could be considered ‘quasi-literate’: they may have known little Latin while attaining a high degree of facility in the vernacular.5 The evidence for female literacy and literate practice, however, has been easy to overlook. At a time when the use of scribes or secretaries was a measure of social status, the fact that many women did not write in their own hands does not reflect their illiteracy or literary marginality. Indeed, women who did not compose texts in their own hands nonetheless had a variety of means at their disposal to register their creative influence on textual culture. The search for medieval women’s writing unearths a range of literate forms and practices that existed outside the schools and their models of auctoritas, but held cultural significance nonetheless.

When we speak of medieval women and authorship, then, we need to draw a distinction between scholastic accounts of auctoritas and actual practices of medieval authorship, which fall outside the definitions of both the scholastic auctor, as rooted in a timeless tradition, and the modern ‘author’, as a self-expressive individual and original creator. While scholastic definitions of the auctor generally excluded women both ideologically and institutionally, medieval authorship, understood as a range of acts and cultural practices, extended more widely across social and gender boundaries than has been previously appreciated. Yet the very diffuseness of medieval literacy and its texts also makes the positive identification of female authors extremely challenging.
The problem of the signature

Medieval books themselves often impede the identification of individual authors, since the author’s name – today taken to be the very marker of authorial identity and individuality – was commonly lost or ignored. Many texts circulated under authorial names that were patently false, often less through carelessness than through the efforts of scribes, translators, and compilers to establish a text’s auctoritas. Vernacular texts showed particular vulnerability to being reassigned to the more authoritative auctores of the Latin past: for example, the work of Richard de Fournival appeared under the name Ovid, while that of Guillaume de Conches appeared as the work of the Venerable Bede. Such false attributions show that the author’s name was not seen as a ‘signature’ – if by this we understand a marker of individuality that stands outside the text and guarantees its authenticity by connecting it to a biographical person. Rather, it became a textual attribute that could be manipulated in order to support particular claims about works’ social status. Gender was one of the attributes of authorship open to such manipulation. Christine de Pizan worried that her work would be reassigned to men, as indeed it was in early printed editions. But it is worth noting that while her name is erased from editions of her works on such masculine genres as politics and war, it is allowed to stand in contemporary editions of The Treasure of the City of Ladies, a work of advice for women, suggesting that literary topics elicited differing expectations about the author’s gender, which in turn influenced the attribution of those works. While modern literary criticism has prepared us to read the female signature as a marker of authenticity, the example of Christine de Pizan shows that signatures were liable to be treated like any other part of the text, and thus, like the title, illustrations, or chapter headings, were open to manipulation.

Even when it does survive, a female signature does not guarantee female authorship; rather, it can demonstrate how difficult it is to assign works to individual writers on the basis of textual evidence, as is the case with the lyric compilation known as the Findern Manuscript. On its pages appear several female signatures which, together with the fact that numerous lyrics seem to issue from a female perspective, lend the impression of female authorship. Yet it has proved impossible to link the signatures with the lyrics as authors or even scribes: they might be the names of the manuscripts’ readers, or even names left by others practising their handwriting in the books’ margins. Like many medieval signatures, they raise more questions than they answer.
A related challenge is the fact that large numbers of medieval texts are anonymous, circulating with no name at all. Many of these, like the Findern lyrics, appear to issue from a female perspective or ‘voice’: such is the case with the longstanding genre of Frauenlieder, women’s songs, which include Anglo-Saxon works like The Wife’s Lament and Wulf and Eadwacer and lyrics like ‘Ich war ein chint so wolgetan’ (‘I was a maiden so lovely’) in the well-known collection, Carmina Burana. We can only speculate about whether or not these texts may have been written by women, as several readers have done to highly suggestive ends. But despite our modern desire to assign texts to single, named authors, it is also important to recognize that medieval anonymity was seen not as a lack of authorship, but as a form of authorship with cultural value in its own right. Anonymous female-voiced texts demonstrate that in the Middle Ages, the indeterminacy of authorial gender was not seen as a problem to be definitively solved – rather, it was part of a sophisticated literary game. To describe this condition, Laurie Finke coins a useful term, ‘epicene writers’, in order to describe ‘a third term which is not a category or sex in itself, but a space of possibility that puts sexual identity into play’. An example of such ‘epicene writing’ might be glimpsed in a poem preserved in Cambridge University Library, a love lament that is recorded in both male and female pronouns, encouraging its reader to explore how its meaning changes when gender is reversed. The literary culture responsible for such a poem reveals itself to be highly self-aware of the problems that anonymous authorship raises for interpretation, particularly around questions of gender. In anonymous texts such as these, the act of writing is not an expression of individual identity or selfhood, the hallmarks of modern authorship; to the contrary, it produces a space where identity and selfhood – along with the signs of gender that they carry – are suspended.

Visionary women: authors by negation

The most dramatic examples of writing as a suspension, rather than assertion, of selfhood come in the work of medieval women visionaries. Faced with the challenge of expressing divine messages, the visionary writer establishes her authority on the basis of her self-effacement, in order to show that her writing issues not from her individual consciousness but from a heavenly source. The twelfth-century German visionary and abbess Hildegard of Bingen develops a metaphorical language for expunging the signs of her selfhood from her writing, picturing herself as a passive instrument through
which God’s message could sound, ‘like a trumpet, which only returns a sound but does not function unassisted, for it is Another who breathes into it that it might give forth a sound’.\textsuperscript{11} Just as Hildegard attempted to write herself out of her work, later visionaries called on a similar language of self-negation: the French visionary Marguerite Porete sought what she called a ‘vie adnientie’, or the ‘annihilated life’, while the Swedish visionary St Bridget is described by her spiritual director as ‘alyenat fro hir self rapt in spirit’.\textsuperscript{12} Such self-annihilation became a common idiom for visionary writers and was used even by men like Richard Rolle and Meister Eckhart. But for women writers, a culturally available language of female humility and debasement adapted itself readily to this selflessness, as Rolle and Eckhart acknowledge by borrowing feminine language and gestures to describe their own visionary experience.\textsuperscript{13} For the German beguine writer Mechthild von Magdeburg, femininity became proof of divine inspiration: the very improbability that ‘a frail woman [would] write this book out of God’s heart and mouth’ establishes that ‘this book has come lovingly from God and does not have its origins in human thought’.\textsuperscript{14} Thus Mechthild stresses her femininity in order to disclaim any literary agency at all: ‘I do not know how to write, nor can I, unless I see with the eyes of my soul and hear with the ears of my eternal spirit and feel in all the parts of my body the power of the Holy Spirit.’\textsuperscript{15} The thirteenth-century French visionary Margaret of Oingt prefaces her work with a similar disclaimer: ‘I ask all those who read this text not to think badly [of me] because I had the presumption to write this, since you must believe that I have no sense or learning with which I would know how to take these things from my heart, nor could I write this down without any model than the Grace of God which is working within me.’\textsuperscript{16} But such feminine humility also offered a powerful strategy for self-authorization; when the English anchoress Julian of Norwich insists, ‘I am a woman: leued [uneducated], febille and freyll’, she transforms the position of ‘woman’ into both a model of Christian humility and an extraordinary figure of miraculous inspiration. There are significant historical and doctrinal differences between these female visionaries that should give us pause before we group them together simply on the basis of their common status as visionaries or women; yet together they show how women’s perceived weakness, humility, and unlearnedness were thought to make them into privileged conduits of God’s word.

If women were excluded from many of the official channels of theological learning, visionary writing gave them special access to divine knowledge that transcended, and revealed the insufficiency of, that learning. This is the point that Porete makes when she insists that only those who ‘abase [their] knowledge’ can understand her message of divine simplicity:
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Theologians and other clerks,
You will not have the intellect for it,
No matter how brilliant your abilities,
If you do not proceed humbly.
And may Love and Faith, together,
Cause you to rise above Reason,
[Since] they are the ladies of the house.¹⁷

The struggle – explicit or implicit – between the female visionary and the ‘theologians and other clerks’ whom Porete targets above comprised a multi-layered conflict over the meanings and institutional uses of religious authorship. The visionary ‘author’ pictures writing as a space of self-dissolution that guarantees the expression of divine will without human intervention. Yet that very effort to disclaim intervention was easily read as an attack on the traditional, mediating role of the clergy. Following Porete’s execution for heresy in 1310, in part due to her model of the ‘annihilated self’, a contemporary English theologian, John Baconthorpe, identified her offence as having ‘published a book against the clergy’.¹⁸ Porete may have invited suspicion because she wrote her book herself, without the usual textual mediation of a scribe or other representatives of institutional literacy. But as visionaries were subject to greater levels of suspicion and attack, such mediation became increasingly necessary and visible.

By virtue of its self-conscious marginality to ecclesiastical institutions of literacy, women’s visionary writing found political uses during historical moments when those institutions were contested. In the fourteenth century, the female visionaries St Bridget and St Catherine of Siena were outspoken in their critique of the Avignon papacy, when the pope resided in France. At a time when ecclesiastical power seemed in disarray, the words of women visionaries carried authority precisely because they claimed to issue from beyond the fray. To those whose causes they supported, like Pope Urban VI, the visionary women’s messages were welcome. On the other hand, Jean Gerson, the famous Chancellor of the University of Paris who supported the French papacy, found women visionaries to be less than credible, and he warned that ‘every teaching of women, especially that expressed in solemn word or writing, is to be held suspect, unless it has been diligently examined’.¹⁹ By stressing the need to examine the writing of women visionaries, Gerson bolstered the importance of textual mediaries like scribes, spiritual directors, confessors, and other figures who represented clerical institutions of literacy and authority. In medieval women’s visionary writings, the scribe was a constant feature, such as Hildegard’s scribe, Volmar, Bridget of Sweden’s spiritual director and editor, Alfonso of Jaën, and the scribes who feature
so prominently in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. But as writings of women visionaries became more politically volatile in the wake of papal schism and late medieval campaigns against heresy, the role of the scribe became one of more active intervention. While Volmar dared make no changes – even on the level of syntax or vocabulary – to Hildegard’s accounts of her visions because they were divinely issued, Margery Kempe’s scribe wrestles visibly with the authority of his subject, directly describing an instance in which he ‘was in purpose neuyr to a leuyd [believed] hir felyngys aftyr’ until he verifies Margery’s experience by comparing it to canonical visionary works like the lives of Mary d’Oignies and Elizabeth of Hungary by Jacques de Vitry. Margery’s scribe is a figure not simply of reproduction, but of examination and legitimation, working from within the text to verify the doctrinal claims of the female visionary.

The figure of the scribe reveals that medieval literary authority was produced less by individuals than by collaborative relationships. When John C. Hirsch asserts that ‘the second scribe, no less than Margery, should be regarded as the author of *The Book of Margery Kempe*’, he defines ‘author’ in its modern sense, as an original creator; Lynn Staley, however, sees the scribe as not decreasing but augmenting Margery’s authorial status. Collating Margery Kempe with an existing canon, the scribe establishes Kempe’s authority by showing precisely that she is not an original creator, but rather one who upholds pre-existing models of *traditio* and *auctoritas*. The presence of the scribe, then, does not negate the authorship of the medieval woman visionary but rather produces it. But it does so by recuperating the visionary into the very systems of textual mediation and inherited authority that she herself disclaimed.

On occasion, contrasting understandings of authority and its sources produce a palpable conflict between scribe and visionary. When Porete’s *Mirror of Simple Souls* entered England, its Carthusian translators played the role of scribes, attempting to impose orthodox meanings onto a number of Porete’s more controversial and potentially heterodox claims. These acts of mediation serve legitimating functions that are comparable to those of spiritual counsellors and hagiographers, like Cardinal Jacques de Vitry, who wrote the life of Mary of Oignies, and his protégé Thomas of Cantimpré, who wrote the lives of Christina *mirabilis* and Margaret of Ypres. Both writers attempt to legitimate their female subjects by defending them against detractors, as Jacques de Vitry targets the ‘shameless men . . . who, hostile to all religion, maliciously slandered the ascetic life of these women’ in his *Life of Marie d’Oignies*. In the process, the biographer or scribe becomes the source of the saintly woman’s authority, rather than the other way around. When John Marienwarder records the visions of Dorothea of Montau, for
example, he reports that Christ instructed her to be the submissive partner in the relationship: ‘Let both of you have one will – one which he ought to possess, not you!’ If the female visionary founds her authority on her lack of will, it is on that very lack that the scribe or biographer asserts his own – and through it, the authority of clerical textual culture over female visionary writing.

Who is the author: scribe or visionary, hagiographer or saint? All position themselves not as originators but as recorders of a divinely inspired text that originates elsewhere – hence Margery Kempe calls herself ‘owyr Lordys owyn secretarijs’, implying that she is merely taking dictation from a divine source. But as the scribes and biographers show, the act of recording is not a neutral one; far from it, the very process of committing the divinely inspired text to writing meant subjecting it to the conflicting aims and concerns of literate culture. These texts bear the marks of those conflicts, showing that their ‘authorship’ is produced not through the expressive will of one person, but through the struggles over authority and interpretation that begin with their first inscription and continue throughout the later history of their circulation.

Authorship in pieces: medieval women and compilation

If the scribes of women visionaries crossed the line between reproduction and creation, so did medieval writers who adopted the pose of the compiler. Like the scribe, the compiler was not, strictly speaking, an auctor, but rather one who brought together auctoritates – that is, selections from authoritative works – into a collection. In medieval manuscript culture, compilatio described an ordered collection of short texts to which the compiler added nothing of his own beyond the act of selection and ordering; by advocating collection over origination, compilatio offered a model for writers as well. In Vox clamantis, John Gower calls on this distinction between auctor and compilator when he describes his writing as a form of gathering: ‘I shall spread my net, so that my mind may thankfully seize upon the things which it requires.’ The objects of his gathering are auctoritates: just ‘as the honeycomb is gathered from the bud of various flowers’, he writes, ‘I acknowledge that my verses have been written with many models and strengthened by learned men of old.’

As Alastair Minnis observes of these lines, ‘Gower ascribes any auctoritates his work may have, in the first instance, to the primary auctor, God and, in the second instance, to the ancient auctores who have disseminated truth.’ Yet even in the process of disavowing auctoritas himself, Gower shows how the act of compiling auctores is itself a form of composition that,
while disclaiming originality or inspiration, nonetheless bears the mark of his shaping hand. While the process of writing by compiling pays homage to a system of auctoritas based on citation and traditio, it would be wrong to assume that compilation was necessarily a non-creative act. To the contrary, its uses in literary culture reveal that medieval authorship did not require a modern concept of originality in order to produce new cultural forms. The point is worth stressing because compilation proved an available form of authorship for women writers.

As might be expected, Christine de Pizan offers one of the most articulate and complex meditations on medieval authorship by compilation. In her Book of Deeds of Arms and of Chivalry (c. 1410), Christine draws on the work of two medieval authorities on the arts of war: Honoré Bouvet, the author of L’Arbre des batailles [The Tree of Battles], and the fourth-century Roman Vegetius, author of De re militari. In the book’s third part, Christine describes a visit by ‘a solemn man in clerical garb’, representing Bouvet himself, who authorizes her to take his work as a source:

> It is good for you to gather from the Tree of Battles in my garden some fruit that will be of use to you, so that vigor and strength may grow within you to continue work on the weighty book. In order to build an edifice that reflects the writings of Vegetius and of other authors who have been helpful to you, you must cut some branches of this tree, taking only the best, and with this timber you shall set the foundation of this edifice. To do this, I as master will undertake to help you as disciple.29

The metaphors of collection that Christine uses – the gathering of fruit from the garden, the selection of branches from a tree – echo Gower’s distinction between the auctor who is the work’s originator and source and the writer who compiles extracts, auctoritates, into a new work. But Christine also suggests that compilation is more than an act of textual subservience. In response to Christine’s narrator’s questions, Bouvet affirms that compilation bolsters the authority of both parties, the auctor as well as the compiler:

> Dear friend, in this matter I reply that the more a work is seen and approved by people, the more authentic it becomes . . . It is therefore not a rebuke, but a lawful and praiseworthy matter when material is suitably applied, wherein is the mastery of the material, for therein is the indication of having seen and read many books.30

Here authority becomes the product of a reciprocal relationship between auctor and compiler, thus making the compiler a vital key in medieval authorship.
Christine describes her own authorial practice as compilation not only in the *Deeds of Arms* but also in her better-known works. In *The City of Ladies* Christine discusses the example of Proba, a Roman Christian matron who compiled selections of classical literature to form a new work, the *Centos* – which literally means a patchwork, or a work made up through literary borrowings:

Now she would run through the Eclogues, then the Georgics, and the Aeneid of Vergil – that is, she would skim as she read – and on one part she would take several entire verses unchanged and in another borrow small snatches of verse and, through marvelous craftsmanship and conceptual subtlety, she was able to construct entire lines of orderly verse.

The resulting work retells the stories of the Old and New Testaments by ‘adapting Vergil’s works to fit all this in so orderly a way that someone who only knew this work would have thought that Vergil had been both a prophet and evangelist’.31

The historical female poet to whom Christine refers, Faltonis Betitia Proba, was the author of *Cento Vergilianus de laudibus Christi*, which was admired by Boccaccio, Christine’s immediate source. Proba was not the only early woman poet to turn compilation into a Christian form of authorship: the Byzantine Empress Eudocia of Constantinople (c. 400–466) composed a similar work entitled the *Homerocentoes*, which compiled verses from *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* to retell the story of the Old and New Testaments, recasting Zeus as God the Father and Jesus as Odysseus, while the Virgin Mary at the annunciation is arrestingly described, using fragments of *The Odyssey*, as ‘sitting by the fireside with her attendant women / turning sea-purple yarn on a distaff’ (*Odyssey* 6.52–3).32 Like Proba, Eudocia turns compilation into an art of transformation and conversion that, by selecting passages from pagan authors, transforms their meaning to support Christian history. The process is endorsed by the later historical writer Ranulph Higden, who describes his own *Polychronicon* as a work made by gathering together from authors (‘ex variis auctorum decerptum’), many of whom are not Christian: yet he defends his use of pagan authors by comparing himself to the biblical Ruth who gathered corn after men (Ruth 2), thus feminizing the act of compilation even as he Christianizes it.33

Like Proba, Christine de Pizan herself employs careful selection to transform her sources in *The City of Ladies*, as she does in retelling Proba’s own story. Christine’s source, Boccaccio, takes Proba as an exceptional model of feminine virtue and uses her story to deride women more than to praise them; Christine, by contrast, ends her own account by selectively citing Boccaccio in order to make Proba an example to women:
‘Boccaccio observes that it should be a great pleasure for women to hear about her.’34 Thus the process of citing an auctor, Christine shows, can be a way of remaking and converting the sources of antifeminism into a history of women.

A related authorial model is offered by Marie de France, who describes her authorship of her well-known Lais as a work less of original composition than of assemblage: ‘des lais assembler’.35 Her use of the term ‘assembler’ has prompted a long-running debate over the nature of Marie’s work: to what extent is she an original creator herself, or is she ‘merely’ gathering together works – most likely oral ones – that she presents in her collection? But such efforts to differentiate original creation from the assembly of earlier sources are challenged by Marie’s description of her own authorial practice, in which the gathering of old works and the production of new ones are perfectly intertwined. In the Prologue to the Lais Marie explains:

The custom among the ancients –
as Priscian testifies –
was to speak quite obscurely
in the books they wrote,
so that those who were to come after
and study them
might gloss the letter [gloser la lettre]
and supply its significance from their own [E le dur sen le surplus mettre] wisdom.36

Marie’s terms here – ‘gloser la lettre’ and ‘surplus’ – describe acts of writing instigated by acts of reading, in turn producing new texts out of old. This view of authorship follows Isidore of Seville’s etymology of ‘author’ as ‘he who augments’ (‘Auctor ab augendo dictus’).37 Authorship by this model is less an act of origination than one that, through reading and ‘glossing’, augments – and thus fulfils the latent promise of – the texts of the literary past.

Consuming authors: medieval women as readers and patrons

If, as Marie de France indicates, medieval ‘authorship’ could embrace acts of reading as well as writing, it is difficult to know where to draw the distinction between author and reader – or indeed, how many readerly activities in the Middle Ages could also be considered ‘authorial’ ones. As readers, medieval women registered a powerful influence on literary and textual cultures. One of the avenues through which they did so was patronage. Since medieval book production was a bespoke trade – largely driven by the
direct demand of individual patrons and readers – the production of many important manuscripts was instigated by women. The *St Albans Psalter*, created in the early twelfth century for Christina of Markyate, reflects her influence: it contains texts upholding the principles of chastity by which she lived, while its illustrations prominently feature scenes of the Virgin Mary reading, reflecting the growing cultural influence of female literacy.38 Similarly, the medieval Czech abbess known as Lady Kunigunde commissioned the *Passionale of the Abbess Kunigunde*, a collection of mystical works that includes a text specially written for her, ‘The Prayer of Lady Kunigunde’, which makes Lady Kunigunde not only the work’s patron and reader but also its imagined speaker.39 Both books use texts and images to produce a kind of semi-autobiographical work in which the female patron and reader could see herself reflected. The same could be observed of deluxe manuscripts like the famous Book of Hours of Mary of Burgundy, which features an illumination of its female patron engaged in devout reading that literally makes her a part of the book. If these female patrons are not technically the ‘authors’ of the books with which they are associated, they nonetheless substantiate D. F. McKenzie’s insistence that no text is the product of a single author.40 Women like Lady Kunigunde and Christina of Markyate share responsibility for their books’ creation in a way that requires us to expand our notion of medieval authorship beyond the expectation of solitary creation to recognize the network of relationships that underlies the production of manuscripts and that gives the patron an exceptional degree of textual agency.

As patrons not only of individual books but also of writers, women played a foundational role in the shaping of vernacular literature from its earliest stages. The Anglo-Saxon poet Caedmon was celebrated by Bede for his songs of divine praise; subsequently, he has been considered the first English poet. Yet Caedmon’s poetry would not have been possible without the support of a female patron, the formidable Abbess Hild, who deserves recognition in the same literary–historical narrative that has adopted Caedmon as origin.41 Her example demonstrates that even inspired poetry does not spring into being through the agency of the poet alone but depends on a material substratum of support; once we grant its existence, we are able to recover women into important, even foundational, roles in medieval literary history. Eleanor of Aquitaine played a significant role in the spread of Arthurian literature, which was continued by her daughter, Marie de Champagne, the well-known patron of Chrétien de Troyes. Chrétien acknowledges that Marie’s active patronage bordered on collaboration, as she provided him the material (*matière*) and interpretation (*sens*) that he elaborated in his work.42
Because they were generally excluded from institutions of literacy that favoured Latin, women became the privileged addressees of vernacular writing, and in the history especially of vernacular religious writing, women are legion as addressees. Some of these women are known by name: Richard Rolle, for example, addressed some of his most important vernacular writing to Margaret Kirkeby, whose influence is registered in Rolle’s English works such as *The Form of Living*. The Middle English Vernon Manuscript, which contains Rolle’s *Form of Living* as well as works such as the *Ancrene Wisse* and *The Abbey of the Holy Ghost*, is believed to have been compiled especially for religious women, perhaps living in a community.43 Similarly, *The Scale of Perfection* and Nicholas Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* are specifically addressed to religious women readers in their prologues. Whether or not their authors had specific, historical women in mind, like Margaret Kirkeby, these works helped to make the figure of the pious female reader into an icon of vernacular literacy, requiring even male readers of these works to imagine themselves in female positions.

Devotional reading was an active process that enlisted the reader as the co-creator of meaning. Indeed, in many instances devotional reading is conceived as a form of writing: thus the late fourteenth-century English *Book to a Mother* instructs its female addressee, ‘thou maist lerne aftir thi samplerie [exemplar] to write a feir trewe bok’, by which it imagines that the reader herself will become a fresh ‘book’ in which she herself can ‘write withinne and withoute’ the lessons of humility, poverty, and chastity.44 Devotional works addressed to women break down distinctions between literary production and consumption by challenging modern assumptions that production is necessarily active and primary, and consumption contrastingly passive and secondary. Rather, works commissioned by or otherwise written for women reveal the myriad ways in which consumption directly instigated production and thus became a creative force in medieval textual culture.

Reading and writing clearly bear a mutually productive relationship with one another in letters, a form of textual production in which women actively participated; however, this participation has likewise stood outside the limits of modern definitions of authorship. St Jerome maintained a wide and active correspondence with women, largely on matters of theological importance. His most frequent correspondent was Marcella, who was as active a writer of her own letters as she was a reader of Jerome’s; as Jerome observes, ‘our letters always crossed, outvied in courtesies, anticipated in greetings’.45 Their letters manifest a degree of intellectual collaboration that ultimately erases distinction between the two writers, Jerome admits: ‘all that I had gathered together by long study, and by constant meditation made part of my nature, she first sipped, then learned, and finally took for her own’.46 The crossing
of self and other, reader and writer, that is made possible in the exchange of letters reveals the production of gendered authorial positions to be a process of mutual formation and negotiation. Heloise demonstrates how letters create gender identity through such negotiations in the subscription to her first letter: ‘to her master, or rather her father, husband, or rather brother; his handmaid, or rather his daughter, wife, or rather sister; to Abelard, Heloise’. Rather than manifesting a stable, gendered authorial identity, letters reveal that identity to be a sophisticated fiction that is created through reciprocal and collaborative textual relations.

Letters have an unstable status in literary history. While long favoured by women as a literary form, they have been taken to confirm women’s marginality to authorship rather than their participation in it. Yet if letters do not have authors, as Foucault insists, they offer an opportunity to challenge the assumptions that underlie modern theories of authorship, which erect divisions between creative authors and passive readers, as well as between the authorship of literary and non-literary texts. The medieval letter recalls the broader conditions of medieval textual culture, in which texts were shaped through communal structures, and in which the act of transmission was also an act of making meaning. As such, it offers a cogent example of how the specific historical and textual conditions of medieval literary culture demand new definitions of authorship, definitions that will allow us to appreciate the full range of women’s authorial activities.

NOTES

1. The insight that the author is a figment of the history of writing, rather than a transhistorical phenomenon, was most influentially formulated by Michel Foucault’s essay, ‘What is an Author?’ trans. Josué V. Harari, in The Foucault Reader, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); for an exploration of the broader implications for the study of early literature, see the essays collected in The Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature, ed. Martha Woodmansee and Peter Jaszi (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).


7. For a discussion of these and other early editions, see Cynthia J. Brown, ‘The Reconstruction of an Author in Print: Christine de Pizan in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries’, in *Christine de Pizan and the Categories of Difference*, ed. Marilynn Desmond (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).


15. Ibid., p. 156.


17. Porete, *Mirror of Simple Souls*, p. 79.


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30. Ibid.


44. This remarkable example is cited by Nicholas Watson in ‘Fashioning the Puritan Gentry-Woman: Devotion and Dissent in Book to a Mother’, in *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain. Essays for Felicity Riddy*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al. (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000), p. 177.
46. Ibid., p. 455.
48. As Foucault writes, ‘A private letter may well have a signer – it does not have an author’ (‘What is an Author?’ pp. 107–8).