Clare Broom Saunders
WOMEN WRITERS AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY MEDIEVALISM

Reviewed by Antony H. Harrison.

The title of this volume seems to promise a feminist companion to previous books on
nineteenth-century treatments of medieval topoi, iconography, or ideology: books such as Mark
Girouard’s The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman (1981) and Alice
Chandler’s A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature
(1971). To supplement these earlier studies, Saunders aims to focus on “female” medievalism
in the nineteenth century, re-assessing the work of women writers to demonstrate their
“consistent use of medievalism for subversive purposes” (5). While “contributing to a historical
tradition of female medievalism,” she contends, these women offered “an acute socio-political
perspective in response to events and expectations of women’s role in their present day
society” (5). Measured against its aims, this book is praiseworthy in some ways and
disappointing in others.

On the positive side, it examines many lesser known writers and artists under rubrics that
make good sense while occasionally surprising us: “Translations of Medieval Language and
Form in the Nineteenth Century”; “War, Medievalism, and the Nineteenth-Century Woman
Writer”; “Romance, Gender, and the Spectacle of the Crimean” [sic]; “Joan of Arc and the
Nineteenth-Century Woman Writer”; “Queenship, Chivalry, and ‘Queenly’ Women in the Age
of Victoria”; and the iconography of Guinevere in verbal and visual texts. Despite the promise
of her topic and the useful and appropriate foci of the book’s six central chapters, however, what
Saunders has produced is largely a survey of creative, historical, biographical, and iconographic
works produced by women of the century that deal with medievalist subjects or extensively employ varieties of medievalist discourse. These works are frequently set in comparison and/or contrast to parallel works by male contemporaries, or shown to be responses to those works—especially to the medievalist writings of Tennyson and Morris.

Saunders’s analyses of these works moves between the two poles of her dominant (and often repeated) thesis: that the works employ medievalism either to reinforce the ideological status quo (conventions or beliefs in the separate spheres and the roles of women, for example) or to critique, subvert, or attempt to undermine it. On the face of it, there is nothing objectionable in such an approach, but one would hope at the very least to find considerable variety and nuance in the analyses of particular texts that support it. For the most part, however, Saunders marches from one text to another under the flags of her chapter headings without providing the reader with much in the way of unexpected or subtle analysis that expands, develops, complicates, or problematizes her thesis or the texts employed to illustrate it. To say this is, nonetheless, not to devalue the useful work this volume undertakes in introducing the productions of women writers and illustrators on medievalist topics and opening up (or in some cases extending) the critical conversation about them. In the comments that follow, I suggest some of the particular virtues of the study, as well as a number of problems with it.

Chapter One, on translation, exemplifies the limitations of Saunders’ approach. Rather oddly, it begins by discussing Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “Sonnets from the Portuguese” on the grounds that these poems pose as translations and employ chivalric rhetoric along with some medievalist iconography. Assuming that Browning’s sonnets are “subversive” as well as (in some sense) translations, Saunders uses them to introduce the work of other, actual, nineteenth
century women translators of medieval texts as equally “subversive” (on the assumption that
EBB’s sonnets in fact are subversive), but this move seems less than convincing. The analyses of
those translations that Saunders subsequently races through are designed to support her main
thesis but are too often thin rather than strong, careful, and subtle; they also depend very heavily
on secondary sources. This is a problem throughout the book and suggests its origins in a
dissertation whose traces one would like to see more effectively erased. On a parallel note, I
might add that the writing throughout this book is adequate and functional rather than elegant.

Chapter Two presents a more innovative and intriguing analysis, this time of medievalist
women writers on war. It examines the use of medievalist topoi, rhetoric, and iconography in
works by Letitia Landon and Felicia Heman. A conventional understanding of “Chivalry” is at
the heart of this discussion, while a major issue is how these works challenge the separation of
spheres: the supposed prohibition of women’s involvement in political dialogue. What Saunders
uncovers in her analysis of poems by Hemans and Landon is a disguised but nonetheless
“vehement sociopolitical criticism.” But here again the discussion is predominantly thematic and
rarely takes into account prosodic, stylistic, or other considerations that often might be placed in
the service of the thematic concerns that consistently occupy Saunders.

Chapter Three extends the work of the previous chapter, focusing specifically on
treatments of the Crimean War by women writers, especially Elizabeth Barrett
Browning (including her letters), Florence Nightingale, and Louisa Costello. Generally,
their works are presented as subversive and frequently oppositional interventions in the dialogue
surrounding that war. While this chapter often strays from its announced topic, its main point is
crucial to the argument of the book as a whole. “The Crimean War,” Saunders writes, “was a
turning point for women’s use of medievalism in the nineteenth century, just as it was a turning
point for the involvement of women in the public sphere. To muster support for the war effort, the government and press used images of medieval chivalry and legendary heroic deeds, popularized in early nineteenth-century medievalism, to propagate the idea of glorious British Armies fighting an oppressor. These patriotic images jarred with accusations of gross mismanagement and reports of the actual horrors of the war. . . .” (63). In addition to exposing such problems, “women writers increasingly use medievalism . . . to highlight the suffocating social stereotypes of Victorian gender ideology” that underlay commonplace idealizations of chivalry.

Chapter Four perceptively analyzes various treatments of Joan of Arc, the female warrior and icon who proved hugely popular during the century and whose life generated multiple biographies, histories, paintings, stained glass windows, poems, and fictional treatments. Saunders’ thesis here (though somewhat derivative) is compelling: “it is as a paradoxical icon and exploder of chivalry that Joan of Arc most clearly served as a subject in the nineteenth century, allowing writers, especially women, a focus through which they could explore women’s contemporary roles in the domestic and public sphere” (80). Saunders’ analyses of Pre-Raphaelite paintings on the subject, by Rossetti, Millais, and Annie Louise Swynnerton, are especially perceptive, and she usefully introduces us to a surprising number of little known texts on the subject produced by women.

Like Chapter Four, Chapter Five is ambitious in the ground it attempts to traverse. “‘Queenly’ Women in the Age of Victoria” discusses the overshadowing presence of Victoria through much of the century but also the “antiquarian” revival of interest in queens from Guinevere to Lady Jane Gray, Mary Queen of Scotts, and Elizabeth I. Here again a major topic gets somewhat less than it deserves. On one hand, the chapter foregrounds Ruskin’s “Of
Queen’s Gardens” and Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* and explores works by Louisa Costello, Barrett Browning, and Landon. On the other hand, much of the commentary derives from the work of others—from that of important critics who work in the era (Margaret Homans, Angela Leighton, Adrienne Munich, and Dorothy Thompson.) Also, the treatment is too often brisk and the analysis less probing than it could be.

“Guinevere” becomes the narrowing focus of the final two chapters of this volume. Readers will, perhaps, be surprised that not one woman writer is mentioned in the first seven pages of this chapter, which focus exclusively on Tennyson’s portrayal of Guinevere in the *Idylls*. The following pages mostly summarize the content of Arthurian works dominated by the figure of Guinevere produced by Dinah Craik, Elizabeth Phelps, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and Violet Fane, with a nod to Sara Teasdale. Once again, we long for more substantial analysis, perhaps beginning with questions about such authors’ apparently persistent attempts to idealize Guinevere as a “virtuous heroine” but in doing so reinforcing conventional separate-spheres stereotypes.

In some ways, the book’s final chapter is the most interesting of all, for it perceptively “reads” the ways in which women artists illustrated the Guineveres wrought in words by Tennyson and Morris. In discussing literary works, Saunders tends to slight such formal features as genre, style, and prosody. In this chapter, which highlights the visual art of Julia Margaret Cameron, Eleanor Fortescue Brickdale, Jessie Marion King, and Florence Harrison, Saunders devotes some attention to style, design, and composition. (See, for instance, *Tennyson’s Guinevere and Other Poems*,

([http://flickriver.com/photos/57167113@N00/2257082114](http://flickriver.com/photos/57167113@N00/2257082114)) illustrated by Florence
Henderson.) Saunders' analysis of King's illustrations--"She threw her wet hair backward from her brow," for instance--argues that King is "faithful to the intense sensuality of Morris's text" (167), thereby reinforcing his poem's ideological subversiveness. Saunders observes how this illustration "focuses on the graceful [curved] figure of the [queen], eyes downcast in a Pre-Raphaelite pose, bringing the attention of the viewer to her physical beauty, the action of fingerimg her hair accentuating the desiring and desired sexual vitality of Morris's heroine" (167), but she also notes how situating the queen behind a high stone wall emphasizes "Guenevere's entrapment within the boundaries of her loveless marriage" (167). Here and in her other illustrations, King depicts Guenevere "caged by the confines of her social role" (171).

The structure of this chapter and the critique it presents are generally more satisfying and illuminating than the rest of the volume. One comes away from the book grateful that Saunders produced it but wishing the discussion as a whole less simply thematized, more complex, and more richly nuanced. As a result, the reader is not always convinced that the women writers and illustrators discussed here regularly “overturned . . . political gender ideologies, and exposed them as sterile for both sexes,” as Saunders claims they did (183).

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