

Representing the Gendered  
Discourse of Power:  
The Virgin Mary in *Christ I*

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The Old English *Christ I* or *Advent Lyrics*<sup>1</sup> have intrigued many scholars working from different critical perspectives. Studies range from the critical-historical attempts to determine sources, especially liturgical, interpretive commentary, and lectionary appropriations (Burlin; Cross 194–99; Joyce Hill 296–99; Thomas D. Hill 26–30; Rankin 317–37; Chance 13–30; Garde 122–30) and specific elements such as speech boundaries in Lyric VII (Anderson 611–18; Harlow 101–17), to studies of the “tonal development” in the Marian sequence (Moffat 134–41) to initial studies of the Virgin Mary in the context of representing women in Old English texts following the “images of women in literature” approach (Klinck 597–610). All contribute to our understanding of this unique Old English text. None, however, has been successful in accounting for the orchestration of gendered voices in the poem’s segments. In its form and treatment, the collection is an anomaly in Western European vernacular literature.

An approach concentrating on the representation of the Virgin Mary in *Christ I* raises some challenging questions about this text. Commenting on the position of women in Anglo-Saxon society as it is reflected in Old English texts, Anne L. Klinck notes that

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Simply because women are debarred from action, their position becomes psychologically more interesting, and they offer greater opportunities for the portrayal of thoughts and feelings, especially of an intimate kind. Women characters, confined to domestic roles, are the natural vehicle for the presentation of personal relationships, as opposed to the public relationships traditionally described by Old English poetry. (606)

Klinck's enlightening study asserts one very highly problematic aspect of the *Advent Lyrics*: psychological realism in the presentation of the Virgin. What seems apparent behind this informative study is an ahistoricism that ascribes the notion of a growing consciousness to the individual. If Old English literature as a whole reveals anything about individuals, then it valorizes the concept of an interconnected social network that defines them in relation to genealogy and—in the case of males—military status. In addition, this study—although not as heavily steeped in this ideology as earlier studies—interprets women as passive and men as active. Historical studies on Anglo-Saxon society and more theoretically-grounded feminist essays on the role of women in Old English texts since the publication of Klinck's article have shown the considerable economic and social power of women in the early Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup>

In the spirit of these more recent studies, this essay argues that the Virgin Mary of *Christ I* is by no means a passive character—“debarred from action” (Klinck

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606)—but is one who is simultaneously the creation of a discourse and the generative voice of a truth-shaping discourse. In essence, what would seem from several perspectives to be a marginalized text is actually an ideological pronouncement about the perception of late antique and early medieval spirituality crystallized in a late Old English text. And as such, the text requires a redrawing of the location of marginality in keeping with the subtle play of public and private spaces.

At the same time, the intention of this study is to show that the Virgin has a part in the poet's symbolic mode for interpreting gender and the construction of the body as a site of power—concepts absent from many OE poems, such as *Caedmon's Hymn*, *Beowulf*, *The Dream of the Rood*, *The Battle of Maldon*, *The Battle of Brunanburh*, *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, and *Deor's Lament*. All are consciously male-authored texts whose preoccupations are those of an imagined heroic society. Even a text such as the *Wife's Lament*, while written from an apparent feminine vantage, has a family feud much like one in an heroic text at its center. Of the surviving literature of pre-Conquest England, the *Advent Lyrics* speak with a more consciously constructed voice of gendered relationships. Current methods of OE instruction have marginalized these voices and have thus “invented” and privileged an almost “heroic only” vision of the early Middle Ages. Our attempt here is to address this imbalance. Before we look at the structuralist power relationships in the poem and then analyze their particulars in the Marian lyrics,

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we need to establish our critical basis, since an appropriate one seems to be missing in scholarship.

### I

In the last decade, Anglo-American literary criticism has witnessed the institutionalization of feminist and gender theory. The introductory essay to a collection entitled *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, edited by Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, traces this development up to the late '80s (1–26). Beginning as an approach broadly examining the “images of women” in literature, feminist criticism following Elaine Showalter’s 1981 article entitled “Criticism in the Wilderness,” has adopted complex theoretical bases (179–205).

Sometimes feminist criticism adopts portions of ideologies from methodologies that may be limiting, if not occasionally counterproductive to the announced agenda. Some feminist criticism adopts a Marxist or materialist base as a way of exploring the role of women not only in the literary text but also in assessing the text’s relation to a social, exterior world. The Marxist penchant to focus almost exclusively on power as repression or as the domination of one social, economic, and gender group over another, however, at best can only produce what we already know about medieval society in general—that it was decidedly patriarchal. Sigmund Freud provides another model, but again his focus on the male-centered world and for the feminine

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envy of that power distorts a view of human experience and tends to treat literary characters as real people. Such an approach has obvious problems when applied to medieval texts, few of which in the period before the rise of interest in Aristotelian causation dwell upon the psychological motivations of characters. In short, the typical character in Old English literature does not possess discernable depth or development that would tolerate an “etherizing upon the table.”

In the late 1980s and 1990s, feminists have turned to the writings of Michael Foucault to find a more congenial model. His *History of Sexuality* and *Power/Knowledge* are the most widely discussed in the attempt to negotiate a critical space between his ideological and scientific discourse and a general feminist criticism. In the introductory essay of a collection entitled *Foucault and Feminism: Reflection on Resistance*, Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby note several areas of similarity between Foucauldian and feminist theory:

Both identify the body as the site of power, that is, as the locus of domination through which docility is accomplished and subjectivity constituted. Both point to the local and intimate operation of power rather than focusing exclusively on the supreme power of the state. Both bring to the fore the crucial role of discourse in its capacity to produce and sustain hegemonic power and emphasize the challenges contained within marginalized and/or

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unrecognized discourses. And both criticize the ways in which Western humanism has privileged the experience of the Western masculine elite as it proclaims universals about truth, freedom, and human nature. (x)

Certainly, Foucault is not without his problems for a critic focusing of the role of women in a text and particularly with the concerns of discourse, given as Eloise A. Buker notes, that the feminine is almost excluded or that his work at least “fails to provide a view of women as participants in culture” (829). While this might be a problem, it is just as possible then to locate the feminine for him in a negotiated space—the Other—which Buker argues must be added into his overwhelmingly patriarchal view for a more complete reading (829). Such a position of negotiations accords well with what we know of the position of women in the Middle Ages.

Particularly interesting to a “feminist critique” of a text most likely written by a monk and intended to be read aloud during mealtime (Woolf 60–61) is this broad notion of power. In a 14 January 1976 lecture, later printed in a collection entitled *Power/Knowledge* and focusing on the historical and philosophical manifestation of power, Foucault contends that

Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never

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localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting targets; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application. (98)

He also uses similar language in volume one of *The History of Sexuality* when he notes “power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations” (94). As noted above, Foucault’s redefining of power from obvious oppression to become an avenue of infinite possibilities is one of his most ingenious accomplishments.

In *The History of Sexuality* he explores the relationship between power, sexuality, and knowledge. Certainly his discussion raises some issues not immediately relevant to aspects of medieval power relationships, but there are several observations that are sufficiently transhistorical to aid an analysis of medieval notions of sexuality and power. As Ladelle McWhorter contends, Foucault was not a “liberationist” but was concerned with a culture’s management of the body (608). In fact, in the book, he charts social institutions “writing” the discourse of the body and sexuality from

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the medieval confessional through the eighteenth and nineteenth century to twentieth-century psychologists such as Freud. Discourses developed to inscribe and contain sexuality, and they became a form of maintenance. In an attempt to define modern society, Foucault writes:

We... are in a society of “sex,” or rather a society “with a sexuality”: the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, to life, to what causes it to proliferate, to what reinforces the species, its stamina, its ability to dominate, or its capacity for being used. Through the themes of health, progeny, race, the future of the species, the vitality of the social body, power spoke *of* sexuality and *to* sexuality; the later was not a mark or a symbol, it was an object and a target. (147)

For the Middle Ages, the body was a very obvious site of power, and the body of the Virgin Mary was no exception. Yet as readers might expect, the examination of the Virgin in keeping with the discourse of sexuality and power sublimated the erotic in favor of the doctrinal concretization of the word (Word).

Few medieval discourses show this aspect of power more readily than do those involving the Virgin Mary. While it is certainly true that medieval people understood the Virgin Mary as a highly exalted woman above all other women (lyric II) and above the entire human race (lyric IX), they would also have “mentally

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imagined” her bodily form as the result of the confluence of several textual traditions. Emerging in the Gospels and apocryphal writings and developing under the control of the Church Fathers, the Virgin became an important figure for veneration in both West and East (Warner 3–67). Celebrated in Roman feasts in Anglo-Saxon England as early as the seventh century, by the early ninth century—a date that Mary Clayton assigns to the writing of the *Advent Lyrics* (206)—the Virgin Mary was perceived as firmly inscribed in patriarchal discourse. Yet such a placement was not always marginalizing or constricting. Both Bede and Alcuin were important figures in the development of Marian thought and devotion, the first in commentary and the second in development of forms of liturgical services. Bede, as Hilda Graef notes, is devoted to the Virgin, but in discussions of the incarnation, stresses Christ’s fleshly inheritance as coming from Mary rather than his divinity (162–65). These early texts privilege the body as a material site. A representation of the Virgin at Breedon from the early ninth century with a raised hand of blessing and without the Christ child manifests “a very different conception of her role” (Clayton 152). All of these texts share in common the concept of the Virgin’s body as a constructed site of power. With the term “constructed,” the sense is not that Mary did not exist before the multilayered discourse we can call “Mary” was known, but that the texts focus on her body as a site both of and for the generation of power. *Christ I* shows how the conception of the Virgin

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was constructed in Anglo-Saxon cultural texts. Here the Virgin becomes what Foucault would call “the vehicle of power.”

## II

The poet of *Christ I* imagines a complex relationship existing among his readers or hearers, himself, and the object of contemplation, between Mary and Joseph, and between typical persons, places and institutions, and their fulfillments in the antitype Mary. Douglas Moffat contends that the poet’s “goal was to move the readers emotionally by recreating the emotional response to the Advent season” (139). Many critics have observed the close structural parallels to Advent liturgy and lections (see the references to critical approaches on page 102). What becomes lost in scholarship’s attempt to historicize the text is an observation of the poet’s attention to a stylized representation of Mary’s body as the site of power. Her body is a textual construction developed from scripture and commentary, far removed from a contemplation of the human form seen in late medieval and Renaissance literature and art, but nonetheless imaginative within the domains of acceptable explanation.

Lyrics II, IV, VII, IX, and XII provide clear evidence of this verbal and ideological posturing. These “Marian” lyrics, as Moffat notes, show “an uncluttered, unambiguous crescendo to joy” compared to darker, brooding “Christ” lyrics (139). Clearly the poet is

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orthodox in his treatment, but such treatment suggests that he is adopting a discursive strategy more directly related to the homology of grammar in the early Middle Ages as a quest for ontology and as an expression of kinship (Bloch 78–80). Throughout the lyrics the poet, similar to a grammarian of the early Middle Ages and a chronicler of history who defines individual family lines according to patronymics or matronymics, creates a verbal space for understanding the ontology of Incarnation and the Marian role within that simultaneous material and symbolic order. That the Virgin has a voice in the lyrics is indicative of the poet’s desire to have her articulate the discourse of power which operates through her. That she seems on the surface in her speeches to articulate the language of patriarchy is in no way limiting. Actually, she is the only person—of biological necessity a female—who can articulate that power. In a real sense, she empowers their language as she is its “consenting target” (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 98). These words have their fullest meaning then as an example of feminine discourse. To illustrate this point further, we need to examine these lyrics.

### III

Lyric II, based on the *O clavis David* antiphon, articulates Foucault’s observation that power “functions in the form of a chain” (*Power/Knowledge* 98). Although the source does not include an implicit reference to the Virgin (Clayton 185), it is here

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developed to show the choice of Mary as a mystery that completes the circuit of the “witgena wōψsong” (46a) (prophet’s songs). In this lyric, Mary is the vehicle of power which circulates throughout “grundisceat” (42b) (the earth) and thus connects her with nature—a traditional association of male-centered discourse used in the description of the feminine. The poet emphasizes the naturalness of this version of power in creating potential for bringing salvation through the natural metaphor “wisna” (43a) (shoot) which receives artistic expression in the high Middle Ages in the Jesse Tree. Jackson J. Campbell notes that from the sixteenth line of the lyric, the connection with the antiphon is less obvious (15). He does, however, note a thematic unity based on the concept of light throughout the lyric (15). The shift away from the antiphon, however, in terms of the feminist discourse is intriguing. To this point, the lyric echoes through the OT exilic prophets an image which we traditionally associate with heroic poetry: the separation from homeland. At this point in the lyric, Mary represents the filling-in of the theological and verbal gap as the one who simultaneously bears the Word and also interprets the mystery in an experiential way. Unlike lyrics IV and VII, lyric II imagines Mary functioning in a chain of discourse whose end is the power of knowledge to be actualized in the Incarnation.

Lyric IV, based on the *O virgo virginium* antiphon, continues the theme of mystery, but here the dialogue presents one of the poem’s two direct, verbal articulations of the Virgin’s discourse of power.

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Anderson terms this presentation “magisterial authority” as she acts as the *eiron* reprobating the *alazon* (232). Scholarship traditionally sees the Virgin’s response to the mystery of birth as a mild reproof (Anderson 232–34; Campbell 18–19). The emphasis here is solidly on the Virgin and on her physical body as the site of power and on her knowledge as the controlling force of power in the formation of a cult around her.

In response to the speaker of the dialogue assessing the mystery, Mary says:

Fricgaf þurh frywet mund minne geheold, mære meotudes suna. cup geryne, in Dauides þæt is Euan scyld wærgþ a aworpen, se heanra had.	hu ic fæmnan had, ond eac modor gewearþ Forþ an þæt monnum nis ac Crist onwrah dyrre mægan eal forpynded, ond gewuldrad is
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(92–99a)

[You ask for curiosity how I my virgin state,  
my purity I kept and also became the great mother  
of the Son of God. Therefore that to humanity is not  
a known mystery, but Christ revealed  
in David’s beloved maiden  
that Eve’s guilt is all nullified,  
condemnation is cast off and glorified  
is the more humble sex.]

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Her response, in distinction to that of her questioners, who are identified as “*sunu solimæ somod his dohtor*” (4.21) (sons of Jerusalem and her daughters), moves away from a contemplation of the body as the site of power to the nature of revelation in the power/knowledge synthesis. The center of power is shifted, if not subverted through the manifestation of that power. While Robert Burlin is correct in asserting that “the woman’s role and the unnatural occasion are overshadowed by the anagogical significance” (95), a feminist critique, while not dismissing the import of his suggestion, instead shows how the poet allows Mary to move beyond the biological to shape a discourse of truth. For it is in the discourse of truth that power operates.

Of the Marian lyrics in *Christ I*, lyric VII is the most unusual, and its form has prompted the greatest amount of critical commentary. There are several points we need to observe here. First, the question of speech boundaries is by no means a matter of scholarly consensus. The number of speech divisions ranges from three (Cosijn 109) to five or more (Anderson 230–40, 611–18; Burlin 611–18). The divisions must concern us here because it is through these speeches that the Virgin establishes her position relative to the discourse of power. Critics, however, do agree that the opening lines (164–67a) and the closing lines (197–213) are Mary’s. Joseph is likely speaking in lines 167b–76a and 181b–95a (Garde 122–30). Second, we must also consider the relative position of Mary and Joseph with

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respect to power, for here the concept is highly problematic and seems to fulfill Foucault's notion that power is "never in anybody's hands" (*Power/Knowledge* 98). Klinck, however, contends that Joseph occupies the central position in this lyric while Mary is the "dominant character" (601). Her observation must be seen in light of the comment that all women in OE literature are "subject to male authority" (Klinck 605). In his edition of the *Advent Lyrics*, Jackson J. Campbell notes that in Mary's concluding speech in which she explains the mystery that

it is best not to apply dramatic criteria of judgment to Mary's last speech, lest she appear prudish and pretentious as a woman. As a spokesman for religious instruction, she fulfills her function in the poem admirably, for the dignity of the teacher is more to the purpose than the appealing ingenuousness of the young girl. (24–25)

Both critics seem to miss the importance of Mary's position in the dialogue—the first under psychological probing and the second under the inability to read her statement within a larger frame of authority which would account for the tone of her speech.

Mary is the bearer of "wuldres þrym" (83b) (heaven's power)—through her, power functions. She is the center of attention. That there are what C.G. Harlow calls a "quotation within [a] quotation" (101) as a structural principle within the dialogue and that Mary

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reshapes the discourse surrounding the image of the temple to herself as the embodied discourse are significant in establishing Mary's dominance in several areas: gender relationships, understanding, and linguistic sophistication.

The quasi-dramatic situation which the poet imagines in this lyric is not a “realistic” (Klinck 602–04) or “naturalistic” (Campbell 24) one; instead, it is one that allows him through verbal echoes and gender roles to meditate on the symbolic and literal channels of power that allowed Joseph to contemplate removing Mary from the Temple to her becoming God’s refigured temple. Anderson is correct in asserting Mary as “self-deprecator and magisterial authority” (237). But we need to extend his point. Mary’s understanding of her position and of Joseph’s are based on gender roles: “Saga ecne þonc/ mærum meotodes sunu þæt ic his modor gewearþ,/ fæmne forþ seþeah, ond þu fæder cweden/ woruldcund bi wene” (209b–12a) (Give eternal thanks to the great Son of God that I have become his mother, however henceforth a virgin, and you called his father by the reckoning of the world). These are roles that she articulates and empowers through her words; and they are ultimately the roles that support the dominant ideology which prescribes them. Only she can resolve the mistaken notions. As Jane Chance notes, Mary teaches Joseph the importance of spiritual over literal reading of her words (24–26)—all of which accords with an early medieval notion of signs and their meanings that privileges spiritual readings over the

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literal sense. We may extend this notion then to suggest that a feminine, authoritative discourse is inscribed within the larger domains of patriarchal discourse. Joseph exists outside the circuits of power; he is brought into the network as a necessary vehicle on both social and linguistic levels. His resistance merely channels the orchestration of power.

With lyric IX, based on the *O mundi Domina* antiphon, we note a shift in the tone as Burlin observes to one of finality (144–47). Here Mary is not the human Mary on lyric VII, but the Queen of Heaven and mediator. Here power represented as biological is now transferred to the spiritual realm in this celebratory lyric. The poet reimagines the events of the incarnation, using as his source the misidentified prophet Ezekiel, who plays on the image of the temple gate (Burlin, 147). The poet does, however, change the polarity of the incarnation slightly by viewing it as an act of sacrifice:

Forþon þu þæt ana geþohtest þrymlice, þæt þy þinne mægþad sealdes butan synnum. ænig oþer bryd beag hroden, to heofonhame siþhan sende.	ealra monna þristhycgende, meotide brohtes, Nam swylc ne cwom ofer ealle men, þe þa beorhtan lac hlutre mode
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(287–94a)

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[Therefore you that alone of all humanity  
thought gloriously, strong in mind,  
that you your virginity brought to God,  
gave it without sin. None like you has come  
any other over all humanity,  
jewel-adorned woman, who the bright gift  
to the heavenly home with clear mind.]

The poet engages the converse positions of powerlessness and powerfulness. At the very moment that it seems that Mary has been made a subject of power, albeit a “consenting target,” the incarnation subverts the power so that she is finally the producer of power inscribed within the patriarchal words of the prophet. Lyric II sees Mary as the fulfillment of the prophet’s speech, but here the imagery—building on an exegetical model as Chance observes (26–30)—combines elements seen in some of the earlier lyrics to sublimate the biological imagery on birthing to that of an ornate temple door, a highly symbolic and controlled metaphor of authority, through which Christ passed. The experiential manifestation of Mary as “consenting target” then transforms her into Queen of Heaven. With its emphasis upon authoritative frames for understanding the incarnation and the implicit concerns for ontology, the lyric describes the power relationships, placing Mary at numerous points within the circuits.

Lyric XII, based on *O admirabile commercium* antiphon, closes the collection of poems and should be

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taken as a recontextualizing of the Virgin within the syntactical scope of salvation history as a “symphonic coda” (Burlin 171). If we see the lyrics as meditative moments highlighting various elements mandated and echoed in liturgical offices during the Advent season, then sometimes what may appear as an idea brought forward for consideration must be reinserted into a signifying space. That is precisely what lyric XII does. Marian devotion must be seen as a part of a whole. The poet ultimately rejects the construction of an homology to the Breedon representation of the Virgin. Merging the virginal birth as a generative point for Christ’s coming into the world through Mary’s “flæsc unwemme” (3) (undefiled flesh) with the sanctified Christ in heaven with imagery that is suggestive of Christ’s sitting the majesty achieves this reordering of the circuits of power. Clearly, Mary’s position is subordinated here—all in accordance with orthodox theology. She is an element within the highly complex notion of salvific power—one of its most human and experiential “consenting targets.”

*Christ I*’s representation of the Virgin Mary as a discourse of power at the same time as functioning within a discourse of power is complex. Critics of the poem have not seen the Virgin in this light. From studies in the material culture and religious institutions of the Anglo-Saxon period, we note Mary’s coming to assert herself in recognizably central positions. While on the surface a feminist approach to the poem may seem suspect to some readers, such an analysis using a

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Foucaultian understanding of power can help us to reexamine the unique role of the Virgin Mary within a system. That patriarchy is present in the symbolic rhythms of the poem is clear, but rather than being a trapped spokesperson for the system, she becomes the true voice of the system. She is the one for whom the system was created and the one who through her own experiences lends to that system a clear and strong feminine voice. Clearly, *Christ I* with its complex associations with liturgical texts, its impressive treatment of gender identification, and its centrality to Anglo-Saxon culture and ritual deserves greater attention—especially given that the poem is a supreme example of the process of negotiation of the authoritative Latin ecclesiastical and liturgical materials with the vernacular Old English which contains embedded traces of a martial and tribal/familial ideologies. The lyrics voice the seldom-voiced but ever-present issues found in the margins of other OE texts.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>All quotations from *Christ I* are from the edition by Robert B. Burlin, Yale Studies in English 168 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1968).

<sup>2</sup>Among the most recent are *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988) and *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Helen Damico

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and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1990).

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