

focuses on the protagonist's role as narrator, whether literary or oral, the shifting of moral authority with narrative authority, and the deferment of moral judgment by means of one or several codas, or revisions, from different perspectives. "Relation" means for Heller both the protagonists' relation with others, especially in mother-daughter relations, and narration, a main theme in Munro's stories being the "getting loose" from boundaries of both gender and genre. Paley's character Faith "does work" for her author, in Paley's own words, by registering her New York community's conflicts of generations, the sexes, Old and New World mentalities, and Jewish memories of disasters and the American promise of happiness. As Heller follows Faith's increasing political and social engagement beyond her family and friends, she clarifies what is to some critics paradoxical, namely the coexistence in Faith of a sanguine temperament and a pessimistic world view, which Paley has also described as her own complex attitude. Heller writes approvingly: "The horrors of the wider world are not denied, but they do not extinguish the value of personal experience." This balance, or oscillation, is coded as female, in contrast to the uniformly bleak attitude of Faith's male lover.

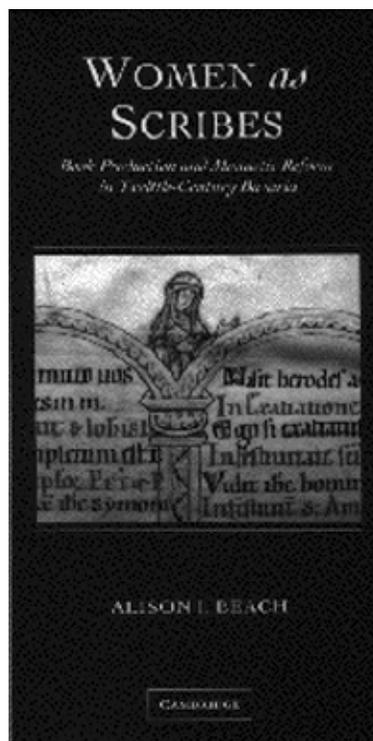
Heller's book gathers together in a coherent, persuasive, and eminently readable account new work and revisions of journal articles published over an extended period. The diverse choice of works, judicious historical contextualizing, astute literary criticism and positioning within the scholarly debates, and the wise judgments on the works' psychological and moral issues make Heller's study also a work of her own life-writing, or "autocritography," through which she joins the sisterhood of the women authors and characters.

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WOMEN AS SCRIBES

Alison Beach
Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004

REVIEWED BY JENNIFER CHURCH



On a day not unlike any other in 1992, in the state of Michigan, an online discussion took place among several scholars, one of whom was Alison Beach. This conversation, perhaps long forgotten by most of its participants, marked for Beach the nascent stages of her research focus for the next several years. Asked a seemingly simple question by one of her colleagues, "Did women copy books in the Middle Ages?" Beach became preoccupied with unearthing an adequate answer – an answer that has culminated in her most recent book, *Women as Scribes*. A concentrated, nearly exhaustive analysis of three Bavarian monasteries, Wessobrunn, Admont and Schäftlarn, *Women as Scribes* sifts through time-

ravished manuscripts, necrologies, booklists, charters and exegetical texts, in an attempt to expose women's extensive participation in scribal activity in twelfth-century Germany. Beach only looks beyond these three monasteries in her introduction whereby she gives her reader a succinct overview of the history of female scribal activity that led to the flourishing of women copyists in Bavaria.

After highlighting specific events and circumstances, such as the success of the double monastery in Germany that cultivated a "favorable climate for female scribes," Beach launches into a discussion of the convictions underlying her methodology. Declaring that handwriting alone is not an accurate means by which to determine a scribe's gender, that sound paleographical analysis must accompany the identification of a scribe's hand, Beach adopts a more "critical approach." She takes into consideration stylistic variations, collaborative possibilities, availability of material supplies and working conditions, as evidence of female hands is sought out in manuscript colophons and "literary works and monastery records." Aware that little scholarship has been written on the participation of more "ordinary women" – everyday nun-scribes – as copyists, specifically in Germanic lands, Beach asserts that for the most part, such an unfortunate occurrence is symptomatic of a belief in the notion that handwriting is gendered.

Noting that penmanship in the Middle Ages was an art form and therefore prone to stylistic changes, Beach, a connoisseur of locating female scribes, scrutinizes the individual shape and formation of particular letters and symbols. She includes an analysis of the typography of telling letters and signs, such as the letters "b," "g," and "p," the employment of ligatures in a text, and the inclusion and/or exclusion of ampersands, to name a few, to successfully match a text to its female scribe(s). Most admirable in her quest

for evidence of female hands is, however, Beach's development of a system of probability—a system comparable to that of a detective's. Devising a code of likelihood to measure the accuracy of her final conclusions, "very likely not identical, possibly identical, probably identical, very likely identical," coupled with numerous charts and illustrations of manuscripts and codicological features that Beach has included for her reader to verify her findings, this scribe-sleuth's process could only be described as meticulously thorough.

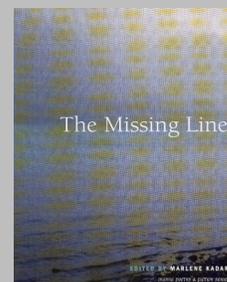
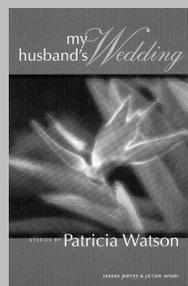
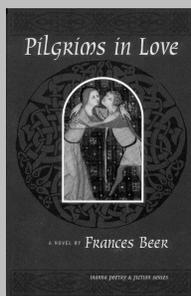
After determining with a promising likelihood of certainty the presence of a female hand, Beach pieces together what the lives and roles of women in a particular German religious house looked like and, by extension, the community's attitudes towards women and education in general. For example, in her investigation into the community of Schäftlarn, Beach writes that the monastery's book-collection in 1164 evolved into "one that more clearly reflected the needs of this community of monk-priests and priests-in-training." Schäftlarn, a monastery under Premonstraten Order and a community believed by Beach to place great emphasis on books, was not a religious centre that encouraged and embraced a woman receiving a rich intellectual life; in this respect, the lives of women at Schäftlarn were significantly different from the nun-scribes of Admont under the Benedictine Rule whose "religious life without devotional reading would have been unthinkable." Despite Schäftlarn's "intellectually restrictive environment" towards women, Beach's study reveals that, although women largely played a supportive role in the community, satisfying a "complex set of spiritual and social needs within the society," women also proved invaluable as the demand for book production (books to be read by men) increased. She shows Schäftlarn's willingness to defy the leaders of the Premonstraten Order as a way "to take advantage of

the labor the women could provide"; a decision which, ultimately, broke "both the physical barriers of the cloister and the intellectual barriers that discouraged female literacy."

Beach's investigation of Schäftlarn is representative of her investigations into Admont and Wessobrunn not only in terms of content, but also in its aesthetics of style and lucid structure. To prevent her reader from becoming overwhelmed by her copious process of uncovering clues, and to better navigate her reader through mazes of anonymity and once-upon-a-time libraries, Beach unhesitatingly inserts tables. In presenting her research that is most dense visually and, from beginning to end of her analysis providing simple yet effective subheadings, Beach guides even her novice reader easily through an otherwise clathrate topic of study. Although the perspicacious and calculated quality of her study is tedious at times, Beach, seemingly aware that

she may be accused of such a criticism, prefaces each chapter on a specific religious house with an historical anecdote to endow her "proof" with an element of ancient intrigue. Sharing historical myths, Beach captures the mysterious aura that haunts the many lost names of women scribes presumably claimed by a topos of humility, or a lost battle against time and the "fight for physical survival." In the second chapter that focuses on Wessobrunn's religious house, Beach relates an event that occurred in the early eighteenth century: the unearthing of the reclusive-scribe Diemut's tomb. She sets the stage with a specific time, "On 5 April 1707," and adds subtle details, "a beautiful odor is said to have filled the air," as she tells her reader about a moment in history that boasts of the extent to which women were able to be "shapers of and participants in the monastic reformation of the twelfth century."

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