chapters focuses on the story of a particular woman, the only exception being one that takes the form of a dialogue between two sisters, Dorothy Skinner and Virginia Skinner Harris. After providing a brief biographical sketch at the head of each chapter, the voice of Melissa Walker recedes into the background as these women tell their stories.

As we read, their words often evoke our appreciation for their courage and resourcefulness, our sympathy as they recount difficult experiences and even our laughter as they relate a funny story filed away in their memories. Korola Neville Lee speaks of an accident in which she killed a child, her vivid account conveying how deeply etched the incident is in her memory. While women such as Evelyn Petree Lewellyn acknowledge the challenges that often defined the Depression years, the tenor of her story as well as that of others is ultimately one of success. Elsewhere, Ruth Hatchette McBrayer and Mary Webb Quinn represent and exude an energy that exemplifies an unstoppable determination.

Despite the richness of these stories, the usual questions emerge. Has not time distorted the memories of these women? If so, what is the value of their stories beyond mere enjoyment? Responding to such concerns, Walker refers to the complexity of our memories-how we remember is as critical in oral history as the what. For instance, we lose our sense of when something happened as these memories become reordered according to the meaning of the event in our lives. As a result, the stories in this collection grant us access to histories that may diverge from that of men whose lives were also irrevocably affected by the tumult of the Depression and the world wars. While these stories periodically intersect with more traditional histories, Walker explains how the value of oral history lies in its ability to create a window into the mindset of the historical actors. The merit of these stories, then, goes beyond providing facts concerning life for women in early twentieth-century Tennessee or South Carolina. They help us to understand the relationship these women have established with their personal pasts and the meaningfulness they have assigned to the various events and people that appear in their stories. However, do these stories have relevance beyond this part of the United States?

In many ways they do, for the thoughts and ideas these stories invoke find an easy affinity with the experiences of women in places like Canada. Certainly conditions such as the Depression, the world wars or the challenges of farming were widespread. A glance at the local histories of some rural communities in the prairies would find women whose lives followed a similar daily round and who experienced similar challenges. For those of us looking on, this collection not only provides insight into the lives of women in Tennessee or South Carolina. This collection of stories also hints at the mindset of Canadian women who would no doubt nod and smile at the experiences described here or perhaps wince at the memory of similar setbacks. These stories defy time and space, striking a chord a little closer to home.

Lee Everts recently entered her third year of a Ph.D. program with the Department of Geography at the University of Saskatchewan where she is engaged with research focusing on two rural communities in Saskatchewan. In particular, she is studying how the ideas and perspectives of seniors reflect the meanings that derive from their cultural landscapes.

PILGRIMS IN LOVE

Frances Beer
Toronto: Inanna Publications, 2004

REVIEWED BY SHELAGH WILKINSON

> "By God! if wommen hadde writen stories,
> As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
> They wolde han writen of men more wikkednesse
> Than al the mark of Adam may redresse."

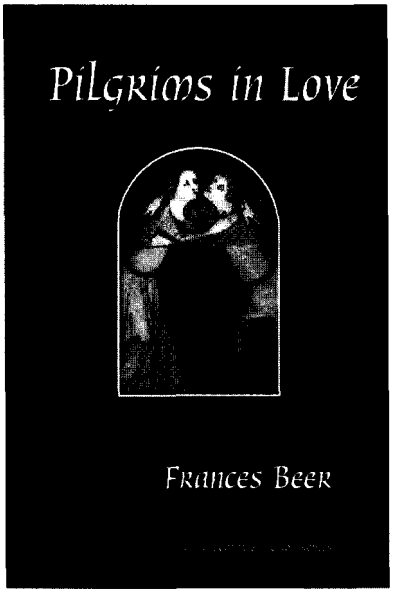
Chaucer has his Wife of Bath speak these lines in her prologue to her tale (ll. 693-696). Immediately we know that the author is revealing the political reality of a woman's place in a man's world. Chaucer gives his Alison a long—virtuoso—prologue compared to the other pilgrims and we learn much about her life with her five husbands. When I taught a gender studies course I always used Chaucer and his Wife to introduce a fourteenth-century feminist perspective in literature. I am not a medievalist, and know none of the specifics of fourteenth-century life. For me it was enough to have a male author willing to share with us such an early, robust, feminist character. Imagine my joy when I read Frances Beer's book and heard Alison speak of her life, and the lives of other women, in frank and honest detail, giving us 'insider' knowledge about gender inequities and how women circumvented them.

As Beer says in the introduction she has kept to the details that Chaucer has given in his *Canterbury Tales*; but, for me, what is significant is that she has allowed herself to fill in his silences. This is not an academic analysis, although the research and the scholarship are impeccable. Instead it is truly a novella told with wit and grace—and it's a page-turner. Again we have a virtuoso perform-

ance: an old, old story seen through a distinctly new feminist lens. Obviously women in the fourteenth century had very few choices open to them if they were to survive with any degree of comfort and independence in a patriarchal society, but here we witness not merely survival but triumph.

In selecting two women as the narrators of *Pilgrims in Love*—Alison, much married and Eglentyne much cloistered—Beer is able to juxtapose the two types of life-style open to medieval women, and to reveal their disparate lives: Alison living in domesticity (the servant of man), Eglentyne living in seclusion (the servant of God). These two women have had totally different life experiences, yet on their pilgrimage to Canterbury they find they share a common need. Both are keen to 'get a man' and of course who better to show the way than Alison—five times a wife.

This book is a gift for those of us who teach gender/women's studies. We need no longer wish that "wommen hadde writen stories," as this novel provides us with the how and the why of a woman's life-story: how Alison, as a girl of twelve, was bartered to a lecherous old man, how she quickly grew a 'thick skin,' and why she chose to marry again—and again. This much-widowed Wife of Bath takes the one option open to her as a poor woman—the married state. But she demonstrates that if a woman uses her wits she may quickly turn disadvantage into triumph. As the pilgrimage begins she reviews the masculine component and swiftly selects which man to bed down with. In the morning, putting on her riding spurs over her scarlet stockings, she revels in her success and tells us "being villified for carnality by the pious was always gratifying." Beer's Alison, who is the catalyst for the narrative, shows us a woman who is practical and honest about her life, and especially about her sexuality; yet she is willing, and able, to understand the difficulty for Eglentyne



whose convent life has been the opposite of hers. As a fourth daughter she was without hope of dowry and so was selected (by her parents) to enter a Benedictine convent.

And from Eglentyne's narrative we learn how she has always longed to be a mother and how much she has missed the intimacy of family life. Alison perceives her needs and her lack of choice, and decides to pass on her hard-earned knowledge to this woman who has been so secluded she could never have learned how to 'get her man.' And obviously this is what Eglentyne wants, once she hears Richard recount his Knight's tale. For a convent woman she begins to show very secular longings and Alison, of course, recognizes this and becomes her co-conspirator and her mentor. This book demonstrates how the personal is political, especially in fourteenth-century England, and it is never dull—in fact it is told with such humour that one laughs out loud. Imagine a Prioress creeping back to her room after a garden tryst with a potential lover and wondering how she can 'kick the habit' while burning with shame at the sin she knows she is committing: "but even more I burned with longing for Richard."

As each pilgrim tells his/her tale we get Alison's comments—not only on the story but more importantly about the person who is the storyteller. We have a new, feminist, analysis of the class divisions as well as the gender divide in medieval England. Alison is a shrewd and vicious commentator, vehement in her beliefs and totally without shame in denouncing the frailties and hypocrisies she observes in her travelling companions. She knows which men enjoy power and control over others; she is hilarious when she analyzes the trumped up potency of lecherous old men; but she is also tender and humane when she recounts the death of her only child and the great love she had for her scholar husband Jankyn. She is shrewd in her assessment of the Prioress, noting her early interest in the Knight: "Was it possible that our demure prioress was actually feeling the stirrings of Venus?"

And this is one of the great joys of this book: Professor Beer reveals a growing friendship and a growing respect that the Wife and the Prioress develop for each other during their short pilgrimage and it is easy to contemplate how two women, thrown together in close quarters, would indeed help and support each other. We learn far more about the lives of these two women than about the other pilgrims and this is why the book is such a gift for a gender/women's studies course. In fact this act of re-visioning—of fictionalizing—a story we all know so well, is at the heart of a genre that has been central to women's studies texts. We think of Margaret Atwood's epic story of Susanna Moodie, of Gwendolyn MacEwen's *Trojan Women*, and just recently Atwood's re-visioning of the Penelope myth. So with *Pilgrims in Love* Beer ads to the re-visioning of women's stories by giving us a new Alison—and for me Chaucer's Wife is newly alive. With this new story we realize many of the social and cultural constraints on women, we hear the politics of gender relations, the subordination of women to the patriarchal policies of both family and society, the barriers to education and to any choice of life-style. But the

fun of the tale comes from hearing the ways in which women learn to subvert the rules, twist the politics to their own advantage, and triumph as "uppity women" who can teach us a trick or two.

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THE NARCISSUS AND THE POMEGRANATE: AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE HOMERIC HYMN TO DEMETER

Ann Suter
Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002

REVIEWED BY SAMUEL WAGAR

I took part in a reconstruction of the Eleusinian Mysteries at a religious retreat earlier this year. The Eleusinian Mysteries were an initiatory series of rituals carried on in the town of Eleusis for a thousand years (from the eighth century BCE to their suppression by the Christians in the fourth century CE). They have been understood to be based on the story recounted in the seventh-century BCE *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. There was some provocative and interesting rethinking of the foundation myth of the mysteries and I was intrigued, so I asked for a list of recommended reading.

Everybody is vaguely familiar with the usual telling of the story: the kidnapping and rape of Persephone (often called Kore) by Hades, god of the Underworld, with the approval of Zeus, and the mourning of Demeter, her mother, the grain goddess, who refused to allow food to grow and threatened to wipe out humanity until Hades was persuaded to let Persephone come back to be with her mother. Hades gave her a pomegranate seed (symbolic fruit of fertility and marriage) to eat and as a result Persephone was obliged to spend part of each year in the underworld. A good translation is by Charles Boer *The Homeric Hymns* (Spring Publications 1970), but there are many. This story is for us, although less so than for the Greeks, a foundation story of patriarchal family relations, in which the whole action centres on decisions made by Gods—Zeus and Hades—and the female characters are secondary to the main action, particularly Persephone, who is a trophy or prize, but not an independent actor.

Suter takes apart the poem, first of all, dividing it into the Olympian/patriarchal telling which frames an older myth and dealing with the two parts separately. The Olympian frame of the story gives Zeus and the gods power, whereas they are insignificant figures in the older story. She makes a strong argument for considering the usual story, the abduction, a later adaptation by the seventh century BCE poet involved in the religious rethinking which subordinated the local deities, often goddesses, and their rituals and festivals to the Olympian pantheon. Suter does not embrace the idea of the "Indo-European invaders" but sees the development of the patriarchal and Olympian pantheon as indigenously Greek. She also sees the evidence of direct links to the primordial Great Goddess in cultus as weak. Her survey of the linguistic evidence and the archaeological material is quite good and she backs up her points here convincingly.

She then subjects the older story, of Persephone's descent to the Underworld and the mourning of her mother, to several layers of reading, each of which is very interesting—beginning with the psychological reading of the life cycles of both the young goddess, the kore (maiden), and of the older goddess, Demeter. She talks here about the sexual maturation and breaking away from the mother of adolescent women as reflected upon in the story and also the reaction of older women to the maturation of their daughters.

She then reads the *hieros gamos*—the ritual of sexual union of the goddess of fertility with a god or human man to bring back the fertility of the Earth. It is Persephone who has sex, and she who is the power of fertility. Suter argues that Persephone is the older goddess and Demeter, who participated in *hieros gamoi* in other places, was later coming to Eleusis. The link between the suppression of the *hieros gamos* and other sexual rituals, not just in Greece but also in other parts of the Mediterranean world, as part of the patriarchal suppression of women deserves a deeper exploration, although Suter does not go beyond the poem and related Greek material to undertake it.

Suter looks at the competition between Demeter and Persephone and the relative ages of their cults at Eleusis. She surveys similar stories and the archaeological evidence from around the Greek world to place the Hymn into its historical context—when and for what reasons it likely was composed, what older materials it was constructed from and what great gaps in the evidence remain. She finds evidence of power struggles between the Olympian and pre-Olympian deities, and also between Persephone and Demeter—undercutting the traditional understanding of a cooperative mother-daughter pairing (except subsequent to the poem). As well, she finds no convincing evidence of paired worship of these two deities prior to the poem anywhere in the Greek world – the theory that sees them as aspects of the same goddess or of the poem as