LEES, Clare A., and Gillian R. OVERING 2001. *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 244+x pages. $49.95 U.S.

Let me begin this review with an anecdote. I was reading *Double Agents* on a plane recently. Noticing the title, the man beside me said eagerly, "Oh, that's the kind of book *I* like too!" "No, no," I replied. "It's not that sort of book."

Actually, *Double Agents* is a detective story—of a Marxist feminist sort. Like Lees' and Overing's other work, this book is a reaction to "the kind of default misogyny and compensatory idealization of women common to the clerical tradition throughout the Middle Ages" (p. 158). They wish "to square the problem of women's recorded absence with the inescapable fact of their physical presence and material contribution" (p. 11). They address women's "entry into the symbolic," i.e., the cultural record and the world-view behind it (p. 2). Their methodology as they examine religious writers like Bede, Aldhelm, and Ælfric is "a feminist patristics" (p. 10). They uncover "the denial, silencing, and elision of women's agency in the Anglo-Saxon cultural record" (p. 172), and show how women can be "coopted or complicit" in patriarchal power-wielding (p. 48). The present book is a part of their lifelong labour "to demystify the naturalizing forces of patristic rhetoric and its power to structure cognition" (p. 172).

Given this agenda, it is unsurprising that the book is not an easy read. Lees and Overing assume a familiarity with a certain kind of modified-Lacanian critical discourse. For this reviewer, the book's "dense theoretical formulation" (p. ix) requires a constant effort to pin down the thought behind the language, and the moments of "colloquial demystification" (p. ix) come as a relief. I began to wonder whether the "cultural symbolic" (e.g., pp. 63, 114, 124) and the "social imaginary" (e.g., pp. 13, 125, 128) meant the same thing, that is, the record. "Guarantors of the symbolic" (e.g., pp. 44—twice, 95, 193 n. 75), though defined on its first occurrence as a matter of "control of representation," continued to mystify. Authoritative elements within the literary and cultural canon, perhaps? "Vernacularity . . . redefines

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the social imaginary of late Anglo-Saxon England" (p. 128) presumbly means "Texts that would formerly have been in Latin are now in English."

There is a certain resemblance between the writing of Lees and Overing and that of some of the more intractable passages they take apart. When they speak of sympathising with the smart old rich—and powerful—nuns of Barking Abbey being subjected to patristic culture (pp. ix, 124), one wonders about the irony of somewhat similar modern women also grappling with Aldhelm's excruciating prose, which they find "spectacularly boring" and "excessively difficult to read" (p. 121). Readers may also find irony in Lees and Overing's remarks about the very difficulty of Aldhem's Latin being part of "a process of containment, direction, and control" (p. 122), and, later, about working against the "obscuring veils of clerical discourse" (p. 171) in order to recover women's agency.

The volume consists of an Introduction followed by five chapters analysing the construction (or demolition) of the feminine in certain selected texts. Chapter One, "Patristic Maternity," focusses on Hild Abbess of Whitby, publisher of Cædmon, the first recorded vernacular poet, and demonstrates how Bede appropriates and masculinises her mothering role at this "birth." Chapter Two, "Orality, Femininity, and the Disappearing Trace," links the disappearance of women with that of oral literature, while admitting that this linkage is actually rather problematic. Here Lees and Overing focus on Asser's account of Alfred's mother—evidently literate—and her book of vernacular poetry which he won as a prize; on Ælfflæd's testimony supporting the rehabilitation of Bishop Wilfrid in the Latin Lives of Cuthbert and Wilfrid; and on orality and the feminine as they leave traces in certain riddles and charters. Chapter Three continues the exploration of "Literacy and Gender," examining the Herefordshire lawsuit involving the oral words of a woman who cut her son out of her will; the Eucharist as a guarantor of the symbolic and women's exclusion from the performance of it; and *The Husband's Message*, an Old English poem which Lees and Overing believe implies a literate female reader, since the addressee is given a rune-stave. The absence of key women's names in some of these accounts (Bede and Asser do name Hild and Osburh elsewhere in their respective books) is regarded by Lees and Overing as evidence of the suppression of women's agency. Chapter Four, "Figuring the Body," looks at hagiography

in Aldhelm's prose *De virginitate*, Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*, especially the anonymous *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* (preserved in the Ælfric collection), and, finally, at some penitentials. The long analysis of the *Life of St. Mary* plays cleverly with the concepts of sight and insight as they can be detected in this work. Chapter Five, "Pressing Hard on the 'Breasts' of Scripture," deals with theological and philosophical concepts symbolised as women, and looks at Boethius's *Consolation*, in Latin and the Alfredian translation, and the *Collectanea Pseudo-Bedae*, showing how the metaphorical female bodies in these texts are either "perfectly chaste" or copiously lactating and "spectacularly maternal" (p. 157).

This book's explorations are ingenious, its breadth of primary and secondary reading impressive. Stylistically and structurally it is laboured. The arrangement and composition, like the language, can be frustrating. The exposition circles around the subject, presents important points as incidental asides thrown out while discussing other things. The authors refer in this tangential way to "the probable decline in female Latin literacy" between the seventh and tenth centuries (p. 59), and note in passing that "wealth and class are prominent elements in any analysis of female monasticism" (p. 127). There is a reluctance to follow up leads and to define patterns. Thus, the theory of a decline in women's status from a "golden age" in the early Anglo-Saxon period is repeatedly questioned but never addressed systematically (pp. 14, 33, 83, 110). Issues raised are left for others to pursue: "Such complex relations between the female saint . . . , the conventions of the Christian subject . . . , and the dynamics of the regulated gaze merit further investigation" (p. 132).

The title is catchy, but not entirely accurate, because the book is not only about women who make things happen, like Hild of Whitby and her successor Ælfflæd, but also about the feminine as a purely literary construct: the suffering bodies of purely imaginary women—as the virgin martyrs essentially are; as well as Lady Philosophy in Boethius' *Consolation* and Wisdom in the *Collectanea Pseudo-Bedae*, figures which are not "agents" in any sense. Insofar as the women of this book are double agents, the doubleness is really in the minds of us readers, seeing them from the perspective of Anglo-Saxon patriarchal males and modern feminists.

Putting this book together must have been no light task, as the occasional flash of exasperation reveals: "Time and again as we have reviewed the material for this book, we have wondered what did our writers think they were writing" (p. 157, a parenthetic *cri de coeur*). It is a pity that in consequence readers are more likely to be turned off these texts than inspired to look at them afresh. Aldhem may be rather dire, but Bede is eminently readable—as are much of the vernacular poetry and prose. If readers test Lees and Overing's explications against their own reactions, opinions will, of course,vary. I, for one, find the dismissal of Bede as a misogynist a little unfair. I am also very sceptical about the runic cryptogram in *The Husband's Message* as evidence for female literacy. In other cases, for example, Lees and Overing's inferences about the Herefordshire woman's lawsuit—attributing her anonymity to the orality of her testimony, and guessing the part probably played by a powerful *man* (Thurkil the White)—chime with my own assessment of the situation.

In short, Lees and Overing's book is not for the faint-hearted, and as a contribution to our knowledge about women in Anglo-Saxon England it disappoints. But it does engage energetically with the culture of the period by applying feminist theory to a range of, often, neglected texts.

Anne L. Klinck
University of New Brunswick

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