



Femke Molekamp. *Women and the Bible in Early Modern England: Religious Reading and Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. xiii, 266 p. ISBN 9780199665402. US\$ 100.00 (cloth).

This work analyzes the biblical erudition of the women literati in early modern England. Their Bible-reading practices, either newly-minted Reformed or revived from humanist, Catholic, and medieval traditions, constitute the pervasive theme. Femke Molekamp explores networks of wealthy and privileged women, with access to leisure time and religious books, to reveal their deeply meditative and emotional lives in the privacy of their household and family. But, as Molekamp makes clear, these women could not help being drawn, from 1550 to 1670, into public, religious, and literary contentions, which were brought about by the Reformation in England and via Switzerland through the Geneva Bible.

In her examination, Molekamp adopts a religious, literary, feminist, and biographical perspective. She argues that reading the Bible stimulated the interpretative and creative writings of Reformed women in their quest for a powerful public identity, literary agency, and even political involvement. She is concerned with female subjectivity as well as women's self-scrutiny and self-representation. Essentially, her study is about the transformative power of Bible reading on early modern women, who, proscribed from reading this holy book before

the Reformation, became shortly afterwards its most fervent readers and interpreters. Moreover, these women used this acquired knowledge to become gradually prolific writers of various genres of texts.

At the heart of this book is an extensive analysis of the Geneva Bible, fully explored in the first chapter and systematically referred to in every subsequent chapter. Molekamp stands close to other scholars by focusing on the Protestant women's sources, but she expands on current research by examining the influence of the Geneva Bible on women readers: information gathering and action planning. The reading journey undertaken by these women was remarkable: they feminized Christian typologies as a way to personalize their own Bible copies, they shaped the content and purpose of printed catechism to enhance their authority in their domestic and devotional life, and they authored legacy books in a hybrid epistolary style. Their biblical paraphrases even showed innovation in English metrical psalmody, but all the way keeping many pre-Reformation reading practices in their toolbox: humanist (naturalized English expressions), classical and Renaissance textual analysis, Catholic (Passion stories, Christ as Book, on Cross), and medieval (Augustinian affective meditations). The second chapter covers women in action, organizing their reading in (non-)linear, cross-referential fashion. Molekamp notes that they organized biblical content by recording insights into commonplace books, crafting timelines as historiographical aids and typologies from biblical personae and themselves, couching biblical and proverbial wisdom in a female voice, and writing paratexts like dedicatory epistles and prefaces. As she observes, women replaced classical adages with biblical and godly proverbs, and re-patterned medieval genres along Protestant lines, thus enhancing their public authority. In the third chapter, Molekamp aims to interpret the reading practices in the suggestive context of effaced boundaries: the Protestant civic space blends into that of a woman's closet, instead of staying separate as scholars have claimed; the geographically-demarcated community for devotional practice also lost its borders in favor of an imaginary or idealized corner for communal reading; the meditative reading crossed confessional Reformed-Catholic boundaries, as women were engaged in educating their relatives and household servants.

In the next two chapters, Molekamp argues that Bible reading received the highest affection among women. Molekamp traces humanist reading practices bent on meditation rather than action, which stimulated English women to write elegies, biblical poetry, funeral sermons, and psalm translation and paraphrases, all rooted in the Geneva Bible. She discovers specific

Reformed traits in that their writings sought to orient feelings and encourage moderation and chastity through religious ecstasy. Materiality, visual elements, the text, class alliances, and sponsorship were all powerful Reformed referents. Using Catholic ballads to reflect on Christ's passions and express their voices showed women's interiority. It was Reformed because of its anti-Catholic rhetoric of disembodiment, apathy, and a fragmented identity. One conclusion stands out: English women reading the Bible strengthened their Reformed identity and exuded quite a literary talent at English versification.

Molekamp is evenhanded in dealing with the gender differences in the patterns of Bible reading. She stresses a variety of intervention roles for women as teachers, writers of prayers, organizers, and household mistresses. But she also draws attention to how men influenced women's reading pursuits of the Bible and other texts annotated by women, all of which were equally serviced by male figures. She emphasizes women's use of maternity as a powerful biblical referent to gain authority, but she notes that breastfeeding and maternity in one's family and religious life prevailed because of patriarchal pressures. She concludes that, although women still appeared to be confined to the home under patriarchal subjection, the private and daily reading and meditation of psalms in closets or gardens acquired a thorough public feminine expression, hence annulling the patriarchal hold on them.

This multifarious approach of the Bible-reading experiences suggests a rich mine of interpretations and ideas, reinforcing the central role of religion in articulating women's nexus of identities. The daily act of biblical reading is fascinating particularly in our age of secularism and relativism, where religion is never far away in studies of identity politics, and where the social practice of religion is more salient than the precepts of the religious text. Five hundred years ago, women's reading was vastly encouraged by the Geneva Bible as a Reformed action; however, women's writings lacked a clear genre, were truncated and instrumentalized, and were in need of perpetual guidance of readers. Thus, one may wonder whether the writing efforts arising from reading matched in scale and depth the women's efforts of communication and consumption, which remained the primary Protestant concerns in the period. More can be said on the subjects Molekamp treats, but she provides a thoughtful framework for discussion, anchored in early modern history and book history as well as in literary criticism. Her judicious analysis of reading practices and her investigation of documents and Bibles led her to ask the right questions of gender and religious identity.

Pompilia Burciã



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University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign