

***Female Devotion and Textile Imagery in Medieval English Literature*, by Anna McKay, D. S. Brewer, 2024, pp. 315, £95,00 (hardcover), ISBN: 9781843847137.**

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'Woman' is a subject analysed in many fields such as literature, sociology, psychology, and philosophy. 'Woman,' whose position varies across continents, nations and communities, has generally been addressed through the lenses of patriarchy, freedom struggle, fundamental rights, and equality. Anna McKay, on the other hand, in her study titled *Female Devotion and Textile Imagery in Medieval English Literature* (2024), takes a new standpoint on women and surveys her manifestation in Medieval English Literature in the context of gender, devotion, and textile imagery. Part of the "Gender in the Middle Ages" series, her work offers a fresh take on the current academic discourse regarding the representation and construction of femininity in medieval texts. McKay's study comprehensively probes how textile-related activities served not only as symbols but also as means by which medieval women expressed and practised their devotion.

In the "Introduction," McKay sets the stage for her investigation by emphasising that textile imagery in medieval texts is not just a metaphor but a critical medium through which women engaged with theological and cultural issues. The theoretical foundation McKay establishes here underscores how textile hermeneutics invites readers to reconsider the roles of women in medieval spirituality, offering a new dimension to our understanding of their agency. In her study, McKay puts forward the idea that textile images in medieval English literature function as a hermeneutic tool. She asserts that

clothwork and textiles act as ways of both expressing and grasping the experiences of others. They help us read and interpret those experiences (10). Apart from this, she enunciates that textile images serve as a lens that gives an idea about women. As it is known, in the Middle Ages, women were restricted from developing a discourse about themselves, and they were reduced to a subordinate/subtle position, especially in religious terms. As McKay clarifies, from the very beginning, male authority in the Church has maintained control over teaching and instruction. The written and spoken word have been reserved as privileges primarily held by men (3). By framing the ability to teach and interpret religious texts as a masculine trait, the Church has marginalised women's voices and limited their roles within religious life. McKay contends that medieval English women, often marginalised in theological discourses, were able to engage with and explicate spiritual truths through a common textile hermeneutics. She further supports her argument by meticulously tracing how figures such as Eve, the Virgin Mary, St Veronica and Jesus were symbolically associated with textiles.

McKay adopts an interdisciplinary approach rather than using a single theory. Her book benefits not only from a feminist perspective but also from literary analysis, historical contextualisation, and theological reflection. McKay utilises Judith Butler's theories of performativity¹ in her examination of the feminine (2). In parallel, she proclaims that the acts of devotion and interpretation conflated with textiles are culturally constructed as feminine rather than being inherently linked to biological sex. Grounding a theoretically powerful narrative, McKay thus introduces a new insight into the repositioning of women, marginalised by the patriarchal structures of the medieval Church, at the centre of Christian devotional practices.

McKay's book is structured in four main chapters, each focussing on a different archetypal figure or motif. As McKay states, "Chapter 1 focuses on Eve, exploring her designation as a spinner specifically as a marker of sensory femininity and transgression" (26). The depiction of Eve as a spinner amplifies her relationship to sensual femininity and transgression, suggesting that her role is deeply tied to perceptions of femininity. McKay examines the figure of Eve and investigates how her relationship with textiles and the act of weaving can be used to reflect on materiality and devotion. She stresses that Eve's weaving is not limited to the domestic sphere, but is deeply connected to the material aspects of faith. Furthermore, she remarks that her act of weaving transcends the confines of the home and represents a deeper, spiritual form of devotion.

¹ For Butler, "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (xiv-xv). Butler argues that the body is not simply a biological entity but is shaped by cultural norms and historical processes. Both Butler and McKay draw attention to how cultural constructs shape perceptions of gender. McKay's statement aligns with those of Butler when she argues that acts such as devotion and interpretation associated with textiles are culturally constructed as feminine.

In the second chapter, “‘Thu art to me a very modir’: Weaving the Word in Marian Literature,” McKay presents a scrutiny centred on the Virgin Mary.² In this context, McKay draws on textile imagery in Marian literature to explore how these images intersect with the word of God and weaving. Through this examination, she reflects on the acceptance of the Virgin Mary’s weaving as a metaphor for the Incarnation. She elucidates that clothwork functions as another way of interpreting or comprehending Christ’s incarnate body. As Mary spins, knits, sews, and weaves, she symbolically forms her son’s flesh (90). Mary’s actions of making cloth can be regarded as a symbol of how Christ’s physical body was formed or shaped. McKay’s exegesis takes textile work from being a simple household chore to a more spiritual and meaningful form. This also indicates that a cultural act such as weaving, typically aligned with women, can also be associated with religious symbolism.

In the subsequent chapter, “‘He who has seen me has seen the father’³: The Veronica in Medieval England,” McKay once again focuses on a religious figure, St Veronica, “who is commonly understood today as the woman who wiped Christ’s face on the road to Calvary, miraculously taking its imprint on cloth” (145). With a distinctive slant, she discusses the symbolic meaning of St Veronica and her veil. As a result of this connection, McKay claims that the cloth/veil bearing the image of Christ’s face becomes a powerful object of devotion. With this inquiry, McKay reinforces the tactile and visual aspects of devotion. More precisely, for McKay, the veil creates a concrete link between the divine and the believer.

In the final chapter, “‘Blessedly clothed with gems of virtue’: Clothing and *Imitatio Christi* in Anchoritic Texts for Women,” McKay explores textile imagery in anchoritic texts. McKay considers the relationship between textile imagery and the concept of *imitatio Christi* (imitation of Christ). She argues that medieval women used textile work as a metaphor for virtue. By clothing themselves in virtue, they aimed to follow Christ’s teachings and lead a devout life. Furthermore, McKay investigates how “fabric encourages a sensory, conceptually feminine, form of interpretation in Christian devotion, and . . . how women engage with fabric as a manifestation of the divine” (216). With these remarks, McKay underlines that cloth and textile held spiritual meaning for women in the medieval period. She notes that women, particularly in a male-dominated society, utilised such items to reflect their devotion and to establish their religious identity.

In the “Afterword,” McKay expounds on the implications of her findings for contemporary feminist scholarship. She articulates that her exploration into textile

² McKay accentuates that “From the earliest days of Christianity, the Virgin Mary has been consistently represented in iconography as a clothworker” (91). This highlights the close connection between Mary and textile work in religious art.

³ This Biblical verse (John 14:9) is often cited to affirm the belief that Jesus is the incarnate representation of God on Earth.

imagery reveals a deeper connection between gender, materiality, and devotion, advocating for a more nuanced appreciation of medieval women's spirituality.

McKay's work, as seen in the four chapters together with the introduction and afterword parts, displays a peculiar stance on the female figure in the medieval period. Focusing particularly on medieval textile images, McKay posits that these images provide vehicles for spiritual expression and theological interpretation. In doing so, McKay employs an interdisciplinary approach, combining literary analysis with historical and theological insights. Thus, McKay's scholarly approach makes her work relevant to scholars in various fields.

Considering the work as a whole, the first notable element of McKay's book is that she introduces seemingly complex theoretical ideas in a riveting and illustrative manner. In addition, McKay meticulously uses medieval texts, especially religious works, as primary sources for her analyses. However, a minor limitation is that while McKay covers the major figures pertaining to textile imagery, there is room for further exploration into lesser-known examples or alternative readings of this imagery in relation to gender and power dynamics. Nevertheless, McKay's research can be considered to be an outstanding scholarly achievement in that it reveals the often undervalued role of textiles in medieval devotional practices. In particular, McKay's research on 'textile hermeneutics' is noteworthy for offering a new perspective on how medieval women engaged with and interpreted medieval spiritual verities. As a final point, McKay's book can serve as an incisive resource for researchers interested in medieval literature, feminist theology, gender, and religion.

Works Cited

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, 2006.

McKay, Anna. *Female Devotion and Textile Imagery in Medieval English Literature*. D. S. Brewer, 2024.

Disclosure Statements

- ✕ The author of this review confirms that this research does not require a research ethics committee approval.
- ✕ The author of this review confirms that their work complies with the principles of research and publication ethics.
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