Review of

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Mary Ellen Lamb’s introduction to the collection provides a clear and erudite analysis of the issues surrounding oral narratives or, as she terms them, ‘old wives’ tales’ (p.1). Although Lamb describes the conventional sets of binaries used to formulate oral tradition – written versus oral, upper versus lower class, and male versus female – she quickly establishes that these divisions offer insufficient insight into a complex and persistently mutating genre. The underlying methodology of the collection looks, therefore, at the ‘blurring…between oral and written,’ and at ‘cultural meanings, especially the gendered meanings, of oral transmission itself’ (p.1). The subsequent essays are divided into three cognate areas.

The essays in Part I explore the ways in which female storytellers are stereotyped in the writings of canonical male authors. There are two pieces on Edmund Spenser, the first by Jacqueline T. Miller that concentrates on The Faerie Queene identifying women who are persistently silenced and ‘constantly thwarted by men,’ and the second by Kate Giglio that looks at Mother Hubberds Tale in which Spenser’s re-articulation of the ‘familiar wisdom’ of women healers becomes an integral aspect of the text’s political allegory (pp. 12 and 24). Romance re-emerges in Julie A. Eckerle’s essay on
Philip Sidney’s *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia* and Mary Wroth’s *The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania* in which Sidney’s depiction of the lower-class foolishness of Miso and Mopsa, is contrasted with Wroth’s skilled female rhetoric. The final essay in the section, by Henk Dragster, deals with John Aubrey’s reframing of the tales told him by his nurse in a historical context, thereby reasserting the classical division of male/written/scholarly versus female/oral/ fiction.

The fascinating essays in Part II combine path-breaking research into the way female identity was fashioned by oral tradition with perceptive close reading, thereby demonstrating the close engagement between literary and social discourses. Diane Purkiss’ essay sets a 1673 witchcraft deposition by Anne Armstrong alongside Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* in order to show how adolescent women were obsessed with food. Similarly, Fiona McNeill demonstrates that Orsino’s flippant demands for musical entertainment in *Twelfth Night* call upon the ballads sung about impoverished women labourers - maids, lace-makers and those sent to serve, and starve, in Virginia. Natasha Korda also looks at the Early Modern female workforce in her essay on street vendors, showing how they were mocked while trying to earn a living in London’s new capitalist markets. The final essay, by LaRue Love Sloan demonstrates the entrenched positioning of genders in oral tradition by linking the curtain lecture in which a shrewish wife harangues her husband with the final tragic pillow scene in *Othello*.

The essays in Part III tend to bolster and confirm the blurring of generic boundaries discussed by Lamb, with contributions on libellous poetry by C.C.MGee, on Margaret and William Cavendish by James Firzmaurice, on
multiple sex changes by Regina Buccola, on humanist verbal performance and *Twelfth Night* by Eric Mason, and on the association between female practice, oral tradition and Catholicism by Clare Kinney.

However, what makes this collection not only informative but hugely enjoyable are the depictions of the women themselves: the imaginative ‘Lucy’ who wished to eat ‘boyled capon with silver scrues;’ ‘Fair Winifright, and Bridget bright’ who were treated like slaves; the women who, as they pawned their petticoats and prostituted themselves, were ‘creatures soone vp, & soone downe;’ Marie Perman who ‘showes her arsse;’ and, finally, the ‘Spinsters…[and] Huswifes’ described by Margaret Cavendish who sat on ‘Cold Winter Nights’ spinning their ‘flax’, weaving their ‘Web’ and – of course - singing ‘ballads’ (pp.64, 112, 125, 140, 144, and 164).

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