Over the last three decades medieval women's writing has become a significant focus of scholarly research. Women's literary culture in England in the later Middle Ages, and the influence of continental European women writers in Britain have been painstakingly charted. Simultaneously, considerable research has been undertaken into the work of Chaucer, his predecessors, contemporaries, and successors. Chaucer's working practices, his relationship with his scribes, patrons, and audiences have all been subject to close and necessary scrutiny, as has the European context of Chaucer's work. Yet, while there have been numerous informative studies of women or gender in the work of Chaucer and his contemporaries, to a significant extent research into women's writing and Chaucerian literature have existed in parallel. The established “canon” of medieval English literature has remained fundamentally unchallenged by the emergence of scholarship on medieval women’s writing. In order to contest this dichotomy of criticism, this Special Issue of *The Chaucer Review* brings together essays by scholars who work both on canonical medieval writers (including Chaucer, the *Pearl*-poet, and Thomas Hoccleve) and on women’s literary culture in England and Europe.

Our main objective in breaking down the divide between so-called female and male literary traditions in the period is to call into question the idea that these apparently different and separate literary cultures constitute a hierarchical binary, with women’s writing – with some notable exceptions – seen by and large as non-canonical. In so doing we seek to re-examine and re-evaluate the assumptions and values that ground the established canon of late medieval texts. Our revision of literary history challenges the idea of parallel traditions by asking what the male
tradition shares with, and – more importantly – owes to, that of the female tradition. In disputing the notion that medieval women’s literary history represents a tradition distinct from that of men, this Special Issue does not argue for an end to the idea, now well-established, that there is a distinctive female literary tradition in the later Middle Ages. Rather, it seeks to demonstrate that Chaucer and other male authors have more in common with women’s literary culture than has previously been assumed.

Before discussing in detail the methodologies and principles that underpin the essays in this Special Issue, it is important to tease out the difference between the terms “tradition” to “canon” as they are used in literary histories and criticism. The term “canon”, as applied to literary works, is a relative neologism, first appearing in North American contexts in 1929 but not finding its way into the *Oxford English Dictionary* until 2002. Here it is defined as “A body of literary works traditionally regarded as the most important, significant, and worthy of study; those works of esp. Western literature considered to be established as being of the highest quality and most enduring value; the classics.” Indeed, as Liedeke Plate has pointed out, such a definition not only posits the “canon” as something equating to “cultural memory” but also suggests that it “embodies the values of dominant social groups”, with these groups, until very recently, having been almost entirely male. Thus, the notion of a canon has played into the hands of a political teleology that has concertedly forgotten women’s contribution to literary culture.

Plate’s conception of the relation between memory and the canon resonates clearly with the questions raised by Virginia Woolf in her essay of 1940, “The Leaning Tower” in which she queries why (Western) culture insists upon “the belief that there is some force, influence, outer pressure which is strong enough to stamp
itself upon a whole group of different writers so that all their writing has a certain common likeness.”⁴ In this essay, Woolf uses the phallic metaphor of the tower to pinpoint a literary genealogy that has worked, like patrilineage, to ensure that “Books descend from books as families descend from families.”⁵ Here Woolf anticipates by some thirty years Michel Foucault’s identification of the incestuous interdependence between the literary canon and a culture’s sense of literary “tradition”, which renders often very diverse works “both successive and identical … making it possible to rethink the dispersion of history in the form of the same”.⁶ Such a process, therefore has served to obscure the ways that literary production, as Woolf had argued fifty years previously in A Room of One’s Own, is always multifaceted, inherently non-linear and far more like “a spider’s web … attached to life at all four corners.”⁷ As such, literary production is anything but successive and identical, spreading out across peoples and their cultures in organic and ultimately unpredictable ways. The idea of the “canon”, therefore, along with the male literary genealogy – the “tradition” – it serves to reify, leaves much of the labyrinth of literary history overlooked or un-remembered, dictating what is worthy of remembrance and what is not. And, whilst the concerted “recuperation” of women’s literary traditions in recent decades remains central to the feminist project – and thus to this Special Issue – the key concerns are not just whether women’s literary production is remembered, but also the way in which it is remembered. As Woolf reminds us, rather than being “single and solitary births,” great works are produced by means of the “thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice.”⁸ As such, a revisiting of the so-called “canonical” works of the later Middle Ages with “the body of the people” firmly in mind can reap rich dividends in uncovering the frequently central role played by women in late medieval literary
Women’s literary culture is here defined broadly to include not only women’s writing, but also women’s roles as patrons, readers and subjects of texts. Essays in this Issue discuss the contexts of the work of Geoffrey Chaucer, his contemporaries, predecessors and successors, to demonstrate the importance of considering women’s engagement with literature in understanding the established canon. A range of methodologies have been adopted by the essays in this Issue, including empirical research; close comparative readings of literary texts by male and female authors to examine the significance of gender in relation to issues such as genre, literary influence, literary reception, the construction of readers and reading, the influence of patrons, and textual anonymity; and archival research, such as analysis of manuscripts of the works of Chaucer and his contemporaries, focusing specifically on evidence of female ownership, production, readership and reception in relation to women’s religious houses. Taken together, the essays in this Special Issue address the following research questions. What evidence is there to support the premise that Chaucer and his male contemporaries were influenced by women’s literary activities? Is there any overlap between the traditions in which Chaucer and his contemporaries position their work and those in which the medieval women writers position themselves? Are literary genres handled differently in male- and female-authored texts? If so, why and to what effect? What aspects of the texts remain constant and why? Is there any evidence that the gender of a patron has a significant impact on the genre or content of the text produced? What can we discover about the reception and transmission of works by women, and by communities of female readers of the work of Chaucer and his male contemporaries? In what ways does this provide us with new insights into the audiences of Chaucer and his male contemporaries? The ultimate aim
of this Special Issue is to consider to what extent and in what ways research into women’s literary culture enhances our understanding of late medieval English literature as a whole. In so doing the essays offer a new approach to and understanding of the nuanced intersections of gender and textual production in the period.

Rethinking Medieval Literary Culture

Recent work that has examined women’s complex relationship to literary production has revealed that such production was essentially collaborative—which proves to be a useful paradigm for thinking about medieval writing more generally, whether by women, by men or both. Current scholarship has demonstrated, for example, the extent to which women could be—and were—very often the shapers of those texts written specifically for them. Here we might think first and foremost of the thirteenth-century guidance text for anchoresses, Ancrene Wisse. Originally written for three female recluses, it was soon adapted by the anonymous author for many more living together in community, eventually becoming another paradigm—in this instance for the literary concept of *mouvance*—as the text was rewritten, adapted and excerpted for many different types of audience, both male and female, religious and lay, well into the sixteenth century. To think of this text as belonging to any single group or any single tradition is to ignore its rich history and the multiplicity of its range and influence—of its *mouvance*. Indeed, to examine it as a “female” text in isolation is ultimately to ignore a large portion of its extensive (his)story.

The same can also be said about the recent charting of continental women writers and their influence upon women’s literary culture in England. Scholars such as
Susan Dickman, Janet Dillon, Lynn Staley, David Wallace, Jonathan Hsy as well as the two present editors, have traced the continental influences of holy women’s writing upon Margery Kempe, for example;\textsuperscript{11} whilst Rosalynn Voaden has done much to open up discussions of the work of the visionary nuns at Helfta in northern Germany and other European areas.\textsuperscript{12} In the Netherlands, too, Anneke Mulder-Bakker has cogently demonstrated the centrality of women’s literary culture to the context of the Devotio moderna, a movement that attracted the lettered scholastic as much as it did the “unlettered” laywoman.\textsuperscript{13} Whilst not arguing specifically for the interweaving of male and female traditions of devotion, nevertheless Mulder-Bakker’s conception of “communities of discourse” involving both men, women and the texts they produced has provided a template for the type of interrogation rendered necessary as a result of the new visibility for the literary women of the Middle Ages we are positing here.\textsuperscript{14}

Alongside an interest in the collaborative literariness of medieval women, the more “canonical” writers such as Geoffrey Chaucer (the so-called “father” of English poetry) continue to preoccupy the attention of scholars, as do their male predecessors, contemporaries and successors, their sources, analogues and intertexts. Indeed, for many generations, Chaucer’s working practices, his relationship with his scribes, his patrons and his audiences (both real and speculative) have all been subject to protracted scrutiny, as have the European contexts of his work. The same can also be said of the work of William Langland, John Gower, Thomas Hoccleve and John Lydgate, a literary circle that for centuries has been a closed one, serving to define and protect the concept of an authoritative English “canon” of medieval English literature. Closely associated with this male literary canon have also been the so-called “English mystics” who have sometimes also been allowed access to this circle.
(Hilton, the *Cloud*-author, Richard Rolle and – occasionally – Julian of Norwich), although, until recently, the figure of Margery Kempe was often excluded. Indeed, whilst there was some interest shown in the extent of the influence of male-authored texts upon both Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, the reverse has yet to beconcertedly considered. Indeed, to a large extent, the concept of separate male and female literary traditions, conceptualized in part as a result of proactive feminist interventions, has remained intact with investigations into male and female authorship continuing to run in parallel.

While we have gained substantial new insights into the role of women in medieval literary culture, the traditional canon of medieval English literature has remained fundamentally unchallenged. The role played by women and their influence upon all kinds of literary production has largely continued to occupy the margins, with the central spotlight continuing to be firmly focused on the monolithic writing of their male contemporaries. As noted, this Special Issue attempts to redress this dichotomy by considering what an understanding of women’s literary culture (broadly defined, as mentioned above) can contribute to our understanding of late medieval literature as a whole, particularly that of canonical status. In so doing, we hope to demonstrate the vital importance of considering women’s engagement with literature when reading the established canon and initiate a new, more inclusive approach to, and understanding of, the nuanced intersections of gender and textual production during the period.

**New Readings and New Directions**
The six essays included in this volume focus on the writings and contexts of the work of Chaucer, his contemporaries and his successors, including the work of the Pearl-poet, Thomas Hoccleve and John Lydgate. Also considered are the ways in which women’s literary production – both of continental and English provenance – formed part of an essential corpus of reading material for late medieval religious communities as well as for pious laymen and women, being devoured alongside works by Rolle, Hilton, Chaucer and Nicholas Love, amongst others. Each essay, therefore, assesses the evidence to support the premise that Chaucer and his male contemporaries were far more influenced by women’s literary activities than has hitherto been considered, and identifies the emerging intersections between the traditions within which these male authors have been positioned by later scholarship and those within which medieval women writers position themselves.

Constructions of the mind in the medieval period were fundamentally different from those of the modern period, and were no less complex: the ‘mind’ (which can blur with that of the soul) was viewed as made up of competing factors: will, reason, conscience, desire, instinct, emotion. These notions intersect with medieval assumptions concerning gender, in particular female bodiliness and the susceptibility of women to affect. In the first essay in this Special Issue, Corinne Saunders explores the proposition that notions of mind, body and affect shape the presentation of the individual female psyche, and hence, the affective engagement of the reader or audience, especially in relation to Chaucer’s romance writing.

The female body – or its absence and loss – as shaping the textual practice of another two male authors forms the subject of Diane Watt’s essay, in which she examines the strong resonances between Goscelin of St Bertin’s *Liber confortatorius,*
written in 1080 for Eve of Wilton, and that of the poem *Pearl*, written in the later fourteenth century. Whereas Goscelin’s text has most often been read in terms of its anchoritic credentials (Eve having left Wilton unexpectedly to adopt the life of a recluse in Angers), Watt makes out a strong case both for *Pearl* being read in terms of the anchoritic tradition and for Goscelin’s text being read as a consolatory text that anticipates *Pearl*. In *Pearl*, we have a poem in which the dreamer-protagonist-writer encounters the spirit of a young girl who has recently died, and which focuses, like Goscelin’s text, on the troubling and deeply ambiguous relationship between an adult man stricken with grief at his permanent loss of an idealized young virgin. Both texts present the spirit of a woman reanimated, who, from the afterlife, or figurative afterlife, brings consolation to the distraught writer, along with spiritual guidance. The reading of these texts alongside one another, so Watt argues, encourages us to read both texts in relation to their engagement with women’s literary culture.

Next, Amy Appleford’s essay opens with another restless male narrator – that of Thomas Hoccleve’s *Complaint*, a man tormented by sickness and social isolation whose identification with the biblical Job is firmly established at the beginning of the text. Likening this introit to that of Julian of Norwich’s *A Revelation*, where the author recounts having prayed for “bodilye sicknesse,” Appleford argues that these two opening evocations signal a preoccupation on the part of both writers with the value of human suffering. For each writer, patient endurance and ascetic mortification are intrinsic to the penitentiary ethics of the text, leading Appleford to conclude that Julian and Hoccleve were working within a shared – although characteristically different – fifteenth-century understanding of suffering as a mark of divine favour, rather than as a result of human sinfulness. For both writers, therefore, whilst inhabiting different subject positions of anchorite and urban layman, an ascetic
identity acquired through suffering generates and grounds a spiritually authoritative perspective on the world – and its worldliness.

Liz Herbert McAvo\textsuperscript{y} similarly argues for the intrinsic importance of female spirituality and its practices within late medieval English contexts. Focusing on the writing of the thirteenth-century German visionary, Mechtild of Hackeborn, both in its original Latin form and fifteenth-century Middle English translation, McAvo\textsuperscript{y} locates its treatment of heaven, hell and purgatory within a wider context of eschatological visionary writing. This was a genre adopted by both men and women, lay and religious, although most scholarly treatments to date have considered the women’s efforts to be adaptations of a primarily male genre dating back to Gregory the Great and finding its zenith in Dante. Resisting such a reading, McAvo\textsuperscript{y}’s essay posits a powerful and influential intergender dialogue between male and female writers of such texts, tracing Mechtild’s work, in particular, into the heart of late medieval English devotional writings aimed at both men and women.

If the reading of devotional texts amongst the laity had become commonplace by the fifteenth century, Nancy Bradley Warren’s essay examines the ownership of manuscripts containing works by Chaucer, Lydgate and Hoccleve by the nuns of Syon Abbey and Amesbury. As Warren points out, these dimensions of later medieval and early modern English nuns’ reading of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century texts initially suggest a more “secular” spectrum of reading than would normally be expected, and certainly point to engagement on the part of the women religious with ideas concerning proper political as well as religious conduct.

The concluding essay of the Special Issue, by Marea Mitchell, reflects those ideas posited at the start of this introduction in her examination of the nineteenth-century preoccupation with the literary culture of the Middle Ages and the response
to it, in the twentieth century, of Virginia Woolf – for a long time held to be the “mother” of British women’s writing. Focusing on Woolf’s *The Common Reader* and “The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn”, Mitchell argues that Woolf positions the medieval texts she draws upon as a lens for examining notions of Englishness when devoid of nationalism, and “English” literary culture as a contested space to be opened up to include writers and ideas that do not form part of the masculinist tradition so excoriated in *A Room of One’s Own*. As Mitchell ultimately points out, whilst Woolf was building on the significant impact of the construction by late nineteenth-century scholars of a nostalgic medievalism, ultimately, she allied those texts to the concerns of twentieth-century modernism and the breaking down of the artificial barriers between past and present and, the artificial barriers between male and female traditions of literary activity.

Together, then, the essays in this Special Issue demonstrate that medieval women’s engagement in literary culture was crucial to the emergence of what has come to be recognized as “the English literary tradition”.

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8 Woolf, *Room of One’s Own*, 85.


10 The concept of *mouvance* was first posited by Paul Zumthor in his *Essai de poétique medieval* (Paris, 1972), in which he argued that the usual anonymity attached to medieval vernacular writings precluded any sense of textual “ownership”. A text might therefore be reworked *ad infinitum* and thus transition through a long series of what he terms “textual states”. See Bella Millett’s useful webpage on this at: [http://www.southampton.ac.uk/~wpwt/mouvance/mouvance.htm](http://www.southampton.ac.uk/~wpwt/mouvance/mouvance.htm). Neither Zumthor nor Millett consider how gender may impact upon the processes of *mouvance* and vice versa, however. However, see Anne Savage, “The Communal Authorship of


12 See, for example, the essays collected in Voaden, ed., Prophets Abroad; and Voaden’s God’s Words, Women’s Voices: The Discernment of Spirits in Late-Medieval Women’s Writing (York, 1999).
