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JERZY STRZELCZYK

THE WOMAN TRANSLATOR IN THE MIDDLE AGES. SELECTED EXAMPLES OF FEMALE TRANSLATION ACTIVITY

Abstract: Translatory achievements of medieval women are rarely discussed. In antiquity, Greek and Roman writings were practically all composed in either of the two languages. Greek dominated, since Latin women's writing did not reach sophistication, or at least we do not possess proof of it. In the early Middle Ages the situation changed: Latin became dominant, and writing in the vernacular, which included women's writing, started to be recognized. While scholarly research tended to focus on high-brow, original literature, female literary endeavours were largely disregarded. Translation, a low-brow activity, was not considered original. Comments about it are rather infrequent in early compendia of medieval literature. This absence may be partly explained by the fact that originality itself was not held in high regard in the Middle Ages. Only recently has the growing research into social and legal conditions of early women as well as into their varied cultural and literary expressions brought them a deserved recognition.

Keywords: medieval women translators, vernacular languages, paraphrase, hagiography, chivalric poetry, *Secretum secretorum*, fables, *Fürstenspiegel*, Marie de France, Clemence of Barking, Hiltgart von Hürnheim, Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken, Eleanor of Scotland, Archduchess of Austria

The aim of this paper is simple: to sketch the problem of translatory interests and achievements of medieval women writers who belonged in the European culture. So far this topic has not been properly discussed or even noticed by historians. In Greco-Roman world, female translation did not exist, as practically all literature available for research now was written in either Greek or Latin. Since women's writing was weakly developed in Latin, or at least little of it has survived to our times, Greek was the only

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language that mattered. In the early Middle Ages the situation changed: in the West, Latin was the dominant language while Greek became nearly forgotten, and in the Greek East, women's writing was barely alive. From the general European point of view, the exceptions such as the literatures of the Celtic (especially Welsh and Irish), Anglo-Saxon, Nordic (Scandinavian), and – to a certain extent – also the Old Church Slavonic cultures remained marginal, even though they did exert some influence on the ideas and literature of the European "core." All the same, in those literatures women's writing was, as far as we know, very rare. In the 11th century, and especially in the 12th century, when intellectual life flourished (the Renaissance of the 12th century), vernacular languages entered literature and writing not only proliferated, but also diversified linguistically. Next to literature composed in Latin, there appeared works written in such languages and dialects[1] as Old German, Provençal, Anglo-Norman and Old Spanish (much later also Slavonic languages). It offered greater possibilities to women's writing.

Although in the early Middle Ages women were occasionally better educated than men, normally they could not profit from systematic studies. Such education was only possible at the courts of enlightened kings and queens, and to a lesser extent also in aristocratic residences and in the more privileged convents of the "Imperial abbeys" in East Francia (i.e. in Germany) of the 10th and 11th century, under the Saxon (Liudolfing) and Salian dynasties. The literary talent of women could best be noticed in areas that did not require the regular "academic" training. Moreover, the recognition of vernacular languages, which, unlike Latin, did not have to be learnt from scratch, gave women the opportunity to create literature. They could express themselves in poetry and other lyrical writings as well as in epistolography, hagiography, mystical and typically pragmatic (e.g. medical or paramedic) literature; it was harder to do so in theology, philosophy, historiography and the seven liberal arts. However, if one wanted to reach wider circles, not limited by a language, one still had to write in Latin – and it remained so for the next few centuries.

While the literary research used to focus mainly on the "high-brow" literary mainstream, and the basic criterion of assessment was originality, the more marginal literary phenomena were either completely disregarded or received perfunctory treatment, unless the object of research was someone outstanding (such as Marie de France, discussed below). Of course, inter-

[1] I do not aspire to the correctness in the complex nomenclature of these languages.

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lingual translation did not partake of thus defined originality; that is why early compendia of medieval literature tell us very little on the subject. It was not acknowledged that the Middle Ages did not rate originality very high. Only in recent times, marked by the rapid development of world--wide research on social and legal conditions of women and their various forms of cultural (and literary) expression, have those "margins" of literature been given the attention they merit.

The topic would require an extensive presentation, but for the purposes of this paper a few examples must suffice. In the light of what was said above, it will only be right to begin with the 12th century. The mysterious Marie de France (Mary of France), a figure hard to pin down historically, lived and wrote within the splendid Anglo-Norman culture most probably in the second half of the 12th century. She was a sophisticated poet and writer, conscious of her own talent, and – contrary to many other ladies (and men) of letters – she had no intention of remaining anonymous or hiding her identity behind a *nom de plume* (*Me numerai pur remembrance: / Marie ai num, si sui de France*, "I shall name myself for posterity: Marie is my name, and I am from France"[2]). She earned her prominent position in the history of medieval literature mainly thanks to twelve *Lais* ("tales, songs"), which were translated into European languages (including Polish) in modern times. She is also known as the author of a volume of fables entitled *Ysopet*, written between 1170 and 1180, comprising 102 verse fables of varied length (mostly quite short), plus the prologue and epilogue. Marie herself claimed to have based her fables on an English version of Aesop's Fables, *Esope*, allegedly translated by King Alfred the Great (9th century) from a Latin version derived, in turn, from the Greek original. We will not go into details of the highly uncertain academic discussion of the sources of Marie de France's *Ysopet*. Suffice it to say that in the Middle Ages the name of Aesop, referring to the half-legendary Greek writer of the Antiquity (dated ca. 6th century BC), was attributed to a number of various versions and adaptations of a volume of fables dated back to Late Antiquity and associated with the somewhat obscure figure of Romulus. Supposedly these fables are prose adaptations of Phaedrus (a fabulist living at the turn of the eras). Marie de France's fables are the oldest extant volume of this kind written in the vernacular. Despite the fundamental differences in form and content, they share one important characteristic with her *Lais*, namely, the

[2] *The Fables of Marie de France: An English Translation*, trans. Mary-Lou Martin (Birmingham, Ala.: Summa Publications, 1982) [translator's note].

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humanistic interest in human affairs, both from the individual and social point of view. No matter if we portray her as a lady in waiting at the court of Henry II or Eleanor of Aquitaine or as the superior of a convent of nuns, Marie de France was a keen observer, deeply interested in the humankind.

When it comes to the third, and the latest, work by Marie de France, *L'Espurgatoire Seint Patriz* (The Legend of the Purgatory of Saint Patrick), the source is not difficult to establish. This 2302-line long poem is a verse translation of the Latin *Tractatus de purgatorio Sancti Patricii* by somewhat obscure H[enry?] of Saltrey. However, while H. of Saltrey's text was widely known and frequently copied, only one copy of Marie de France's paraphrase has survived to our times. It is now housed at the National Library of France in Paris.

As Jacques Le Goff,[3] an eminent French medievalist, demonstrates, the 12th century played a significant role in shaping the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory (which, as Roman Catholic theologians themselves admit, lacked foundation in the Holy Bible). Since the "traditional" spheres of the other world, i.e. heaven and hell, were not treated comprehensively by the biblical canon either, it is not surprising that people, in their curiosity, searched for answers to the most intriguing questions, including those about the localisation and "geography" of purgatory, and of course about the nature, severity and duration of the purgatorial punishments. The Irish knight Owein supposedly narrated his journey to Saint Patrick's Purgatory in Lough Derg (today County Donegal, North-West Ireland), where the entrance to purgatory was to be located. His gruesome and tremendous experiences served as the subject of H. de Saltrey's Latin treatise and its poetic paraphrase by Marie de France.

As we will learn below, it is quite probable that Marie de France was the author of one more literary work: *La Vie Seinte Audree* (*The Life of Saint Audrey*).

It is no coincidence that over the 12th and 13th centuries Anglo-Norman culture produced a small but interesting group of hagiographies devoted to lives of saintly women and written by women. These were not original works, but vernacular adaptations of earlier Latin originals. One Clemence of Barking used available Latin versions to produce her own life of Saint Catherine of Alexandria (who died in martyrdom in the early 4th century)

[3] J. Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1990; French original 1981).

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in Anglo-Norman verse. An anonymous woman writer wrote a life of King Edward the Confessor (d. 1066). Saint Catherine was a widely-known and worshipped saint, who, nevertheless, belonged to the Antiquity. Saint Audrey (Etheldreda) was a historical figure somewhat less distant in time; she was a beautiful and virtuous daughter of King Anna of East Anglia (d. 653/654). The Latin *vita* of St. Etheldreda, most frequently attributed to Thomas of Ely, recounts, among other things, her marital tribulations: wedded twice, each time against her will, she manages to remain a virgin; later, she founds the convent at Ely and becomes the Abbess. In the first half of the 13th century, or maybe even earlier, a woman writer signing herself only with her name Marie translated or, more precisely, paraphrased the Latin life of Saint Etheldreda into a long (4620 lines) Anglo-Norman poem. The surmise that the said Marie may be none other but the well-known Marie de France has recently been almost definitely confirmed by the American scholar June Hall McCash.[4]

Another example of a woman's translation, to be discussed in greater detail, is connected with South-West Germany of the second half of the 13th century: the Middle-High-German translation of the medieval "bestseller," the pseudo-Aristotelian treatise *Secretum secretorum* (*Secret of Secrets*) by Hiltgart von Hürnheim, a Cistercian nun. The original *Secretum secretorum* is indeed an intriguing masterpiece, whose origins are exceptionally complex and possibly beyond explanation. Many elusive authors, compilers and epitomists seem to have contributed to it and the number of editions and versions, often varying considerably, is difficult to establish. Already in the Middle Ages the treatise was translated into most of the languages of the East and West, both Romanic and Germanic, and there were also Hebrew and Russian translations in the late 15th century. While the invention of the printing press in the West put an end to further copied manuscripts, it ensured the widespread distribution of the numerous incunabula (before 1500) and printed editions. In the East, even in less distant times, new translations appeared: in Turkish, Persian, and even in Hindi (in the 19th century).

One significant reason for the overwhelming popularity of the treatise was the conviction that it had been written by Aristotle himself, who in the

4 Ö. Södergård, ed., *La vie seinte Audree, poème anglo-normand du XIIIe siècle* (Uppsala 1955); J.H. McCash, "La vie seinte Audree. A Fourth Text by Marie de France?", *Speculum* 77 (2002), 744–777.

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Middle Ages was commonly held as the greatest sage of all times. In fact, as it is now commonly acknowledged, the Latin text given to Hiltgart by brother Rudolph and used as the basis for her translation was one of the Latin versions of this pseudo-Aristotelian compendium compiled in Arabic in the 10th century in the East, within the Syrian culture with some Persian influences. The author of the Arabic version, which evolved later into two different editions (a longer and a shorter one), is not known to us. Beginning with the 12th century, the Arabic compilation gained wide popularity in the West, and over a few centuries was translated and paraphrased many times, which is confirmed by numerous manuscripts (some of which can be found in Poland, too). The text on which Hiltgart von Hürnheim worked was probably compiled in the early 13th century by an obscure clergyman from Southern France known as Philip of Tripoli; this version was widely appreciated by the whole Western Europe of the 13th century.

It seems that Hiltgart's translation did not gain wide popularity; the autograph did not survive (which is not surprising), and we only know about two late medieval manuscript copies (from the 15th century), of which only one has survived (and is currently in Munich).

Who was the author of the translation? Formally, the text is anonymous. The translator did not mention her name anywhere, but we may deduce that she was not driven by modesty, a common trait among medieval women writers, because the extended verse prologue contains enough information for the scholars to pinpoint her identity almost unmistakably.

We learn that she was a Cistercian nun in the Holy Cross Convent in Zimmern. Founded in 1252 and subject to the Abbot from the nearby Kaisheim, the convent remained active until the Reformation. Traces of its existence survive in the name of the village of Klosterzimmern near Nördlingen in the Bavarian Swabia. The prologue informs us that the translator had already been in the convent for some time, but she started working on the translation still as a young woman. Her work shows that she was highly competent in Latin. In the 13th century such education was available in better-ranked convents and mainly to noblemen's daughters.

The girls were usually sent to convent at the age of seven. Given the fact that Hiltgart finished her translation in 1282 (as she herself declares), and the work most probably took her ten to twenty years, it may be assumed that she entered the convent sometime between 1260 and 1270. Her family roots should be traced back to noble families living in the vicinity of Zimmern, especially those connected to the convent. Research

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has yielded some information: there is a document in which Rudolf von Hürnheim donates a large sum of money to the convent; the donation is to pay for his daughter's monastic education and upbringing. The name of the daughter does not appear in the document, but the genealogy of the Hürnheim-Hohenhausen nobility indicates that her name was Hiltgart and she came to Zimmern in 1262. It has been generally accepted that she and the translator of the pseudo-Aristotelian work is one and the same person. Hence, it would mean that on accomplishing her work in 1282 Hiltgart was twenty-seven.

There are other data in the prologue which also confirm her identity. Hiltgart says that she started working on the translation upon the agreement of her superior Elisabeth, the first Abbess of the convent, whereas the idea itself came from brother Rudolf von Kaisheim, also known as "von Hürnheim," or maybe even from his superior, Abbot Trutwin (1268–1288), who was a passionate book lover. Rudolf von Hürnheim and Hiltgart were related, although they came from different branches of the family. He was the one who gave Hiltgart a copy of the Latin text to be translated into the "vernacular." The three locations mentioned in the prologue – Zimmern, Kaisheim, and Hürnheim – lie within twenty-five kilometres from each other and form a geographical triangle. It is within this area, limited in size and removed from important centres of thought, that the initiative of the first German translation of one of the most mysterious medieval works was born.

It has been suggested that Hiltgart's translation was a sign of the intellectual revival of Cistercian circles which began in the early 13th century as a reaction to the expansion and intellectual development of new mendicant orders, that is, Franciscans and Dominicans. The question remains, however, why it was *Secretum secretorum* and not any other work that had been chosen. After all, modern scholars have regarded the treatise as full of superstition and prejudice, marred by clumsiness, repetitions and contradictions, flawed by mistakes that could be spotted even by a medieval reader.

Of course, we should not judge people of the Middle Ages by our own standards. Already in those times *Secretum secretorum* had its opponents, but as an allegedly Aristotelian work it was not only popular but also trusted, and treated very seriously by such enlightened minds of the 13th century as, for example, Roger Bacon. Certainly, people's imagination was stimulated by the aura of mysticism surrounding the text even in its Arabic version. At the beginning of her translation, Hiltgart refers to the treatise

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as "so mysterious that the human heart is not able to comprehend it," and claims that she is transferring its content onto the lifeless parchment only with great reluctance; she would rather transfer it orally. Could it be a secret wink to the reader, an invitation to partake in a great mystery and an encouragement to read something unavailable to others?

Indeed, in the alleged treatise of the great Aristotle the medieval reader could encounter many elements that were new to her, bizarre, wonderful, and even at odds with the doctrine of the Church. It could be, for example, an oriental tale of a beautiful girl sent by the queen of India to Alexander the Great with a mission to kill him. As a baby, the girl was fed, not with her mother's breast milk, but with snake's venom, which gave her the power to kill people with her eyes. One victim could have been Alexander, who fell in love with her, but Aristotle noticed the danger just in time and intervened. A lot of information – more or less fantastic from our point of view – was also to be found in chapters on medicine, cosmology and astronomy, such as the neoplatonic (and hence undoubtedly contrary to the Christian doctrine) account of the "world soul," which was the source of the matter and all beings including man, and which was determined by the influence of celestial bodies (stars and planets) and the four elements. The task of the human being was to strive after perfection and, at the moment of death, to return to the world soul. While this kind of content could be the source of moral distress for some readers, it was by and large absent from chapters devoted to preventive medicine, the recommendations of both alternative and conventional medicine. In the Middle Ages the conviction that celestial bodies exerted influence on human beings constituted the core of astrology; it was almost universally accepted and generally not regarded as contrary to the Christian doctrine, in a similar fashion as fortune-telling. As a matter of fact, the occult and hermetic content of *Secretum secretorum*, easily noticed in the Arabic versions, lost its importance in European reception and was abridged or omitted. While the Latin version by Philip of Tripoli still contained the clearly neoplatonic, magical and alchemical elements, they were severely reduced or even omitted in the unidentified version used by Hiltgart. Generally then, despite the fact that the treatise was surrounded by the aura of mysticism skilfully augmented and that the magical, occult and hermetic lingered in it, the vast majority of Hiltgart's translation of *Secretum secretorum* lies within the range of knowledge typical of the 13th-century Latinate culture.

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Indubitably, the theme of the curious and the wonderful plays a decisive role in two other late-medieval translations made by women. We remain in Germany, in the south-west and the south-east borderlands. These are the women from the highest strata of the society: countess Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken (ca. 1397–1456) and Eleanor of Scotland, Archduchess of Austria (1433–1480).

Elisabeth was a daughter of Prince Frederick of Lorraine and Margaret of Vaudémont and Joinville, born in Vézelise near Nancy, in north-eastern France. Her well-educated mother instilled in her a keen passion for late-medieval *chansons de geste*, epic poetry of heroic deeds. In 1412, around the age of fifteen, Elisabeth married Count Philipp I of Nassau-Saarbrücken. They had three daughters and two sons. After her husband's death, between the years 1429–1442, Elisabeth ruled in the name of her juvenile son (also named Philipp). She died on 17th January, 1456, and was buried in the Collegiate Church of St. Arnual, today located in Saarbrücken. She is remembered by the inscription on the stately tomb erected in the centre of the church.

Elisabeth seems to have been predestined to act as a liaison between the French and German cultures. Her family was well-connected. Reportedly, when Elisabeth was a child, her mother translated *Loher und Maller* (*Lohier et Mallart*) from Latin to French, which her daughter translated later from French to German. Even if, as some scholars assume, the mother's contribution was in fact less substantial and limited to collecting anonymous 13th- and 14th-century manuscripts of French poems (either for herself or for her daughter), it does not diminish the inspirational role of the family. Elisabeth herself bequeathed to her daughter Margaret a collection of books, unfortunately not known to us.

There are speculations whether Elisabeth could already speak German when she joined her husband. On the one hand, it is rather doubtful, but on the other hand, her husband, despite various connections with neighbouring French territories, was not very fluent in French. This issue matters if we want to answer the question to what extent the four translations attributed to Elisabeth are authentic.

All of them are prose versions of French chivalric poems thematically related to the figure and times of Charlemagne, his successors and his enemies. Chronologically, the first of Elisabeth's tales is *Herpin*. The action begins at the court of Charlemagne. Breaking the king's order, Prince Herpin de Bourges kills Prince Clarius, his enemy and slanderer. For this deed

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he is sentenced to death, but thanks to the intercession of his relatives, he goes into exile and his property is confiscated. Herpin and his son experience all kinds of adventures, and the tale is filled with elements of the supernatural. *Herpin* reached the peak of its popularity in the 16th and 17th centuries; between 1514 and 1659 there were several printed editions. The history of the second book by Elisabeth, *Sibille*, was quite different. The book survived in manuscript only, in a posthumous collection of her works compiled on her son's order and most probably unpublished for a few centuries. This counter-historical tale concerns the life of Charlemagne's wife, who was wrongly accused and later cleared of charges. In the case of *Herpin* and *Sibille* Elisabeth's authorship was established solely on the basis of stylistic criteria and their presence in the manuscripts together with her other translations, whereas in the case of *Loher und Maller* and *Huge Scheppel* Elisabeth as the author is mentioned explicitly either in the colophon or in the prologue.

The French sources of the four translations by Elisabeth are known to us, and the comparison with their German versions allows us to say that hers are faithful translations, abridged in erotic passages, but certainly more and more autonomous due to her growing experience. The most acclaimed of the four was *Huge Scheppel*, whose last edition (before the modern scholarly editions) was published in 1794 – unsurprisingly, as the name Hugo Scheppel conceals the historical figure of Hugh Capet, who in the late 10th century moved the Carolingian dynasty away from power to become the first king of the Capetian dynasty. What merits the attention is the social perspective of Elisabeth's work, untypical of the 15th-century feudal society: to gain power Hugh must overcome the prejudice and opposition of the French aristocracy, and he finds support in Parisian townspeople. He himself is of lower descent: his father was a common knight, and his grandfather was a butcher (though a wealthy and well-connected one). However, his individual talents and achievements prove more than the "merit" of high birth. It would be interesting to see how the ideological elements of Elisabeth's work were received and evaluated from the mid-15th century onwards, also in the revolutionary France and the Germany of the late 18th century, when Louis Capet (Louis XVI) was guillotined in Paris.

It seems that, initially, the translations of Countess Elisabeth were known mostly in the courtly milieu. The situation changed with the spread of print, when subsequent editions of three of her works (with the exception of *Sibille*; *Huge Scheppel*, 1500, was the earliest) made them available

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to a wider audience consisting of educated bourgeoisie, and later also of the lower classes.

Born a few decades after Elisabeth, Archduchess Eleanor (1433–1480) was of royal descent. Her father was King James I of Scotland (1394–1437), and her mother was Joan Beaufort, Countess of Somerset (d. 1445). In 1449 Eleanor married Sigismund, then Archduke of Austria, and they had a son, who probably died at an early age. In her husband's absence (1455–1458 and 1467), Eleanor reigned in the duchy. The cultural life was vibrant both at the court of James I (the King himself was a literature lover) and in Innsbruck. In his youth, Archduke Sigismund (d. 1496) was friends with Enea Silvio Piccolomini (who at the end of his life became Pope Pius II) and he made his court one of the most splendid German cultural centres at the turn of the medieval and modern eras. It is rather improbable that the young duchess learned even basic German while growing up in Scotland. In her new home she quickly managed to win some friends. In 1473 Heinrich Steinhöwel, a humanist, dedicated her his German paraphrase of Giovanni Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus* (On Famous Women). The Archduke and Archduchess maintained contacts with other connoisseurs and patrons of literature, especially with countess (Pfalzgräfin) Mechthilde von Rottenburg and Duke Albert IV of Bavaria.

Eleanor's prose romance, *Pontus and Sidonia*, written in the years 1448–1465, is a sort of "mirror for princes" (*Fürstenspiegel*), aimed at sons of nobility. It was based on *Ponthus et la belle Sidoyne*, a French romance from the late 14th century. The translation, or rather the paraphrase, survived in two versions and soon gained significant popularity in German-speaking countries, thanks to Archduke Sigismund, whose efforts resulted in *editio princeps* (the first edition) as early as 1483 in Augsburg. There were three more incunabula editions in the 15th century, nine editions in the 16th, further seven in the 17th, and finally three more in the 18th century (the last one in 1792). Eleanor's *Pontus and Sidonia* exerted some influence also on other authors.

None of the abovementioned works have been translated into Polish. Because of the essayistic character of this paper, I will not provide a fully comprehensive bibliography; when it comes to the German translations, I can only refer the reader to relevant entries in *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters. Verfasserlexikon*, second edition, volumes I–X, Berlin 1977–

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1999. More information about some of the names and works presented above can be found in my book *Pióro w wątłych dłoniach* (A Quill in Frail Hands); medieval women writers are discussed in its second volume entitled *Rozkwit (od Murasaki Shikibu do Małgorzaty Porete*) (Zenith [from Murasaki Shikibu to Marguerite Porete]), chapters VIII, XI, and XII (Warszawa 2009). Some basic information can also be found in Magdalena Sakowska, *Portret, postać, autorka. Kobieta a literatura europejskiego średniowiecza*, tom II, *Słownik autorek średniowiecznych. Od św. Radegundy (ok. 520–587) do Suster Bertken (1426 lub 1427–1514)* (Portrait, Character, Authoress. The Woman and the Literature of the European Middle Ages; volume II, Lexicon of Medieval Authoresses: From Saint Radegund [ca. 520–587] to Suster Bertken [1426 or 1427–1514]; Warszawa 2009).

trans. Magdalena Buchta

Prof. Jerzy Strzelczyk is the Head of the Medieval Studies section in the Institute of History at the Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań (Poland). An author of numerous monographs and studies, he has written extensively on women's contribution to the development of the European culture from antiquity to the 11th- century. His books include: *Pióro w wątłych dłoniach* (Pen in Frail Hands; vol.1, 2007; vol.2, 2009), *Otton III* (Otto III, 2009) and *Apostołowie Europy* (Europe's Apostles, 2010).

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