



**Bea Lundt, Michael Salewski, eds.** *Frauen in Europa: Mythos und Realität*. Dokumente und Schriften der Europäischen Akademie Otzenhausen. Münster: LIT Verlag, 2005. x + 494 pp. EUR 55.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-8258-8665-3.

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## The Perils of Edited Collections

I do not quite know what to make of this collection. The title is straightforward enough and draws attention to women in Europe, myths and realities. But the collection is both much more and much less than the title implies. It consists of twenty original chapters written by practicing historians, Germanists, literary theorists and critics, many of which appreciably offer important contributions to various debates in the related fields. Many essays are methodologically sophisticated and complex and most are not an easy read. The hefty collection (nearly five hundred printed pages) draws on themes and problems from Europe's late medieval world well into the present. Chronologically, therefore, the volume covers a lot of ground. My difficulty is not with the separate chapters, some of which truly are excellent and thought-provoking and should, in a review like this, be made known to the German reading public, but I do not see a logic in the whole. In this case, the impact of the collection taken together is not greater than the contributions of its parts.

The participants have tried to be innovative, at least as Bea Lundt claims in her introduction, which is, unfortunately, short and disappointing for such a complex undertaking. In the introduction she explains the time frame of the book, its focus on western European patterns and, innovatively, on northern Europe. Lundt also offers some key concepts and notions around which the collection purports to work and draws attention to the significance of present concerns and past patterns, particularly with regard to the more fluid gender realities of

today. She claims that the book will speak to today's contemporary generation because of what it shows about the past. In the same way, she argues that the authors subject "myths" about women's roles and capabilities to the harder "realities" of historical experiences, at the same time recognizing how the two can easily blend together and intersect. Lundt goes on to claim that this is a book about European gender history and, thus, more than simply about women in Europe. Again, Lundt draws attention to the transnational agenda that motivates many of the authors and their willingness to develop methods to assess the myths, symbols and institutions across political and territorial divides. Topics are not analyzed within one territorial or "national" frame. The contributors use this forum to publicize the status of collaborative research projects; indeed, German and European academic culture sustains many more collaborative research projects than does the American. It also is clear that the participants in this project want to reach out to a general reading public interested in gender and not just other professionals. While each aim is valid and promising and consistent with gender research, in practice few common threads actually draw the material together in a way that promotes new thinking. To put it another way, the work of pulling the material together is left up to the reader, a daunting task for the professional given the wide diversity of topics and methods, let alone the more casual audience the book hopes to reach.

The collection is divided into five broad thematic sections of four original chapters each. The broader rubrics

are hardly “traditional” to be sure, responding to today’s understandings of gender relations in flux, and seek new ways to organize material. The first section turns to “old” and “new” patterns of marriage and family, but it is difficult to understand why such disparate chapters are juxtaposed together, which does not mean that each is not interesting in its own right. Thus, Jan RÅ¼diger takes the reader into a difficult etymological analysis with close readings of twelfth-century texts, for example, in his article on the Nordic myths of the “strong woman” and its potential resonance today, even if mythic. Claudia Lenz describes the recent history of the Norwegian welfare state with its eventual premium on equality, which was created out of war, occupation and recovery after 1945. This section also includes a study of contestations in aristocratic women’s households in early modern Europe by Beatrix Bastl and an examination of two sixteenth-century texts in Strasbourg which, as Elisabeth Nivre shows, ultimately were about imposing male social order, but the analysis is not historicized and does not discuss the Reformation’s challenges to authority and gender hierarchy at the time. The second rubric focuses on women’s professional lives from “the desk to the battlefield.” In this section, Linda Maria Koldau addresses the role of women as cultural mediators in the musical world of the early modern era and Angelika Epple provides an excellent assessment of the emerging historical profession in the early nineteenth century through the work of women’s historians *at its margins*. Elke Kleinau also provides a state of the research report on a project on German women teachers in the *Kaiserreich*, offering preliminary findings on their mobility and identities. The final chapter in this section, by Dorothee Platz, treats the British Army Auxiliary Corps in the early twentieth century but, in focusing solely on the British example, misses transnational exchanges, particularly between the German and British courts that, in different national contexts, helped shape a new patriotic duty of state service for women at the front.

“At the margins of society” is the rubric for the next section, which reflects a coherent set of inquiries focused upon prostitutes, heretics and witches. One of the chapters is on women in the crusades; a neglected theme in the literature, its reconstruction requires considerable attention to philology and a precise archaeology of words in texts, as Sabine Geldsetzer demonstrates. Geldsetzer raises important questions about medieval sexuality and warfare that need further research. Other chapters look at prostitution in late medieval urban North Europe, through an examination of such terms in the sources

as “Frauenhaus” and “Badepuff.” Reflecting a presentist concern, Dagmar Hemmie sets her research in the context of contradictions around the contemporary effort to “decriminalize” prostitution, at least for EU citizens. What follows are two very well researched projects on “heretics,” by Daniela Mueller, and a new challenging interpretation, set extremely well in its large historiography, on witch trials as persecutions of women from a combination of elite and popular cultural contexts in early modern Europe by Claudia Opitz.

The remaining section is divided between work in cultural and literary studies, such as Melanie Krueger’s essay on the multiple societal uses of Jeanne d’Arc as symbol and myth over the long *dur e*, which includes a very clear and useful, but not easily accessible, discussion of the mechanisms of the formation of collective memory through German theory, in addition to writers like Maurice Halbwachs. It also includes Bea Lundt’s piece on the many different incarnations of the ancient prophetess Sybel, drawing on a wide range of sources to reconstruct the recurring (but shifting) meanings of this female symbol. The sections also include historical studies, as Ute Planert’s somewhat conventional chapter on the women’s movements in Germany, France and England, which offers little attention to the many transnational contacts and networks that intertwined women’s organizations and politics starting in the mid-nineteenth century. Daniela Hacke contributes a chapter on the European “argument about women” in the early modern era and Carola Hilmes and Michael Salewski both examine the related turn-of-the-century gender crisis among male cultural icons. Perhaps appropriately, the final chapter by Juliette Wedl reads contemporary feminist theory on equality, difference and deconstruction as complementary models for new feminist politics in the European Union. The collection, then, ends with prescriptions for ongoing feminist engagement with politics.

Collections serve many purposes, of course, and allow young scholars to test their new research projects and bring awareness of interdisciplinary collaboration to the academic profession. This collection purports, however, to speak to a wider reading public attuned to contemporary gender issues and which would profit from alternative historical contexts to assess situations in the present. The failure to impose a useful framework on the material seriously limits the usefulness of the collection as a whole. It falls short of both its goals. Its loose, idiosyncratic structure combined with its highly specialized academic discourses probably will not help shape contemporary historical consciousness among the

German reading public. It also misses an opportunity to bring historical precision to the academic discussion of changing patterns of European gender relations over the *longue durée*.

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