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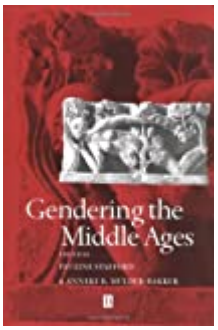

Pauline Stafford, Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, eds. *Gendering the Middle Ages.* Oxford, U.K. and Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2001. vi + 244 pp. $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-631-22651-2.

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Sanctity, Authority, and the Law: Constructions of Gender in the Middle Ages

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Gendering the Middle Ages is a fine and often innovative contribution to the ever growing study of gender. The collection of essays, published originally as a special issue of *Gender and History* (vol. 12, no. 3, 2000), reveals the medievalist flair for resourceful inquiry into a world where a dearth of sources is the norm. Old and often unlikely sources are mined anew, allowing burial archeology, Vatican archives, Byzantine coins, and canon law to shine new light into the gender constructions inherited and transformed by the Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions.

While few of the nine essays focus on masculinity outright–a result mourned by the editors themselves–another author reminds us that masculinity, like motherhood, was everywhere and nowhere. Each of the nine essays and the four thematic reviews that end the volume seek to keep women from being considered in isolation. Monasteries, political upheavals, succession crises, and battles all helped challenge existing assumptions of gender in both the historical record and in modern historiography. The authors are conscious, to varying degrees, of how tenuous and unfixed such gender narratives are. Public-private distinctions, especially the role of dynastic familial power, shaped the gender and identity of men as readily, and often as profoundly, as they did of women. Medieval men and women saw their spaces contract and expand, their voices rise and fall, and their power bloom and fade.

This volume reminds us that early medieval masculinity was an uneasy construction at best. Kings and aristocrats, warriors and soldiers, priests and visionary men, statesmen and eunuchs were susceptible to attacks on their authority, stature, power and masculinity. In "The Gender of Grace," Kate Cooper and Conrad Leyser challenge the common assumption, attributed first to Gibbon, but modernized by Foucault, that Christian asceticism had "fatally compromised" the manliness of Roman men and barbarian warriors in the fifth-century transformation of the West.

That is, the vigor, sexuality, and measured violence that characterized the earlier masculine authority had been checked and replaced by a new model of Chris-

tian passive virtue, forbearance, and the shunning of weapons. Upon reviewing the widely disparate ascetic writings, Cooper and Leyser contend, persuasively, that Christian asceticism and the notion of grace instead helped preserve and reinvigorate the ancient tradition of civic masculinity and masculine self-control.

The effects of the transformation of the West on gender is raised again, when Julia M. H. Smith evokes Joan Kelley's provocative 1976 essay, "Did Women have a Renaissance?" by asking a self-acknowledged "misplaced" question, "Did Women have a Transformation of the Roman World?" Unlike Kelley, who definitively claimed that women did not have a Renaissance in the traditional sense, Smith's answer, while no less thoughtful, is far less definitive. She raises more questions than she can answer in this short piece. Recent scholarship has favored the idea that the transformation of antiquity to the Middle Ages was characterized more by continuity with localized change, disaggregation and gradual reintegration, revising the long standing expectation of decline, collapse, and disintegration. Smith charges scholars to consider the gendered aspects of this momentous social, political, economic, and religious transformation, by recognizing that women played an active part in the transmission and reception of ideas of Romanitas during the period of cultural reorientation. Thus, a gendered perspective on late antiquity and the early middle ages must start from the domestic world of the family and household rather than an "empire-wide grand narrative," in order to understand the continuities and discontinuities of women's lives between c. 300-800 (p. 28). Smith claims that four fundamental aspects of women's lives did not change in this period. These include the relative historical invisibility of women in the sources; the centrality of marriage and motherhood in women's lives; the subordinate positions of women in the gender hierarchy; and women's vulnerability to violence and exploitation. Ultimately, the transformation Smith seeks is historiographical and methodological, a laudable goal, so long as the important public roles of women are not undermined in the process.

In "The Gender of Money: Byzantine Empresses on Coins (324-802)," Leslie Brubaker and Helen Tobler demonstrate how coins communicated gender strategies in the late antiquity and early Byzantine world by examining the portraits of empresses on Byzantine coinage. Empresses were often depicted on smaller denomination coins which circulated more and reached a wider audience. The coins demonstrate hierarchy (the position of the empress to the subservient right) as well as the ideological and legal relationship between the emperor and empress in Byzantium. Coin imagery served as a gauge for imperial status and authority, and the means to convey certain images and virtues. Many coins depicted empresses as mothers rather than as wives. For example, Constantine I's wife Fausta is depicted holding two children in order to convey "fertility, security, and dynastic stability" (p. 46). By the sixth century, the empress no longer occupied the coin alone, and was always joined by her husband to promote familial continuity and dynasty. The later empresses were often unnamed, causing Brubaker and Tobler to speculate that their anonymity was purposeful to depict the empresses as symbols, for such coins generally appeared during times of transition (i.e., succession crises). Although the point is well argued, one wonders whether this contention is still valid in comparison to the iconography of Byzantine empresses found in other public forms. Were mosaics and statues also anonymous? Were Byzantine empresses represented in similar fashion? Such a comparison would surely strengthen an otherwise fine discussion.

The admiration of one Byzantine princess for an earlier Lombard princess (for the power and influence she wielded over her husband and the Lombard army) is explored by Patricia Skinner in " 'Halt! Be Men! Sikegaita of Salerno, Gender and the Norman Conquest of Southern Italy." Skinner focuses on a passage of the Alexiad, written by Anna Kommena to honor her father, the emperor Alexius I, in which the Byzantine princess eagerly describes the actions of Sikelgaita of Salerno who rode alongside her husband into battle against the Byzantines. By this account, Sikelgaita unofficially shared command with her husband, the Norman leader Robert Guiscard, and even ordered a group of cowardly runaways to "halt and be men," using the extreme insult against their masculinity to rally the soldiers back into battle. Sikelgaita continued to influence her husband, and later her son, creating a memory and legend for herself as a female warrior and leader. Sikelgaita's life and legend offer a means to understand the gendered aspect of the Norman invasion and, even more broadly, to show how political upheaval could offer certain women opportunities (or "temporary spaces") to exert their power in different ways (p. 107). When the Lombards, an "aggressively masculine group ... [with] tight familial control over women and their property" were supplanted by the Normans, some aristocratic women like Sikelgaita gained more economic and political space in which to maneuver (p. 107). As interesting as the essay is, one can only wish that Skinner

had done more to tease out the implications of this story for Anna Kommena, in her role as a Byzantine princess. A useful appendix of the structure of "The History of the Normans" ends the chapter.

Two of the essays deal with legal aspects of women in the Church. Eva M. Synek eloquently seeks to unpack the complex status of women in early medieval canon law, pointing to the ambiguous classification of laity and clerical. Rather than the long supposed ecclesiastical model proposed by Gratian of a clear division between cleric and lay, Synek suggests that the classification was far less distinct and rigid. Married men and women shared status in the first order, widows, married deacons, and the continent occupied the second order, while virgins and nuns shared the same status as monks in the third order. To share status, however, did not mean to share rights, privileges, and duties. (This of course begs the question as to what Synek means by status). For example, some women (deaconesses, queens, female landholders) could possess the same jurisdictional rights as their male counterparts. Similarly, while the office of Bishop was open only to men, women could have clerical privileges and even clerical status. Canonesses acted as "fathers" in female houses with specific rights and duties, having been granted a status with rights and duties akin to abbots in male houses. The boundaries between clerical and lay were far from absolute, and the rights and duties varied by gender, family connections, and wealth. Synek's main contribution is to show the ambiguities inherent in the complex categorization of medieval sources, making an admirable stab at differentiating the classification of clerical and laity in all their rights and duties.

Ludwig Schmugge takes on a different aspect of women in the law by studying the role of female petitioners in the Papal penitentiary. Using Vatican records from the office of the Penitentiary, an unusual source in the study of gender, Schmugge examines the dispensations granted by the office from the many ecclesiastical restrictions. Schmugge focuses especially on petitions for dispensations that both men and women could request, including dispensations in cases of illegitimate birth and marriage, and in the right to make confession to a private confessor. He asks, and attempts to answer, intriguing questions. Why did so few women request dispensations from the office? Why did the women who did address the Penitentiary do so? He found that although women sought such dispensations at a rate far lower than men, the Office of the Penitentiary granted the same privileges, absolutions, dispensations and licenses to women as they did men. Schmugge concludes that there was "no real difference" between petitions submitted by female and male supplicants in either the tone, actions, or treatment of the Procurates. Moreover, there was no real gender difference in regard to the professionalism, style, and canonistic expertise of the texts" (pp. 170-171). Yet, this seems to contradict his earlier point that "for female petitioners the chances of being granted a dispensation in the case of illegitimate birth was much lower than for men" (p. 157). This seeming contradiction aside, Schmugge's final point is significant. The records powerfully support the long-debated notion that women of the Renaissance were not strongly restricted, and that the well of grace offered a means for women to obtain their rights in their personal spheres.

Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker explores the gendered aspects of education and the transmission of knowledge in "The Metamorphosis of Woman: Transmission of Knowledge and the Problems of Gender." Even though it is a commonplace to assume that education and wisdom derived primarily from cathedral schools, universities, and scholastic treaties, Mulder-Bakker dismisses the idea that classical and sacred knowledge were "the exclusive domain of the clergy" (p. 120). To make her case, she uses the example of Guibert of Nogent, an eleventh- and twelfth-century cleric, who compared the education received by his mother, his lay uncle, and himself. Guibert tried to portray his mother as less schooled than she was, claiming that her religious education derived primarily from imitating exemplary people and from experience (considered quite good enough for a woman). On the other hand, his superior education derived from scientia (reading books, formal learning at school, etc.). Mulder-Bakker asserts, however, that boys and girls both learned on the job, by experience, and by imitation. Women may have been as well-educated in their youth as men, and continued to learn informally throughout their life, but such learning was not as highly valued when compared to formal education of the clerical tradition. In time, an alliance of male scholars (through the university system) made it increasingly difficult for women to enter the world of higher education. Despite its bitter tone, this essay (with the most apparent political agenda of the collection) might provide fodder for discussing gender issues in higher education today, not just in the later middle ages.

In "Visions of My Youth: Representations of the Childhood of Medieval Visionaries," Voaden and Stephanie Volf examine the visionary narratives and vitae of twenty-seven female and thirteen male visionaries from Britain and Europe between the late-eleventh and early-fifteenth centuries. The authors contend that

the writings of female visionaries were marked by a precocious piety (although notable exceptions include Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich). Supposedly female visionaries had to create more pious childhoods than male visionaries because the women stirred up more mistrust and suspicion. Women represented themselves as pious and visionary from childhood, and as young girls, they became convinced by their visions to remain virgins and to devote their lives to God. Women did not have to abandon the innocence of childhood. Men severed themselves from childhood, using radical conversion experiences instead of pious childhoods to demonstrate their piety and sanctity. They readily admitted that as youths they had fulfilled their material needs and desires before they learned to devote themselves to God. For males, childhood was "irrelevant to the construction of a visionary self" (p. 146). These insights into the social and gendered constructions of sanctity support Katherine Lewis' fierce criticism of recent works that claim that the holiness of male and female saints allowed them to supercede gender.

Cordula Nolte's well-structured study of the princely dynasties and families, principally the margraves of Brandenburg Ansbach, shows how hierarchy and gender affected the dynamics and domesticity of the court. Even though the patriarch played a central, and usually dominant, role in the family network, communications, and system of regulations, the roles and attitudes for family members and the court were not absolute. Specifically, the hierarchy among the family members was not static but changed according to transitions of power and changes in the life cycle. Age (especially the aging of the father), death, and marriage brought about changes in status, duties, and the hierarchy for the entire court. While some of Nolte's conclusions seem to have been long charted by historians of gender and the family, she argues more effectively that such shifting dynamics had a profound effect on the origin of the early modern state. Such an approach might yield fruitful inquiry, and hopefully Nolte will continue this pursuit in book-length form.

While writing a review of a review might seem redundant, Janet Nelson's discussion of Elisabeth von Houts' *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe* is worth noting. Van Houts' work, well-received by Nelson, examines women's involvement in cultural production, specifically through the cultivation and transmission of memory in eleventh- and twelfth-century Europe.[1] As heiresses, widows, and members of noble or otherwise important families, women had many good reasons to remember, record, and transmit the history and traditions of their families through such varied sites and objects as songs, funeral monuments, gospel books, commemorative gifts and bequests, and written histories. In a larger context, Nelson urges scholars to take a more comparative approach to women's social power between the east and the west, calling on them to escape the boundaries of their areas of specialty "to transcend disciplinary sectionalism and the arbitrary demands of academe." Three other thematic reviews cap the volume, Katherine J. Lewis' review of gender and sanctity in the middle ages, S. H. Rigby's more economic than cultural discussion of the gendering of the Black Death, and Felicity Riddy's examination of nunneries, communities, and domesticity.

If *Gendering the Middle Ages* were not an otherwise fine volume, fit for undergraduates and scholars alike, one might criticize the editors for deliberately excluding all but one non-European scholar. Their sheepish apology for the lack of critical essays on masculinity and the alleged impossibility of finding a "suitable" (read European) reviewer to do the larger works on masculinity justice, is the weakest component of the volume. Nevertheless, *Gendering the Middle Ages* is a thought provoking and stimulating read, and well worth a place in the classroom.

Note

[1]. Elisabeth van Houts, *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe, 900-1200* (London: MacMillan, 1999).