

## BOOK REVIEWS

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**Bitel, Lisa M. *Women in Early Medieval Europe, 400-1100*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Pp. xv + 326.**

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The latest in the Cambridge Medieval Textbooks series, Lisa Bitel's *Women in Early Medieval Europe* succeeds in all of its objectives but one (about which more later). Bitel has produced a concise, clear, engaging, and readable history of Europe from 400-1100 with a focus on women. This will be an enormously useful textbook in many undergraduate history and women's studies classes; it should probably be on the required reading list for most graduate students in all areas of medieval studies because of its clarity of presentation. Bitel's historiography challenges her readers to approach seemingly familiar historical themes in innovative and sometimes provocative ways.

Bitel's work builds upon the ongoing project of medieval feminist history that is only now being catalogued by Jane Chance's *Women Medievalists in the Academy*. Bitel joins a long list of eminent scholars that includes Mary Bateson, Eileen Power, Shulamith Shahar, and a host of others. Like these foremothers, Bitel states clearly in her introduction that she "challenge[s] the traditional events and structures of early medieval historiography as central to our understanding of medieval Europe and its women" (6). While Bitel lauds the earlier efforts in medieval women's history that worked to include women in historiography at all, she explicitly works against a rubric in which "men's memory and men's history remain the norm in which female actors participate" (3), or one in which "[s]cholars arrange historical events, as well as art and literature, into a teleology conceived by men for male thinkers and artists" (4). Throughout, analysis of written, artistic, and archeological evidence allows Bitel to create a different kind of historiography by "gently deconstructing men's chronologies of men's deeds" (269).

This history, then, is not organized by chronology or geography as many histories are. While the book ultimately does follow a loose chronology, Bitel focuses instead on rewriting and reworking the traditional thematic presentation of early medieval history. Her most important contribution throughout is to insist on a focus on the stasis in women's lives throughout the period—for stasis, traditionally uninteresting to both medieval and modern historians, defined much of women's lives throughout the period. As Bitel puts it, "Poets preferred not to sing of dull daily events like women's unchanging work" (273).

The first chapter describes the climate and landscape of early medieval Europe in detail, setting the scene of depopulation, poor weather, and hardship for women of the period no matter their class or religion. Statistics about lopsided population ratios, deaths in childbirth, and life expectancy (24-26) are sure to engage even the most jaded undergraduate with their starkness. Most interestingly, Bitel here and in later chapters takes the time to describe the stasis of women's daily lives, underscoring a truth about medieval women's lives

unfathomable to most modern women (and men): “the walls of a woman’s home and farmstead, and the boundaries of her family and community, surrounded her all the days of her brief life” (30). Another important contribution in this first chapter is Bitel’s addition of her own considerable scholarly weight to the arguments against romantic/feminist quests for matriarchal or equitable prehistories (42-43). Rather than to search for a Mother Goddess, an empowered virago, or a series of gender victims, Bitel seeks more subtly to describe the “constantly changing but always gendered environment of the early Middle Ages” (45).

In much the same fashion as Joan Kelly’s important article asked whether women had a Renaissance, Bitel’s second chapter questions whether women had a migration period. After remarking in the introduction that “[t]he earliest years of the Middle Ages, then, belonged as much to women who stayed put as to men who wandered” (10), Bitel moves to “discard the very concept of invasion which for so long defined the period” (48). She argues instead for a model of both settlement and assimilation, as her readings of the evidence show very small forces of explicitly male invaders (or perhaps of current residents in decaying Roman colonies) followed by much more gradual settlement by both men and women as well as intermarriage of “invaded” women with “invading” men. Again Bitel makes the point that the detailed work of women’s daily lives necessarily changed very little—no matter the nationality or tribal affiliation or religion of the man who styled himself as king, lord, master, or husband, women were expected to bear and tend children, make cloth, prepare food, and manage the household.

The third chapter addresses issues of religion in women’s lives, while the fourth and fifth chapters focus on kinship, marriage, motherhood, and the economics of women’s lives. Bitel makes apparent the deep intersections and varied relationships among these seemingly discrete concepts, for all women were defined by their kin-groups; religion affected all women’s lives in a variety of ways; all women were deeply involved in the economics of their communities. Throughout, Bitel resists teleological conclusions and summations, preferring instead a subtler (and for the undergraduate, much more challenging) analysis of the evidence that provides for a rich, varied presentation of history—both of women and of men.

Throughout, Bitel refines her more general statements with explicit reference to primary texts and major secondary sources. Her frequent use of Irish material is unsurprising, given her previous, more specialized work, and it is also refreshing, for many introductory histories for undergraduates tend to rely almost solely on English and Frankish sources. The inclusion of Jewish and Muslim women in every thematically organized chapter is a welcome surprise, and an indicator of the beneficial impact of the multicultural movement on the field of medieval studies.

I stated at the beginning of this review that *Women in Early Medieval Europe* succeeds in all of its objectives but one, and my contention here is not with Bitel but with our contemporary culture’s system of hermeneutics. Bitel closes

her introduction by stating that “This book is not just a history of women, but a history of the early European Middle Ages through the eyes of women” (12). In that sentence she challenges us to re-categorize our methods for classifying knowledge, to make explicit rather than implicit the fact that “traditional history” means “a history of men,” even one gussied up with sidebars and extra paragraphs about Joan of Arc or Eleanor of Aquitaine so as to seem inclusive of women (as Bitel discusses in her conclusion, 266-296). But her book is not classified as traditional history or as “real” history—its Library of Congress call number is HQ1147.E85 B57 2002x, and it sits in the “women’s” section of the library even as Rosamond McKitterick’s *The Early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2001) sits in the “real” history section at D121 .E28 2001. Because of the ways we classify knowledge, *Women in Early Medieval Europe* will probably not be a primary textbook for any history class not explicitly focused on women, although it certainly could function as one. This fault, however, is inherent in our culture, not in Bitel’s scholarship, and she is to be lauded not only for her contribution to our teaching but also for her attempt to reconfigure the ways we classify historical knowledge and scholarship.

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**Deborah A. Fraioli. *Joan of Arc: The Early Debate*. Suffolk; Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, Ltd., 2000. Pp. x, 235. \$75.00. ISBN 0-85115-572-3.**

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The attempt by the English and Burgundians to vilify Jehanne d’Arc can be reduced to a few simple factors: they sought to destroy the threat she posed to religious and secular authority as a low-born, uneducated woman usurping the traditional role of a man, of a warrior in particular, without renouncing her essential female-ness or claims to divine inspiration. Her astonishing accomplishments, as well as her straddling of class and gender “lines,” continue to mystify modern scholars even as they frustrated her contemporaries. Fortunately, we now have Deborah Fraioli’s recent book, *Joan of Arc: The Early Debate*, a long-overdue and invaluable tool for understanding how the enigmatic Jehanne was received and understood by her contemporaries. Fraioli’s examination begins to fill a gap in scholarship regarding the theological battle that this young woman’s claims to be *a Deo*, at a time when divine involvement was especially desirable for the Dauphin’s earthly political concerns, set off at Charles VII’s court. In a close examination of significant contemporaneous texts, Fraioli focuses in particular on the essential process of *discretio spirituum* that propelled the first efforts to determine the extent of the Dauphin’s support of Jehanne’s claims.

Fraioli begins her study with Jehanne’s arrival at Chinon, where general reactions to the young girl’s declarations “were characterized by a mixture of derision and disbelief” (7). Nevertheless the dynastic concerns of the war and Jehanne’s legendary revelation that Charles was the “true heir of France’ [*vray héritier*]” spurred the court to action, and the ecclesiastical members of the *Conseil* conducted an initial investigation. Fraioli supports the validity of this early inspection, in spite of some critics’ uncertainty, stemming from the political expediency of a swift acceptance of Jehanne and her mission,