

<sup>1</sup> Sheila Delany, "Mothers to Think Back Through: Who are They? The Ambiguous Example of Christine de Pizan," in *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, ed. Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman (Cornell University Press, 1987), 177-197.

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**Samantha J. E. Riches and Sarah Salih, eds. *Gender and Holiness: Men, women and saints in late medieval Europe*. London: Routledge, 2002. 200 pages, with illustrations.**

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Samantha J.E. Riches and Sarah Salih introduce this collection with a story from Gerald of Wales's *Life of St. Gilbert of Sempringham*. In this account, St. Gilbert suppresses carnal desire in one of his nuns by exposing his aged, withered, and scab-covered body to the nuns' gaze while preaching against lust combining "preaching and striptease" to effect. Riches and Salih's discussion of this story acknowledges one of the primary conundrums of the study of gender and religion in the Middle Ages: "it is impossible to discuss this kind of story with any degree of certainty, given the modern commentator's *distance in time and space* in addition to the insurmountable problem of *the impossibility of truly accessing another person's subjective experience*" [emphasis mine] (1). Each author in this collection of scholarly essays, then, grapples with the impossible – to transcend time, space, and experience in order to comprehend "the relationship between gender and religious culture in particular, as well as medieval understandings of belief systems in general" while also acknowledging that "'male' and 'female' are not constants" through time and space (1).

The authors of these essays do something that all of us as scholars should do. They seek meaning through a variety of textual and other physical artifacts, and they do it admirably. Consequently this collection adds to our understanding of how gender and holiness were constructed, perceived, and dealt with in both secular and religious late medieval culture. The authors' attention to "the mutually implicated questions of whether religious practice is inevitably mediated through discourses of gender and whether cultural concepts of gender are inevitably informed by religious sensibilities" (2) is a common thread in the collection.

Jacqueline Murray addresses the meaning of masculinity and the male body in the medieval West. After an excellent overview of recent scholarship in this area, Murray focuses on Peter Abelard and demonstrates the diversity of materials that must be approached to ask how Abelard "as a man, made sense of his experience" (10). Samantha Riches unbalances the "convenient categories" of analysis used to study saints' cults (64) while assessing images of St. George as both virile male warrior and male virgin martyr. She posits "a third indeterminate, perhaps virginal, gender, not...a pseudo-female." The distinction she makes is semantic. St. George, the warrior, is clearly "demasculinised, not feminised" by his martyrdom (75). Katherine Lewis explores late medieval notions of kingship and virginity through Richard II's reconfiguration of himself after the death of Queen Anne focusing primarily on Richard's anxious endeavors to connect himself with the supposedly chastely married Edward the Confessor. Lewis examines textual and visual evidence including the important Wilton Diptych and Richard's carefully prescribed tomb effigy for himself and Queen Anne, "the first double royal tomb ever commissioned in England" (90). Robert

Mills engages secondary and primary texts and Renaissance art to analyze “the ways in which queer possibilities continue to be checked, censured and circumscribed in even the most purportedly ‘liberal’ contexts” (154). Although the homoerotic nature of medieval men’s writings about their union with Christ is easily available to a postmodern sensibility, Mills rejects the resistance to this reading by Caroline Bynum and others asking us instead to resist the “flattening, overly normalizing metaphoric of unvariegated heterosexuality” (162).

Four other chapters in this volume view female sanctity with regard to that of men as well. Martha Easton draws attention to differences in the treatment of male and female martyrs in the Huntington Library’s 13th-c. manuscript of the *Legenda Aurea*. Its graphic illuminations of the saints’ tortures do not always match the narrative of the life but rather “depicted [the female martyrs] often-sexualized tortures in progress” (57) with their bodies stripped nude and exposed while male martyrs’ bodies were never fully naked nor functioning as sexual metaphor in the same way as the women’s. Easton’s chapter makes it clear that while pain had become the central “signifier of heavenly grace” by the 13th century, the means to that pain/grace was clearly gendered (53). P.H. Cullum explores the medieval concept of Charity through the almsgiving of both male and female saints engaging materials which reveal how “the interaction of sanctity and gender affected both practice and reputation in the later Middle Ages” (138). What she finds is that “transgressive gender behavior” among the male and female saints was acceptable only when their “performance and message were coherent” (149). Miriam Gill examines piety/impiety in visual images of women from wall paintings in England in the 14th century. She draws upon a variety of materials for her analysis of the three mural subjects that are the focus of her study. Like Easton, Gill finds a marked difference between texts and the images that purport to represent the stories the texts relate. Sarah Salih takes another look at *The Book of Margery Kempe* as “a partial exception” to the accepted idea of the gendered nature of medieval conversion experiences as these are related through medieval hagiographic texts. Salih compares the Digby plays of Mary Magdalene and St. Paul with Kempe and her *Book*. Initially, she resists the play of “Mary Magdalene as an influence” on Kempe’s *Book*. In the end, however, she acknowledges the distinct possibility that “the influence was the other way around” (131). Kempe continues to be mined for her disruptions both medieval and modern.

Two more chapters round out this remarkably well-linked collection. Anke Bernau uses the 13th-century *Ancrene Wisse* to demonstrate how the language of the text destabilizes “the trope of virginity” which seems to work firmly within the prescribed “male-female gender paradigm” (36). She shows that the *Ancrene Wisse*’s attempt to confine and control the performance of virginity and enclosure depends on language, and that it was as clear to medieval thinkers and writers as to modern ones that language is the most unwieldy tool of all for control. Wendy Larson’s approach to the cults of Sts. Margaret and Marina of Antioch illustrates that it is the reader, not the writer who gives meaning to a text. Cultural differences between the East and West influenced the viability of the cults of these two saints far more than their shared early *vita* in its many incarnations could do.

This collection illustrates the range of disciplines that must be engaged to reach any kind of understanding of medieval secular and sacred culture across time and space as well as the results of twenty years of scholarship on women, gender, and sexuality. That this is a critical venture at a time when medieval studies programs are being threatened from without and from within because of “irrelevance” to the larger community of scholarship is an understatement. Copious notes and an exhaustive collection of references pertinent to the study of medieval gender construction further enhance the excellence of the individual chapters.

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**Tova Rosen. *Unveiling Eve. Reading Gender in Medieval Hebrew Literature*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2003. 264 pp. ISBN: 0-8122-3710-2**

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*Unveiling Eve* offers a feminist analysis of medieval (10th-14th-century) Golden Age Hebrew literature, i.e. the literature either produced by Jews of the Iberian Peninsula or by Provençal and Italian Jews inspired by this tradition. The book also offers scholars working in European literatures access to a series of medieval Hebrew texts—poetry, rhymed prose narrative, philosophical works—that would otherwise be inaccessible since they have not been translated from the original Hebrew. Rosen is successful not only in illustrating the importance of such works in the larger European context, but also in offering an original and incisive feminist analysis of this corpus of largely misogynist works. In her own words, the study is an attempt to “map the positions and positioning of female figures and female voices within the patterns of male discourse and its procedures of signification” (189). Rosen has a mastery not only of contemporary theory and medieval Hebrew and Arabic, but also of various European literary traditions such as French and German. Her scholarship reveals a breadth and profundity hard to find among medievalists specializing in the European Middle Ages, and this study should be considered fundamental for understanding not only medieval Hebrew and Spanish literature, but also the medieval literature of the West.

Six of Rosen’s chapter titles underscore her thesis that a feminist approach to medieval Judeo-Spanish literature yields subversive subtexts that heretofore have been ignored by contemporary critics of Hebrew Golden Age literature, who like many of the authors they focus upon, also exclude women from their discourse. Chapter One, “No Woman’s Land,” focuses upon the exclusion of Jewish women as active subjects from medieval Hebrew literature and from the modern scholarship of that literature. Because it was only men who voiced their opinions of women in written texts, “[t]he path left for the Hebrew medievalist feminist is thus approaching the issues of women and gender via male-authored texts” (3). Rosen then presents an historical overview of male attitudes toward women as found in a series of Jewish texts, including the Geniza documents and the poetry of the courtier-rabbis of Spain.

In Chapter Two, “Gazing at the Gazelle: Woman in Male Love Lyric,” Rosen further narrows her focus on the most widely recognized genre of Judeo-