

about matters of theology,” although they subsequently dismiss this as unlikely and anachronistic. This might lead the reader to expect the *vita* of Margaret the Lame to be dull fare. That is far from the case. Friar John paints Margaret as a lively and complex woman. At the age of one, we are told, “God mortified her in her limbs.” Despised and abused by her mother and her neighbors, Margaret assumed the life of a recluse perhaps as early as her mid teens. Unable to do much physical labor, she busied herself counselling great sinners, the poor, the desolate and the downtrodden. So popular was Margaret that “people said that she was talkative and gossipy, and behaved like a hostess in public.” She had a penchant for losing her temper, and not everyone received her counsel gladly. But in her Lord’s eyes, Margaret is “a teacher of love, uniquely adorning [his] crown.” She holds a privileged place in his heart and his kingdom, right next to his Mother: “I, my Mother, and you will be together in unique intimacy in eternity.” Their colloquies are punctuated with his (for God is always depicted as male) extravagant praise of her unique awareness and suffering.

Margaret’s is a mysticism of suffering, but not of physical suffering, as you might expect. Her suffering is spiritual suffering, caused by her awareness that “the more grace God gives to the soul, the less she can thank and praise him, because she sees herself as inadequate and unable to respond to God’s blessings.” It is “the heart’s suffering for the soul to praise God.” This leads her to conclude that it is through faith alone that one is united with God, not through great works, as the Devil tries to persuade her. One has to wonder if this insistence that faith alone is needed for justification contributed both to this text’s popularity in Northern France and Belgium in the fifteenth century, where most of the extant manuscript copies originated, and to its omission from the *Acta Sanctorum* in the seventeenth century, and its subsequent obscurity.

Whatever the case may be, this translation of *The “Vita” of Margaret the Lame* should do much to remedy that obscurity. Lewis and Lewis have striven to “render the text into idiomatic modern English, while remaining as close as possible to the Latin original.” They have succeeded in producing a very accessible translation of the text. It is accompanied by a comprehensive commentary geared to readers unfamiliar with medieval prose to be read alongside the text, an extensive index, and a useful bibliography. This volume promises to be a valuable resource for undergraduate courses on medieval mysticism as well as courses on medieval women. Scholars will also value this introduction to the *vita* of Margaret the Lame.

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Jones, Michael, ed. *The New Cambridge Medieval History, Volume VI c. 1300-c. 1415*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp. xxx + 1110.

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For those who have read the previous volume of the *New Cambridge Medieval History*, it will perhaps be of no surprise that volume six has little to say on gender or on topics of feminist concern. Elizabeth Van Houts, when review-

ing volume five in this series, noted that “this book is not only written almost exclusively by men (out of thirty-five contributors, Reyerson is the only woman) but it is almost exclusively *about* men too.”<sup>1</sup> The editor of this volume, Michael Jones, makes a point, though, of commenting that the volume it replaces, *Cambridge Medieval History*, volume seven (*Decline of the Empire and Papacy*, edited by C.W. Previt -Orton and Z.N. Brooke in 1932), had little to say about women: “it is a crude measure that of nearly five hundred chapter subtitles, which acted as a rough index to the themes treated in *Decline of the Empire and Papacy*, less than ten specifically mention women in general or a particular woman, and of those, four appear in the chapter on medieval mysticism” (p. 14). So does Jones’s volume do any better?

Judged against his own criteria, perhaps not. The index records twelve occurrences under its heading “women”; granted this is a problematic marker as it picks up on passing references to women, such as chivalry’s requirement that the honor of women be defended (pp. 212, 220), as well as more significant passages dealing with Byzantine peasant women (pp. 809-10), while ignoring Paul Freeman’s discussion of peasant women in European societies (p. 84). Jones comments that three of the four women who appeared in the chapter on medieval mysticism in Previt -Orton and Brooke’s volume “naturally find their place at appropriate points in the chapters which follow” (p. 14), but fails to mention that two of these, Catherine of Siena and Julian of Norwich, are dealt with in Jeremy Catto’s “Currents of Religious Thought and Expression.”<sup>2</sup> The crucial improvement, as Jones sees it, is the inclusion of a chapter in which “the role of women generally in fourteenth-century society is extensively discussed” (p. 14). This is Christiane Klapisch-Zuber’s “Plague and Family Life.” This chapter seems to serve a dual purpose for Jones as he also sees it as representing economic and social history, particularly the demographic impact of the Black Death (pp. 6, 10). While I do not think Klapisch-Zuber’s chapter is concerned with “the role of women,” there is indeed much in it of interest for women’s historians concerned with areas such as age at first marriage, the status of widows, and differences between northern and southern Europe. All of this is useful for the debate on women’s position in fourteenth-century society, although Klapisch-Zuber leaves this precise debate to one side.<sup>3</sup>

Klapisch-Zuber’s stated intention is to discuss approaches to studying the plague which have arisen in the last 20-30 years, many of which focus on the family (pp. 125-26). Key factors are therefore household size, nuptiality, fertility, and the status of widows and other single persons. These factors figure in the argument that in the late medieval period there were two marriage and household formation patterns in Europe, a northwestern one and a Mediterranean one. The first is typified by late age at first marriage for both sexes (over 23 for women and over 26 for men), the establishment of a new household upon marriage, and by the pre-marital circulation of young people between households as servants. The second pattern is typified by earlier marriage for both sexes (under 21 for females and under 26 for men), and the young wife usually joins her husband in the household of which he is a member, perhaps headed by an older person or couple. England and Italy respectively are

often used to demonstrate these two patterns. It has been argued that women had more opportunities in the former as a result. For example, women could go into service and learn a trade, could defer marriage until they had some economic independence and, with the goods and skills that they brought into a marriage, had the possibility of a more equal marital relationship. Klapisch-Zuber picks up on this from the opposite perspective when she notes that, “the well-established hierarchy between both sexes served to justify, reinforced and implanted the Mediterranean preference for a very young wife: as a result the husband gained in authority” (p. 154).

Klapisch-Zuber’s chapter, though, questions this apparent orthodoxy by arguing that we have not yet analyzed enough evidence to demonstrate such patterns. Regarding England, she contends that too much weight has been placed on the 1377 poll tax returns, which post-date the first three major outbreaks of plague. Figures for Prato in 1371, 1427 and 1470 indicate that after the first two plagues, 65% of households consisted of a simple conjugal unit; after 1427 this had fallen to 58%, and further to 55% in 1470 (p. 149). Klapisch-Zuber argues that if we follow the notion of the developmental cycle of the household, then, “Periodically, and for a short time, the domestic group became smaller, passing through a simple form, before it began again to expand in a later phase” (p. 147). A high death rate increased the break-up of conjugal units and therefore decreased the chances of households reaching a point in their cycle when they became more complex and numerous (or of us observing them; p. 148). Klapisch-Zuber believes this holds for her Italian evidence but remains to be convinced that this was not also the case in England. She maintains that we must look back further if we want to say that large numbers of simple households in England in 1377 marked “the beginning of a very long-term movement” rather than “a disturbance provoked by external traumas” (p. 154).<sup>4</sup>

While Klapisch-Zuber’s chapter includes much information about marriage, women’s position in the household, and differences between northern and southern Europe, it does not support Jones’s claim that this new volume contains a chapter concerned with the role of women. Jones says with respect to other groups “who, along with women, were often overlooked by earlier historiography” – Jews, heretics, criminals and the poor – that they are integrated into various chapters rather than given thematic treatment (p. 15). I am not opposed to such an approach, but women do not figure prominently in other chapters. Catto does best when he discusses women and the religious life (pp. 59-64). While this volume of the *New Cambridge Medieval History* may differ from its 1932 predecessor by going beyond traditional political history (p. 1), it still does not reflect the variety of medieval history at the start of the twenty-first century.

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<sup>4</sup> E. Van Houts, “For Men Only,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 June 2000, pp. 31-32 (p. 31; author’s italics). See also John H. Arnold’s review in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 30 August 2002, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> Julian of Norwich is also briefly mentioned on p. 728. I could find no mention of Catherine of Genoa and the index was no help in this respect. The fourth and "missing" woman from this volume was Hildegard of Bingen.

<sup>3</sup> For a consideration of the various debates surrounding women's status in fourteenth-century England, see S.H. Rigby, "Gendering the Black Death: Women in Later Medieval England," *Gender and History*, 12 (2000), pp. 745-54.

<sup>4</sup> For an argument that Italy is closer to the northwestern model, in terms of women's participation in the work force at least, see Samuel K. Cohn, "Women and Work in Renaissance Italy," in *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. by Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis (Longman: London and New York, 1998), pp. 107-26, esp. 114-20.

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**Klassen, John M. ed, with Eva Doležalová and Lynn Szabo. *The Letters of the Rožmberk Sisters: Noblewomen in Fifteenth-Century Bohemia*, translated from Czech and German with Introduction, Notes and Interpretive Essay. The Library of Medieval Women. Cambridge: D.S.Brewer, 2001. Pp. x, 134.**

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This excellent addition to The Library of Medieval Women presents translations, from Czech and German into English, of letters written between ca. 1448 and 1488 by two sisters in the most powerful noble family in late medieval Bohemia, the Rožmberks (Rosenberg). Most of the letters were written by Perchta (ca. 1429-1476), who signs her letters "born of Rožmberk and the wife of Lord John of Lichtenštejn," documenting her unhappy arranged marriage. The letters were critical to Perchta's unrelenting efforts over more than two decades to mobilize her birth kin and connections in order to secure the marital economic and social rights that her husband and his family denied her. Additional letters from Perchta's servants and from her kinsmen further illuminate her situation. A small number of letters from Perchta's sister, Aněžka (d. 1488), survive, and these provide a tantalizing glimpse into the life of a noblewoman who remained single and lived on the family estate throughout her long life.

These documents open a remarkable window into the conditions, beliefs, and expectations that shaped the lives of late medieval noblewomen. From a modern perspective, Perchta's life is lived as one long conflict between the medieval ideal of obedience and submissiveness to one's male relatives, an ideal with which Perchta aligns herself, on the one hand, and on the other, Perchta's struggle to better her situation and assert her rights. Her letters are urgent, forthright, pressing demands for help. Thus she writes to her father in 1450, after about one year of marriage: "Let this be given to my dear lord, my father, Lord Ulrich of Rožmberk. And dear lord! That which I wrote you in my first letter, that I am doing well, is unfortunately not so; would that I was doing well. On the contrary, I am doing very badly. And the complaint I bring before Your Grace is that I am in such a disorderly residence that there is no way I can get used to it" (p. 35). The letters allude to a state of near-constant strife and turmoil: neglect by her husband; abuse by her mother-in-law; attempts to send away her servants; lack of sustenance and assistance while in childbed; threats and fear of poisoning; and Perchta's distraught state of mind. In 1451, Perchta's lady-in-waiting writes a dramatic letter to Perchta's brother, Henry, berating him for neglecting his sister and informing him that Perchta's husband beats her and abuses her so badly that "others say that if it had been