

BOOK REVIEWS

John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler, eds. *Medieval Mothering*. The New Middle Ages, vol. 3. New York: Garland, 1996. Pp. xviii, 384.

As its title suggests, this collection of nineteen essays focuses on “mothering” as opposed to “motherhood,” stressing “nurturant behavior rather than strict sexual reproduction as the dominant theme” (xv). Thus, while the subjects investigated do not exclude biological mothers, they also include literary and spiritual mothers, surrogate mothers, and “maternal” fathers. Anxious to avoid any trace of editorial essentialism, Parsons and Wheeler note that their “essays are not ordered by space or time, and they make no claim to be exhaustive, comprehensive, or representative” (xi). Like many similar anthologies, this one gains in diversity and range what it loses in clarity of focus. It offers something for everyone interested in medieval women or gender studies, though not all will read the collection from cover to cover.

The essays can be roughly divided into three groups. One large cluster deals with the politics of motherhood in the ruling class: John Carmi Parsons on pregnant queens, Barbara Hanawalt on upper-class fostering, Joel Rosenthal on the Pastons, Marjorie Chibnall on the Empress Matilda, Lois Huneycutt on twelfth-century royal mothers in England and Scotland, Kimberly LoPrete on Adela of Blois, and Miriam Shadis on Berenguela of Castile. A second set of essays revolves around symbolic constructions of motherhood in religious texts and devotional images: Pamela Sheingorn on “the maternal behavior of God,” Rosemary Drage Hale on St. Joseph as mother, Felice Lifshitz on abbesses, Susanna Greer Fein on Aelred of Rievaulx’s rule for his sister, Maud Burnett McInerney and Andrew Sprung on Julian of Norwich. Literary mothers are investigated by Patricia Ann Quattrin (Herzeloydë in *Parzival*), Allyson Newton (Griselda in *The Clerk’s Tale*), and Stephan Grundy (Icelandic sagas). Finally, the collection is rounded out by William MacLehose’s essay on mothers in medical discourse, Jenny Jochens’s broad historical perspective on Old Norse motherhood, and Nancy Partner’s psychoanalytic reading of “the family romance of Guibert of Nogent.”

The historical essays inevitably stress the importance of lineage and dynastic politics in understanding the behavior of upper-class mothers. But if any single theme dominates these pieces, it is a covert and at times polemical insistence that, counter to the well-known theses of Philippe Ariès, Lloyd DeMause, and Lawrence Stone, “affective motherhood” did not first spring into being in the early modern period, but can be discerned in a variety of medieval sources. Lois Huneycutt states the position most directly: “We need not assert that medieval

children were unwanted and unloved, nor that medieval childhood was generally unhappy, much less the 'nightmare' that modern theorists have posited" (307). Rather, we must be more cautious than previous historians in drawing inferences about private life, particularly the emotions, from sources that are by definition concerned with public life. But even these sources—chronicles, royal biographies, wills—indicate that dynastic ambition did not necessarily exclude affectionate bonds between mother and child. Margaret of Scotland, Empress Matilda, and Adela of Blois all receive sympathetic assessments in this context, while Barbara Hanawalt's study of the Lisle letters from Tudor England takes issue with historians' traditionally negative view of fostering as a practice that weakened parent-child bonds. Her reading suggests that, for the noble Lisle daughters and presumably others like them, fostering created a network of extended family connections that was both emotionally satisfying and effective in promoting the girls to successful court careers and marriages.

John Carmi Parsons and Miriam Shadis prove, from very different angles, that motherhood could neutralize both the threat inherent in female sexuality and the subservience of the wifely role. Berenguela, a thirteenth-century queen of Castile, continued to exercise royal authority even after abdicating so as to secure the kingship of her son, as Shadis demonstrates in a nuanced study of the queen's marriage negotiations on behalf of her children. Parsons's study of pregnant queens shows how closely their role was modelled on the Queen of Heaven's, and vice versa: Marian imagery invested the queen with a fictive virginity that mitigated the threat of her sexual power over the king, while childbirth enhanced her privileged, if carefully controlled, position as intercessor. A darker side of motherhood emerges in Jochens's study of the Old Norse world, where infanticide remained legal until Christianization. Jochens notes that "Germanic religion . . . contains no exemplary model of a loving mother-child couple such as the Christian Mary and Jesus" (203), and observes that the sparse evidence for affective maternity begins to appear only after conversion, chiefly in hagiography. Stephan Grundy's exploration of the sagas modifies this picture somewhat, but not in the direction of sentimentality: he points to a number of maternal witches who exercise their considerable powers to advance adult sons.

Representations of mothering in religious contexts give rise to more diverse and contested readings, including several inspired by psychoanalytic schools. In a persuasive and original account of Julian of Norwich, Andrew Sprung draws on D. W. Winnicott's theory of play as a strategy to negotiate the boundaries between self and world. Analyzing Julian's exceptional capacity for trust, he shows how the visionary used her theology of a double-gendered God "to override the binary oppositions of male and female, God and man, to locate both lack and plenitude in both parties" (196-97), and thus to subvert Freudian and

Lacanian models of maternal inadequacy. Pamela Sheingorn looks at artworks representing Mary as the daughter/bride of a nurturing Father God and sees in them objects of authorized female fantasy, designed to legitimate the increasingly common May-December marriages of the late Middle Ages by reassuring young women offered willy-nilly to older men. In Sheingorn's view, these images of a loving, even "maternal" Father in heaven serve to reconcile women to their fate and thus "operate as part of the ideological system that transmitted the values of patriarchy" (83), including normative heterosexuality. Her essay provocatively compares medieval Marian devotees to the women readers of popular romance studied by Janice Radway.

In contrast to Sheingorn's emphasis on the cultural construction of desire, Nancy Partner endorses a more humanistic brand of psychohistory, skillfully reading Guibert of Nogent's autobiography in the conviction that "sexuality . . . remains, always, private, mysteriously constructed, and in ironic energizing relation to the clear ambitions of the ego" (376). Guibert's family romance involves, *inter alia*, impotence, witchcraft, child abandonment, and demonic rape. Reading this dense yet elliptical narrative through both psychoanalytic and feminist lenses, Partner disentangles "his story" from "her story," sympathetically interpreting both the abbot's difficult oedipal victory and his mother's lifelong resistance to sexuality for the sake of self-determination. In an aphorism that nicely captures the asymmetrical nature of medieval subjectivities, she remarks that "if Guibert's story speaks insistently of sex, his mother's story speaks of gender" (370).

Space does not permit a full account of the remaining contributions, but it is worth noting that two break virtually untouched historical ground. In her cleverly titled essay "Is Mother Superior?: Towards a History of Feminine *Amtscharisma*," Felice Lifshitz inquires into the construction of authority by female monastic superiors—a subject virtually defined out of existence between the numerous studies treating masculine abbatial authority on the one hand and feminine charismatic spirituality on the other. Joel Rosenthal likewise pursues a neglected historical quarry, the grandmother (and thus the marginality of old age), finding his evidence among the "unlovely" but ever-interesting Pastons. These and other essays compress their rich material into all-too-limited space, leading one to hope that at least a few will blossom into book-length studies of the many discourses and practices clustered around the theme of medieval mothering.

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