

GENDER AND MEDIEVALISM

BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS: WRITING NOVELS ABOUT MEDIEVAL WOMEN FOR MODERN READERS

Despite the last thirty years of research and publication on the many aspects of the life of women in the Middle Ages, film and fiction are still saturating the general public with the same stereotypes that were prevalent at the beginning of this century. These seem to consist of two opposing images, that of woman as object of chivalry, pampered and adored or, at the other extreme, as the object of total repression, voiceless and perhaps mindless. Those who teach the history of women in the Middle Ages first have to overcome these stereotypes before a balanced picture can be presented and the mainstream of women integrated into the mainstream of medieval history.

While I have been a serious medievalist for nearly twenty-five years, some time ago I decided to make the attempt to portray the period to a non-academic audience. While for this article I shall focus on the role of women in my work, the overall intent of my work is to provide some corrective to a number of misunderstandings about the Middle Ages. By choosing the form of the novel, I can concentrate on innumerable, intertwined facets of life within a short time frame, something nearly impossible in the classroom.

I am currently working on the fifth novel in a mystery series set primarily in Northern France in the mid-eleventh century. As a result of the success of the first four mysteries, particularly the mass market paperback sales, I've been asked to speak in a variety of settings, often public libraries or bookstores. I try to use these opportunities to discuss medieval women in general. I also give a bibliography, much of it culled from the lists in this journal, and encourage attendees to read further or even enroll in one of the continuing education courses offered by their local universities.

Readers sometimes tell me that they think my female characters are too "modern." When I ask why, the response is always that they seem too independent-minded. This is in a book set in 1140, when Empress Matilda, Christina of Markyate, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Heloise and Hildegard of Bingen, to name only a few of the most notable, were all alive and very active.

In a review of my second mystery, *The Devil's Door*, one man wrote that he loved the book but was confused as to why anyone would take the time to solve the murder of a woman since "everyone knows that in the Middle Ages women were chattel." This one line upset me more than any literary criticism could. I do believe that in western society today, women have more rights and opportunities than at any previous time. However, we have certainly not found Utopia and the

assumption that the past centuries have been a steady improvement is a dangerous one, as well as being inaccurate. It's all too easy to feel superior to the past and neglect to understand that rights have been won before and lost.

The rectification of such complacency is currently the focus of many excellent articles and university courses, but these reach relatively few people compared to those who receive their instruction on medieval feminism from Mel Gibson, for instance. And even when audiences are aware that they are watching Hollywood fantasy, the general impression remains in their subconscious. I can attest to the fact that there is still a firm belief in the *jus primae noctis* and in the common use of chastity belts, despite the implausibility of the latter.

The nineteenth-century idea of the convent as either a prison or a last-ditch refuge for unwanted women is also alive and well. That a convent might fulfill spiritual needs as well as intellectual ones is a difficult concept for many modern readers, as are many aspects of medieval religious attitudes. One of my most difficult tasks has been to accurately present the medieval world view, as I understand it, without baffling modern readers. In this I've not always been successful, as I was recently asked why anyone would be upset if in twelfth-century Paris a canon of St. Victor converted to Judaism.

This leads to another aspect of women's history, too often neglected even in the classroom: that of non-Christian women in medieval Europe. In researching this series, I have become fascinated by the differences between the lives of Jewish and Christian women as well as the common bonds that they shared. I would like to incorporate women from Islamic and Western Orthodox areas but I don't feel I can do justice to them without a working knowledge of Arabic and Greek. I hope that someone else, more qualified, will take up the challenge.

In writing this series, I've been fortunate in finding a publisher and getting good distribution, both in the United States and in Europe. It's a great deal of effort and only recently have the financial rewards been much greater than if I had stayed in the university. I am tremendously lucky in being able to make a living doing the two things I love best. But I do not pretend that these books are a substitute for traditional methods of teaching. I make every effort to be accurate, doing my own primary research and also shamelessly exploiting the scholarship and good nature of my friends. What I hope is that my work can be used as a bridge between the worlds inside and outside the academy and that it will encourage the general public to perceive that the Middle Ages were a time of great diversity and that the roles of women were infinitely more varied than they had imagined, and in doing so, to look at the situation in which we find ourselves now in a less complacent light.

Sharan Best
s.newman@genie.com

Sharan publishes as Sharan Newman. Her books to date are::

Death comes as Epiphany. Tor, 1993

The Devil's Door. Forge, 1994

The Wandering Arm. Forge, 1995

Strong as Death. Forge, 1996

Guinevere. (reprint) Tor, 1996

WISHING FOR HISTORY

"But women in ancient Celtic countries were the equals of men. Why don't you put **that** in your historical novels?" The women who ask me this perennial question are all young and often angry. Whether they send me e-mail or latch onto me at science-fiction conventions, they so badly want it to be true that they generally don't listen when I start talking about primary sources in literature and the documents of law courts. "The old sagas were all written down by monks," they tell me. "They hated women and changed the stories. Besides, I read about the women being equal in a book, a history book."

How do you counter a beloved myth? And why, I sometimes ask myself, do I bother to try? All historical novels contain a greater or smaller helping of fantasy; mine, with their magical and mythical elements, serve up more than most. Why not tell my readers what they want to hear, that pre-Christian Celtic countries were a feminist paradise? Plenty of novelists, such as Marion Zimmer Bradley and Patricia Kenneally, have done so, and they make a lot more money than I do.

They draw upon the pseudo-historians whose books my angry readers proffer: Norma Lore Goodrich, for example, or John and Caitlin Matthews. All of these writers start with a few remarks in Tacitus or Strabo and a few out-of-context quotes from ancient law texts; they cobble together more material out of the gilded whimsies of older Celtifiers such as Iolo Morgannwg. Upon these shaky foundations they then build an amazing construction, a veritable cloud-castle like Morgan le Fay's, of non-logic and wishful thinking. You can find their works prominent in chain bookstores, all filed under non-fiction.

I would suppose that these people believe what they write. Certainly many of the minor novelists, such as Persia Woolley, who draw upon this body of myth believe it to be history with all their hearts. We can't blame the readers of fiction if they, in turn, believe what they find in books that impress them. Like most of the ardently deceived, they refuse to acknowledge the truth when they finally do hear it. It's not just my novels that draw their fire. I find myself roasted in such good company as the anonymous recorder of the *Tain Bo Cualinge* on the one hand and Stuart Piggot and Barry Cunliffe on the other. I haven't heard so many accusations of "patriarchal conspiracy" since the early 1970's.