

- Abhandlungen, 259 (Zurich: Juris Druck & Verlag Dietikon, 1994). An examination in modern botanical/chemical terms of the physiological properties of 25 plants which Hildegard (1098-1179) recommended for gynecological and obstetrical conditions.
- Schleissner, Margaret. "Sexuality and Reproduction in the Late Medieval Problemata Aristotelis," in Josef Domes, et al., eds., Licht der Natur: Medizin in Fachliteratur und Dichtung. Festschrift für Gundolf Keil zum 60. Geburtstag (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1994), pp. 383-98. Discusses a thirteenth- or fourteenth-century composition attributed to Aristotle which comprises, among other things, a series of questions on reproduction. Schleissner discusses both the Latin text and one of the two German translations.
- Weston, L. M. C. "Women's Medicine, Women's Magic: The Old English Metrical Childbirth Charms," Modern Philology 92.3 (1995), 279-93. Argues that three Anglo-Saxon charms for assisting, respectively, pregnancy, childbirth and lactation show signs of coming directly from women's oral tradition

BOOK REVIEWS



Clare A. Lees, Thelma Fensler and JoAnn McNamara, eds. Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages. Medieval Cultures, Vol. 7, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994. Pp. xxv, 193.

The premise of this collection is that much about masculinity is becoming visible only in the wake of feminist studies. The claim of feminism that women's cultural positioning has differed from men's in order to consolidate men's authority has undone the universalizing tendency of traditional histories and revealed the effortful construction of what had seemed a natural masculine superiority. The authors of this collection turn from the feminist position to focus on "medieval masculinities" with fruitful results. The volume is more engaged in documenting men's plight than in theorizing masculinity's psycho-social construction. And with the exception of a couple of paragraphs, masculinity is heterosexual for this collection. The two tendencies may be related, in that gay theory is currently the groundbreaking site for analyses of masculinity that are derived from psychoanalytic traditions. Medieval Masculinities draws on the work of David Cillmore, Clifford Geertz, R. W. Connell, and Thomas Laqueur rather than on work of postfreudians and gay theorists. Most of the resulting essays succeed in documenting specific practices around normative masculinity in substantial and fascinating detail.

Four essays emphasize that heavy demands are placed on men in consequence of their cultural dominance. Vern Bullough's "On Being a Male in the Middle Ages" reviews anatomical and physiological writing that held men responsible for the woman's orgasm, which was believed to be necessary for conception, and for the sex of offspring, since male progeny were believed to indicate more efficacious sperm than female ones. Two essays on marriage practices, Susan Mosher Stuard's "Burdens of Matrimony: Husbanding and Gender in Medieval Italy" and Stanley Chojnacki's "Subaltern Patriarchs: Patrician Bachelors in Renaissance Venice," reveal the constraints that poem

marriage practices placed on husbands and on their brothers as well, requiring husbands to define themselves in relation to their wives, to take legal responsibility for them, and to preserve the worth of wife's dowries' and requiring brothers to help in raising large dowries and to postpone or give up marriage so that one brother could afford to marry. These studies of twelfth-century Florence and fifteenth-century Venice are particularly compelling for the wealth of specific information they provide about historical practice in each case. From literary material, Louise Mirrer convinces me that the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian cultures in Spain shared some basic convictions about masculinity that allowed them to understand each other's insulting depictions of political subordination. "Representing 'Other' Men: Muslims, Jews, and Masculine Ideals in Medieval Castilian Epic and Ballad" illustrates amply that masculinity in these texts "is proved not through biology, but through force, intimidation, and the use of threatening language" (p. 169). In scenes of interracial confrontation, politeness, deference, and hesitation are mutually understood as signs of weakness and unworthiness.

Three essays stress the complexities of masculinity, even its precariousness, and the ongoing cultural work required to sustain it. Christopher Baswell's "Men in the Roman d'Eneas: The Construction of Empire" offers a subtly historicized reading of Eneas in terms of Henry II's centralizing, judicial kingship and his patrilineal claim to territory actually acquired by conquest and marriage. The work's homoerotics are in Baswell's view "unspoken" or "already contained" (pp. 152, 163); access to Simon Gaunt's and William Burgwinkle's work might have enriched these passages in the argument. But Baswell makes clear how thoroughly Eneas is in consonance with Henry's personal and dynastic ambitions. John Coakley's "Friars, Sanctity, and Gender: Mendicant Encounters with Saints, 1250-1325" compares the sanctity praised in men and in women by men of mendicant orders. Female sanctity is characterized by close relations with a confessor who interrogates the saint, advises her, and records her insights; male sanctity in contrast is witnessed less interactively and does not typically involve delivering confidences to and receiving advice from a confessor. Both kinds of sanctity defend the peculiar role of mendicants, the former by submitting to mendicant guidance and the latter by participating in the mendicant way of life. Jo Ann McNamara's "The Herrenfrage: The Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050-1150" is less successful in arguing that "[t]he entire gender system spun into a crisis" (p. 6) over the newly stringent requirements for celibacy in religious orders. No evidence is adduced from the period to support the claim that men believed celibacy threatened their identification as men (p. 5). Celibacy was far from a new attribute of religious commitment in the eleventh century, and religious writers had long made sense of it, for men, as a willed abstinence from sexual pleasure that was predicated on the persistence of sexual identity. Here no contemporary writing reveals a change in that understanding of celibacy around the eleventh century.

A third group of essays takes the position that literature can critique its culture's standards for masculinity. Clare Kinney's "The (Dis) Embodied Hero and the Signs of Manhood in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" argues that Gawain's masculinity is complexly figured—derived from epic as well as competing romance models, disembodied in the pentangular representation of the court but reembodyed by the lady's sexual temptation—and that such complications permit masculinity to recognize weakness in itself. Clare Lees begins "Men and Beowulf" by arguing that analyses of the

by J.R. R. Tolkien and James Earl, despite their contrasting orientations toward manhood, both “use masculinity as a beginning for interpretation” (p. 129) rather than questioning masculinity’s ideological configuration. *Beowulf* both celebrates and critiques a warrior ethos, according to Lees; for example, by demonstrating that bonds between lord and retainer are stronger than those between father and son, the poem affirms masculine volition but also reveals that “[t]he maintenance of patrilineal genealogy is no easy thing” (p. 141). In “The Male Animal in the Fables of Marie de France,” Harriet Spiegel argues that Marie uses the fable, “the very form that establishes and supports the male hierarchy, both to endorse it and to challenge it” (p. 112). Marie writes within the genre’s conventions associating males with power and the public sphere, but occasionally a small, weak creature’s femaleness is compatible with resistance to power and even with representing justice or truth in the face of official oppressiveness.

These brief summaries cannot indicate the wealth of detail or the subtlety of presentation that raises most of the essays in the collection beyond the ordinary. The volume as a whole will repay the attention of a wide range of readers, including undergraduates, who seek reliable and readable explorations of its topic.

Susan Crane, Rutgers University

Donald M. Nicol, *The Byzantine Lady: Ten Portraits 1250-1500*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), x, 143, ISBN 0-521-45531-6, \$39.95

Donald Nicol is a senior British Byzantinist with a long career of solid monographs and prosopographical studies in late Byzantine history. Consciously emulating the works of earlier Byzantinist belletrists Charles Diehl and Dmitri Obolensky¹, Nicol here offers a series of biographical sketches of ten late Byzantine aristocratic and imperial women.

These are not, though, mere literary exercises since Nicol has a thesis. Adopting an interest of feminist historians he seeks to show that Byzantine women could indeed possess agency and that “in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries Byzantine women seemed to feel more free...than their ancestors” [p.3]. His ultimate goal is to “dispel some of the gloom about the role of Byzantine women.” [p.10] Each individual sketch has some value, and could be assigned as class reading for instance, yet Nicol fails in his stated goals partially because of the intractability of his material, but largely because of his methods.

As he acknowledges [p.2], Nicol’s biographical approach restricts him to upper class women. Source material on other individual women is scarce: for instance the period is almost entirely lacking in female hagiography. But Nicol’s cohort is so distorted that it is doubtful that anything significant about Byzantine women could be drawn from even the most able group prosopography. Six of the women were empresses or queens, three others were princesses, and the one exception, Anna Notaras, lived her entire adult life in post-Byzantine Italy. Even with these royal women, information is so lacking that the lives of at least four of them (Helena Doukaina, Tamar, Eirene Asenina, Helena Cantacuzene) amount to little more than excuses to recount male-dominated historical episodes. Only four were Byzantine women who lived their lives in the Byzantine world; 76 novels and plays published since 1850 shows that 85% of them are concerned with the