

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.

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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

two others were westerners living in Byzantium, three were Byzantine women sent west, and one lived largely in the Ottoman world. The two best sketches concern these semi-Byzantines — those on Anne of Savoy and Anna Notaras. Oddly enough, three Byzantine women who would back up Nicol's thesis (St. Theodora of Arta, Anna Palaiologina and Theodora, mother of John Kantakuzenos) feature only as bit players.

Some of these women might as well have been valuable icons for all the agency that Nicol is able to demonstrate in their lives as they were tossed back and forth between one male lord and another. Many were married off at an age when they could not object. Several in fact seem to have spent a significant part of their adult lives in some form of imprisonment. All but one were married and, when they did act, seemed to do so for familial rather than personal reasons. In fairness to Nicol, some of his women did undertake significant political or scholarly activity. Curiously though, Nicol, who is given to using clichés such as “feminine wiles” and asserting that individuals “must have felt” some emotion, often deprecates the achievements of his best cases: he criticizes Irene Choumaina Palaiologina, a notable religious activist, for her spelling and grammar; and insists on presenting Anne of Savoy in classic Diehlesque terms, as women given to extravagant gestures and dominated by men. It is not at all clear, nor does Nicol make any real attempt to demonstrate, that these late Byzantine women were more free, or more active than elite women of earlier periods.

Does this mean then, that despite good liberal intentions, no agency can be demonstrated for Byzantine women in general? I think not. The problem is that Nicol is writing too much in the tradition of Diehl: he is spinning entertainment around the lives of these women (who, however, are much less entertaining as figures than Diehl's adulterous or saintly empresses.) In doing so he shows the limits of the positivist approach. What the texts tell us about the *facts* of these women's lives is Nicol's main concern. This is exactly the right approach for a prosopographer, but women's history has developed new ways to approach such subjects. Since few of his women left written records, Nicol, who *is* aware of the importance of family, needed to look more closely at the family structures in which women's power lay. It would also have been productive to look at the historical sources as texts in themselves — what are their assumptions about women and men? For all his nod to women's history, Nicol does not seem to have any use for the concept of gender as category of analysis. It is, however, the use of structural and gender analysis that has opened up investigation into the lives of western medieval women, an approach which Byzantine scholarship needs to emulate.

These sketches though, do have some purpose. Nicol has at his command an admirable grasp of source materials and an ability to marshal them well within his limited aim. As individual essays to assign to students in Byzantine history courses, or even women's history courses, many of these would provide a basis for discussion of the relative powers and limitations of the lives of rich as compared to poor women. An excellent comparison would be the composite sketch of an “average” Byzantine peasant women, drawn from statistical sources, at the conclusion of Angeliki Laiou's *Peasant Society in the Late Byzantine Empire*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975).

It is worth, finally, considering the intended audience for this book. At one time there was a real market for Byzantine romances, which could be satisfied by fiction or *realia*. This market, as witnessed by the success of novelist Gillian Bradshaw, still exists. And it is a market focused almost exclusively on women heroines. (An analysis I did of

activities of Byzantine women.) There is also, as John Julius Norwich and John Ash have recently discovered, a market for well written narrative history and travelogues about Byzantium. I think it is at these markets that Nicol's book is aimed. For historians of women the book does provide concise prosopographical evidence. It also provides a good, if slightly depressing read. What it does not do is contribute to the work of analysis of Byzantine gender relations advanced in recent years by scholars such as Angeliki Laiou, Catia Galatariatou and Alice-Mary Talbot.

A word about the price of this book. At scarcely 150 pages, \$39.95 is a typically excessive Cambridge University Press price, but one which limits severely the possible audience.

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1. See especially Charles Diehl, *Figures byzantines*, (2 series, Paris: 1906-08; 4th ed. Paris: 1909, 1939)

Mary Clayton and Hugh Magennis, eds. *The Old English Lives of St. Margaret*. (Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 9). Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994. Pp. xi, 239. 2 b/w plates.

The story of St. Margaret is in many ways a conventional passio: a Christian maiden attracts the sexual notice of a pagan prefect, then defends both faith and chastity against his threats before achieving a glorious death. But Margaret also confronts several of her antagonists more actively, doing physical battle with dragons and demons. The Middle English versions of this legend, appearing in Bodley and Ashmore 43, will likely be more familiar to many scholars than the Old English accounts presented here, which have not recently been available to English readers. Clayton and Magennis thus perform a valuable service to scholars of Old and Middle English alike. They supply thoroughly edited texts of the two surviving Old English passions, which survive in Cotton Tiberius A.iii and Corpus Christi College Cambridge 303, complete with readable facing-page translations and extensive textual notes. In addition, they provide corrected texts of two of the passions' Latin sources, the "Casinensis" version (based on earlier edition in Bibliotheca Casinensis) and a version of BHL no. 5303 contained in a late Anglo-Saxon manuscript (here published for the first time). These materials are supplemented with discussion of the evidence for Margaret's cult in Anglo-Saxon England, with information concerning the codicological and linguistic characteristics of the Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, with a full bibliography, and with a particularly comprehensive discussion of the various interrelationships between the Old English and earlier Greek or Latin treatments of the legend. Also useful is the richly detailed analysis of the different themes and concerns of these various versions of the life.

The most controversial aspect of this volume is likely to be the editors' treatment of the Cotton Tiberius text. Because this manuscript was apparently emended by two additional scribes shortly after its initial inscription, Clayton and Magennis have elected to supply one composite text (an edition of the text as it now appears) with all scribal alterations of the original text carefully footnoted and, in an appendix, an additional Master of the Ulm Boccaccio's woodcuts for Heinrich Steinhöwel's German translation