

specialized, and that only in the case of single women and widows did women's work patterns resemble those of men.

The last two articles diverge from the focus on peasants and urban working women. Rowena Archer writes on "'How ladies ... who live on their manors ought to manage their households and estates': Women as Landholders and Administrators in the later Middle Ages." Her focus is on a number of individuals who managed their own or their husbands' estates and on the gap between theory and practice. Roberta Gilchrist, in "'Blessed Art Thou Among Women': The Archaeology of Female Piety," suggests that the large number of English nunneries built with north cloisters reflects late medieval Eucharistic imagery and Marian devotion. Her argument that "as a form of passive female piety, nunnery architecture simultaneously reflected belief and actively constructed and renegotiated belief" (p. 225) is thought-provoking but deserves greater development than a dozen pages.

None of the essays takes an explicitly feminist stance or advances the theoretical understanding of gender issues. They are not meant to. What they are meant to do, and what they accomplish, is to enlarge understanding of what women's lives were like in England in the late Middle Ages, without addressing the larger dynamics of the power relations that made them that way.

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M^cLeod, Glenda. *Virtue and Venom: Catalogs of Women from Antiquity to the Renaissance*. Foreword by Charity Cannon Willard. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1991. 168 pp.

Virtue and Venom "traces a general history of ... the catalog of women — focusing especially on ... the close of the Middle Ages" (1). M^cLeod defines catalogs of women as "lists — sometimes found in other works, sometimes found alone — enumerating pagan and (sometimes) Christian heroines who jointly define a notion of femininity" (1). The assumption that the women included in catalogs "define a notion of femininity," a term she uses to rid her book of the connotations of "femininity" (1), is central to M^cLeod's study. She believes that the late Middle Ages are a particularly interesting period in which to study "femininity" because some late medieval authors of catalogs see women as "participating in and formed by historical currents" (2).

The recovery of a period's notion of "femininity" is a big project, and M^cLeod's book is brief; it gives a sense of pervasiveness of the catalog tradition, but does not consistently develop, substantiate, and defend readings of individual texts. For her descriptive summaries of medieval thought, M^cLeod relies heavily on the work of other scholars, without clearly distinguishing between her own ideas and those she has borrowed. Many scholars are not credited directly in the texts or notes, although they may be listed in "Works Consulted." Documentation of sources is sloppy; misspelled names of authors and titles, misquoted titles of primary and secondary sources, missing or incorrect editors, and incorrect dates of publication are numerous.

Chapter One, "A Fickle Thing is Woman," surveys the catalogs of women in Hesiod's *Eoiae*, the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, Plutarch's *Mulierum virtutes*, Semonides of

Amorgos' *On Women*, Juvenal's *Satire Six*, and the *Heroides*. According to McLeod, the catalog "could invoke, mock, transmit, and transform the authoritative view of womankind, or it could associate that view with other peripheral concerns" (34).

Most of Chapter Two, "Woman's Particular Virtue," is devoted to a well-judged discussion of Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*. McLeod argues that Jerome revised his classical exempla to make them conform with Christian morals rather than pagan social values, addressed the positive catalog in part "to widows who wish to remarry" and the negative one to men to dissuade them from marriage (44), and isolated "the active and virtuous woman from her gender" by his definition of "femineity [as] naturally vicious as well as inferior" (45). She asserts that later medieval users of the tradition did not appropriate the literary complexity of Jerome's text, which attacks male in chastity as well as female and which gives women "some opportunity for prestige" (46). In a few pages on Walter Map's *Dissuasio Valerii ad Rufinum*, McLeod argues that "Map is having fun while showing off his learning and wit" (52). Sermons and the *Roman de la Rose* are briefly discussed.

Chapter Three, "The *Mulier Clara*," defines Boccaccio's *De Mulieribus Claris* as a "scholarly florilegium" (63). Perhaps because of this generic identification, McLeod does not provide an analysis of Boccaccio's structure or rhetorical methods (as she does for Jerome, Chaucer, and de Pizan). The chapter does not clearly pick up and develop topics from the previous chapters, and some of the citations are superficial and misleading. Among the examples offered to prove that "Boccaccio's good wives are passive, nondescript Their fame rests on their allegiance to their husbands" (67) is Sulpicia, a wife who joined her husband in exile. McLeod describes Sulpicia as self-effacing (67), yet, according to the *De Mulieribus*, Sulpicia chooses to disguise herself and cross stormy seas and mountains to join her husband. Boccaccio offers her as an exemplary of the way that women must and can "endure toil, go into exile, bear poverty, and face danger bravely with their husbands" (trans. Guido Guarino, 186-7). He praises her courage and resourcefulness as fulsomely as he does her loyalty to her husband. The story offers a model of female heroism appropriate to his own time in which the choice of women to remain comfortably at home or suffer the hardships of exile might face Florentine matrons. McLeod's reading of Sulpicia as "passive" and "nondescript" can only be sustained if one accepts any action a woman performs in her capacity of wife to be of no value whatsoever. Boccaccio's narrative makes it quite clear that this is not his belief; McLeod's reading of the text damns him for his notion of female heroism while appearing simply to describe it.

In contrast to Chapter Three's concentration of the text's attitude towards women, Chapter Four, "Al of Another Tonne," says almost nothing about the "notion of femineity." McLeod asserts that "Chaucer uses the good woman to explore the problems and potentials of a changing notion of poetry" (109); she discusses the two versions of the prologue, the development of the persona of the narrator, and the connection between the prologue and the legends.

Chapter Five, "The Defense of Gender, the Citadel of the Self," examines Christine de Pizan's *Cité des dames*. This is the heart of the book, the chapter for which all the rest seem to prepare. McLeod presents a brief but outdated history of critical responses to the *Cité*, analyses the figure of the narrator created in the prologue, and argues that de Pizan associated the good woman with community, integrates her in history, and "uses past

heroines to oppose the misogynistic concept of femineity" (137). These, she asserts, are important changes in the catalog tradition. This chapter is M^cLeod's best, perhaps because de Pizan's goal may well have been the one that M^cLeod claims for all the authors — the redefinition of "femineity by the location of women in history."

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Louise Mirrer, ed. *Upon My Husband's Death: Widows in Literature & Histories of Medieval Europe*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992. Pp 351.

Recent interest in medieval widowhood (another collection of essays on the topic is forthcoming from Hambledon Press) perhaps springs from the remarkable polarities which characterize this state. On the one hand, widowhood has been presented as a period of heightened opportunity, a time when the degree of freedom and control enjoyed by women might approach that of men. On the other hand, the notable range and variety of medieval misogyny never shows more clearly than in the depiction of widows, whose sexual instability is sometimes presented as barely human. No wonder, then, that contemporary scholars are eager to explore the realities of this state, and in particular, to ask just what possibilities widowhood afforded women, and in what societal nerves its presence touched.

If the goal of explorations such as this is to understand more accurately the social realities of women's lives, that goal is achieved with particular fullness in the work of Ann Crabb, Linda Mitchell, Barbara Hanawalt, Judith Bennett, and Harry Miskimin, all of whom present archival material of great freshness and interest. It sometimes seems, in fact, that the exploration of practice rather than precept in medieval women's lives might yield the most illuminating results. Crabb points out, for instance, that in her husband's absence, Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi invested capital as a passive partner in relatives' companies, executed sharecropping contracts with her peasant workers, sold land, and made legal contracts, circumventing the required male facilitator in the last instance by using a court-appointed stranger merely as a formality.

This degree of scope is, of course, a function of male absence, as is the female assumption of the baronial role which Mitchell describes. Such English noble widows appointed bailiffs, controlled wardships, paid debts, argued in court, received royal grants of wood, furnished men-at-arms, and were even imprisoned as politically dangerous. In short, they "lived the life of a baron, with all of its responsibilities and usually with few of the rewards."

Both Mitchell and Hanawalt treat the important subject of dower litigation — women's suits to regain their marital status. Hanawalt's sample of 299 mostly fourteenth-century cases from the London court of Husting reveals that widows won slightly more than half the time (53%), most commonly through default. The desirability of these propertied women, who retained their dower rights for life, as second-marriage partners is clear. Of the widows with children in Hanawalt's sample, about two-thirds remarried before the registration of their children as orphans, suggesting the strong