

Studying Gender in Medieval Europe: Historical Approaches, by Patricia Skinner. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. Pp. 180. ISBN: 9781137387530.

This is an important, comprehensive, and yet remarkably concise book. Patricia Skinner highlights why gender matters to medieval history, explores how it was neglected by earlier generations, and illuminates twentieth- and twenty-first-century approaches towards studying medieval history through a gendered lens. As readers of this journal know, scholars have authored dozens of excellent books on topics related to medieval gender history in recent decades, yet no broad textbook covers the entire medieval period from a gendered perspective, and most gender history textbooks skip or gloss over the Middle Ages.

Tackling the historiography of gender and related themes for medieval scholars is one of the strengths of Skinner's book. Although not every work written on gender in the past decade has been cited, Skinner includes the most prominent ones while also addressing earlier, formative, scholarship. Skinner concisely documents feminist waves and explains how earlier concerns played a role in challenging traditional history and in formulating the questions asked. Here she not only focuses on feminist history but also discusses trends like the *Annales* school and Marxist scholarship and how they influenced the trajectory of historical studies. Normally this kind of discussion focuses entirely on secondary sources, but Skinner provides an interesting overview of how the editorial decisions made by compilers of major primary source collections continue to reverberate and occlude women from view.

Historiography permeates this book but is especially prominent in Chapters 1 ("Setting the Scene") and 2 ("Why 'Medieval' Matters to Gender History"). The subsequent five chapters take a thematic approach to various topics that best highlight gendered issues in medieval society (and the historical fields of study that have most interested scholars studying gender). Despite employing a thematic approach, Skinner documents chronological change throughout, for example by recounting the shifting rules on clerical celibacy in Chapter 3 ("Bodies: Sex, Sexuality and Healthcare"). The material in this chapter covers foundational literature (Thomas Laqueur and Joan Cadden on sexual biology, John Boswell on homosexuality) as well as newer research into medicine (Monica Green) and disability (Irina Metzler).

In under twenty pages, Chapter 4 ("Rules: Patriarchy, the Law and Gendered Behaviour") provides a succinct overview, not only of how women engaged with legal systems and codes of conduct, but of European legal history in its entirety. This concise analysis of complex legal traditions—secular and religious

(Christian, Jewish, and Islamic)—is impressive and is paired with geographically comprehensive historiographical analysis of how women’s rights activists (or at least those interested in the fairer treatment of women) in France, Italy, Britain, and the United States paired their beliefs with historical research into medieval laws. Similarly, the introduction to Chapter 5 (“Voices: Authority and Suppression”) reminds students of the many different kinds of primary sources available and addresses questions of education, literacy, and authorship important for all students and scholars, not merely those interested in gender. In addition to highlighting known female authors such as Dhuoda and Anna Komnena, Skinner introduces students to a complicated scholarship that argues for a more wide-ranging approach to authorship; for example, by considering women as contributors, through curation of material culture and familial memory, to texts attributed to male authors.

The theme of Chapter 6 (“Identities: Categories and their Complications”) might be the most complicated one for students but, at the same time, might be one that (in today’s climate) they are most eager to read. Indeed, Skinner does not shy away from the phrase “identity politics” but instead opens with it. This chapter thus focuses on the goals of feminist history, queries the alleged feminism of Christine de Pisan and Margery Kempe, and takes up the overlapping identities of economic class, religious difference, and ethnicity to understand complicated intersectional identities and to criticize binaries. Perhaps most controversial will be Skinner’s analysis of masculinity studies, in which she asks whether masculinity has “had its moment” (139).

Skinner continues to pose questions about the future of the field in Chapter 7. Entitled “Studying Gender and Queering the Picture,” this short chapter serves as a conclusion that does far more than summarize the current state of research. She analyzes the queer approach to medieval studies, which has been embraced more fervently by literary scholars than historians, and issues a call to those historians who are interested in gender to engage more forcefully with the output of queer theorists and to include, rather than exclude.

As a textbook, the work requires no prior knowledge from students and provides numerous aids for the undergraduate reader, such as highlighting glossary terms in bold and providing a glossary at the end of each chapter. The lists include terms necessary for understanding broad medieval history (*feudal, fama*), historiography (*foremothers, postcolonial*), and gender studies (*intersectionality, patriarchal equilibrium*). One might raise a minor quibble that a sole glossary at the end of the textbook would facilitate student comprehension. For example, Skinner raises the concept of intersectionality in multiple chapters,

but the student would need to recall that the term can be found in the glossary following Chapter 1.

My students generally prefer it when authors clearly define important terms at the outset, as Skinner does in Chapter 1. She indicates precisely how she will employ the terms “women’s history,” “feminist history,” and “gender history,” (14-15) while also demonstrating the potential for overlapping fluidity between the terms. Thankfully, Skinner almost entirely eschews jargon, despite a witty penultimate sentence which I suspect undergraduates might not realize was intended to be humorous until it was explained to them.

Of particular help for teachers are the “Source Hunt” segments at the end of each chapter. Based upon the chapter’s theme, Skinner asks specific questions and provides references to precise primary sources (or source collections) to help the students find the answers. Many of these are print-bound texts but Skinner also includes internet resources for students without access to strong medieval library materials.

Studying Gender in Medieval Europe is therefore recommended for anyone researching or teaching gender in the Middle Ages, although one hopes that all scholars would read this book. It would serve as a useful starting point for those teaching broader gender studies surveys by allowing instructors to cover the earlier period of history succinctly (if they wished) while also introducing students to historiographic trends. Alternatively, instructors may wish to keep this book as a reference point for themselves when constructing exercises for their classes. While one might not assign the text in entirety in a Western/World History or introductory medieval survey, using at least one of the chapters to help build lecture material and assigning students a task based on one of the source hunts could prove very fruitful indeed.

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