

Stories of Women in the Middle Ages, by Maria Teresa Brolis. Forewords by Franco Cardini and Giles Constable. Translated by Joyce Myerson. Montreal, CA: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018. Pp. 203. ISBN: 9780773554788.

First published in 2016 as *Storie de donne nel Medioevo* (Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna, Italy), this pithy collection from independent scholar Maria Teresa Brolis offers elegant sketches of sixteen medieval figures who together represent the diverse and meaningful ways women contributed to the European Middle Ages.

The first half of the collection ambitiously introduces eight women so famous that it would be difficult to add much to the volumes of existing research on them. What Brolis offers instead is a set of character sketches that study each woman using an explanatory epithet: Hildegard von Bingen is “the Genius,” Raingarde is “the Mother,” and Heloise is “the Love-Struck”; Eleanor of Aquitaine is labeled “the Queen,” Clare of Assisi “the Founder,” Bridget of Sweden “the Pilgrim,” Christine de Pisan “the Writer,” and Joan of Arc, so dedicated to her cause that she was burned at the stake for it, is “the Rebel.”

Brolis lightly integrates biography and occasional scholarship around these famous women, but her interest lies mainly in understanding character and the wish to “shed light on [their] mystery” (13–14). Hildegard, for example, she portrays as sensitive, ambitious, “both melancholy and tremendously tenacious” (15), in short an “enigma” both “special and unique” (13). With Raingarde, Brolis reads the portrait sketched by her son, Peter the Venerable, for “the peculiar and original characteristics” of “a restless female personality,” which she describes as impulsive, fervent, and emotional (25). With Heloise, Brolis considers the “human and specific” (33) elements of “one of the most legendary love stories of European literature” (29), meditating on Heloise’s intellect as well as her passions. While Eleanor’s entry is a swift citation of “the main milestones” (34) of her quite colorful career, with Clare, Brolis studies the challenges faced by this first woman founder of a religious order.

Brigid of Sweden earns the lengthiest entry in this gallery, the only one that departs from medieval sources, using a twentieth-century novel to examine Brigid’s life and attempting to tease “a perspective which aspires to be realistic” out of the “medieval feminine mystique” perpetuated by the hagiographers (50). As elsewhere, Brolis is curious about the “intensely human characteristics” (60) of these celebrated women, approaching them not as evidence but as people. She praises Christine de Pisan for her literary ambitions, her “intellectual and moral sensitivity” (70), and her “surprising lucidity and strong practical spirit”

(71). The portrait of Joan of Arc is likewise less interested in the well-rehearsed events of her life than in a personality of “tenacious strength and acute intelligence” (80). In her introduction, Brolis admits that she selected these eight women purely out of personal interest, and the freedom with which she treats these admittedly captivating portraits, in the tradition of Boccaccio’s *De Claris Mulieribus* (*Concerning Famous Women*, 1361–62), proves both informative and entertaining.

The eight entries in the second section of “ordinary women” are likewise selected by interest but reveal rich details about women’s lives in fourteenth-century Bergamo, at that time a mid-sized economic hub in Lombardy, northern Italy, with which Brolis is familiar through life and research. Here Brolis leaves well-trodden ground to excavate primary sources including notarial documents, wills, and the records of the Misericordia Confraternity, gleaning the scant biographical details of women otherwise invisible to “large-scale” history (3). Brolis uses these eight portraits to investigate an aspect of medieval life within which these women participated: for example, Flora is a businesswoman; Agnesina illustrates the “plight of the poor” (99); Ottebona illustrates the institution of marriage; and Grazia, women’s participation in religious life, the opportunities for which are varied. Gigliola provides an opportunity to discuss fashion; Bettina, medicine; Margherita, care-giving—a predominantly female career—and Belfiore, medieval travel.

The portraits are made particularly interesting by the granular details Brolis dwells upon, like the chickpeas a benefactress directs to be cooked to give out to the poor, the silver buttons on Gigliola’s blue dress, the household utensils a woman might list in her will. These “names and small stories,” Brolis hopes, will “open a window . . . onto the larger theme of daily life” (149), and again it is the lived experience that interests her, “their day-to-day reality” (168): women’s “emotional and love bonds” (113), their obligations toward their communities, their devotion to religious ideals. While this book in some respects is an exercise of imagination as much as historical research, Brolis’s conclusion, that “medieval women have positively contributed” (169) to the historical legacy, is one the bulk of medieval feminist scholarship equally supports.

From a feminist perspective, the volume’s unquestioned association of “female” and “feminine” with some distinct and essential aspect of womanhood—Brigid’s “true feminine preaching” (57) or Christine’s “genuine feminine dignity” (70), for example—employs a sex-based gender ideology that will strike many readers as false or incomplete. Curiously, the scholar introducing the Italian edition seems anxious *not* to position the volume as a feminist resource,

describing “feminist history” as a “fashionable” approach opposed to “history on the grand scale” (xiii) and emphasizing the roles various men played in the lives of the women under consideration. While the introduction gives due credit to the considerable expertise Brolis demonstrates with medieval Bergamesque history and her deep knowledge of archival documents of the period, as well as her skill at interpreting visual art and material artifacts, he fails to acknowledge that Brolis’s efforts to “investigate the female condition at the centre and on the periphery of the medieval world” (3) participate in a well-established and valid effort of feminist historians to enlarge and correct the biased perspective entrenched in so-called large-scale history.

The translation by Myerson delicately navigates a style that ranges from the curiously formal to the sometimes musical, maintaining throughout an informal and inviting tone. On the whole, Brolis’s collection, balancing breadth and specificity while leaving space for curiosity and human interest, will be most rewarding for those scholars wishing to know more about fourteenth-century Bergamo and for general readers seeking an introduction to medieval women that looks beyond the usual arcade of “famous women” to detect the “female presence” (127) less acknowledged but no less important.

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