



Medieval Feminist Forum

A Journal of Gender and Sexuality

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Gender, Science, and the Natural World:
Essays on Medieval Literature
from the 2020 Gender and
Medieval Studies Conference



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Medieval Women, Material Culture, and Power: Matilda Plantagenet and Her Sisters, by Jitske Jasperse. Gender and Power in the Premodern World. Leeds, UK: Arc Humanities Press, 2020. Pp. x + 134, 28 illustrations. ISBN: 9781641891455, 9781641891459.

Jitske Jasperse's engaging analysis of Matilda Plantagenet and her sisters Leonor and Joanna is a new contribution to the discipline-wide project working against the assumed exceptionalism of powerful medieval women. Jasperse thus joins Amy Livingstone, Heather Tanner, Laura Gathagan, Lois Huneycutt, Therese Martin, and others in the effort to recategorize medieval elite women with power and authority as the norm rather than the exception. In a related vein, Jasperse here expands arguments like that of Kimberly Benedict to see female patrons as collaborators and "makers" of culture rather than simply as disengaged bill-payers. This book is not a group biography of the sisters but rather an analysis of their royal and aristocratic feminine power as indicated through material culture.

Jasperse concentrates most of her work on Matilda (1156–1189), the oldest daughter of Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine. Matilda became the Duchess of Saxony when she married Henry the Lion in 1168 (the marriage was not consummated until she came of age). Since the textual record provides little information about Matilda, Jasperse focuses on material culture to reveal Matilda's "performance of power through objects" (120) as well as, to a lesser extent, that of her younger sisters (Leonor married the King of Castile in 1170 and Joanna married the King of Sicily in 1177). The marriages of all three of the sisters provided an opportunity for the "performance of power of royal daughters" (18) in the pageantry and treasure of their journeys to their husbands' domains. After dispersing them throughout Europe in chapter 1, Jasperse presents her chapters not chronologically but by media, a refreshing decision that permits her to make connections with other objects and other owners/patrons in compelling ways.

The chapter on coins and seals presents a nuanced and careful argument about the imagery of the ca. 1172 Henry-Matilda bracteate, analyzing the scepter in Matilda's hand to indicate that "when Henry departed on crusade in January 1172, [he was] leaving his wife, now older and firmly established as duchess, equipped to hold real authority in his stead if necessary" (40). Jasperse presents bracteates of Emperor Frederick Barbarossa as useful comparisons; she also analyzes

individual women's seals to show the ways that these very small, detailed images affirm their dynastic powers and affinities. In this and all chapters, Jasperse and ARC Humanities have provided excellent, full-color illustrations of these little-known objects.

The heart of the book is chapter 3, Jasperse's analyses of two books known to have been made for and used by Matilda and, to a lesser extent, her husband. Like the bracteate, the psalter and the gospel book present images of Matilda and Henry that emphasize "the unity and cooperation between the ducal couple who complemented each other" (61). The dedicatory poem in the gospel book lauds the couple, although most scholarship on the manuscript's patronage has focused on Henry and ignored Matilda, despite her prominence in both the poem and the donor portraits in the manuscripts. Jasperse corrects this historiographical error, showing how the books function as proclamations of the couple's ancestral status, both actual and aspirational; the striking coronation miniature of their gospel book shows Henry and Matilda as they "receive the crowns of eternal life under the gaze of their parents and grandparents" (86). Jasperse sees Matilda and Henry in a high-functioning partnership, executing their political strategies and dynastic aspirations throughout their marriage.

The final chapter focuses on donations of deluxe textiles from Matilda and her sisters to various religious institutions; we must rely much more frequently on lists of these donations than on actual extant fabrics. Jasperse analyzes Hildesheim Cathedral's list of "very beautiful ornaments" donated by Matilda as an expression of Matilda's performance of power; Henry is not mentioned as a donor of the opulent items. Some potentially similar items are extant, including a silk stole and maniple commissioned by Matilda's sister Leonor and now in a museum in León. Jasperse pushes back against the usual scholarly assumption that Leonor was the weaver of these items, arguing instead for a professional weaver/artist who worked the fibers and the tablets, even while she designates Leonor as a "maker"—an engaged patron who provided design instructions for these textiles that celebrated her status and power. As such, "Leonor consciously fabricated textiles that remembered her" (102), part of a standard process for elite medieval women to use textile art to advance their political and spiritual agendas.

Jasperse has thus provided us with new analyses of material objects little known in English-language scholarship; she also has advanced developing frameworks for the field's understanding of elite women's

history, including our interpretations of female patronage and power. I'm looking forward to the moment when this sort of analysis does not need to be scaffolded by rejections of the "exceptionalist assumption," and scholars like Jasperse can focus entirely on their exciting contributions to the field.

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Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern, edited by Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Klosowska. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021. Pp. viii + 393. ISBN: 9781501759505.

Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern offers compelling evidence that what we now call trans identity is not exclusively the product of a modern, post-Enlightenment consciousness. Rather, gender plurality *as a historically specific phenomenon* appears persistently in premodern texts. The strength of this collection resides in the variety of its approaches to the emerging field of trans studies. Each chapter provides a distinct view of trans figures in premodern literary and historical archives. Moreover, the contributors' vibrant accounts of gender plurality expose the inadequacy of our critical vocabularies for transness now. *Trans Historical* reveals how premodern texts shed new light on historically specific gender formations, and the collection makes rich contributions to trans studies today.

Gender plurality need not be named as such, and this volume observes how people modify or move away from their assigned sex without calling themselves trans. Many of the terms the collection uses—trans included—are the products of twentieth-century medical science, and they evidence the unsettled genealogies of trans studies. *Trans Historical* departs from past queer approaches that maintain the stability of binary gender across time to uncover same-sex desire. Furthermore, the editors suggest that explicitly foregrounding race redefines the priorities of trans studies, a field known for its whiteness. By attending to the writings of Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, and C. Riley Snorton, the collection recognizes how gender is intimately racialized. While an analysis of racialized gender has informed scholarship in more recent periods, this