



Medieval Feminist Forum

A Journal of Gender and Sexuality

VOLUME 58 • NUMBER 1 • SUMMER 2022

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



University Press | Kalamazoo
MIEVEAL INSTITUTE PUBLICATIONS
WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

MEDIEVAL FEMINIST FORUM
A Journal of Gender and Sexuality

VOLUME 58 • NUMBER 1 • SUMMER 2022

GENERAL AND MANAGING EDITOR

Jennifer C. Edwards
History, Manhattan College

EDITORIAL BOARD

Jessica Barr
*Comparative Literature,
University of Massachusetts
Amherst*

Liz Herbert McAvoy
English, Swansea University

Anne Matter
*Religious Studies,
University of Pennsylvania*

Lynn Shutters
English, Colorado State University

SUBSIDIA EDITOR

Emily Francomano
*Spanish and Portuguese,
Georgetown University*

BOOK REVIEW EDITOR

Melissa Ridley Elmes
English, Lindenwood University

DESIGN & TYPESETTING

Linda K. Judy
*Western Michigan University
Medieval Institute Publications*

SOCIETY FOR MEDIEVAL FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP OFFICERS

PRESIDENT: Roberta Magnani (2022–2023)
English, Swansea University

VICE PRESIDENT: Nicole Lopez-Jantzen (2022–2023)
History, CUNY—Borough of Manhattan Community College

SECRETARY: Kathryn Maude (2020–2023)
Women and Gender Studies, American University of Beirut

TREASURER & MEMBERSHIP COORDINATOR: Amy Vines (2018–2024)
English, UNC—Greensboro

ADVISORY BOARD

Michelle Armstrong-Partida (2021–2023), Lucy C. Barnhouse (2022–2024), Daisy Black (2022–2024), Jill Clements (2021–2023), Carissa Harris (2021–2024), Boyda Johnstone (2021–2024), Laura Kalas (2021–2024), Amy Livingstone (2022–2024), Kathryn Maude (2019–2021), Sara McDougall (2022–2024), Amanda McVitty (2021–2024), Dana Oswald (2021–2023), Alexandra Verini (2021–2023) Graduate Student Representatives: Kersti Francis (2020–2022), Thelma Trujillo (2021–2023), Christine James Zepeda (2022–2024)

Medieval Feminist Forum is indexed in the MLA International Bibliography, published by the Modern Language Association, 26 Broadway, 3rd floor; New York, NY 10004; <http://www.mla.org> and *Feminae: Medieval Women and Gender Index*, <https://inpress.lib.uiowa.edu/feminae/WhatIsFeminae.aspx>

Medieval Feminist Forum, e-issn 2151-6073
<https://doi.org/10.32773/LBCI8319>

Copyright © 2022 by the Board of Trustees of Western Michigan University
Medieval Institute Publications is a program of
The Medieval Institute, College of Arts and Sciences



WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

≈
CONTENTS

FOREWORD	7
<i>Laura Kalas</i>	
INTRODUCTION: “GENDER, SCIENCE, AND THE NATURAL WORLD”: ESSAYS ON MEDIEVAL LITERATURE FROM THE 2020 GENDER AND MEDIEVAL STUDIES CONFERENCE	10
<i>Linda E. Mitchell and Daisy E. Black</i>	
≈ ARTICLES	
FEMALE MASCULINITY IN THE EMBODIED <i>BEOWULF</i> WETLANDS: A NEW, RADICAL, ECOFEMINIST APPROACH	16
<i>Teresa Pilgrim</i>	
THEREBY HANGS A TAIL: CREATION AND PROCREATION IN MEDIEVAL WEREWOLF ROMANCES	45
<i>Victoria Blud</i>	
ABDUCTION AND FEMININE EXPRESSION IN <i>SIR ORFEO</i>	67
<i>Ruth Worgan</i>	
BEING THE BIGGER RAM: ARABLE VS PASTORAL MASCULINITIES IN THE TOWNELEY <i>MACTACIO ABEL</i>	84
<i>Daisy E. Black</i>	
<i>MAY MEDICA</i> : DIVINE HEALING AND THE GARDEN IN “THE MERCHANTS TALE”	106
<i>Maria Zygianni</i>	
“LET HIM WALK WITH YOU”: TELLING STORIES ABOUT FIFTEENTH-CENTURY MEN, AND THE WOMEN THEY LEFT BEHIND	128
<i>Rachel E. Moss</i>	

≈ RETROSPECTIVES

- LESSONS LEARNED—THEY'RE NOT JUST FOR ACADEMIA, BUT FOR LIFE 146
Linda E. Mitchell

≈ BOOK REVIEWS

- Female Desire in Chaucer's "Legend of Good Women" and Medieval English Romance* 152
Lucy M. Allen-Goss.
reviewed by Suzanne M. Edwards
- Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages* 155
Roland Betancourt
reviewed by C. Libby
- The Matter of Virtue: Women's Ethical Action from Chaucer to Shakespeare* 158
Holly A. Crocker
reviewed by Masha Raskolnikov
- Christine de Pizan, "The God of Love's Letter" and "The Tale of the Rose"* 161
Thelma S. Fenster and Christine Reno, eds. and trans.
reviewed by Roberta L. Krueger
- Medieval Women, Material Culture, and Power: Matilda Plantagenet and Her Sisters* 164
Jitske Jasperse
reviewed by Mary Dockray-Miller
- Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern* 166
Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Klosowska, eds.
reviewed by Nat Rivkin

Women Intellectuals and Leaders in the Middle Ages 169
Katherine Kerby-Fulton, Katie Ann-Marie Bugyis,
and John Van Engen, eds.
reviewed by Linda E. Mitchell

≈ NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS 173

Sojourner Truth's 1851 "Ain't I a Woman?" speech as a contribution to trans studies, LaFleur suggests that "there is not, and probably will never be, consensus regarding what trans history is or means" (374).

Taken together, these essays provide invaluable resources for scholarship that recognizes the resonances of gender plurality across time as well as its historical contingencies. *Trans Historical* deviates from existing queer and feminist scholarship by centering figures that have traditionally featured at the edges of critical analysis. It also expands the current picture of trans identity in premodern periods beyond recognized locations of gender plurality. In a moment of increasing anti-trans fervor across the globe, *Trans Historical* provides a vaster set of possibilities for gender plurality than is currently available in trans histories that focus on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Nat Rivkin

<https://doi.org/10.32773/ORNQ6884>

Women Intellectuals and Leaders in the Middle Ages, edited by Katherine Kerby-Fulton, Katie Ann-Marie Bugyis, and John Van Engen. Woodbridge, Suffolk and Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 2020. Pp. 438. ISBN: 9781843845553.

It is unusual in this era of short-ish and digitized books to read one that could be considered a "tome." Divided into six discrete sections, plus a lengthy Introduction (by Kerby-Fulton) and brief Epilogue (by Van Engen), this weighty volume contains twenty-one articles, plus six section prefaces, each written by leading scholars in each sub-field. The sheer length and complexity of the volume precludes talking about each article individually, so I will be focusing my remarks more generally and looking at the essays contained in each section as a group.

To begin: this is an excellent, even a superb, volume of essays, if organizationally a little odd. It has something for everyone inclined toward feminist (re)readings of medieval texts of all kinds. There are some less-wonderful essays, which is inevitable in a collection this long and varied, but I was impressed, even delighted, by the inventiveness, creativity, and challenges I found in the volume. Originating from a 2015 conference at the University of Notre Dame's Medieval Institute, each article is relatively brief but tightly packed: this is not an introductory essay collection, and it is not an easy read. Kerby-Fulton,

in her Introduction, presents the volume as one that is diverse and interdisciplinary. I admit that, other than Part I, which was devoted to Jewish and Muslim women, I did not find the rest of the volume to be all that diverse. Even as the approaches challenge scholarly norms, the “usual” geographical regions—England, France, the Rhineland, and Low Countries—dominate the remainder of the volume. Indeed, Part IV, titled “Multidisciplinary Approaches to Gender, Patronage, and Power,” is devoted to only one location—England—with two of the three articles focusing on the thirteenth century. The absence of any scholarship on central and eastern Europe, the Crusader States, the Iberian peninsula, Scandinavia, the Islamic world, and the Byzantine Empire, or indeed on any populations other than Western Christian (excepting the three articles in Part I) does rather bely Kerby-Fulton’s claims of diversity. There is, nevertheless, a lot to like about these essays despite the over-promising of the Introduction.

Kerby-Fulton’s Introduction is in fact one of the best essays in the volume—and one that would work well in classroom contexts—because it operates as a manifesto of sorts, embodied in the title “Taking Early Women Intellectuals and Leaders Seriously.” It aligns with the work of other scholars (such as myself) who dispute that women who were successful in doing “stuff,” as well as in suffering things being done *to* them, were somehow “exceptional” or “unusual.” Kerby-Fulton calls out the people who persist in claiming that female action and effectiveness was rare—and therefore able to be ignored or sidelined in standard historical or literary scholarship. Kerby-Fulton acknowledges the sheer weight of evidence showing that traditional assumptions and presumptions about the past and about the female lived experience are fundamentally flawed and must be reassessed. She admits—as we all must—that misogyny and patriarchy limited (and continue to limit) opportunities for women, but that does not mean that medieval women did not achieve success. This is particularly the case with respect to arguments about women’s education, knowledge-bases, ability to operate as actors in public spaces, and understanding of Latin in the Middle Ages.

As mentioned above, the three articles in Part I, “Scholarship, Law, and Poetry: Jewish and Muslim Women,” focus on non-Christian women in the West, two on Islamic women as scholars and poets and one on Anglo-Jewish women. These articles are welcome additions to an otherwise homogeneous collection, but they serve to tantalize more than satisfy. I really wanted to learn more, especially since there are so few pieces written in English about women outside the medieval Christian mainstream. After reading the entire collection, I wondered

why these essays were roped off from the others, as the topics could have been incorporated into other subsections where the issues raised were similar or parallel to the ones in these pieces. If diversity was a goal, inclusion of these essays with their Christian sisters would have made that more obvious.

Part II, "Authorship, Intellectual Life, and the Professional Writer," travels more familiar paths by looking at better-known authors—Agnes of Harcourt, Catherine of Siena, Christine de Pizan, and Mary Ward—but the authors of the four articles discuss works that are either of contested authorship or are less well studied. The essay about Mary Ward, by Gemma Simmonds, might seem out of place in this collection, as Ward is a seventeenth-century figure, but Simmonds places her intellectual development firmly in medieval Catholic liturgical culture and I agree: she fits. The three essays in Part III, "Recovering Lost Women's Authorship," focus on female authors who are not well known or are unknown, but the issues arising from the texts, such as the knowledge base of the authors and the lack of study of their work, are similar to those of the known authors of the Part II articles. An exception, perhaps, is the essay by Jocelyn Wogan-Brown on the possibility that the works attributed to Marie de France were actually created by multiple un-named authors. Here we have a group of well-studied texts that are lumped together under one authorial name in ways Wogan-Brown finds limiting, instead of the usual problems of namelessness of female-authored texts.

The articles in Part IV, "Multidisciplinary Approaches to Gender, Patronage, and Power," seem connected to each other only by their geographical specificity. The first essay discusses the articulation of nonbinary gendering in the Old English version of the story of St. Perpetua, an Early Christian martyr. It shares this subsection with two essays about thirteenth-century subjects—themselves unconnected to each other, as one focuses on a manuscript compiled for Joan Tateshall, a late thirteenth-century noblewoman, as a mechanism of self-creation and auto-education, and the other is a brief study of London widows and the administration of their estates taken from the hustings rolls of the London courts. Each article is useful in its own way—the essay on the Tateshall Miscellany, by Anna Siebach-Larsen, is especially interesting—but the grouping reminded me of one of those Medieval Congress sessions in which the "leftovers" get jumbled together for no intellectually purposeful reason.

The last two subsections, Part V, "Religious Women in Leadership, Ministry, and Latin Ecclesiastical Culture," and Part VI, "Out

of the Shadows: Laywomen in Communal Leadership” are clearly interconnected. It is here that the issues of women as intellectuals—especially in Latin—and as leaders combine in ways that suggest these might have been the original thematic impetuses for the conference itself. The division of the essays (five in Part V and three in Part VI) is made between those centering on professional religious women and others looking at laywomen as leaders in religious movements. This seems a somewhat artificial separation, but Part V is focused mostly on issues of education of female religious and challenges assumptions that women did not learn to read and write Latin, and that their theological writings were simplistic or lacking intellectual sophistication. Part VI’s articles are not connected to each other thematically. Maureen C. Miller’s piece—the only article on Italy—is a study of connections between laywomen as patrons and reformed Benedictine houses in Florence during the upheavals of the Gregorian reforms. Rachel Koopmans’s article focuses on Englishwomen as patrons of miracle cults as depicted in stained glass windows. The final article, by Barbara Newman, analyzes the influence of the laywoman Mechthild of Magdeburg over the nuns of Helfta, in particular Mechthild of Hackeborn. Although clearly different thematically, all the pieces speak to the power wielded by and influence of laywomen on both the establishment of religious spaces and places and what happened in them.

John Van Engen’s brief “Epilogue” summarizing the purposes behind the volume ends with a plea for further challenges to stereotypical presentations of women and new narratives: “If we fall into the trap of viewing women only through the lens of certain medieval stereotypes ... we perpetuate as history certain attitudes or stances which only partially reflected actualities on the ground” (401). While not perfect, the essays in this collection open up avenues for discussion, debate, and exploration that continue to be vitally necessary as we reassess the roles, position, and contributions of women to medieval culture—and after. I do not recommend thinking of this volume as a conceptually integrated whole, because the articles themselves are not fully interconnected and the ways in which the volume is organized is a little too random. However, each individual article operates as a place of challenge and contemplation, which could lead to other scholarly discourses. And that is fine with me.

Linda E. Mitchell

<https://doi.org/10.32773/PRAN4022>