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CONTENTS

~ ARTICLES

Envisioning a World without Rape in Late Fifteenth-Century Dream Narratives 7
Boyda Johnstone

Selecting Authority: The Compiler and Female Mystical Sources in Speculum devotorum 40
Caitlin J. Branum Thrash

“Oiez mon aventure”: Cuer d’Acier’s Nonbinary Gender in Perceforest 75
Brooke Heidenreich Findley

Holy Matter Making Holy Meaning: Fashioning Memory, Community, and Dissimilar Similitude in Middle Dutch Sister-Books and The Book of Margery Kempe 112
Godelinde Gertrude Perk

Female Reception of Stained Glass Images of St. Anne in Late Medieval York: Women, Mothers, and Wives (2021 Gender and Medieval Studies Graduate Student Prize Essay) 150
Susanna Wyse Jackson

~ BOOK REVIEWS

Book of the Body Politic by Christine de Pizan 169
Angus J. Kennedy, ed. and trans.
Reviewed by Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski

Christine de Pizan: Life, Work, Legacy 172
Charlotte Cooper-Davis
Reviewed by S.C. Kaplan
Gender and Voice in Medieval French Literature and Song
Rachel May Golden and Katherine Kong, eds.
Reviewed by Joseph P. Derosier

Obscene Pedagogies: Transgressive Talk and Sexual Education in Late Medieval Britain
Carissa Harris
Reviewed by Jenny C. Bledsoe

Studying Gender in Medieval Europe: Historical Approaches
Patricia Skinner
Reviewed by Jessica E. Zisa
traditions within Middle English literature. Cornell University Press now offers the book in several formats, with the e-book and paperback being very affordable options for classes.

Jenny C. Bledsoe
Northeastern State University
https://doi.org/10.32773/EOHC3054


In slightly under 180 pages, Patricia Skinner makes a very salient argument for why gender history is history and why gender matters to medieval studies and the postmodern academy more broadly. This textbook not only provides a critical survey of twentieth- and twenty-first-century themes and methods used to study gender in medieval Europe but clearly traces how studies of gender have been applied to the field of medieval studies and the wealth of knowledge these studies have contributed to the field more broadly. As this introductory text makes evident, gender should not be treated as a minoritized subject in medieval studies and the medieval period should not be neglected by the field of gender studies.

Each of the book’s seven chapters is set up as a guide to the study of gender in the Middle Ages and is organized around how a particular theme has been studied for over a century. Skinner follows a roughly chronological order within each chapter but makes clear that the book itself is not meant to be a history of gender. Chapter 1, “Setting the Scene,” provides a useful overview of key points in modern feminist movements and the theoretical discourse that helped shape and give rise to the study of women’s history and gender history through a variety of approaches. She casts light on the unseen labor of women in the history of medieval studies as a field, while also pointing to how gendered patterns of neglect and exclusion are not limited to the medieval past. In chapter 2, “Why ‘Medieval’ Matters to Gender History,” she goes on to point to scholarship that attempts to address and restore the medieval in histories of women and histories of gender, while also addressing how the very Eurocentric organization of disciplines around national boundaries complicates how gender historians approach the history of gender and the medieval period more broadly. Here Skinner...
contextualizes the scope of the book as a textbook about studying the idea of gender as it applies to medieval European source material, while bringing attention to the global diversity of gender history and historical periodization.

Building upon the historiographical foundation of the first two chapters, the subsequent chapters focus on gendered approaches to themes within medieval studies related to the body, law, as well as literacy and educational access. Chapter 3, “Bodies: Sex, Sexuality and Healthcare,” introduces premodern ideas about the body in terms of the sexuality, bodily humors, reproduction, health, and self-regulation, while pointing to foundational scholarship and more recent interdisciplinary fields of research on medieval medical and scientific texts. Chapter 4, “Rules: Patriarchy, the Law and Gendered Behavior,” provides insight into the how laws, rules, and customs in the Middle Ages were formed as patriarchal structures used to regulate gendered social behavior for both men and women. Skinner suggests studying medieval law is useful for the study of medieval gender because it reflects “a wider social network of relations based on power, property, and kin” (88). Chapter 5, “Voices: Authority and Suppression,” goes on to addresses the struggle medieval historians face with limited source material deemed to be produced by “authentically female voices” (97). The chapter traces the ways scholars work through these archival challenges to form new disciplinary methods to study authorship when women’s voices have been historically silenced, lost, or erased from the historical record over the centuries.

Chapters 6 and 7 turn the reader’s attention to an overview of how the study of gender in the Middle Ages has continued to expand in recent years. Chapter 6, “Identities: Categories and Their Complications,” provides a sketch of how gender historians debate issues of exceptionalism, intersectionality, religion, race, and ethnicity. Skinner outlines gender historian debates about whether masculinity studies reinforce a masculinist view and suggests that “the unease over masculinity seems to lie in misinterpretations that maintain a stark binary opposition” (139). While Skinner does not directly engage the interventions made by transgender studies to the binary she points to here, chapters 6 and 7 could be useful for introducing students to recent transgender scholarship in medieval studies. Skinner’s final chapter, “Studying Gender and Queering the Picture,” gestures toward issues of diversity and inclusion that continue to pervade the field of medieval studies and a postfeminist academy. Skinner concludes by encouraging historians to fully recognize queer approaches to the medieval as
a critical method for forming new ways of thinking beyond the binaries that medieval studies so often deal in.

While Skinner makes clear in chapter 1 that this book is written for the beginner in history, she offers readers of all educational levels critical insight into what studying gender in medieval studies has looked like over time. What makes this book particularly ideal for the undergraduate classroom is that it helps equip students to enter the academic conversation. Skinner explains that the book was itself born out of an undergraduate course taught over a period of twelve years, and as a result, the chapter design reflects an inquiry-based pedagogical approach that speaks to readers with varying degrees of prior knowledge. This approach appears in the conclusion of each chapter with the “Source Hunt,” which pairs samples of medieval sources with finely tailored questions prompting further analytic thought and reading. The “Source Hunt” is followed by a brief bibliography of sources discussed in that chapter, recommended future readings, and a glossary that defines academic and discipline-specific concepts used in that chapter. These combined sections prompt the undergraduate student to engage in a more mindful interdisciplinary reading praxis. I suggest pairing readings from Skinner’s text with recent scholarship from the Medieval Feminist Forum’s 2019 issue Visions of Medieval Trans Feminism, edited by Dorothy Kim and M. W. Bychowski, as well as David Sterling Brown’s “‘Hood Feminism’: Whiteness and Segregated (Premodern) Scholarly Discourse in the Post-Postracial Era,” which appeared in the Literature Compass 2021 special issue Race before Race: Premodern Critical Race Studies. In this way, Studying Gender in Medieval Europe can serve as a critical pedagogical resource for helping students enter these ongoing conversations with a firm foundation of knowledge to build upon.

Jessica E. Zisa
University of California, Santa Barbara
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