MARY C. ERLER AND MARYANNE KOWALESKI, EDS. *GENDERING THE MASTER NARRATIVE: WOMEN AND POWER IN THE MIDDLE AGES.* CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2003. PP. VIII, 269.

If you teach medieval European history, women's history, or gender history, buy this book. Make your graduate students buy it and read all of it and assign essays from it to your undergraduates. If you're teaching historiography, assign this book in conjunction with some of the other feminist historiographical classics, especially the 1988 volume, *Women and Power in the Middle Ages,* edited by the same scholars and born of the same conference as this one. This new collection of short, fine articles offers a methodological sampler, a collective discussion of recent issues in women's history, and a chance for some of our best medievalists to revisit the Frauenfrage(n) that have plagued us for so many years and too many printed pages.

A concise introduction by Erler and Kowaleski, along with Jo Ann McNamara's remarkable essay, remind readers of how much we've discovered since 1989. We have learned how to use social science to study power, agency, family, and patriarchy. We have taken the linguistic turn and finally figured out Foucault and Butler. We realize, now, that we have been puzzling over the wrong questions and expecting the wrong sorts of answers; instead of asking whether women were victims or agents, suffering victimization or enjoying a golden age at any given historical moment, we need to probe the multiple narratives of gender that coexisted and overlapped within the texts and other evidence left to us.

McNamara's essay directly engages her earlier piece, written with Suzanne Wemple, in the 1988 volume. She applies fifteen years' worth of collective wisdom to their previous hypothesis that women derived power from their roles within early medieval kin-groups. She and Wemple had guessed what later work by David Herlihy, Gayle Rubin, Diane Owen Hughes, and Georges Duby actually helped to prove. Her instincts were right, according to McNamara, but her emphases and chronology were wrong: rather than haplessly tumbling into positions of authority during times of political disorder, women actively sought political and economic power via the partnership of marriage. Women suffered no abrupt gains or declines at the transition to the later Middle Ages, but worked creatively with men over a millennium and more to create what we now call European civilization.

Dyan Elliott and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne offer their usual first-rate work on literate religious women. Elliott describes how

women of the thirteenth century, especially beguines, reinvented themselves as professional penitents in an intimate relationship with their confessors. They took the blame for sin but they also made men listen to their religious revelations in a mutually binding system that at once empowered women yet limited their liturgical influence. Wogan-Browne offers a series of quietly brilliant discoveries about religious women's agendas and how women networked to achieve them. Here, she studies the women of French-speaking Anglo-Norman convents who commissioned of female-authored lives of indigenous saints. The nuns selected their hagiography to suit their political identities and liturgical tastes.

Other essays in the volume take up the same theme of reassessing historical categories, definitions, and timelines. Wendy Larson suggests the simple tactic of reading the material remains of popular cult practice on the same conceptual pages as written hagiographic texts, so that neither assumes the historiographical role of dominant discourse for any particular cult. She shows us exactly how to do this with her explication of dragon imagery in the cult of St. Margaret. Pamela Sheingorn also refocuses the lens of art history on the image of St. Anne teaching the Blessed Virgin to read. Instead of assuming that Anne, Mary, and Jesus symbolized the Incarnation, what about investigating the books that Anne and Mary are always holding and reading while they ignore the baby?

Another significant theme linking the essays of this volume is what the editors call the push-and-pull of women's power and status in the Middle Ages. For every statement of women's authority or disenfranchisement, the contributors offer complexities and qualifications. Nicholas Watson tries to explain the surprising popularity of the seemingly misogynist parts of *Ancrene Wisse*, the thirteenth-century guide for anchoresses. The text's tough love for female hermits chastised them as weak women but directly addressed them as heroes who bravely maintained the Christian desert within their own hearts. Barbara Newman analyzes the figure of Dame Nature in medieval French literature, complicating the tension of feminine Nature and masculine Culture by revealing the many Natures of medieval thought. Katherine French shows how involvement in parish functions helped Englishwomen achieve social visibility, but also reinforced traditional gender roles. Three articles on women's uses of space by Holly Hurlbut, Sarah Rees Jones, and Felicity Riddy help to gray the black-and-white of private feminine space and public, politicized, masculine space assumed by most social scientists. How gendered were workspaces in late medieval urban centers? How did other conditions of habitus inflect gendered spaces?

The only problem with this book lies in its very collectivity. Except for the introductory essay, which is fairly narrowly aimed at summarizing the articles, and McNamara's essay, the volume consists of case studies. The essays complicate synthetic histories that track highly visible women, or that reduce women to victims of history and historiography, but the book offers no sustained, coherent, critical voice. There is no radical or innovative feminist solution to the Question of Women here. Instead, the essays read like the vigorous, empowering chatter of a consciousness-raising session. Together, they suggest that we trust no single definition, periodizing scheme, or method to find feminist answers to history. Our main hope of coherence is the gnomic wisdom offered by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne: when you peek past the master narratives of history, literature, and art, "women are always there."

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