

Middle-Aged Women in the Middle Ages. Edited by Sue Niebrzydowski. Gender in the Middle Ages. Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2011. Pp. xiv+153. ISBN: 9781843842828.

This slim volume of eight short essays and an introduction is one of the first to focus on women specifically identified as “middle aged”: not a designation that can be claimed as medieval but one that has more modern connotations. The editor and authors made a clear decision to move away from the “maiden-wife-widow” triad more typically found in medieval texts and to embrace a category based on biological and linear age. Niebrzydowski in her introduction specifies middle age as the period between roughly the ages of forty and sixty, the time in which most women who have survived the rigors of childbirth and fertility move into menopause and, often, widowhood. The age of forty is also a common gateway for both women and men, a time when radical life changes can happen. Margery Kempe, for example, was forty when she began her career as professional pilgrim and general troublemaker.

The editor begins with the premise—repeated in several of the essays—that the classical and medieval systems that number the “ages of man” between three and seven can be translated to woman as well, even though virtually no reference to female life stages occurs in the texts that categorize these life stages. Indeed, the period associated with men aged forty to sixty—virile adulthood—is described as one of tremendous energy and action, while women of the same age are perceived as old, dried up husks who are not of any great interest, “bestrav” in the evocative words of Geoffrey Chaucer in *The Merchant’s Tale*, as discussed by Sue Niebrzydowski in her introduction. And herein lies one of the conundrums of the book: how to make this category of middle-aged women a useful one?

The eight essays deal with eight different aspects of presenting middle-aged women. It is hard to categorize the approaches as specifically historical, literary, or even New Historicist, as most of the sources are literary but the methodologies employed are not specifically those of current feminist literary criticism. Four of the essays focus on older women and books (Jane Geddes, Carol Meale, Niebrzydowski, and Raluca Radulescu): collecting them, writing them, or being presented with them. The rest of the essays look at older women in other contexts: in late medieval urban communities (Anneke Mulder-Bakker); in Welsh legends and legal texts (Sara Roberts); in romance literature (Corinne Saunders); and as iconically presented in the Anglo-Saxon *Life of St Mary of Egypt* (Diane Watt and Clare Lees).

Although this volume does not claim to be authoritative, I nonetheless found it missing some key elements that might have been addressed had the authors engaged in a truly discursive (dare I say feminist?) process with each other and with their topics. The most significant issue identified by Niebrzydowski in her introduction has to do with establishing a putative middle age for medieval women, yet she is the only author in the collection to remain consistent in her conception of middle age. This is not an unproblematic definition, however, as lifecycle, social status, time, place, even standard notions of average life span are largely glossed over. I would have thought that this could have been a perfect opportunity to discuss middle age (as well as youth and old age) as gendered categories to a much larger extent. Niebrzydowski does mention this in her discussion of the snide “bene-straw” remark, but instead of using this as a fruitful way of unpacking medieval attitudes about women and aging, she falls back upon modern categories as reasonable to impose on the Middle Ages.

It is not as if such a discourse would operate in a vacuum. Social and medical historians debate quite strenuously about the effects of diet, lifestyle, and class on the biological development of girls and women. Although the canonical age of marriage for girls (between twelve and fourteen) is usually assumed to relate to the onset of menses, it is hard to connect that to either biological realities, especially malnourished peasant and urban working-class girls, or to notions of adulthood in girls and women. Although we do know that more women lived into their fifties and sixties than is assumed by life tables that do not account for infant mortality, how “old” was a fifty-year-old woman considered to be in the Middle Ages? And if age can be considered a gendered category, how did this affect not just how men saw women, but how women saw themselves? It might have been useful to employ sociological or anthropological analyses to unpack this issue.

The authors in the collection also did not adhere strictly to the parameters of middle age laid out in the introduction, loosening and diluting the category even further. Some seem to equate widowhood with middle age in ways that are not accurate, or they stretch the concept of “middle age” to encompass women in their early thirties to those in their late seventies. The authors thus reveal that it is almost impossible to discuss middle-aged women *qua* middle age. Medieval sources—especially legal and literary texts—do not exhibit any great interest in women “of a certain age” or else viewed them with hostility: they were dangerously magical (evil stepmothers and women such as Morgan le Fay) or dangerously sexual (medieval studies’ favorite middle-aged woman, Alysoun the Wife of Bath). A more thorough attention to how the parameters of middle

age might be laid out for medieval women would have benefited these authors and would have done a lot to keep their essays focused on the topic at hand.

This leads me to my second criticism: the dearth of sophisticated feminist approaches to the topic in the volume. The only overtly theory-oriented article is that of Watt and Lees on the Old English *Life of St Mary of Egypt*, in which they discuss the relationships in the texts—between Mary and Zosimus, between Mary and her imagined companion the Virgin Mary, and between Zosimus and his male, homosocial community—as a series of queered couplings. Niebrzydowski's diagramming of language in *The Book of Margery Kempe* employed an interesting methodology, but she did not carry the analysis beyond making an argument that women became bolder speakers as they aged, which she equated with menopause loosening the restraints on women's tongues—a common enough statement heard even today, but one that could have been looked at more creatively as a passage from one kind of gender identification to another. In large part the rest of the articles do not present a stated feminist goal or dedication to any particular feminist theoretical position. I consider this to be an unfortunate lacuna in the volume in general, especially since the authors are trying to establish a category—middle-aged women—that did not exist in the Middle Ages and that is neither uncontroversial nor neutral even today. It is odd to see scholars adopting an essentially Aristotelian category as one appropriate to discussing women, even knowing that Aristotle's interest in the female was more or less nugatory. Indeed, a fruitful discussion of this one issue, which was introduced by Niebrzydowski, could have been carried throughout the volume, but even she didn't try to establish a gendered category of middle age that would have been useful as the foundation for discourse among all the authors.

Even so, as the first attempt to locate women's experiences within an age-focused, rather than marriage-status-focused, context, this collection of essays has value and could spark more creative and, indeed, more feminist work on the topic.

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