
Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe*. (Middle Ages series.) Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. Pp. 1, 246.

Despite the publication of a number of insightful and imaginative collections of articles since the late 1990s, the study of medieval masculinity is still very much a nascent field of inquiry, sorely in need of research.¹ The history of masculinity, initially treated with some reticence, has since been embraced by feminist scholars like Karras, who concludes that to dismiss “men as wielders of patriarchal oppression and unworthy of feminist examination is as reductive as dismissing women as unimportant historical actors” (19). This reversal in perspective has led to a much more nuanced and perceptive approach to the study of both genders; and yet, Karras’s most recent contribution to the field of masculinity studies is the first broad survey of the subject to be published for the medieval era. What is more, by focusing her work on male adolescence, Karras isolates masculinity at its most critical point in development, unswayed by the otherwise compromising or transformative experiences of marriage and householding. Instructors who teach courses on the construction of gender identity in the Middle Ages will heave a collective sigh of relief when this volume of “The Middle Ages Series” reaches their desks. Drawing on a broad array of sources from across Europe, Karras is capable of teasing out a European-wide sense of masculinity in three different settings (knight-hood, the university, and the craftsman’s workshop), while at the same time highlighting regional variation and changes over time. Such a wide-ranging approach, coupled with plentiful research into each of these three historical contexts and an easy readability, makes this an ideal textbook for the subject. This book, however, may disappoint avid readers of Karras’s past scholarship. Much of the substance and creativity of her arguments relating to the creation of gender identity among young knights and scholars has appeared previously in print.² While there is certainly great merit in bringing this work together under one cover, enthusiasts of her work may find it difficult to sustain their interest until Karras presents her newest research in Chapter Four (“Masters and Men: Independence and Urban Craft Workers”).

Karras begins with the premise that there is no one medieval masculinity. For men, gender identity is influenced and created by not only one’s station in life, but also by one’s work environment and relationship with women and other men. Thus, “[p]eople of the same social group can have conflicting ideas about what a man should be—indeed, one individual can have conflicting ideas. Not only do societies adopt particular models and ideals of manhood under particular historical conditions, but individual men may also adopt them in particular situations in everyday life” (8). The thread weaving these distinct varieties of medieval masculinities together is an over-riding sense of the necessity of proving one’s self superior to other men.

In the realm of knighthood, young men defined themselves against both women and other men. Most significantly, a knight’s success in love and his ability to appear attractive to women were understood as measures of his

achievement as a knight. This fixation on a ritualized (as opposed to actual) submission to the power of women inspired a feminization of knighthood during the fifteenth century, in which knights adopted genteel table manners and behavior in an effort to render themselves more pleasing to women. These changes did not undermine their masculinity in the eyes of other men, however, provided that they continued to demonstrate their prowess in jousts and tournaments. The masculinity of knighthood was very much defined by aggression, but of a specific breed. As Karras points out, the individualistic and heroic feats of the greatest knight were least admired by his comrades on the battlefield, who might well lose their lives making him look more glorious.

While knights founded their identities very much on the presence of women, scholars, on the other hand, defined themselves by the absence of women. Adolescence in the university setting provided few opportunities for contact with women other than prostitutes or servants (in other words, women of poor or suspect reputation). Thus, Karras believes that the university setting, whether intentionally or not, fostered the ideology of women as mere sexual outlets. Scholars also identified themselves in terms of opposition, but here the more pertinent opposite is the beast. Education acts as a process of civilization, transforming the student from animal to rational man—the uneducated man (like all women), then, has more in common with a goat than a scholar. Astutely, Karras notes that university students were the most likely to feel the pressures of competing masculinities. As many scholars belonged also to the knightly class, students endured many admonishments to dress and behave like scholars, not knights, and to refrain from carrying weapons. Moreover, despite the clerical setting, most students seem to have shared many of the more typical characteristics of medieval homosocial bonding: drinking to excess, enjoying bawdy songs, and making joint pilgrimages to the local stew.

Masculinity in the craft workshop had the least to do with women. To a craft worker, mature masculinity was synonymous with mastership. Nonetheless, the economy did little to accommodate this vision of gender identity. While all apprentices were trained to aspire to this position, few were able to attain it, creating an unusual situation in which most craft workers (apprentices, journeymen) suffered a prolonged (and sometimes unending) adolescence. Not surprisingly, Karras attributes certain instances of urban unrest to the frustration and hostility engendered by this experience of stunted masculinity. Moreover, all of this had an important impact on women. First, it also prevented many women from attaining mature femininity (usually journeymen were not permitted to marry). Second and perhaps more crucially, using late medieval Dijon as an example, Karras notes that in a frantic effort to participate in the paternalism of craft masculinity and show themselves to be “real men,” some journeymen took it upon themselves to police women who did not conform to contemporary standards of sexuality, using rape as a tool of social control. While tentative, Karras’s explanation demonstrates the need for a more responsive study of gender relations in the towns at the end of the medieval period.

Unfortunately, the particularly sensitive handling of this material only highlights the book's weakness. As Karras freely admits, this vision of the formations of medieval masculinity does not take into account the vast majority of society, that is, the agricultural workers (peasants or wage laborers) of the late medieval period. Although such a project would be infinitely more difficult because of the paucity of documentation, Karras' fine work makes the matter seem even more pressing. Nevertheless, scholars and students alike will delight in this intuitive and provocative journey into the history of masculinity formation.

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¹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (eds), *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1997); D.M. Hadley (ed.), *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (New York, 1999); Jacqueline Murray (ed.), *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West* (New York, 1999).

² Ruth Mazo Karras, "Sharing Wine, Women, and Song: Masculine Identity Formation in the Medieval European Universities," in Cohen and Wheeler, pp. 187-202; Karras, "Separating the Men from the Goats: Masculinity, Civilization, and Identity Formation in the Medieval University," in Murray, pp. 189-213; Karras, "Young Knights Under the Feminine Gaze," in Konrad Eisenbichler (ed.), *The Premodern Teenager: Youth in Society, 1150-1650* (Toronto, 2002).

Patricia Ranft, *Women in Western Intellectual Culture, 600-1500*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. Pp. xi + 279.

Patricia Ranft has taken on an ambitious project in *Women in Western Intellectual Culture: 600-1500*, and she is to be commended for addressing this long-neglected aspect of women's history. Her stated objective is to redress the once prevalent attitude that only exceptional women participated in the intellectual culture of the Middle Ages. While the impressive scholarship on medieval women and their achievements in recent decades has eroded that assumption, there is as yet no overview of women's activity in this particular area. Because of the relative newness of this field of inquiry, Ranft admits that her task is "elementary," breaking it down into three distinct parts: to make the general public aware of the range and quality of women's contributions; to contextualize their contributions rather than isolate them; and to examine each piece for its distinctive contribution.

The range of Ranft's coverage is astounding, both chronologically and thematically. She begins with the high points of cultural production in the early Middle Ages, and then moves systematically along an axis defined by the increase in literacy, especially vernacular literacy, to arrive finally, in Chapters Six and Seven, at women theologians and humanists. After establishing the intellectual context of each period, she highlights its major female writers and thinkers and demonstrates how they connect with and respond to the intellectual challenges posed within their cultural milieu. In providing the broader context, Ranft draws largely on Marcia Colish's *Medieval Foundations of the Western Intellectual Tradition: 400-1400*, Brian Stock's *Listening for the Text and Implications of Literacy*, and other texts relating to the development of intellectual culture and the history of science.