

## BOOK REVIEWS



Goldberg, P.J.P., ed. *Woman is a Worthy Wight: Women in English Society, c. 1200-1500*. Wolfeboro Falls, N.H.: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1992. Pp. xvii + 229.

This collection of essays on women in later medieval England makes no claims to comprehensive coverage of its theme: it is a conference volume, focusing especially on social history. Nevertheless, it largely escapes the tendency of conference volumes to be uneven and disjointed, and its individual essays illuminate each other.

Richard Smith's article, "Geographical Diversity in the Resort to Marriage in Late Medieval Europe: Work Reputation, and Unmarried Females in the Household Formation Systems of Northern and Southern Europe," is likely to prove the most influential of the lot. Smith, a demographic historian, builds on his earlier work, in which he pushed the origins of the "European marriage pattern" back in time from early modern to medieval England. Here, he further develops the comparison between England and the rest of Europe, which had a significantly earlier age of marriage for women, arguing that employment patterns for women gave rise to demographic regimes so different that Europe cannot be treated as a fundamental unity. Smith never quite takes a stand on the relative role of economic conditions and cultural norms in determining demographic patterns (though he de-emphasizes the teaching of the church as a factor promoting homogeneity), and his view of work opportunities for women may be a bit rosy given their restriction to low-wage, low-status occupations; but he has set out the parameters for further discussion.

Articles by Goldberg and by P.P.A. Biller also take up the theme of Europe's heterogeneity and English peculiarity. Goldberg's "Marriage, Migration, and Servanthood: The York Cause Paper Evidence," supports Smith's thesis, arguing that a period in domestic service formed an important part of women's life-cycles, at least in urban northern England, and that this is a contributing factor to women's late age of marriage. In "For Better, For Worse': Marriage and Economic Opportunity for Women in Town and Country," he suggests that women in towns married later because they had greater economic opportunities and exercised more control over their own marriages. Biller, in "Marriage Patterns and Women's Lives: A Sketch of Pastoral Geography," looks at pastoral manuals to determine the church's teaching on women and marriage, and finds that the regional variation corresponds to the demographic differences Smith identifies. In northwestern Europe there was more emphasis on consent in marriage and an ideal of married love, compatible with a pattern of late marriage in which women had more choices to make.

The article by P.H. Cullum, "'And Hir Name was Charite': Charitable Giving by and for Women in Late Medieval Yorkshire," does not have as strong a conceptual underpinning as those of Smith, Goldberg, and Biller, but is full of useful information and ideas. She finds that the idealization of charity as part of the female role was borne out in reality, as women's role as household managers extended to their care for the poor. Helena Graham's "'A woman's work ...': Labour and Gender in the Late Medieval Countryside" draws on her research on the village of Alrewas, Staffordshire, to support other scholars' arguments that women's work was part-time, occasional, and non-

specialized, and that only in the case of single women and widows did women's work patterns resemble those of men.

The last two articles diverge from the focus on peasants and urban working women. Rowena Archer writes on "'How ladies ... who live on their manors ought to manage their households and estates': Women as Landholders and Administrators in the later Middle Ages." Her focus is on a number of individuals who managed their own or their husbands' estates and on the gap between theory and practice. Roberta Gilchrist, in "'Blessed Art Thou Among Women': The Archaeology of Female Piety," suggests that the large number of English nunneries built with north cloisters reflects late medieval Eucharistic imagery and Marian devotion. Her argument that "as a form of passive female piety, nunnery architecture simultaneously reflected belief and actively constructed and renegotiated belief" (p. 225) is thought-provoking but deserves greater development than a dozen pages.

None of the essays takes an explicitly feminist stance or advances the theoretical understanding of gender issues. They are not meant to. What they are meant to do, and what they accomplish, is to enlarge understanding of what women's lives were like in England in the late Middle Ages, without addressing the larger dynamics of the power relations that made them that way.

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M<sup>c</sup>Leod, Glenda. *Virtue and Venom: Catalogs of Women from Antiquity to the Renaissance*. Foreword by Charity Cannon Willard. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1991. 168 pp.

*Virtue and Venom* "traces a general history of ... the catalog of women — focusing especially on ... the close of the Middle Ages" (1). M<sup>c</sup>Leod defines catalogs of women as "lists — sometimes found in other works, sometimes found alone — enumerating pagan and (sometimes) Christian heroines who jointly define a notion of femininity" (1). The assumption that the women included in catalogs "define a notion of femininity," a term she uses to rid her book of the connotations of "femininity" (1), is central to M<sup>c</sup>Leod's study. She believes that the late Middle Ages are a particularly interesting period in which to study "femininity" because some late medieval authors of catalogs see women as "participating in and formed by historical currents" (2).

The recovery of a period's notion of "femininity" is a big project, and M<sup>c</sup>Leod's book is brief; it gives a sense of pervasiveness of the catalog tradition, but does not consistently develop, substantiate, and defend readings of individual texts. For her descriptive summaries of medieval thought, M<sup>c</sup>Leod relies heavily on the work of other scholars, without clearly distinguishing between her own ideas and those she has borrowed. Many scholars are not credited directly in the texts or notes, although they may be listed in "Works Consulted." Documentation of sources is sloppy; misspelled names of authors and titles, misquoted titles of primary and secondary sources, missing or incorrect editors, and incorrect dates of publication are numerous.

Chapter One, "A Fickle Thing is Woman," surveys the catalogs of women in Hesiod's *Eoiae*, the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, Plutarch's *Mulierum virtutes*, Semonides of