

Founding Feminisms in Medieval Studies: Essays in Honor of E. Jane Burns. Edited by Laine E. Doggett and Daniel E. O'Sullivan. Gallica 39. Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2016. Pp. xvi + 255; 36 b/w ill. ISBN: 9781843844273.

BY EVERY MEASURE, E. Jane Burns is a founding mother of medieval feminist scholarship. Her own impressive body of work, including five monographs (most notably her very widely read 1993 study *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature*), four edited collections, and over three dozen articles (see the Bibliography on pp. 15-18), has made multiple important contributions to the field while generating new ideas and insights in other scholars (including her own students). She was also one of the original founders and early editors of the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* (predecessor of *Medieval Feminist Forum*), and among the founders of the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship (SMFS). She richly deserves a high-quality *Festschrift*, and I am happy to say that she has received one. The volume under review here has only one serious flaw: its misleading title, which implies a collection of historiographical, methodological, or state-of-the-field critical essays exploring a broad range of feminist approaches to medieval studies. In fact, the vast majority of the essays concern French literary studies, and a few are even written in such a way as to be relatively inaccessible to non-specialists. The collection should certainly not be missed by anyone in the field, but it can also be useful to those outside of it, as long as they are aware of the level of its contents.

The French studies essays are contributed by a stellar roster of specialists in the field: Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner on *Mélusine*; Kristin L. Burr on *Le Roman de Silence*; Daniel E. O'Sullivan on *Trobairitz tenors*; Lisa Perfetti on *fabliaux* (from a refreshing pedagogical perspective); Sarah-Grace Heller on the poems of Baudouin de Condé; Laine E. Doggett on various twelfth- and thirteenth-century Old French romances and epics; Cynthia J. Brown on works produced and/or commissioned by Anne de Bretagne and Anne de France; Roberta L. Krueger on Marguerite de Navarre's *La Coche*; and Nancy Freeman Regalado on Christine de Pisan's *Epistre Othea*. However, two contributors exploit medieval French literary texts to make arguments that should be of interest to all students of the European Middle Ages, and possibly beyond.

Sharon Kinoshita takes the Franco-Italian *Le Devisement du monde*, a text co-authored by Marco Polo and Rustichello of Pisa in 1298 (widely known today as *The Travels*), "as a window onto the cosmopolitan world of silk production and commerce across Eurasia, c. 1250-1300" (142). As the author of a new (2016) and already standard translation of Polo's *Description of the World*, Kinoshita

knows the text as well as (or better!) than anyone, and she uses it here to reveal how traffic in silk under the short-lived *pax mongolica* “catalyzed contact between cultures ranging from Latin Europe to China, in dynamic modalities of exchange that unsettled political, confessional, and cultural binarisms of all kinds” (151). Helen Solterer shines a spotlight on the innovative *Apparicion Maistre Jean de Meun*, written ca. 1400 by Honorat Bovet as an intellectually courageous example of literary diplomacy at its best. In this work, Bovet invented and respectfully ventriloquized a learned, eloquent Saracen whose strategic indictments of Christendom’s systemic corruption were grounded in Bovet’s substantial knowledge of Muslim culture and functioned so as to increase familiarity with the Islamic South, including sub-Saharan Africa. For Solterer, Bovet himself was effectively a diplomat who fostered intercultural understanding and modeled the avoidance of ethnocentric condescension. It is certainly regrettable that his legacy was “slim at best” (168).

Three of the most valuable contributions (all of which I will be assigning in classes this coming year) fall completely outside the field of French literary studies. Madeline H. Caviness utilizes a wide range of medieval visual arts (manuscript illuminations, seal matrices, stained glass windows, statues, and panel paintings) from all over Europe to illustrate the basic fact that “medieval culture was thoroughly familiar with dress codes” (75). While this will come as no surprise to any professional medievalist, the value of Caviness’s essay lies in her ambitious desire to speak to a broad audience concerning matters of burning contemporary concern, for she uses the medieval Christian European material to complicate current discussions of the extent to which modern Islamic dress codes might be oppressive or require the abrogation of individual freedom of choice. Unfortunately, the parallel will probably only reinforce the prejudices of Islamophobes who already believe that Muslims are “stuck” in the (primitive, barbaric) Middle Ages. Ruth Mazo Karras and Tom Linkinen return to a fourteenth-century English legal case, about which Karras published (with David Boyd) in 1995, to ask whether the defendant in that case, John/Eleanor Rykener, might now be better understood as a transgender person rather than as a transvestite (as the 1995 publications had it). While this debate is important in itself, the chapter makes an even more valuable contribution by exploring the uses of imagination to fill gaps in the historical record through discussion of Linkinen’s 2011 puppet show version (“John-Eleanor,” co-written with Timo Väntsi), and Bruce Holsinger’s 2014 novel version (*A Burnable Book*) of John/Eleanor’s story. Readers are likely to come away persuaded that fictional genres such as historical novels and puppet shows make significant contributions to

our understanding of the past because of the many ways that they can do what scholarship cannot. Finally, Ann Marie Rasmussen contributes an essay on (to quote her article subtitle) “The Holy Kinship as a Way of Thinking about Women’s Power in Late Medieval Northern Europe.” She analyzes Holy Kinship altarpieces, which flourished especially in Germanic-speaking lands (North Germany, the Rhineland, Denmark, Sweden, Flanders, and the Low Countries). These images imagined Christ’s kinship network as a matriline, and emphasized the centrality of his female relatives, all sainted, learned women with books and babies. At the center of the network sat the thrice-married and extremely fertile St. Anne, whose multiple sexually active marriages were held up for veneration, countering clerical pronouncements in favor of chaste widowhood. The altarpieces echo a matronly ideal also found in numerous barely studied Northern European texts “depicting women besting churchmen in theological debate and observant practice” (215). Rasmussen’s essay will be an excellent resource for combating whatever lingering stereotypes of pervasive “medieval misogyny” decades of feminist scholarship, as practiced and inspired by E. Jane Burns, has still left in place.

The collection closes with a “Reponse to the Volume” by Elizabeth Robertson, herself a giant in the field of medieval feminist scholarship (and indeed a co-founder with Jane Burns of both the SMFS and the *MFN/MFF*), who laments a number of perceived failings in the current state of the field, above all the relative absence of attention to actual historical women.

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