

The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe. Edited by Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xiv + 626. ISBN: 9780199582174 (hardcover and e-book).

TO BEGIN WITH the obvious: there is an irony inherent in the characterization of this volume as a "Handbook." At 640 pages it won't fit in your pocket or purse. Weightier yet is the cumulative wisdom and historical acumen found in the thirty-seven separate essays written by leading scholars in the field of medieval sex and gender studies. This project is enormous in conceptualization, with outcomes both captivating and compelling. It will be the foundational reference work, the starting point for future research, for the next generation of scholars.

Bennett and Karras proffer a vigorous introduction, providing an overview of how medieval women have been treated, ranging from mythologizing to minimizing to marginalizing until the advent of second-wave feminism brought with it a robust interest in medieval women in their contexts. In little over three pages (2-5), they present a cogent historiography of medieval women and place the essays in this volume in a context that is both revisionist and reparative. These few pages could serve as an introductory overview for students and newcomers to the field. The remainder of the Introduction is equally effective at integrating the diversity of essays that cross periods, cultures, religions, geographies, social groups, and intellectual traditions. Rarely do we encounter an introduction that is a *tour de force*, but this is one.

The volume is divided into seven sections that provide coherence and continuity to the immense breadth of topics and information. Each essay is supplemented by copious references and a section of Further Reading. These demonstrate how each essay is deeply embedded in a rich field of previous research, while at the same time contributing to, and extending, that field. It is too bad that not every essay has the very useful concluding section that draws it all together at a glance.

The first section is devoted to the theoretical underpinnings of medieval society and its ideologies about women and gender. These include Christian, Jewish, and Muslim perspectives, as well as political theory and natural philosophy, thus bringing together religious and secular perspectives on women under one patriarchal umbrella. These essays flow nicely into the next section on Law, which presents a breadth of legal perspectives, including canon law and secular law. The legal perspectives of the early Middle Ages are examined against the ground-breaking work of Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple. Other studies push law into the later Middle Ages, examining the context of civic courts,

laws pertaining to marriage, and canon law. Thus, the essays provide an overview of myriad legal systems and their interventions in medieval women's lives.

Domesticity, households, and daily life form the third section of the book. Essays examine topics including demography, material culture, and public and private space. Religious diversity is enhanced by an essay on the Jewish community, and temporal diversity by an essay on the Carolingian period. The section ends with a discussion of the role of Christianity in the development of the medieval household and domesticity.

Land, labor, and economy are the focus of the fourth section. The four essays each take a specific approach to medieval economies including slavery, urban economies, rural economies, and finally, aristocratic economies. All these essays stress women's varied experiences and opportunities in different and dynamic economic contexts.

The fifth section presents four essays under the rubric Bodies, Pleasures, Desires. The topics vary considerably from women's medicine to same-sex desire. Geographic and cultural diversity is added by an essay on the Byzantine body. The essay on courtliness suggests that that discourse allowed for the possibility of gender mutability. The essays here do not really articulate with each other in terms of subject; they do, however, open our minds to the multivalent possibilities of gender in medieval culture.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the sixth section, which focuses on Christian perspectives, is also the largest, with seven essays. There are essays devoted to monasticism, saints, and heresies. The conversion of Northern Europe and the impact of the Gregorian Reforms are examined, as are cultures of devotion. The topics and the geographic and temporal span of the essays is quite inclusive, and together the section provides an introduction to women, gender, and (Christian) religion.

The final section of essays is entitled, "Turning Points and Places." It brings together five essays that reflect on paradigm shifts and social change stretching from Late Antiquity to the fifteenth century, from the central role of women in early Christianity to the demonization of women during the Witch Craze. In between, there are discussions of women and the economic transformation of the central Middle Ages and during the development of merchant capitalism. The section concludes with a reflection on Christine de Pizan, literacy, and the emergence of feminism.

All works, even one of encyclopedic proportions such as this one, set boundaries and define what they will and will not cover. In this instance, as the editors readily admit, the volume is tipped towards medieval women, with men

and masculinities taking the secondary place so long reserved for women. One exception is the essay on same-sex possibilities, which has rather more to say about male than female experience. Other areas receiving somewhat cursory coverage include the early Middle Ages, the geographic east, and non-Christian peoples and perspectives. Because the boundaries are porous, however, these topics do receive attention but are not as central as the Christian West in the High and Later Middle Ages. Does any of this detract from the volume? Not one iota. Indeed, given the comprehensive nature of this volume, it would be churlish to quibble.

The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe is going to hold pride of place as the reliable research tool, whether to fill in a gap of knowledge or to access an authoritative overview of a topic. In this, it will be much like James A. Brundage's, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (University of Chicago Press, 2009). These are not works one reads cover to cover, but rather they provide a starting point for further research or are an indispensable tool for scholars and students seeking background information on specific issues. Thus, despite its diminutive title, this is a mighty handbook and an enduring contribution to scholarship on women and gender in the Middle Ages.

Jacqueline Murray
University of Guelph