

Judith Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). xiv + 626 pages. ISBN 978-0199582174. Hardcover \$150.00.

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In their introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, Judith Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras write that they intend this volume to “continue the ongoing task of creating fully peopled histories of the Middle Ages,” and to eschew the long tendency of historians to treat women as “*the* marked gender” within medieval society (1). Bennett and Karras’ use of the plural “histories” here is a deliberate one; reflecting the impact of several decades of debate on the meanings of the terms “sex,” “gender,” and “woman,” they disavow any attempt to make the *Handbook* representative of a single view of, or way of approaching, the history of medieval women. The *Handbook’s* thirty-seven chapters, arranged into seven thematic sections, accordingly explore a broad variety of regional, religious and topical contexts from across the European Middle Ages.

The first section, “Gendered Thinking,” explores the ways in which gender was thought of in medieval Europe, not just in scientific theory and political discourse, but also in religious writings. Here the editors have been careful to ensure that, despite the volume’s admitted focus on the areas in which Latin Christianity predominated, Europe’s three main religious traditions are all assessed thanks to contributions from Judith R. Baskin on Judaism and Jonathan Berkey on Islam. Taken as a whole, these essays

illustrate how the denigration of women could be “vicious, powerful and cross-cultural (6),” but also how medieval people were capable of holding contradictory ideas about women and gender. In “The Political Traditions of Female Rulership in Medieval Europe,” Amalie Föbel examines the legitimation strategies of empresses and queens, and shows how gendered tropes could be combined in different ways, in varying legal contexts, in order to provide a “basis for [female] power which should not be underestimated (81).”

The second section, “Looking Through the Law,” explores a wide variety of ways in which legal contexts shaped, and were shaped by, gender expectations. The contributions of Marie Kelleher and Sara McDougall in particular form a complementary pair, with Kelleher discussing later medieval law in community contexts and McDougall looking at canon law in relation to women and gender. Both authors emphasize that, while these legal codes entrenched gender inequalities, discriminating against women in cases of inheritance and sexual behavior, scholars should remember the ways in which women were capable of turning the law to their advantage through the litigation process. Prescriptive texts such as law codes may have severely restricted women's actions, but as these essays show, cannot be facilely used to predict actual practice.

The third section, “Domestic Lives,” looks at the ways in which gender shaped households in medieval Europe. The authors use a variety of methodologies, some of which have been adopted relatively recently by historians, and which offer new avenues of inquiry. Maryanne Kowaleski's “Gendering Demographic Change in the Middle Ages” provides a fascinating look at the utility of statistics for feminist scholars. In the absence

of documentary evidence for the lives of the vast majority of medieval Europeans, a demographic analysis of archaeological remains can give us an idea of not just mortality rates, but also population sex ratios, household size and the proportion of the population which was married. Analyses of skeletal remains can also reveal gendered patterns of wear and tear, with the female skeletons found at the deserted medieval English village of Wharram Percy indicative of women spending a lifetime on their haunches, tending fires or grinding grain. Katherine French's exploration of gender and material culture likewise uses artifacts to get at the lives of ordinary medieval women "unfettered by the rhetorical devices and clerical biases of so many literary works (197)," while Sarah Rees Jones demonstrates how spatial analysis can help us understand the ways in which medieval people constructed gender. She argues that over time, medieval Europeans came to think of private and public space as being closely associated with differing modes of gendered conduct. Since it was difficult to distinguish male and female spaces through the use of architecture outside of large-scale civic buildings, regulation of personal conduct through normative behavioral codes became ever more important.

The four chapters in "Land, Labor, Economy" discuss first slavery and then rural, urban, and aristocratic economies. Women's work in the Middle Ages, and the roles women played in the production of wealth, have been the subject of much scholarly interest since the 1970s and 80s, particularly in the pioneering work of Judith Bennett, Barbara Hanawalt, and David Herlihy. This section of the *Handbook* is an invaluable reference guide to the key debates in the area—such as the vexed question of whether there was a "golden age" for women's paid labor in the aftermath of the Black Death—

while also engaging with more recent scholarship. In the past several years, many scholars have focused on how women could generate wealth because of their biological and social reproductive worth; in particular, the chapters by Jane Whittle and Joanna Drell explore how this research has revealed “much flexibility in the society once considered staunchly patriarchal (340).”

The fifth section, “Bodies, Pleasures, Desires,” shifts the book’s focus to the gendered body and to sexual relations. Kathryn Ringrose and E. Jane Burns explore the diverse masculinities and femininities which existed in the Middle Ages, and indeed the people who traversed genders and normative gender roles. Helmet Puff examines the many same-sex possibilities of the Middle Ages, erotic and otherwise, which existed in both texts and acts, and demonstrates how new ways of reading, coupled with the exploration of new archives, have changed the ways in which scholars have understood these intimacies since the 1970s. Monica Green brings to bear her considerable research on the *Trotula* in her examination of how medieval biological understandings were mediated by culture, and demonstrates how this meant that the medical care of women’s bodies in the Middle Ages was focused on fertility and pregnancy. Both the history of sexuality and the history of medicine are rapidly expanding fields, and Puff’s and Green’s essays show how useful gender can be as a lens when considering these topics.

The sixth section, “Engendering Christian Holiness,” is the largest part of the book, reflecting the outpouring of work on female and heterodox religiosity in recent years. The groundbreaking work of Caroline Walker Bynum on medieval women’s interactions with, and use of, religious texts and artifacts is reflected especially in Miri

Rubin's chapter on saints' cults and Kathleen Ashley's on cultures of devotion. Fiona Griffiths' discussion of women and reform, and Anneke Mulder-Bakker's assessment of lay piety, both stress women's agency and the innovative nature of their contribution to the development of medieval Christianity. Women were omnipresent within the reform movement, Griffiths points out, as actors, opponents and objects. By examining the actions and writings of both religious and laywomen, we can see some of the ways in which medieval women were able to slip their constraints through their own interpretations of Christian theology and spirituality. There are strong parallels to be drawn between this section and those on law and gendered ideologies.

Lastly, the section "Turning Points and Places" deals with feminist chronologies of the Middle Ages, and the ways in which feminist scholars have problematized traditional categories such as the tripartite division of the Middle Ages in the wake of Joan Kelly's influential criticisms. Constance Berman's "Gender at the Medieval Millennium" argues that, contrary to the traditional view of women losing institutional and political power in the later medieval period, women actually gained opportunities in the years past 1000. Other contributors are more ambivalent about their periods of study. Martha Howell and Laura Stokes focus on the end of the Middle Ages, seeing in changes of that period the origins of some early modern phenomena which were less favorable to women. Howell argues that the emergence of a merchant capitalist narrative which excluded women from active participation in market production curbed women's entrepreneurial endeavors, while Stokes sees the emergence of a specific, often carnally-

charged, demonological discourse in the early fifteenth century as the spark which ignited the mass witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

For students, this book is sure to prove an invaluable primer on roughly the last forty years of historiography on women and gender. Many of the chapters function not only as a state-of-the-field review, but also as useful models of engagement with primary sources. In the classroom, the *Handbook* should allow for reflection on both the scholarly and political aspects of the various traditions of feminist medieval history. Each chapter provides a useful and up-to-date reading list, in addition to its bibliography, which will allow the reader to explore a given topic further. While the hefty price tag will most likely put the *Handbook* out of the price range of all but research libraries, it is still highly recommended reading for all those with an interest in medieval women's and gender studies.