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Sandy Bardsley. *Women's Roles in the Middle Ages.* Portsmouth: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007. 264 pp. $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-33635-5.

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Building on What Jo Ann McNamara Started

As I complete this review I have received the notice of Jo Ann McNamara's death. She was truly a founding mother who provided the inspiration for much of the scholarship that this book summarizes. She will be much missed. As for me, although I find abhorrent books and series titled "Women's Roles," Sandy Bardsley has produced a fine work of synthesis aimed at students from high school through early graduate study. It is particularly useful because it has a very comprehensive bibliography on medieval women–a tribute to what has been accomplished over a generation of scholarship. The bibliography alone makes it a wonderful starting place for many projects, from undergraduate research papers to comprehensive exam reading lists. The task of writing such a volume is a daunting one–I would not want to attempt it myself–because it is so easy to quibble with any author's generalizations from afar, especially when they happen to correspond with one's own area of expertise. For every quibble mentioned in this review, however, there are multiple items to praise.

Bardsley opens the book with a useful and compact chronology that incorporates complexities and that makes points quickly and accurately. For example, under the year 313 we see: "The Roman Emperor Constantine issues the Edict of Toleration, meaning that it is no longer illegal to be a Christian within the Roman Empire" (p. xiii). On the other hand, the abbess Heloise was not only the lover, but the wife of Peter Abelard (p. xvi); Yvette of Huy was Flemish, not Dutch, and whatever linguistic complexities we have here, her life was written in Latin and Huy is upstream from Liege in today's Belgium (p. xvii); and Alice Kyteler may not have been accused and convicted of witchcraft (p. xix), for the imputations of witchcraft in the story came from documents well after her lifetime (p. xix).

Reading this book, I wavered often between thunderous applause and groans. I love the introduction, which begins by explaining without hesitation that medieval society was patriarchal: "women as a group were virtually always viewed as inferior to men as a group" (p. 1), and which also explains that when we speak of medieval women's identities, class is always more important than gender–which is why abbesses could so easily rule double houses, because they were social superiors of the men. These two points alone–often left unspoken and rarely stated so succinctly–are worth the price of admission. The discussion of sources that follows, however, has good examples but imprecise terminology, at least to my ear. I would have called Hildegarde's letters "exhortations" to her nuns rather than "messages" (p. 4). Similarly, Clare of Assisi's Rule is not merely a "document," for rules or forms of life (as Clare's is usually called), are not the equivalent of such things as records of real-estate transactions, and "documents" are not normative in the sense that rules are.

The volume is laid out topically, with chapters on "Women and Religion," "Women and Work," "Women and the Family," "Women and the Law," "Women and Culture," and "Women, Power and Authority." Each chapter covers the wide span of time from late antiquity to the fifteenth century and encompasses not only western Europe but also the Byzantine East. Bardsley also attempts to incorporate what can be said about not just Christians, but Jewish, Muslim, and heretical Christian women as well. That this is done as well as it is in little over two hundred pages is remarkable, but also explains some of the tendency to overgeneralization. This is seen even in the introductory chapter, where one wonders what Bardsley means when she says, "Many Romans could read and write" (p. 13). How many? And does this include Roman women, or not?

One is also soon reminded that Bardsley is an expert on late medieval women in England, and secular ones at that. Her overview of the Middle Ages is hence

more reliable on the late Middle Ages than on late antiquity or the early medieval period. For example, she deals extremely competently with the issue of whether there was a late medieval golden age for women, a topic of great debate concerning what happened to wages and access to jobs and wealth after the Black Death. Yet she seems less aware that this is not the only golden age debate in medieval women's history and–more striking to those of us who work on the central Middle Ages–she assumes that the early medieval period can still be treated as a golden age in comparison to the High Middle Ages (when, she asserts, there was a growth "in the power of men over women" (p. 17)). The basis for this assertion seems to derive from a very old-fashioned view of early medieval abbesses: "Abbesses … enjoyed a position of relative strength during the early Middle Ages, a strength that would be curtailed as the power of the church and state grew in later centuries. Some queens too, held positions of significant influence" (p. 16). Similarly, she writes, "feudalism … would ultimately disempower women, since it located authority within a network of obligations from which women were excluded" (p. 16). But what type of feudalism (if we must use a word that has been so debated) and where and when did it disempower women, and from what?

By and large the chapters on work, family, law, culture, and authority provide up-to-date summaries, and the opening of the chapter on religious women–with its overview of changing attitudes towards virginity–is promising. When Bardsley discusses nuns and beguines in the central Middle Ages, however, she is suddenly out of touch with recent scholarship, despite citing some of the recent literature. "The High Middle Ages," she states, "thus saw a proliferation of new types of monasticism, movements seeking to get back to an ascetic, austere lifestyle. As chapter 1 explains, these movements often excluded women, and the monastic orders established for women alone tended to be marginalized" (p. 20). Yet included in the bibliography is my recent *Women and Monasticism in Medieval Europe: Sisters and Patrons of the Cistercian Reform*, where I contend:

"Religious women's history in the High Middle Ages has been neglected because it was assumed that during what was characterized by Marc Bloch as a Second Feudal Age there had been a decline in the numbers of cloistered religious women. Older scholarship and work on monastic records *seemed* to confirm this. Documents from male houses certainly predominate in the materials published over the last century by local history societies. However, this reflects editorial and social bias, not the reality of what has been preserved (or of the medieval situation). There are many more documents about women and women's houses than is apparent at first glance."[1]

Indeed, whereas it is true that traditional histories of medieval monasticism have marginalized religious women–placing them in separate compartments at the end of chapters, and divorcing the religious experience of women from the secular one, when for many women, these were just different stages of life–this should not be the case in a history of medieval women. Nor should the old clichés we have been trying so hard to combat be incorporated, as when Bardsley (attempting to be positive about religious women?) opines that "[s]ome women were forced into nunneries, but many entered very much of their own volition," but then talks about houses of nuns as "refuge(s) for widows and even, sometimes for brutalized wives" (p. 35), as if women had no religious volition, but only used the entrance into a nunnery to escape something worse. Thus Bardsley comes close to applying without question the old double standard that whereas men entering monastic life or becoming clerics had religious vocations, women becoming nuns or beguines or recluses did not. She continues on p. 39 that "[w]hile the number of nuns varied between regions of Europe, one thing remained constant, women were always poorer than their male counterparts." She should perhaps read more closely Erin L. Jordan, *Women, Power, and Religious Patronage in the Middle Age*s (2006) on abbeys like Flines or Marquette; or Bruce Venarde, *Women's Monasticism and Medieval Society: Nunneries in France and England, 890-1215* (1997), on abbeys like Fontevrault; or Penelope Johnson's *Equal in Monastic Profession* (1991), on le Ronceray or Saintes; all cited in her bibliography. Or read my work scattered in various places on Saint-Antoine-des-Champs near Paris, in which I argue that despite a long misogynous tradition about the lack of efficacy of nuns' prayers, major university clerics were making gifts for souls to those nuns and were preaching to them sermons about their prayers. Yet Bardsley concludes:

"The prayers of nuns did not attract the same kind of financial support among the laity as did the prayers of monks. In part, this may have been due to the fact that monks were sometimes ordained as priests, and the spiritual value of having an ordained priest pray for one's soul was thought to trump any prayers from nuns or from non-ordained monks. However, this cannot be the only reason that nunneries tended to make less money than monasteries, because even monasteries without large numbers of ordained priests fared better than nunneries. Throughout the Middle Ages, families tended to invest less in their daughters than in their sons" (p. 39).

Are nunneries in the business of making money? Or of feeding the poor? Recent research, including a series of articles by Fiona Griffiths that began to appear in 2004, suggests that not only were nuns' prayers efficacious, but that the priests engaged in the care of nuns' souls may often have valued those prayers as more efficacious than their own.

There is much that is good in this book, on women and work, on credit, on textiles, and on images of women in art, but Bardsley concentrates primarily on late medieval English history and seems deaf to the nuances of early versus central Middle Ages, to what was happening in Germany or Italy or Spain, and to the recent work on religious women, even when it is included in her selected bibliography.

Note

[1]. Constance H. Berman, *Women and Monasticism in Medieval Europe: Sisters and Patrons of the Cistercian Reform (*Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2002), 2.

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