

ENNIFER CARPENTER and SALLY-BETH MACLEAN, eds., *Power of the Weak: Studies on Medieval Women*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1995. ISBN: 0-252-06504-2. \$39.95 (hard), \$14.95 (paper).

The essays in *Powers of the Weak: Studies on Medieval Women*, edited by Jennifer Carpenter and Sally-Beth MacLean, examine the influence available to medieval women, and the limitations of such influence, through a series of case studies. Although the editors are rightly wary of elaborating any 'overarching theory' or 'artificial unity,' the collection identifies three general avenues of access to power: piety, politics, and, in the somewhat exceptional case of Gracia Mendes, finance.

The opening essay, by Jacqueline Murray, is perhaps the weakest. This may be inevitable, since the author attempts to provide an overview both of medieval texts on sexual difference, and of contemporary scholarship on the issue. The result is somewhat too general for specialists, although it may serve as a useful introduction to non-medievalists or to those unfamiliar with women's history. The last part of the essay, on Chobham and Grosseteste, is more valuable, suggesting that writers who had extended contact with women because of their pastoral duties are less likely to endorse the misogynist assumptions of scholastic writers.

Two essays, by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne and Jennifer Carpenter, examine a pair of very different holy women, St. Etheldreda, Anglo-Saxon queen and virgin wife, and Juette of Huy, a twelfth century recluse. Wogan-Browne considers the evolution of Etheldreda's cult through Latin and vernacular *vitae*, concluding that Etheldreda served different functions for different audiences: in Bede, she is a type of virginity; the twelfth century *Liber Eliensis* also represents Etheldreda as an ideal rather than a person, using her to assert a continuing tradition of post-Conquest monasticism. Only the vernacular *Vie seinte Audree* fully develops her as a female protagonist. Wogan-Browne links this transformation to the probable audience of the *Vie*, Anglo-Norman noblewomen for whom chastity might be not just an ideal, but a way of controlling one's self and property. For Juette, forced to marry and unable to preserve her virginity like Etheldreda, mothering provided a way of modeling her life on that of the Virgin, but also tied her firmly and against her will to worldly concerns. Carpenter's essay provides a nuanced discussion of the dilemma of motherhood for a holy woman.

Libby Garshowitz gives a lucid account of the complicated legal and religious obstacles encountered by Gracia Mendes, a *conversa* whose attempts to retain her property and reclaim her religion carried her across Europe to the Ottoman empire, where she was able to wield considerable financial power, largely directed to helping other Jews escape Portugal and the Inquisition. Garshowitz's contribution provides a much needed reminder of the cultural and religious diversity of early modern Europe.

The last three essays all concern queenship, and may be of the greatest interest to Arthurians, since they provide a historical background against which to read the queens of romance. Lois L. Huneycutt and John Carmi Parsons deal with the queen as intercessor. Huneycutt considers the importance of Esther as a role model for Matilda, wife of Henry I. Matilda, in contrast with St. Etheldreda, rejected the monastic life, choosing instead to embrace the role of the queen who intercedes with

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her husband. Huneycutt emphasizes the limitations of this role even for such a strong-willed woman as Matilda; the twelfth century saw a steady erosion of the queen's political influence, and any power Matilda could claim was undermined by the fact that it was predicated on her very weakness, with no basis in practical politics. Parsons, dealing with thirteenth-century English queens, identifies paradoxical attitudes towards queenship. Aristocrats were generally suspicious of the queen's power, a phenomenon which Parsons relates to the literary representation of capricious courtly ladies; meanwhile, popular expectations of the queen's intercessory power linked her more and more closely, often through iconography, to the image of the Virgin. Parsons uses theoretical models derived from Victor Turner to suggest ways in which the very concept of queenly intercession, imagined as emotional and abject—in a word, feminine—threatened the male order, and requiring legitimization by the invocation of Mary. The final essay, by Elizabeth McCartney, examines the coronation of Anne of Brittany in 1504, demonstrating the way that the ritual of coronation itself was used to redefine the queen's right to share fully in royal prerogatives, establishing a juristic basis for French queenship.

It is easy to think of individual women or classes of women who might have been included in this collection. Heretics, for instance, often redefined feminine authority along with Christianity. No single volume, however, could possibly satisfy every wish, and *Powers of the Weak* remains a useful and varied contribution to the field of women's history.

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