

Weikert, Katherine, and Elena Woodacre, eds. 2021. *Medieval Intersections: Gender and Status in Europe in the Middle Ages*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn. Pp. 132. ISBN 9781800731547.

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In its 1995 edition, Maggie Humm's *Dictionary of Feminist Theory* did not yet include the term *intersectionality*, which, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, has in the last decades become an essential component of much Third Wave feminist research and activism. Crenshaw presented it as a phenomenon whereby individuals may experience discrimination as they partake of multiple social categories in different degrees. In such intersection, distinct forms of oppression or privilege are generated. Notions such as those of race, social class, sexual orientation or religion, the most widely wielded, are added to the gender condition so as to outline a complex overlapping process which leads to multiple forms of identity. On the same page of the dictionary, other related terms do appear: *interdisciplinary*, *intersubjectivity*, *intertextuality*. These three entries do share with the missing one some basic semantic features, like the sense of adjustment, inclusion, reciprocity, or communication. They have also been intensely used in Gender Studies and proved most efficient in other disciplines and critical approaches. The crossing of borders and sharing of categories is being clearly suggested not only through the common prefix, but further on by the notions of subjectivity or textuality, major cruxes in the development of contemporary research fields. Along with *intersectionality*, all of these terms suggest, therefore, a basic dialectic relationship between at least two parties that get interconnected, and out of which a constant movement of re-adjustment seems to be generated. This ongoing process may be projected and transferred from a synchronic perspective into a diachronic one. Many are the scholarly fields that have accepted such diachronic challenge, among them, that of Medieval Studies, which in the last decades has also faced the archival turn. This demanded further attention to the power dynamics involved in the selection, preservation, and interpretation of archival contents, out of which medieval narratives and identities may be shaped and constructed. With these scholarly concerns in mind, *Medieval Intersections: Gender and Status in Europe in the Middle Ages*, edited by Katherine Weikert and Elena Woodacre, stands as a courageous attempt to bring into contact the disciplinary methodological tools of Medieval and Gender Studies.

From a 21st century standpoint, the handling of the intersection category to refer to medieval contexts entails a singular effort of speculation concerning the very diversity within the medieval timespan, as well as of its categorization as a historical *media aetas* period. Heir to ancient classical, biblical, and local traditions, medieval culture has been conceived of as one in which orality and writing nourish and legitimize each other. The development of writing gives rise to a gradual distance between the cultured and the popular, to new attitudes towards the old forms of interpretation and transmission, and

to a different perception of the past. The deployment of writing also alters the subjective notion of being—which gets deferred and externalized in the articulated norms of writing: births, deaths, baptisms, marriages, contracts of all kinds... begin to have their written counterpart—, thus entailing increasing structuring and abstraction. The way this general transformation affects women or men differently and the trace they can leave as historical subjects is not easy to discern. The processes that this book tries to describe are precisely immersed in this long-lasting cultural transformation, and this makes the interpretive effort of each of its chapters all the more deserving. Weikert and Woodacre privilege an interdisciplinary approach that encompasses different kinds of documents and data, ranging from the written personal letter and other archival records to archaeological vestiges or else to early and late medieval literary texts and images. Each individual chapter not only includes its own referential and methodological patterns, but also extends its analysis to other disciplines, trying to outline the complex map of gender relationships during these centuries. Such resourcefulness is the product of these contents having been previously exposed to dialogue and contribution from other fields, since they derive from the Gender and Medieval Studies Conference held at the University of Winchester in 2014. This guarantees a versatile final product that may surprise those readers expecting more orthodox or single proposals.

The title itself makes clear their essential goal, that of better grasping the complexity of gender within the medieval social uses and analysing how such notions and practices might be re-shaped or reconfigured. Wisely, the second term in the title is none other than *status*. By providing a sound justification which suits medieval social codification, the editors do not choose to discriminate among the different categories, but instead to include under the umbrella term all those which interact with gender issues.

In all, the volume contains nine contributions: Alison Creber's "Mirror for Margraves. Peter Damian's Models for Male and Female Rulers" dwells on letter writing techniques and biblical models in order to discern those points where gender issues, in conflict with the duality between the secular and the religious status, must be redefined. Peter Damian's view of the differentiated duties of male or female rulers—in this case, Godfrey's, margrave of Tuscany, and Adelaide's, ruler of the mark of Turi—to their subjects is an illuminating inquiry on how Damian could simultaneously articulate and defend seemingly contradictory principles in a paradoxical way, thus revealing a multifaceted regard on gender.

Linda D. Brown's "*Inaudito exemplo*. The Abduction of Romsey's Abbess" charts the uneven existence of King Stephen and Queen Matilda's daughter Marie. Drawing on lexicographical research, and in the wake of Duby's research on female cases, Brown revisits the *topos* of the woman torn between duty and desire in order to tell a different story: having become an abbess, Marie is abducted and forced to marry. Her change of status is analysed in the light of a complex political background, in order to discern how aristocratic women could adapt their female condition to several discourses according to their needs.

If this historical episode was widely known, although ignored by some contemporary sources, another chapter in the book considers the visibility of noble women in Anglo-Saxon society, not through the written records, but precisely through the material items that symbolize that very visibility: their jewellery. Frank Battaglia's "Wrist Clasps and Patriline: A Hypothesis" considers the displacement of matrilineal tribal identities by

patrilineal ones in Anglo-Saxon England, leaning on anthropological theories which study the evolution of matrilineality from the Neolithic period up to that of early medieval North European tribes. To prove his theory, Battaglia resorts not only to the study of funerary practices, but also to the re-interpretation of some of the passages in a key text in Anglo-Saxon insular culture, the poem *Beowulf*, which is most aptly restored to its original commitment with the history of these early medieval centuries.

Other literary works in the book surprisingly illustrate gender aspects which so far had gone unnoticed. Addressing these sources from the perspective of Masculinity Studies involves an effort that turns fruitful in the reassessment of gender as an “identity machine” (Cohen) that runs smoothly within the homosocial circles of young noblemen who tried to acquire full social acceptance. This is what Rachel E. Moss’s “*And much more I am sorryat for my good knyghts: Fainting, Homosociality, and Elite Male Culture in Middle English romance*”, offers: a journey through a number of Arthurian late medieval romances in which the theme of male fainting proves the existence of a homosocial knightly code that helped reinforce a sense of belonging not only on account of gender, but also on that of status. The chapter points out the performative element in such code of conduct and stresses this particular male bonding as culturally created and intended for the male elite recipients of these texts.

With the same precision and acumen, McGlynn’s “*Pueri Sunt Pueri: Machismo, Chivalry, and the Aggressive Pastimes of the Medieval Male Youth*” depicts chivalric values, and the male devotion for the lady as a mere security posture which screens, through the alleged contrast with peasants’ “bestly” games, the violent undercurrent pervading knighthood culture. This thorough study of male games and sports in late medieval English society reveals a tendency to favour violent ones as a means of training boys in war tactics.

Another group of texts belonging to the same tradition is scrutinized in Elizabeth S. Leet’s “Objectification, Empowerment, and the Male Gaze in the Lanval Corpus”. Lanval’s figure is studied from its inception in Marie de France’s lays to the late medieval Middle English *Sir Landevale* and *Sir Launfal*. Leet insists on the visual component of the medieval cultural tradition and on the importance of the individual and the communal gaze in the creation of a sense of subjectivity. Laura Mulvey’s inspirational theory on the existence of a male gaze which projects itself from movie screens into society is invoked so as to propose the rise of a medieval female gaze and subject. Leet detects, though, that throughout the textual *corpus* of these poems, also the female characters get redefined and objectified according to their different conditions. The fairy character brings into question female human behaviour, whereas the Queen character, from a public high-status position, threatens the knight’s heterosexual identity. In distinguishing Marie de France’s Anglo-Norman French lay from those in Middle English, Leet also invites further revision of the adaptation process entailed in medieval translation, suggesting the comparison between visual and textual colonization.

Another layer of meaning that clearly interacts with gender is that of the married/single status. Natalie Hanna’s “*To take a wyf: Marriage, Status, and Moral Conduct in “The Merchant’s Tale”*” points out the male misogynous obsession with marriage and its power to transform male and female identity. Old January married to young May, and Duke Walter married to poor Griselda, from their respective literary genres in *The Canterbury Tales*, represent the class/gender/age oppressions through

which Hanna reflects on the female way to deal with impositions through a range of low-frequency responses, far from the “Wife of Bath’s” loud demand for sovereignty. The chapter shows Chaucer denouncing male anxieties over the exercise of power, as these husbands imagine and experience the different senses of “taking a wife”.

Illnesses too posed a constant threat to medieval populations and were codified accordingly. Among them, leper was especially stigmatized. Christina Welch and Rohan Brown’s “From Villainous Letch and Sinful Outcast, to ‘Especially beloved of God’: Complicating the Medieval Leper through Gender and Social Status” offers a picture of the threat hovering not only over the bodies, but over the souls of the community too. A sign of moral corruption associated to lust, and especially to men, from the 12th century onwards, it was also increasingly found among the destitute and landless poor, whose bodily liminality was symbolized by the building of *leprosaria* on town outskirts. The chapter not only describes the type of oppression they were subject to, but registers as well the subtle change in the consideration of these living dead, who, associated to spiritual healing through carnal suffering, could paradoxically become signs of redemption.

A thought-provoking and most original chapter is Mercedes Pérez Vidal’s “The Corpus Christi Devotion: Gender, Liturgy, and Authority among Dominican Nuns in Castile in the Middle Ages”. On the one hand, Pérez Vidal studies the theological treatises and canonical legislation regarding the visibility of the Corpus Christi, as well as the right of the faithful—in particular, of religious women—to access sacramental or ritual objects as part of the liturgies of the ecclesiastical year. On the other hand, she closely analyses architectural instances of Castilian Dominican nunneries, identifying the active role of aristocratic or royal inmates and patrons, who would contravene the initial rules and ignore the ordered interior designs of nunneries. The chapter demonstrates that, in spite of age-old attempts to keep women apart from the administration of the sacred, by the late Middle Ages some of them had achieved a certain degree of independence.

As is well known, the notion of inequality was deeply ingrained in the social and economic structures of medieval society, the feudal system being the main referent in this sense. That same system is also a metaphor for the principle of interdependence. The chapters in *Medieval Intersections: Gender and Status in Europe in the Middle Ages* perfectly illustrate the co-existence of different types of hierarchies and the overlap of the foundational concepts they lean on. Through the study of the cases of certain individuals or communities, gender is considered in combination and interdependence with other aspects, so as to convey the set of nuances that each particular situation breeds. The final picture is as insightful as it is suggestive, one that keeps inviting research and passion for the Middle Ages.

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