

*A Medieval Woman's Companion: Women's Lives in the European Middle Ages*, by Susan Signe Morrison. Havertown, PA: Oxbow Books, 2016. Pp. vii + 244; b/w illustrations; glossary. ISBN: 9781785700798; e-ISBN: 9781785700804.

IN THE FIRST WEEK of classes this semester, a student asked if I knew of a medieval woman she could do a research project on for another class. She didn't want to cover one of the usual suspects: Joan of Arc, Eleanor of Aquitaine, etc. For a moment, I drew a blank, and then I remembered a book that happened to be in my possession.

In a genre of increasingly theoretical and well-detailed analyses of particular medieval women, their eras, and their accomplishments, budding scholars and undergraduates alike are usually pleased to find a volume that will speak to these readers on why it is so important to study this field. Susan Signe Morrison's *A Medieval Woman's Companion* aims to be just this book: an approachable handbook that introduces new medievalists and entry-level scholars into the very complex world of feminist medieval studies. In her introduction, Morrison outlines the purpose of the book and also explains exactly what her scholarly terms entail for the fledgling reader: why and how we study the Middle Ages, what the Middle Ages were, and even how to read them. Morrison understands the lack of foreknowledge that her readers bring to the table, thus she breaks down her overview of medieval European history from a woman's perspective into six themed parts: Pioneers, Fearless Females, Women of Wisdom, Non-Conformists, "My Most Honored Ladies," and "Experience is Right Enough for Me." These thematic units of approximately four ten-page chapters each help create a digestible and easy-to-read companion that will tempt students into learning more about the women who grab their attention.

Morrison, a Professor of English at Texas State University, uses her extensive experience in research and teaching to craft a book in keeping with her professional commitment to "bringing the lives of medieval women to a wider audience" ([amedievalwomanscompanion.com](http://amedievalwomanscompanion.com)). Her talents in fiction-writing and story-crafting can be seen in this slim volume. Appropriate to her audience's expectations and experience level, Morrison uses a very engaging style to introduce several key female figures in each part. Each subsequent chapter also progresses in somewhat chronological order, allowing readers to see history unfold and the role of medieval women rise and fall as the European Middle Ages progress. Each chapter contains call-out boxes that bring readers' attention to parallels in contemporary history, as well as explaining key terms and concepts.

The end of each chapter also provides a “Learn More” link section that will allow readers to pursue topics of interest on a deeper level. These two features, along with the extensive footnotes and gloss, make this concise paperback very cost effective and functional as a teaching text.

By limiting each chapter to a particular woman, time period, and geographic location, Morrison does not overwhelm her readers. These chapters are almost tidbits of tantalizing information—disappointingly short to the scholar immersed in the field of feminist medieval and gender studies, but just the right amount of biography and historical correlation for novice scholars in the field. Morrison also carefully interweaves chapters that consider general issues that confronted women in the Middle Ages: the languages they were able to speak and study, the limitations and importance of their clothing, and even how medieval church policies regarding the body governed a woman’s place in society. For example, the chapter on “Understanding the Female Body” introduces readers to the Eve/Mary paradigm and ties the theory of humors to why the medieval church considered men to be one temperature and women another. Morrison’s final chapter ties the series of vignettes together as it examines the importance of reading women in the Middle Ages and how intersectional feminism can help—and occasionally hinder—our ability as modern scholars to interpret women’s historical roles accurately.

Medieval scholars will recognize many of the ‘major’ canonical authors that Morrison treats: Margery Kempe, Hildegard von Bingen, Christine de Pizan, and Marie de France to name a few. Concepts unfamiliar to fledgling medievalists are carefully tied into these historical biographies. Morrison also includes fascinating histories of active warrior women such as Gudrun Osvifsdottir and Gudrid Thorbjarnsardottir, as well as a veritable pioneer in the field of disability advocacy—Teresa de Cartagena—and a War of the Roses era matriarch—Margaret Paston. Inclusion of these lesser-known women and explanation of their ties to the field of feminist medieval studies at large helps to increase the approachability of this book. Morrison brings the experience of medieval European women into a conversation that contemporary students can identify with, as they, too, question issues like gender fluidity, disability advocacy, and how to make women’s voices heard.

In some ways, the complex history and experience of each biographed woman is simplified and taken out of a larger historical context. This condensed version may frustrate more experienced scholars, as this book serves as a handbook, almost an encyclopedia, rather than putting these fantastic medieval women into conversation with each other. Morrison also focuses mainly on

Western Europe, mentioning few women outside of the traditional fields of medieval literary studies: Britain, France, Italy, etc. She touches on the female troubadours and mentions a fascinating Iberian poet, Qasmūna Bint Ismāʿīl, but I would have liked to see more information about non-Christian women. As Morrison herself states, much of the information that we have on women's lives in the European Middle Ages is limited at best, so we do, in effect, have to take what we can get.

Having taught an introductory course on Women in Medieval Romance, I can see how Morrison's handbook would have served as an excellent introduction for my students, many of whom came into class with little to no prior knowledge of the Middle Ages. My student, after flipping through Morrison's handbook for a class period, had three lesser-known names to pursue as potential subjects. She also had a huge smile on her face, the result of a successful research session. As many instructors of undergraduate—and graduate—classes can attest, much of the school term seems to be taken up by demystifying and clarifying the Middle Ages to students. Morrison's *A Medieval Woman's Companion* serves as excellent introductory reading for students to help integrate them into the complex and varied experiences of women within the Middle Ages. Her blog, glossary, and introduction to the larger conversation in her final chapter also help situate students gently within feminist medieval studies.

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