



Medieval Feminist Forum

A Journal of Gender and Sexuality

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Gender, Science, and the Natural World:
Essays on Medieval Literature
from the 2020 Gender and
Medieval Studies Conference



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Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages, by Roland Betancourt. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021. Pp. 288. ISBN: 9780691179452.

In 1977 the Combahee River Collective articulated its political mission, stating, “We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.” Roland Betancourt’s *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages* provocatively takes up this analytic framework to unearth and reinterpret marginalized subjectivities in the premodern Byzantine world.

With careful attention to the trio of gender, sexuality, and race, Betancourt unapologetically utilizes modern conceptual frameworks and terminology to interpret the intersectional lives of his premodern subjects. Weaving together religious texts, legal documents, medical writings, and visual culture, *Byzantine Intersectionality* brings to life the rich historical complexity of the Byzantine world and offers readers a glimpse of the ghostly images of marginalized subjectivities so often purged from the historical archive. Particular attention is paid to two pairings: “non-normative sexual practices and sexual consent” and “transmasculine gender presentations and constructions of race based on skin color” (2). Although these pairings structure the book, the larger project sets itself against binary logic, especially the binary opposition between margin and center. As Betancourt writes, “In Byzantium, the center does not depend on ostracizing the margins in order to forcefully exclaim and perpetually reclaim its centrality” (206). This insight is expounded through a series of minor histories that demonstrate the enmeshed complexity of identity in the Byzantine world.

Byzantine Intersectionality covers extensive historical ground, spanning from the fourth century to the conquest of Constantinople in the late fifteenth century. Methodologically it relies on microhistory, archival absences, and recuperative hermeneutics to “articulate new structures of representation” (202). A close reading of competing narratives about the ascetic holy figure Mary of Egypt serves as the jumping-off point for the book. Betancourt highlights how evolving narrative depictions of Mary move from early accounts describing her as a devout woman fleeing lustful men to later versions that foreground her miraculous conversion from a life of depraved sexual desires and practices. The increasingly sexual overtones of the narrative are interpreted in conjunction with Mary’s

masculine representation in visual art and her “burnt-looking skin” (13). Betancourt argues that these factors make this narrative a paradigmatic example that proves the importance of attending to the “multifaceted intersections of skin color, gender stereotypes, racial identity, and ethnic grouping” (14). Here, intersectionality offers the historian an analytic lens capable of dignifying the complexity of overlapping identities and acknowledging how these identities create unique conditions of inequality and oppression.

Chapters 1 and 2 engage with the first strands of intersection proposed by Betancourt: non-normative sexual practices and sexual consent. Chapter 1 examines several theological texts on the Annunciation to trace the increasing importance of Mary’s consent to conception in the post-Iconoclastic period. A surprising thesis appears in this chapter when Betancourt turns to Nicholas Cabasilas’s homily on the Annunciation to suggest that Mary’s consent acts as a foil to Adam’s lack of consent during the creation of Eve. Although Betancourt may push this logic too far when he frames Eve’s creation as the divine rape of Adam, his introduction of a more capacious approach to consent across the biblical and theological record is noteworthy.

Chapter 2 extends the discussion of consent by exploring Byzantine perspectives on pregnancy prevention, termination, and reproductive choice. Beginning with Procopius of Caesarea’s vitriolic text, *The Secret History*, Betancourt explores how the slut-shaming experienced by the empress Theodora works as a rhetorical practice designed to silence both men and women. What is most appreciable about this chapter is the careful mapping of abortive and contraceptive practices in Byzantine texts. The author highlights the expansive breadth of knowledge on these matters while reminding readers that class privilege typically meant that these reproductive technologies were available only to the wealthy. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the pitfalls of two popular interpretive strategies for dealing with Theodora’s shaming. Faulting both attempts to recuperate Theodora through attention to her repentance, charity, and contributions to society and the embrace of Theodora’s shamelessness as a queer identity, Betancourt proposes an alternative reading that embraces “an image of a sexually active, promiscuous, abortion-having, orgy-partaking, oral-sex enjoying, sodomitical Theodora who nevertheless persisted and thrived in the cosmopolitan sphere” (88).

The second half of the book examines transmasculine gender presentations and constructions of race based on skin color. Chapter 3 begins with a reflection on hagiographic texts written between the

late antique and early medieval periods that recount tales of figures assigned female at birth who live as monks. Betancourt laudably rejects the problematic designation of these figures as transvestite saints preferring instead to refer to them as transgender monks. He also reiterates an important theoretical intervention of medieval trans studies when he warns readers that danger lies, not in the possibly anachronistic use of the term transgender, but rather in “modern assumptions about the binary gender system and a conflation of sex and gender terms” (90). Although this chapter would have benefited from a more robust engagement with contemporary trans theory, Betancourt manages to sketch what a trans Byzantine identity might look like more broadly through his attention to gender-crossing saints, transfeminine figures (Elagabalus), gender-affirming surgical procedures, genderqueer subjectivity (eunuchs), and nonbinary identity (Michael Psellus). The author then builds on the call to shift away from binary conceptions of gender and sexuality in chapter 4 through an exploration of same-*gender*, rather than same-sex, desire in the Byzantine world.

In the final chapter, Betancourt, pursues a sustained treatment of race through the image of the Ethiopian eunuch in the *Menologion of Basil the II*. This image highlights the multiple operations of skin color in the Byzantine world, and Betancourt uses it to demonstrate how race intersects with the other identities discussed throughout the book. He concludes by asserting that because the Ethiopian eunuch’s identity lies at the intersection of several marginalized groups, the interpretation of this figure requires new structures of representation grounded in intersectional analysis.

Readers familiar with the origins of intersectionality in black feminist writing may be disappointed to discover that little to no attention is given to black women in the text. Furthermore, although Betancourt has faulted others for neglecting to attend to issues of physical or mental disability, those topics are overlooked here as well. While one book cannot address everything, these topics would have been welcome additions. Nonetheless, the intersectional methodology Betancourt models throughout his text will be of great use to scholars interested in tackling these questions in the future.

The strength of this book lies in its belief that historical work must pursue an unabashed engagement with contemporary questions of oppression and marginalization. Betancourt drives this home in his final exhortation: “If we are not willing to call out the distant historical past for its perpetuation of social inequality, then how will we ever be able to call out our neighbors and ourselves?” (208). With his

careful attention to the intersectional nature of oppression faced by marginalized and non-normative bodies in the premodern Byzantine world, Betancourt makes a timely and substantial intervention in the broader field of medieval studies. Readers who are not familiar with Byzantine social, political, or theological history will find this volume accessible and insightful. The meticulous and extensive primary source citations make this book invaluable for those interested in expanding their understanding of marginalized Byzantine figures. Betancourt's lively prose renders the book utterly readable, making it an excellent addition to both undergraduate and graduate curricula across the fields of religious studies, history, and women's, gender, and sexuality studies.

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The Matter of Virtue: Women's Ethical Action from Chaucer to Shakespeare, by Holly A. Crocker. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. Pp. 360. ISBN: 9780812251418.

How can this broken world be made whole again? Holly Crocker's *The Matter of Virtue: Women's Ethical Action from Chaucer to Shakespeare* re-values the "feminine" as universal and the "weak" as powerful and offers an important and persuasive counter-history of ethics. In doing so, she shows how stories told about women long ago can offer hope for how we think about ethics today. Historically, women could not have virtue if "virtue" was defined solely by the kinds of actions women couldn't take. As Crocker writes, "the classical formulation of *virtus*, with its emphasis on empowered, public action, rendered women's excellences largely invisible" (6). Here, she imagines the power of vulnerability in a way that genuinely offers an alternative to the doctrine of the self-created, independent individual, and the hope that this alternative has existed at least since the Middle Ages.

Crocker's reading of the medieval and early modern periods bears witness to the decline of ethical systems governed by the idea of virtue and the rise of systems governed by rules, neither having much room for the kinds of actions available to women. The ancient heroic virtues often have violent consequences—the Trojan War burnishes its heroes' glory and makes of Criseyde an object of exchange, and later