



# Medieval Feminist Forum

A Journal of Gender and Sexuality

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VOLUME 59 • NUMBER 1 • SUMMER 2023



University Press | Kalamazoo  
MIEVEAL INSTITUTE PUBLICATIONS  
WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

**MEDIEVAL FEMINIST FORUM**  
**A Journal of Gender and Sexuality**

VOLUME 59 • NUMBER 1 • SUMMER 2023

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*Medieval Feminist Forum*, e-issn 2151-6073  
<https://doi.org/10.32773/AVHW9936>

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commissioned “a golden shrine or casket dedicated to her” (135). It had unexpected attributes. When its makers tried to cheat their clients, they suffered unfortunate consequences. Better was Christina of Markyate, making “gifts of mitres and sandals” to send to the Pope (164), who responded politely. Yet one thing not mentioned for Christina is how as a young woman she was nearly seduced by Ranulph Flambard (d. 1128), Bishop of Durham. Luckily, she tricked him and “darted out of the room,” locking the door firmly behind her. One might think that, given such goings-on, medieval women must often have seen the attractions of life as a nun.

Diane Watt has, then, given us a precious book, one that will last. *Women, Writing and Religion in England and Beyond* deserves every success.

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<https://doi.org/10.32773/LRZB4846>

*Medieval Intersections: Gender and Status in Europe in the Middle Ages*, edited by Katherine Weikert and Elena Woodacre. New York: Berghahn Books, 2021. Pp. 132. ISBN: 9781800731561.

Emerging from the 2014 Gender and Medieval Studies conference at the University of Winchester, and originally published as a special issue of *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* in 2016, this collection of essays is a celebration of interdisciplinarity in medieval studies. The volume’s contributors explore the changes and disruptions, the possibilities and boundaries, of gendered medieval lives in light of the shifting nature of status, its limitations as a currency, and its impact both inside and outside male hegemonic cultures. With a geographical emphasis on sources from England, France, and Italy, though Spain and Scandinavia figure as well, the nine chapters cover thematic ground that is likely to function as a stimulating springboard for further work on gender and status.

The introduction has not been updated substantially since 2016, which is something of a missed opportunity. Reflections on Joan Scott’s call to consider gender as a useful category of analysis and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s definition of interdisciplinarity are important markers of a

feminist scholarly lineage, as well as significant analytical cornerstones of the volume; however, given that such references are frequent sightings in the field, it would have been exciting to see the editors, whose shared expertise is wide-ranging, develop their notion of gender and status as more than binary concepts, perceiving them instead to be “complementary and cohesive” and “multiple parts of a societal whole” (5).

To turn to the contributions themselves, the collection, though not divided into sub-sections, generally explores themes in sets of two at a time. First out are Alison Creber and Linda Brown’s essays on noblewomen in secular political life. Comparing and contrasting Peter Damian’s advice letters to two Italian rulers, Godfrey, margrave of Tuscany and Adelaide, ruler of Turin, Creber challenges previous interpretations by arguing that Damian tailored his advice according to the gender of the recipient. Adelaide was pointed towards the recognizably feminine virtues of biblical heroines, though the language associated with her was at times gendered male so as not to disrupt the notion that power itself was innately masculine. If medieval femininity was associated with powerlessness, Brown’s essay on the abduction of Princess-Abbess Marie of Blois proceeds to reinterpret narratives of female vulnerability by assessing Marie’s active role in her 1160 *raptus*; though her contemporaries framed the event as a forceful seizure of a holy woman, Brown portrays Marie as a politically ambitious ex-royal who, as her status shifted and she became the last surviving member of her natal family, chose to leave her religious life behind.

Gender and status were nonetheless significant parts of life within religious institutions as well. Mercedes Pérez Vidal explores how nuns and patronesses fought to overcome the limitations placed on their ability to worship, arguing for participation in the Corpus Christi devotion to be understood as an expression of authority and status. The entitlement of high-status women to religious practice efficiently highlights the overlap between secular and religious life, and how status carried over from one sphere to the next. By contrast, Christina Welch and Rohan Brown’s essay on fluctuating perceptions of the stigmatized medieval leper—a figure often gendered male in the medieval mind—explores the role of religious discourse in shaping perceptions of those at society’s bottom level. The authors conclude that the “status” of the leper stemmed from their very alienation from society, given the significance of this figure in medieval theologians’ thinking around liminality and holy suffering.

Language itself is a matter of status in Natalie Hanna’s linguistic analysis of *The Canterbury Tales*, the author noting how several of the

male characters expect to be worthy of the deeply value-laden term “housbonde” without fulfilling any marital duties. Despite the social and economic status that they bestow upon their lowlier wives, their greedy and domineering conduct ultimately downgrades them to the less prominent term “wedded men.” Elizabeth Leet’s fascinating essay on two fourteenth-century adaptations of Marie de France’s *Lanval* tales then considers power and status as exercised beyond speech acts and traditional political performativity. The brief but politically charged appearance of fairy women intent on rescuing their lovers from false accusations at the court of King Arthur is a display of their ability to exploit the male gaze to their own purposes and find a point where empowerment and objectification intersect. Invoking Donna Haraway’s interpretation of identity as constructed beyond a set of fixed characteristics, a hybrid identity is imagined for the fairies drawing on their possessions and animals—signifiers of economic and social autonomy—as well as their sexual bodies.

The next two chapters bring into play issues surrounding hegemonic cultures of masculinity, with Sean McGlynn exploring how violence, in the form of the martial culture that was central to the practice of chivalry, reinforced traditional relationships of status and hierarchy. Rachel Moss then looks at the multiple meanings of non-romantic male swooning, a practice that reinforced norms of elite masculine behavior and promoted homosocial bonding. These chapters demonstrate how the themes of gender and status are productive not just in relation to those on the margins of medieval society, but when looking to understand the actors of more dominant cultural strands as well. They are followed by Frank Battaglia’s chapter on the topic of early English wrist clasps and the emergence of patriliney in Europe, an essay which rather unexpectedly offers a reinterpretation of attitudes towards matriliney in *Beowulf*. Battaglia’s proposition that the status of early English men was increasingly communicated through adornment of women’s bodies as matrilineal identities were replaced by patrilineal ones, is an elegant conclusion to the volume; the growing strength of patriarchal structures sits alongside traces of a matrilineal past in this essay, thus reminding us that we do not have to keep dominant and liminal cultures thematically separate.

Even so, the absence is felt of an epilogue reflecting on the wider significance of gender and status, and ways forward for these concepts within medieval studies. For instance, given tendencies in the past to fit medieval women’s lives neatly into a maid-wife-widow triptych, the

volume's notions of shifting status and overlapping identities seem to lend a sense of cohesion even in the face of processes of change and disruption in women's lives. Despite the lack of reflection of this kind, however, the collection as a whole demonstrates the possibilities of an interdisciplinary and status-sensitive lens in medieval gender studies, and will be a useful and accessible read for students and scholars alike.

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<https://doi.org/10.32773/JBTP1573>