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REVIEWS

Barbara Rosenwein and Lester K. Little, eds., *Debating the Middle Ages: Issues and Readings* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1998) xiii + 396 pp.

This volume brings together recent scholarship in four areas of medieval studies which have seen dramatic development and innovation over the past two decades. The assembled articles by leading American, British, and continental scholars represent mostly previously published material which has contributed in some way to discussions on the Fall of Rome, Feudalism, Gender, and Religion. Since the works of several of the authors, like Gerd Althoff and Jean-Claude Schmitt, are not widely available in English, the book is additionally useful for exposing readers not fluent in German, French and Italian—and I am thinking of undergraduates in particular—to important trends in continental scholarship.

No book can be all things to all people. The subjects taken up in *Debating the Middle Ages* reflect for the most part those which have also occupied the two editors in some way, both of whom are leading historians of European social history with a focus on religion and religious institutions. Thus other areas of medieval studies which have arguably been transformed in equally profound ways over the past twenty years, particularly art history and literary studies, are not represented as such. But this is one minor drawback to a book which will make an otherwise excellent reader for an undergraduate, or even graduate, course on medieval history or historiography.

Each section is not a coherent presentation of a particular historiographical debate per se, but offers five to six individual perspectives on a select topic. For an actual “debate” in many cases, students must follow up on their own the authors and ideas critiqued, directly or indirectly, in the selected essays. Much of this external literature is noted or discussed in the introductory essays to each chapter which neatly contextualize and summarize the main arguments encapsulated in the articles. I have occasionally noted other pertinent material in my discussion below which readers and students may find interesting.

Part 1 deals with questions of continuity and change in the Latin West in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Walter Pohl’s article on ethnicity is a good overview of the model of early medieval ethnogenesis pioneered by Reinhard Wenskus and developed further by

Herwig Wolfram in his researches in Gothic history.²¹ For a contrasting viewpoint, however, students will need to consult the work of British historian Peter Heather, who studies the barbarian migrations using a more traditional anthropological model of ethnic identity.²² Essays by Walter Goffart, Chris Wickham, and Richard Hodges and David Whitehouse are all critiques of various views of the Germanic migrations and the continuity of classical institutions into the early Middle Ages. Goffart and Hodges and Whitehouse are responses to older theories of the Germanic migrations and the Pirenne thesis, respectively. Wickham's piece is actually a critical review essay on Jean Durliat's *Les Finances Publiques*, a controversial book which tried to demonstrate that the Franks and Lombards inherited and perpetuated the taxation and financial institutions of the Roman state.²³ Ian Wood on the historiography of Clovis's conversion can serve as a very good introduction to Gregory of Tours and is an important corrective to the uncritical view of Clovis's conversion as a central turning point in the early Middle Ages. Alexander Murray on magic and Christianity in the early Middle Ages is a thoughtful critique of some of the arguments made by Valerie Flint in her *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*.²⁴ Students looking for further material—and controversy—along these lines can also be pointed towards James Russell's *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*, and, more recently, Peter Brown's *The Rise of Western Christendom*.²⁵

Part 2, "Feudalism and its Alternatives," presents historiography addressing the problem of feudalism as an analytic tool and the ways of characterizing early medieval society in the absence of this paradigm. Elizabeth A. R. Brown's essay on the "tyranny of a construct" is generally cited as the opening salvo in an ongoing debate that has rigorously problematized the traditional (non-Marxist) view of feudalism, developed by luminaries like Marc Bloch, François Ganshof, and Joseph Strayer.²⁶ The critical resonance here, however, is more with George

²¹Reinhard Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Stammesverfassung: das Werden frühmittelalterlicher Gentes* (Cologne 1961); Herwig Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Los Angeles and Berkeley 1988).

²²Peter Heather, *The Goths* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA 1996).

²³Jean Durliat, *Les Finances Publiques de Diocletien aux Carolingiens (284–889)*, *Beihefte der Francia*, vol. 21 (Sigmaringen 1990).

²⁴Valerie I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton 1991).

²⁵James C. Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity: A sociohistorical approach to religious transformation* (New York 1994); Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity AD 200–1000* (Cambridge, MA 1996).

²⁶See especially Bloch's *Feudal Society*, trans. L. A. Manyon, 2 vols. (Chicago 1961);

Duby's pathbreaking 1953 thesis on the Mâconnais.²⁷ The articles by Pierre Bonassie and Dominique Barthélemy on social transformations, or lack thereof, around the year 1000 represent only a slice of the extensive debates engendered by Duby's conclusions about the disappearance of Carolingian government in central France and the rise of a new castellan class which exercised justice on its own terms. A series of recent exchanges in *Past and Present*, discussed in the editors' preface, between Thomas Bisson, Barthélemy, Chris Wickham, Stephan White, and Timothy Reuter represents the diversity of opinion and approaches to this problem more completely than the two articles here do on their own.²⁸ Frederick Cheyette's classic article, "Giving each his due" ("Suum cuique tribuere") is one of the foundational studies in the new tradition of socio-anthropological legal history pursued elsewhere by scholars like Stephen White, Patrick Geary, and William Ian Miller.²⁹ Finally, Monique Bourin and Robert Durand's short article on village communities suggests, along with Gerd Althoff on political friendship (*amicitia*), some alternate ways of describing and discussing social and political relationships that do not rely on superimposed structures like "feudalism." Both propose that we can parse the language and terms medievals used to describe relationships between people and groups not in search of fixed legal or social categories, but as fluid markers within a mental landscape that trace continuities and changes in how people defined social relationships.

Part 3 assesses the state of the field in medieval women's history and gender studies with articles by Janet Nelson, Pauline Stafford, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, Caroline Bynum, and Susan Mosher Stuard. Among academics, medieval historians have produced some of the best

Ganshof, *Feudalism*, trans. Philip Grierson, 3rd ed. (New York 1964); and Joseph Strayer, *Feudalism* (Princeton 1965) and idem, *The Medieval Origins of the Modern State* (Princeton 1970). Brown's article was the point of departure for a hefty and controversial monograph by Susan Reynolds, which offered more substantial arguments for the absence of "feudal" institutions prior to the twelfth century. See her *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford 1994).

²⁷Georges Duby, *La Société aux XIe et XIIe siècles dans la région mâconnaise* (Paris 1953). While this book was unfortunately never translated into English, his methods and conclusions appear, albeit in somewhat modified form, in his collection *The Chivalrous Society*, trans. Cynthia Postan (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1977).

²⁸This exchange began with the publication of an article by Thomas Bisson, "The 'Feudal Revolution'," *Past and Present* 142 (1994) 6–42, that argued, *pace* Duby, for a transformation in the nature of lordship around the turn of the millennium and criticized some of the newer legal anthropology that had suggested otherwise. See the follow-up articles in "Debate: The Feudal Revolution," *Past and Present* 152 (1996) and 155 (1997).

²⁹This literature cited in the editor's preface (111 n. 18).

scholarship in women's history, managing to focus on women's lives and communities, and even language, without being swamped in the groundswell of post-structuralist gender theory emanating from neighboring language departments; the five essays here are good examples of scholarly rigor producing real and meaningful insights on a subject of supreme importance. In many ways, medieval women's studies in the past decade, including some presented here, are engaging in a critical dialogue with the widely-disseminated thought of scholars like Georges Duby, who suggested that the eleventh-century shift from agnatic to patrilinear forms of inheritance and kinship condemned medieval women to becoming almost a type of chattel shuttled between families to create kinship ties that benefited their more prominent male members.

The trend more recently, however, has been to acknowledge that the significance of gender in the Middle Ages was multivalent, and to explore how both women's and men's lives were circumscribed by gendered ideologies in ways that the rigid binary of patriarchal dominance and female oppression obscured. Indeed, Christiane Klapitsch-Zuber's piece on women and property relations in the Toscana is drawn from a lecture originally delivered in one of Duby's seminars and hews closely to his views. Janet Nelson's article, on the other hand, illustrates how even though queens in the early Middle Ages often found themselves at the mercy of the political machinations of their male kin, they nonetheless managed to carve out significant niches for themselves within that order where they exercised considerable power. Pauline Stafford problematizes earlier studies that imagined a "golden age" for women in Anglo-Saxon England while arguing for their decline beginning with the Norman Conquest in 1066 and the advent of a more strictly patriarchal, feudal-military order. Susan M. Stuard's article, drawing on Italian evidence similar to Klapitsch-Zuber's, underscores the ways in which men in particular and their social identities were considerably constrained by the politics of kinship and managing property within a family. Along with Caroline Bynum's contribution on men's appropriation of female religious imagery—excerpted from her widely acclaimed book, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*—Stuard's essay draws attention to the importance of men and discourses of masculinity within the broader program of gender history, which until recently had focused the critical spotlight largely upon women. To the editors' credit, they have chosen to make this important shift in the state of the question a cornerstone of the "debate" on medieval gender.

The final segment of the book covers the field in which the two editors themselves have garnered the most experience and approbation, namely religion and spirituality and includes: Marie-Dominique Chenu on the theology of the mendicant orders, Sofia Boesch Gajano on miracles in the early Middle Ages; Dominique Iogna-Prat on memorial practices at Cluny; R. I. Moore on literacy and heresy; and Jean-Claude Schmitt on folklore and religiosity. While all the articles are representative of important branches of recent scholarly inquiry on medieval religion and spirituality, they are not necessarily those upon which major debates have recently hinged. A significant absence is John Van Engen's 1986 article on the Christian Middle Ages which represented a sharp critique of the socio-anthropological approach to medieval spirituality expounded by Jacques Le Goff and his colleague, Schmitt.³⁰ Van Engen's views receive a brief and somewhat dismissive remark in the introduction to this section, but it is unfortunate that the essay could not be included in its entirety alongside that of Schmitt where it would have certainly fostered a lively classroom discussion.

Iogna-Pratt's discussion of Cluniac commemorative practices is a good example of another important methodological turn in recent years towards liturgical and memorial texts as sources for cultural and social history. It is important to remember, however, that this work was made possible with the methods of source criticism pioneered by the late German medievalist Karl Schmid and developed by his students and the working groups based at the University of Münster, as cited in a thorough bibliographical note by Iogna-Prat on page 341f. Sofia Gajano's essay deserves special mention here for the way she proposes to read miracle accounts in a discrete social context, arguing that our attention should be directed to the way authors used descriptions of miracles as a way of framing a wide range of issues, from conflict to theology and in particular the ideology of holiness. "In this schema," she writes, "miracles, far from appearing as a simple manifestation of the sacred made possible by the 'credulousness' of an entire society, become the best means of revealing different levels, or relationships among different 'levels' ..." (336). This approach can serve as a useful counterweight to the perceptions of students who often come to medieval religion with a prejudice against the supposedly benighted superstitions so rigorously conveyed in popular culture.

³⁰John Van Engen, "The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem," *American Historical Review* 91 (1986) 519–552.

While Père Chenu's essay on the theology of apostolic poverty readily appreciates the role of exegesis in fostering religious transformation, the strong bias in the section overall towards social history might lead some to dismiss the importance of this field. Despite the ascendance of popular religion as a field of study, the intellectual history of religion is still important and has been the subject of the most insightful and innovative scholarship being written today. Philippe Buc's *L'Ambiguité du Livre* is essential here, as are the numerous studies by Karl F. Morrison on the interpretive structures and hermeneutics of major religious ideologies such as spiritual authority, reform, and holiness.³¹ The editors might have also acknowledged at some point the important studies by Constance Brittain Bouchard and John Howe on the central role of the laity in shaping ecclesiastical policy and (particularly monastic) institutions—an often-overlooked factor in assessing the social interplay of the laity and religious ideology in medieval society.³²

It is said that an intellectual is someone who thinks about his or her own thought. Compilations such as this one will ensure that medieval studies remain intellectually vibrant by encouraging students of the subject to reflect critically upon the forces and ideas that have shaped, and continue to shape, the discipline. Despite my own reflection on some occasional absences or silences in this book, I believe it will prove to be an indispensable tool for both teachers and students in the future. I would hope that the editors, or their equally-qualified successors—undertake to update and expand such a collection in future years as the state of the question in the represented fields inexorably changes over time.

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³¹Philippe Buc, *L'Ambiguité du Livre: prince, pouvoir et peuple dans les commentaires de la Bible au Moyen Age* (Paris 1994). Karl F. Morrison's work on the intellectual history of medieval theology is extensive: his most important work includes *The Mimetic Tradition of Reform in the West* (Princeton 1982); *I am you: the hermeneutics of empathy in Western literature, art and theology* (Princeton 1988); a number of his key essays are collected in *Holiness and Politics in Early Medieval Thought* (London 1985).

³²Constance Brittain Bouchard, *Sword, Miter, and Cloister: Nobility and the Church in Burgundy, 980–1198* (Ithaca 1987); John Howe, *Church Reform and Social Change in Eleventh-Century Italy: Dominic of Sora and his Patrons* (Philadelphia 1997).