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REVIEWS

Mavis E. Mate, *Women in Medieval English Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999) 114 pp.

Part of the "New Studies in Economic and Social History" series, this overview of the economic, legal, and social status of English women during the Middle Ages is "written primarily for undergraduates" according to the blurb on its back cover. Mavis E. Mate sets out to give an overview of historians' views on the subject and to address the question of whether there was a "golden age" for women at any time during the English medieval period. While she does meet those goals, the awkward nature of her prose in many sections makes the book a dry and sometimes frustrating read that is not likely to appeal to the audience at which it is ostensibly aimed. In addition, her study includes relatively little information on the important earlier period from 600 to 1250.

In her introduction, Mate gives the reader a succinct overview of the issues affecting the study of medieval English women's lives. She explains the difficulty of attempting to reconstruct an adequate overall survey of women during the period, drawing attention to the lack of comprehensive administrative records. For example, she notes that information on widows, who had legal autonomy, and ale-brewers, who were regularly fined, is easier to obtain than for women in other situations. She also points out that variations in women's class, the stage they had reached in their lives, and the region in which they lived could create drastic differences in degrees of female autonomy and influence. Mate then discusses historians' viewpoints concerning the existence of a "golden age" for women within the English Middle Ages. She explains that some scholars have placed this putative period of comparative freedom during the Anglo-Saxon period, while others have sited it during the years following the population losses of the Black Death, and that still others have denied the existence of such a time entirely.

Mate places herself within this last camp and, in the two chapters that follow (one dedicated to the period from 600 to 1250 and one on the years from 1250 to 1530), she makes cogent arguments for her point of view based on various aspects of medieval English law, custom, and economics, finally concluding that "there is no picture of steady progress in either women's rights or opportunities. Gains in one place or at one time were matched by losses elsewhere" (96). She goes on to state that "despite evidence that individual women could exercise considerable economic and political clout, women as a group did not enjoy any kind of legal or economic equality Yet at no time in the Middle Ages can women be regarded as downtrodden. Prior to marriage, in the absence of their husbands and as widows women successfully manage households, businesses, and land. Despite the negative ideology, many women took advantage of the opportunities that society did offer, and were able to lead rich and productive lives" (100).

In keeping with her earlier statements about the availability of records concerning widows and ale-brewers, the most interesting and detailed passages in this book tend to concern those two types of women. There is also some good discussion of the status of women within the religious houses and much important information concerning the ways in which women inherited or were

kept from inheriting property, though much of the material on the latter point is written in a way that makes it extremely difficult to digest. The book particularly suffers from infelicitous word choices, punctuation problems, and word omissions in the first pages of the chapter on the late Middle Ages. The writing throughout lacks verve, but what will perhaps create an even greater problem for inexperienced readers is the introduction of terms such as “Domesday” (11) and “villein” (89) without any definition or contextualization provided.

Finally, the comparative lack of information on the early period is disappointing—more than three times as many pages are devoted to the later era. Though there are fewer records extant prior to 1250 than after that date, there is certainly enough material for a more detailed discussion of this important time span, particularly since a major point in Mate’s argument is the refutation of the idea that women enjoyed more power and had more rights during that time. Perhaps the paucity of information offered here has to do with Mate’s own area of specialization, since her work has focused mostly on the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries.

In general, though Mate’s book contains much useful information and makes a compelling argument, her unappealing style obscures her argument and is likely to prove a deterrent to even the most motivated reader. Furthermore, by choosing to concentrate its attention on the period after 1250, it provides relatively little information on an important period of English history—a regrettable omission in any text, but particularly so in one designed for beginners.

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