



Women and Power in the Middle Ages

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Power in medieval society has traditionally been ascribed to figures of public authority?violent knights and conflicting sovereigns who altered the surface of civic life through the exercise of law and force. The wives and consorts of these powerful men have generally been viewed as decorative attendants, while common women were presumed to have had no power or consequence.

Reassessing the conventional definition of power that has shaped such portrayals, *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* reveals the varied manifestations of female power in the medieval household and community?from the cultural power wielded by the wives of Venetian patriarchs to the economic power of English peasant women and the religious power of female saints. Among the specific topics addressed are Griselda's manipulation of silence as power in Chaucer's "The Clerk's Tale"; the extensive networks of influence devised by Lady Honor Lisle; and the role of medieval women book owners as arbiters of lay piety and ambassadors of culture. In every case, the essays seek to transcend simple polarities of public and private, male and female, in order to provide a more realistic analysis of the workings of power in feudal society.

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Editorial Review

Review

According to evidence presented in the articles, medieval women were empowered by a wide variety of means?family connections, networks of patronage and friendship, widowhood, noble birth, gift-giving?but were never granted authority, that is, power that was publicly legitimated. The authors use an excellent range of sources, such as letters, wills, seals, court records, hagiography, literature by both women and men, and guild records. Many of the essays complement each other nicely by allowing the reader to compare the experiences of rural and urban women, or of peasants and nobles. Most also explore questions that use gender as a category of analysis, comparing female and male networks of influence, methods of telling stories, or concepts of the family. The authors are all well-known authorities in their fields, presenting their most current research.

(Choice)

About the Author

Mary Erler is a professor of English at Fordham University. Her books include "Records of Early English Drama: Ecclesiastical London" and "Women, Reading, and Piety in Late Medieval England." Maryanne Kowaleski, who also teaches at Fordham, is the Joseph Fitzpatrick S.J. Distinguished Professor and Director of Medieval Studies. Her books include "Local Markets and Regional Trade in Medieval Exeter" and "Medieval Towns: A Reader."

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