



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

University of Wollongong
Research Online

Faculty of Arts - Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts

2005

Review of Women in the Middle Ages: An Encyclopedia, 2 Vols

Louise D'Arcens

University of Wollongong, louised@uow.edu.au

Publication Details

D'Arcens, L, Review of Women in the Middle Ages: An Encyclopedia, 2 Vols, Wilson, KM and Margolis, N (eds), The Medieval Review, 2005.

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:
research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Wilson, Katharina M., and Nadia Margolis, eds. *Women in the Middle Ages: An Encyclopedia*, 2 vols. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004. Pp. xxxii and xviii, 997. \$199.95 (set) (hb). ISBN: 0-313-33016-6 (set), 0-313-33017-4 (vol. I), 0-313-33018-2 (vol. II).

Reviewed by:

Louise D'Arcens
University of Wollongong
louised@uow.edu.au

At the 2003 International Congress at Leeds, a panel posed the question of whether feminist medieval studies can be said today to be "pressing or passé." Far from signalling the obsolescence of feminist investigations into the Middle Ages, the posing of such a question reflects the extent to which feminist scholarship, and in particular the study of medieval women, has consolidated its position within the larger field of Medieval Studies. Similarly, the appearance of a watershed resource such as *Women in the Middle Ages: An Encyclopedia* is a clear sign not of only how far scholarship on medieval women has come over the past three decades or so, but also how indispensable gender has become as an analytical category that informs our understanding of the medieval period.

The editors of *Women of the Middle Ages: An Encyclopedia* are well placed to assemble such volumes on medieval women. Wilson is widely known for her vital editorial contribution to the study of early women writers, with an output comprising not only an encyclopedia on Continental women writers, but also a number of essay collections on early women writers, including her pioneering collection *Medieval Women Writers* (Georgia University Press, 1984). Margolis, also a literary scholar, is best known for her important contribution to the study of Christine de Pizan and Joan of Arc. Despite their shared literary background, however, the editors do not allow their own particular scholarly interests to define the shape of the volume. Instead, they solicit entries on a wide range of relevant subjects, with entries on writers comprising a little under one-fifth of the total entries, which number over three hundred.

The editors do not claim that the *Encyclopedia* is completely comprehensive in its coverage of medieval women. Nevertheless, as pointed out in the Preface to Volume I, it does cast its historical net widely, acknowledging the lives and activities of both the great and the humble. The historical treatment of medieval women's lives ranges from biographical entries on prominent secular and religious women to longer entries that discuss female communities and document less famous women's participation in a wide array of medieval occupations. These include religious life, medicine, music, trade, and even, according to Thomas Head's entry on Juliana Berners, angling and sports writing. There are also entries offering information on social customs and practices that had an impact on medieval women's lives, such as dress codes in Western Europe and foot binding in medieval China.

The literary entries in the *Encyclopedia* range from discussions of women writers to analyses of the representations of significant female literary figures such as Melusine, Griselda, and Criseyde. There are also entries on literary genres relevant to women, such as courtesy manuals, and literary themes that are known to have been deployed by women writers, such as, for instance, *minne*. Entries on the writers include current reconsiderations of their *oeuvres*: for instance Eric Hicks's entry on Heloise, while mainly dwelling on her best-known epistles, refers also to recent scholarly additions to the corpus of her letters and sermons. Women whose legendary or mythic status exceeds knowledge of their historical existence, such as Pope Joan and Lady Godiva, are also included. The necessary brevity of the encyclopedia entry format proves more congenial to some subjects than others. While some subjects can be competently covered in around a page, Denise-Renée Barberet's entry on the most pivotal female figure of the Western Middle Ages, the Virgin Mary, has to compress into a few short pages a selective summary of the Virgin's long and varied career in medieval doctrine, literature, art, and popular religious practice.

One particularly welcome inclusion in the *Encyclopedia* is that of Middle-Eastern, South and East Asian, and even Aztec women of the Middle Ages. This move beyond Western ethnocentrism is signalled on the two volumes' handsome covers, which juxtapose images of European women with those of East Asian women. It is arguably the case that the relative smallness of the latter images reflects the relatively minor place of non-western women within the *Encyclopedia*. Nevertheless, the genuine effort to include them alongside continental and English women is reflected by the inclusion not just of well-known non-western women such as Murasaki Shikibu but also others who are arguably less familiar to Western readers, such as the twelfth-century Japanese Buddhist nun-poet Abutsu-Ni (entry by Shigemi Sasaki). These women are also cross-referenced with comparative Western women as well as other Asian women: for instance both Abutsu-Ni's and Murasaki's entries are cross-referenced to Christine de Pizan's as well as to one another's.

The *Encyclopedia's* contributors do not aim simply to recount facts, but also to trace the changing fortunes of medieval women at the hands of history and of scholarship. This is achieved through judicious negotiation of scholarly debate in a number of the entries. For the most part these entries, presumably with the general reader in mind, are careful not to dwell at length on the minutiae of such debates at the expense of clarity and accessibility. One example among many is Glyn S. Burgess's entry on Marie de France which, rather than opening with a potentially confusing discussion the identification and dating debates around Marie, sensibly includes this information in the closing stages of his discussion. Nevertheless, this kind of complexity is not shied away from when it is intellectually necessary to discussing the subject at hand. One example of this is Anne Berthelot's entry entitled "Enchantresses, Fays (Fées) and Fairies" which rightly begins with a discussion of the linguistic difficulties involved in defining and categorizing these elusive figures in medieval literature.

The editors have also made an effort to assist readers by including, at the beginning of both volumes, alternative categorizations to facilitate a range of search paths. To take a single example, Christine de Pizan is listed not only under the category "writers," but also "historians," "manuals of conduct," "wives and widows," "lovers and beloved," "mothers," "misogynist/feminist debates," and "scholars, thinkers, humanists, and teachers." This multiple categorization is further supplemented, as mentioned above, by the inclusion of helpful cross-searching suggestions at the end of most entries.

As a resource on medieval women, the *Encyclopedia* is valuable for a readership ranging from undergraduates in medieval studies and gender studies to more seasoned scholars in these fields. The generous, judiciously selected, and up-to-date bibliographies for each entry offer further direction for the more ambitious or expert reader, while the lucid, accessible prose style makes the volume readable for a more general reader. It is admirable to find such consistency of style throughout the *Encyclopedia's* two volumes, especially given the fact that it boasts an impressive number of leading scholars with otherwise quite distinct prose styles.

There is little to say by way of criticism for this valuable resource. To say that it is not always as generously illustrated as one might hope seems in itself ungenerous, given how much else is offered here. There is no avoiding the inbuilt obsolescence of an encyclopedia devoted to such a vibrant, rapidly developing area of study; indeed, important new work on a number of medieval women has been released since the date of the *Encyclopedia's* publication. Nevertheless, this is the kind of important reference work that, because of its breadth and clarity, as well as its depth of scholarship, has a place not only in university libraries and on medievalists' bookshelves, but also in general reference libraries everywhere.