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## MARGINALIA

Welcome to the first Marginalia Book Review column. I will be offering our Misericordia International members short reviews of books on related themes in each issue, aimed at both the professional and the amateur. In the following issues I hope to review more recently published books and include order forms from the publishers for our membership's convenience. I would also encourage any of our members with new books in print, in either French or English, to ask their publisher to send a review copy to:

N. Lee Wood  
Marginalia Book Review Editor  
1, rue Maître Albert  
75005, Paris, France.

### A Small Sound of the Trumpet, Women in Medieval Life

by Margaret Wade Labarge  
Boston, Beacon Press

This exceptionally readable book has quickly become a masterpiece on the history of medieval women by one of the most respected of medieval scholars. Much of medieval history up until the last few decades has been largely by men about men, with women, usually queens, appearing as rare exceptions to the rule. The advent of medieval history of, for and by women no doubt is partly a result of the rise of feminism in the last half of this century. But, also partly as a result of feminism and partly because the Middle Ages is so conveniently replete with examples of extreme misogyny, the danger has been to use women's history as a political forum of modern-day ills. Labarge had skillfully and thankfully balanced facts and opinions in this work; not our opinions but the opinions of the women who lived the facts. From queens to beggars, peasants to harlots, she examines the entire spectrum of female existence

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in medieval Europe. Backed by solid documented research and abundant anecdotal evidence, the women in these pages appear not as the dejected, subservient slaves of men but as shrewd survivors battling husbands and Church with humor, common sense and occasionally even love, a spirited tenacity in the face of odds many modern women might find overwhelming.

Women of the Medieval World

edited by Julius Kirshner & Suzanne F. Wemple  
Oxford, Basil Blackwell, Ltd.

This collection of articles on medieval women combines the talents of fourteen scholars, six men and eight women, most of whom are associated with Columbia University. The advantage of an essay collection is not only a diversity of viewpoints, but the range of subject matter. Bernard McGinn examines the effects of Roman Sibylline prophetic traditions on the Christian theology of the Middle Ages. Jo Ann McNamara shows how hagiographies written by Merovingian nuns were used to protect their religious communities against predatory men. Jane Bishop examines the marital advice of bishops, sometimes useful, sometimes malicious, but often surprisingly original and humorous. Suzanne Wemple, co-editor of the collection, contributes a history of the rise and fall of one of the most important female monasteries in northern Italy. Phyllis Roberts thoroughly dissects Stephen Langton's Sermo de Virginibus and includes the whole sermon in Latin. Michael Goodich's essay on the servant as saint examines how the Church created examples of virtuous lives of female servants, routinely used and sexually abused, to create popular saints to appeal to their larger disenfranchised servant populations. Leah Lydia Otis examines the legitimacy of prostitution and brothels in late medieval Perpignan. Stephen Wessley takes a close look at female imagery in Joachim's Order of Fiore. Ronald Musto studies the relationship between Queen Sanchia of Naples and the Franciscan order

of monks. Janet Senderowitz Loengard writes on English dowers in the year 1200, with almost as much footnote material as text. Julius Kirshner, the other co-editor of the collection, challenges the opinion that the legal rights of women declined in the late Middle Ages in an extensive essay on wives' claims against insolvent husbands in Late Medieval Italy. John Day writes on the rights of women in Medieval Sardinia and the lasting effect in Sardinian society. Helen Rodnite Lemay presents a fascinating study on Anthonius Guainerius' 15th century medical treatise on medieval gynecology, Tractatus de matricibus. Beatrice Gottlieb takes a lively and much needed skeptical look at medieval "feminism", in particular the work of Christine de Pizan, and warns against modern feminist perceptions being imposed on history. This is an outstanding collection, a must read for anyone interested in the history of medieval women. As a minor personal plus, extensive footnotes are included at the bottom of the pages rather than at the end of the book or essays.

Le Chevalier, la Femme et le Prete

by George Duby (Trans. by Barbara Bray)

Paris, Librairie Hachette

Also existing in an English translation, (Penguin Books, England), The Knight, the Lady and the Priest is an effervescent study of marriage in medieval France, with a twist of lemon. George Duby, a distinguished historian known affectionately in France as "Uncle George", is one of those rare academics with a wide popular audience. In both the French and the English translation, the prose is straightforward, his arguments well organized and well delivered. His general deductions are illustrated with clear anecdotal evidence. However, this book has as much to do with his theories about medieval violence as it does with medieval marriage; a depressing litany of endless rape, incest, abduction, wife-beating and murder. While the Middle Ages was certainly a violently misogynist era, I doubt whether rape and murder were that

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widespread, although the argument is made that husbands and fathers did have a vested interest in protecting their valuable property. Duby's theory has a definite appeal, especially for the modern day feminist, but the limited number of footnote sources, and the often dubious candor of frequently malicious contemporary chroniclers gives me pause for thought.

The Fourth Estate

A History of Women in the Middle Ages

by Shulamith Shahar (Trans. by Chaya Galai)

London & New York, University Paperbacks

Translated from German by Chaya Galai, Shahar's study of medieval woman does not, by her stated intention, deal with the roles of specific queens, or of the wives, sisters, mothers or mistresses of kings or feudal lords, or of historical flukes such as Joan of Arc. Rather, this exhaustive work focuses on the general conditions of medieval women in society, in life and under the law. In the chapter on secular law, Shahar goes beyond examining the effect of rape and murder on medieval women, to women's testimony in court, the prison conditions, and even arguments on the pros and cons of various methods of punishment and execution by their contemporary magistrates. The social status, life and legal rights of nuns, married women, and noblewomen, the career opportunities for working townswomen, the status of peasants, bastards, heretics and witches from the 12th to the 15th century are examined with the same painstaking detail. Shahar uses numerous anecdotal evidence gleaned from guild regulations, tax rolls, court records, business receipts and invoices, census registers, monastical grants, diaries and letters - just about every form of account preserved from those centuries. Shahar's scholarly research is impeccable and the complex picture Shahar draws of the lives of medieval women is a touch bitter, occasionally depressing, but always fascinating and profound.

Sister of WisdomSt. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine

by Barbara Newman

Berkeley, University of California Press

Although the emphasis of our organization is on the secular world, I have included this book because of the way Hildegard was able to utilize the restrictions of her monastic life in her struggle to improve the status of women in her time, both religious and secular. Hildegard was the tenth child of noble parents who, like many with superfluous daughters, gave the unwanted infant to the Church as a convenient "tithing". During the next eighty years of her life she was to prove talented, intelligent and determined, manipulating both her notoriety as a mystic and her "female weakness" as tools to further her personal goals in a world dominated by men. Even the great misogynist of her era, Bernard of Clairvaux, praised and endorsed her work. And like Bernard, Hildegard felt no hesitation in involving herself, often effectively, in political and secular affairs. Newman has written an exhaustive and insightful study of Hildegard far beyond an analysis of her mysticism. She has examined how this little-known abbess was able to reconcile her religious faith with her secular concerns. Hildegard was not simply another charismatic mystic, but a talented scientist, political mediator and social reformer. The abbess's work was influenced as much by older myths and magical symbolism as it was by Biblical apostles, and her writings reveal earthy and revolutionary opinions about everything from medicine to human sexuality to feminism. At a time when the "sin of Eve" was used to condemn women by a male-dominated Church, Hildegard helped to cultivate the worship of the Mother of God and through the elevation of the Virgin promote the more earthly rights of women. Her visionary work had a lasting effect on the life of medieval women, both inside and outside the Church.

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Pillars of the Earth

by Ken Follett

New York, Signet International Paperback, NAL

And now on a lighter note. Ken Follett, more widely known for his spy thrillers, sets his first historical novel, Pillars of the Earth in King Stephen's England. Written with his usual page-turning thriller style, it is packed with murder, arson, treachery, torture, hate, lust and love, as well as a lot about how to build a Gothic cathedral. His plucky heroine, Aliena, daughter of the earl of Shiring, fights to regain her father's lands and title for her brother, Richard, while battling evil villains, scheming churchmen, and the general misogyny of the times. The story is crammed to the gills with historical trivia, details of fulling wool, medieval quarries and the various grains baked in bread. Too much, in fact, because it becomes obvious Follett has done a tremendous amount of research and cannot bear to waste a single word of it. The other main fault with the book is all too familiar: the 12th century woman with a 20th century feminist consciousness. It may indeed be PC these days for plucky heroines to triumph over male chauvinist pigs, but Follett's Aliena and the other female characters strain the limits of my ability to suspend disbelief. There is an actual murder mystery, but after wading through 973 pages with a cast of thousands and the countless number of historical details, I was too exhausted by the end to much care whodunit.

