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Review Essay: Mary Beth Rose, ed., *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*

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Edmund Ironside in the Malone Society edition; those in the street are probably best advised not to read it at all.

Charles L. Squier
University of Colorado-Boulder

Mary Beth Rose, ed., *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Syracuse University, 1986.

This interdisciplinary collection of eleven essays presents, in large part, the fruits of a conference, "Changing Perspectives on Women in the Renaissance," held at The Newberry Library in 1983. The volume contains both historical and literary studies, although literary subjects tend to predominate, as do Renaissance subjects in comparison to medieval. The influence of pioneering feminist historian Joan Kelly is readily apparent in the interdisciplinary approach, in the emphasis placed on examining the influence of sexual ideologies, and in the basic notion of using public and private spheres as an analytical framework.

The essays fall into two distinct groups. The first examines the effects on women of a patriarchal sexual ideology. The initial essay explores a significant social change that began concurrently with the advent of the Renaissance, namely that women's roles and activities were increasingly forced out of what was becoming defined as the public sphere of life. Another essay investigates the possibility that medieval nuns committed self-mutilation in order to safeguard the state of virginity, which the Church deemed essential to their being. Yet another uses gender distinction to examine statistics that relate to accusation and punishment during the Italian Inquisition. Two selections analyze well-known texts by men, Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, in order to suggest how these texts reflect an ambiguous attitude toward women. The last essay in the first part looks at the political uses of androgynous images by drawing a parallel between Shakespeare's comic heroines (acted by boys) and Elizabeth I's self-defined image as "prince." The second half of the book contains essays that examine texts by women (Margery Kemp, Sister Beatrice del Sera, the Countess of Pembroke, Madeleine and Catherine des Roches, the Duchess of Newcastle, Ann Fanshawe, Alice Thorton, and Anne Halkett). These women's writings illustrate various responses to the problem of attempting to create a self-identity through literary endeavors usually reserved for men.

As this collection illustrates, medieval and Renaissance women were not attempting to contradict the prevailing patriarchal ideologies; nevertheless, their lives reveal a struggle to reconcile their personal lives with the lives

they were expected to lead. The ways in which they accomplished a synthesis, or failed to, offer an illuminating and instructive insight into the period. One or two of the essays could have been more tightly focused, and one might object to stretching the book's title to include an article on late seventeenth-century figures. These, however, are minor problems when compared to the success the essayists achieve in avoiding the overly simplistic or polarized presentation that marks some efforts at gender-based analysis.

In spite of the tentative quality of several of the contributions, this collection will occupy an honorable place among the increasing number of studies that seek to expand and redefine our traditional views of history by asking questions based on gender-defined factors. Editor Rose has compiled a volume whose innovation and provocative approaches will certainly inspire potential future scholarship as well as serve to broaden the perspective of medieval and Renaissance specialists and scholars investigating feminist studies generally.

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