

## Women of the Twelfth Century

**Review Number:**

73

**Publish date:**

Tuesday, 1 June, 1999

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**ISBN:**

9780745616957

**Date of Publication:**

1997

**Pages:**

104pp.

**Publisher:**

Polity Press

**Publisher url:**

<http://www.polity.co.uk/book.asp?ref=9780745616957>

**Place of Publication:**

Oxford

**Author:**

Georges Duby

**ISBN:**

9780745617893

**Date of Publication:**

1997

**Pages:**

160pp.

**Publisher:**

Polity Press

**Publisher url:**

<http://www.polity.co.uk/book.asp?ref=9780745617893>

**Place of Publication:**

Oxford

**Author:**

Georges Duby

**ISBN:**

9780745619002

**Date of Publication:**

1998

**Pages:**

128pp.

**Publisher:**

Polity Press

**Publisher url:**

**Place of Publication:**

Oxford

**Reviewer:**

Ann Kettle

There can be no response to this review as Georges Duby, the author of this trilogy died, full of honours, on 3 December 1996 before even the first of the translated volumes was published. This is the last work of a great medieval historian in which he attempts to forget that he is a man with his own idea of women and tries to get close to the women of the twelfth century. He had been preoccupied with this idea for at least 15 years. In the introduction to *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest* (1981) he announced:

What I want to do next is to demystify this male discourse and find out what the position of women really was in the period with which I am concerned.

In *Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages* (1988) he noted:

The middle ages were resolutely male. All the opinions that reach and inform me were held by men, convinced of the superiority of their sex. I hear only them. Nevertheless, I listen to them speaking here about desire, and consequently about women. Men were afraid of them and, to reassure themselves, despised them. My aim is to reveal the hidden part, the feminine. To find out what women were in those distant times, that is my present endeavour.

In the course of his search for the traces left by women in the twelfth century he says that he became fond of the women even though he could glimpse only 'shadowy figures, without shape, without depth and without individuality'. (i.2) In the end he has to concede defeat and admit that he has found out much more about the men who were the contemporaries of these fleeting images and about how they saw women. The trilogy ends with a gallant, if limp, apology to the women he has been trying to find: 'It was the men, ultimately, who failed women'. (iii.122) This admission of defeat at the end of a scholarly career immersed in the twelfth century is rather disheartening to those of us interested in history of women in the middle ages and it is enlightening to ask why Duby finds women so elusive and to try to explain why his sympathetic male gaze at mediaeval women is so disappointing and ultimately unsatisfactory.

It is not easy to criticise the last work of a master of the historian's craft. This is history in the grand manner: magisterial, confidently relaxed and redolent of distilled scholarship lightly worn. It is a wonderfully easy read, helped by the excellent translation. The translator so skilfully reproduces Duby's clear and direct style that modernisms such as 'young girls up for grabs' (i.48), churchmen who 'laid it on the line' (iii.6) or a young man 'strutting his stuff at tournaments in search of a good catch' (ii.42) fail to jar. The tone is personal and intimate; Duby speaks directly to his readers, he tells us what he is trying to do, how he is going to do it and freely admits his limitations and frustrations. There is none of the usual scholarly apparatus: no footnotes, no bibliography, no index, quotations are from primary sources only and there are very few references to other historians. Occasionally, however, a phrase such as 'recent excavations in this spot have revealed...' (ii.119) gives an indication of the depth of his knowledge. Duby as a co - editor of the multi-volume *Histoire des Femmes*, must have been familiar with recent writing about the history of women in the middle ages but he gives little indication of it here. He reveals, however, that he does not approve of some recent treatments of women in the twelfth century: 'I have fought long and hard against the hypothesis of a promotion of women in the feudal age, since the arguments put forward to support this thesis seem to me unconvincing.' (i.97).

Duby concedes that 'history has for too long been written without regard for women' but immediately warns that 'we must not therefore fall into the opposite trap of conceiving a history of women which pays no

attention to men'. (ii.94) He hopes to explain the relations between the two sexes by a close examination of the surviving written evidence. He tries to disarm criticism by saying that he cannot go beyond his texts; 'the historian of these distant periods has no way of probing the secrets of hearts'. (ii.133). He makes it clear that he sees himself as a 'positivist' historian:

For me the positive is not the reality of the 'small true facts'; I am well aware that I will never achieve this. The positive is the concrete object, this text which preserves an echo, or a reflection, of words and deeds irrevocably lost.

Duby is superbly confident in his handling of his chosen texts and can conjure from them some memorable images of women, such as Gunnor, the mistress of Duke Richard I of Normandy who startled her husband by asserting her right to turn her back on him in bed once he had married her, or Petronella, the child bride of Arnold III of Ardres observed, 'simple in soul and childlike in body' (ii.130), cooling herself by swimming in a fishpond or Arlette, the mother of William the Conqueror, surrendering herself to his father and dreaming of a tree growing out of her belly and giving shade to the whole of Normandy. He tries hard to be sympathetic to women; in the poetic conclusions to each of the volumes he recognises their parlous condition and, although he rejects the feminist viewpoint (he refuses, for example, to see Eleanor of Aquitaine as the 'first heroine of the feminist struggle' (i.15)), he recognises the need to look for the turning points which punctuate the miserable history of women in the middle ages.

One must ask why he finds it so difficult to see his women clearly? It may be the nature of the texts which he knows so well. The authors are not only all male and clerical, they are fixated on masculine values and all of the texts Duby uses, even the fictional ones, are didactic in that they were trying to change the way that men and women behave. It may lie in the period of his enquiry as he admits that the culture of the twelfth century was a very masculine one. It may be a matter of the region he studies, the country of the langue d'oïl where even the courtly poets were churchmen. Or it may be the limited group of women from the upper ranks of society who appear in his texts. Or it may lie in his own ingrained attitudes as an elderly, male and French medieval historian. For all the excellent clarity of his exposition he can appear patronising about the women he is writing about, for example, 'She retained a portion of reason; pretty small, of course; in her desire predominated.' (i.103) Occasionally he seems to take a salacious delight in describing the sins of women:

If they had no luck, in default of a partner of good blood, they made do with the menservants, forcing them to have sex with them as if they were bitches on heat. (iii.6)

or repeating the brutally direct interrogations of women by churchmen:

Have you made what some women as in the habit of making, have you made a certain machine of the right size for you, have you bound it to the site of your sex or that of a woman friend and have you fornicated with other evil women, or others with you, with this instrument or another? (iii.12)

It is significant that Duby does not attempt to write a continuous history of women in the twelfth century but produces three volumes, each with a different emphasis and based on different kinds of sources, which can be read separately but which are linked by common themes. In the first volume, *Eleanor of Aquitaine and Six Others* the approach is biographical and the main sources are chronicles and romances. He tells the stories of seven women, three of them real: Eleanor of Aquitaine, Héloïse and Juetta (a Flemish widow who became a recluse), one of them, Mary Magdalen, a legend and three of them: Iseult, Soredamors and Fenice, fictional women invented by male authors. In his treatment of the real women he seems concerned to cut

them down to size, to strip away the accretions of legend and reveal how even women who appear to be powerful were really frail and under the control of men. He is inclined to pity Eleanor of Aquitaine and doubts the authenticity of the correspondence between Héloïse and Abelard which he sees as a moral treatise with lessons to teach about the proper dependence of women on men and the need for women to overcome carnal desires. He explains the apparently powerful heroines of romance as an attempt to civilise the young men of the courts of northern Europe at a time when more of them were allowed to marry. In these profiles of individual women he claims to have identified the three main features of woman's place in the world order of the twelfth century. Women were primarily objects to be used by the men who controlled their space and their time; since women did not always allow themselves to be controlled, men feared them as naturally bad, carrying within them the seeds of sin and death; finally women were deceitful because they were weak.

The second volume, *Remembering the Dead*, is based on one source, the family memorials of the dukes of Normandy, counts of Flanders and other great French families. Here Duby tries to find out what knights and priests thought about the women of their blood and what place those women occupied in the households and hierarchies of the twelfth century. Once more the images are fleeting and indistinct: 'lineage, after all, was a man's business' and women were merely 'tools of alliance', the bridge between lineages. (ii.33). Access to women had to be strictly controlled and their sexual activities contained within well-ordered households. The main method of control was the political act of marriage. 'Women were obliged to submit to the decisions of the men of the family, whose job it was to make profitable and judicious use of their procreative capabilities.' (ii.127) Duby finds in these family memorials evidence of a strict division between the public domain of men and the private, contained space of women. The separate lives of men and women is one of the main themes of the trilogy:

This was a society which took care that the feminine and the masculine were strictly separated, assigning each to its place. (ii.106)

Duby concludes that women were expected to be docile daughters, understanding wives, prolific mothers and, in old age, pious widows. The final function of women within the household was to lead the mourning for their men, prepare their remains for burial and preserve their memory faithfully.

With the third, and perhaps the most interesting, volume, *Eve and the Church*, we reach the real villains, the clerical writers of letters, sermons and penitentials, who were 'trapped in their male prejudices and obliged to keep away from women and fear them'. (iii.2) There are four sections: 'The Sins of Women' based on collections of sermons and similar didactic and penitential writings; 'The Fall' which tells the story of Eve from twelfth-century commentaries on Genesis; 'Speaking to Women' based on sermons and letters written to high born women; and 'Love' which concentrates on the *De Amore* of Andreas Capellanus. Duby's main argument is that the deeply misogynist attitude of churchmen was tempered during the twelfth century as new meanings of love were developed. The clerical writers in the courts of northern Europe began to address the spiritual needs of women, not only of their preferred audience of virgin nuns but also of married women whose salvation had previously been left to their husbands. The church had a considerable difficulty with married woman: the 'stumbling block' (iii.92) of sex. Just as the church imposed in this century its idea of marriage as a way of curbing sexuality, it decided, Duby argues, to take over from husbands the control of the behaviour of their wives and held out the hope of salvation to devout married women, provided they did not take pleasure in physical love. Yet another burden was placed on wives: they were expected to have two husbands, one on earth and the other in heaven, each of whom had rights over them. The manuals of courtly love had the same didactic function as letters and sermons in that they were intended to regulate the relations between the sexes. In the game of courtly love it was the husband who pulled the strings. As always men were in control, they were the ones that mattered. Women were a race apart, a different and hostile species and a constant source of temptation to men. It was necessary to master them, keep them in seclusion and protect them from their own natures.

Duby has not really written a history of women in the twelfth century, his chosen sources do not allow it. He

provides the male context for women but the women themselves have eluded him. Nor is he writing the history of the relations between the sexes - one side of the equation is missing. He is really writing the history of male attitudes towards women. He feels obliged to look for signs of this attitude changing and thinks that he has detected some 'slight signs of improvement' in the last two decades of the century with the economic upswing and the beginning of the 'feminisation' of Christianity. This improvement, however, does not amount to more than a slight change in the way that women of the upper classes were controlled by men. Seduction replaced rape and the promise of rapture in heaven was held out to wives provided they renounced pleasure on earth. The church overcame its distaste for women and completed its work of civilising society by regulating sexual relations to the advantage of men.

The women of this period remained, certainly, subject to the power of men, who still regarded them as dangerous and frail. A few of the latter, however, and a growing number, discovered them as objects and subjects of love. They looked at them with a less disdainful eye. In this way, women began imperceptibly to extricate themselves from the heaviest of the shackles in which they were bound by masculine power. (i.104)

In the end it amounts to a rather old fashioned, out dated and extremely pessimistic view of the position of women in the high middle ages. There is little advance on Eileen Power's pioneering work on medieval women. Duby simply elaborates, with great erudition, on her view that those who wrote about women in the middle ages came from two narrow castes, lay and clerical, who were ignorant of the great mass of womankind. He takes a very narrow view of the nature of female power:

The nature of women made them unsuitable to the exercise of public power. Some, nevertheless, managed to snatch a few crumbs, but discreetly, and by exploiting their feminine resources. When they were young, they played on the desire that the sight and the touch of their body aroused in the bodies of men, that of their husband and those of the knights of the court. In old age, they relied on the tender regard of their sons. (ii.145)

and too easily gives up the attempt to get behind 'the screen that is erected before the historian's eyes by the invective and contempt of men.' (iii.121). Students often find it difficult to understand the nature and extent of clerical misogyny in the middle ages and I would direct them to the final volume for an inspired explanation of clerical attitudes to women but advise them to look elsewhere to find out what life was like for women in the middle ages. It would be interesting to know what Jean Birrell, herself a noted medieval historian, thought about the central themes of these books which she has translated with such skill and sensitivity.

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