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Cordelia Beattie

## **Introduction: Gender, Power, and Difference**

In her recent book, *History Matters*, the medievalist Judith Bennett argued that the historiography of women's and gender history is shaped around two key issues. The first, following Joan W. Scott's essay in the 1986 issue of the *American Historical Review*, is the study of gender as a 'primary way of signifying relationships of power'. For Scott, a perceived hierarchical relationship between male and female allowed other relationships to be coded masculine/feminine, in a way that established and naturalized the gendered coding and thus reaffirmed the hierarchical relationship. The second is the study of difference. Historians of women have long argued that 'women' cannot be treated as a unified category, anymore than 'men' can.<sup>1</sup> People differ by class, 'race', ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and any number of other categories.<sup>2</sup> Both these issues - gender and difference and gender and power - run through this collection of essays, although gender and difference, with a particular focus on religion and ethnicity, is the uniting thread. This introductory essay, though, will argue that we cannot ignore the power dynamic, given that the intersections of gender, religion and ethnicity are all being studied here from Western, Christian, male-authored texts.

### Intersections: Gender and Difference

The study of 'difference' began as an attempt to break from all sorts of universalizing tendencies, such as the assumed norm of the male, elite, white, Eurocentric heterosexual.<sup>3</sup> However, for some scholars, the attention to difference within

women's and gender history sometimes led to 'an uncritical discourse of plurality', 'a celebration of diversity that urges us more to respect difference than to resist the inequalities that can arise from it'.<sup>4</sup> Such scholars have argued that when thinking about gender and difference we need to keep in mind power relations, dominance, and subordination.<sup>5</sup> That is, how some groups designate other groups as 'different' in order to dominate them. A good example is that of 'racial' difference, that is, designating someone as different because of external characteristics such as skin colour. For Gerda Lerner, 'It is not "difference" that is the problem. It is dominance justified by appeals to constructed differences that is the problem.'<sup>6</sup>

This approach has recently been forcefully articulated by multiracial feminists,<sup>7</sup> who argue that gender is constructed by a range of interlocking inequalities, what Patricia Hill Collins has called a 'matrix of domination'.<sup>8</sup> The matrix of domination seeks to account for the multiple ways that people experience gender, 'race', class and sexuality, depending on their position in the structures of gender, 'race', class, and sexuality.<sup>9</sup> The idea is that several fundamental systems work *with and through* each other. The 'intersections' of our title thus emphasizes the crosscutting nature of hierarchies.<sup>10</sup> I have some sympathy with Lerner's view that the various forms of oppression are so connected that it might be more productive to see them as 'one, inseparable system with different manifestations', rather than as 'separate though intersecting and overlapping systems', but it is the intention of this volume to focus in on a *particular* set of intersections within this larger system.<sup>11</sup>

For the modern period, the core focus has often been 'race', class, and gender. However, taking the approach into a medieval realm helps to shed a different light because these categories are not as apparently self-evident (socially or analytically) in the pre-modern world. When Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack produced an

essay collection entitled *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, Farmer explained that their contributors tended to avoid terms like ‘race’ and ‘class’ because they might cause readers to conflate medieval and modern categories of difference.<sup>12</sup> The key categories in their collection are gender and social status, religion (sometimes bracketed with ethnicity), and sexualities. The focus in this book is deliberately narrower. In the essays that follow, the emphasis is on gender and religious difference and/or ethnicity, although attention is often given to social status and sexuality because they are all bound up together.

Many of the essays in this collection originated as papers presented at the 2008 Gender and Medieval Studies conference, which had as its theme ‘Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages’.<sup>13</sup> The key area that was explored at this conference was gender and religious difference, with the focus variously on Christians and Jews, Christians and Muslims, Christians and pagans, and (Christian) religious life versus secular life. This collection seeks to build on that base. We also decided to make ethnicity a key category. As Robert Bartlett has argued, there is a problem of distinguishing groups and identities of an ethnic kind from religious ones: ‘Especially in a period like the Middle Ages, when religion meant membership of a community much more than adherence to a set of principles or beliefs, there was a sense in which one was born a Christian, a Muslim, or a Jew, just as one was born English or Persian.’<sup>14</sup> When Orderic Vitalis and William of Malmesbury wrote about Christians fighting Saracens and Turks, is it helpful to see one as a religious category and the others as ethnic ones?<sup>15</sup>

Bartlett has, more controversially, argued that we might also use the terms ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ interchangeably. The argument is that they are both social constructs (‘biological differences do not themselves constitute race or ethnicity but

are part of the raw materials from which race or ethnicity can be constructed - along with language, religion, political allegiance, economic position, and so on') and, as long as it is made clear that 'race' is not a biological category, then it should be possible to reclaim the word from the racists.<sup>16</sup> However, others have argued that 'race' is a term best left to the racists, that it acquired particular connotations from the nineteenth century onwards which cannot be easily shrugged off, and that in the United States in particular the terms 'race' and 'ethnicity' have quite separate and different histories.<sup>17</sup> However, we have not tried to impose a particular form of words on our contributors. Juliette Dor, for example, does use the terms 'race' and 'ethnicity' interchangeably in her analysis, although one of her essay's aims is to draw out Chaucer's deconstruction of the medieval racial and racist clichés concerning Oriental women. Steven F. Kruger uses the term 'quasi-racial' (and related constructions) 'to indicate that something like, but by no means identical to, the modern category of biologized race is at work in medieval thinking about identity'.

'Intersections' sums up our approach to the study of gender and religious/ethnic differences in the Middle Ages in another way. The book does not claim comprehensive coverage of the Middle Ages but rather offers, through a series of close readings of texts, a series of snapshots of places and periods when differences were encountered, discussed, and managed.<sup>18</sup> Our contributors set out how and why the authors of their chosen texts used gender, religion and ethnicity to construct or enforce positions of dominance and subordination. The dominant groups are overwhelmingly male, Christian, and European, thus positioning women, along with Jews, Muslims, and pagans, as 'other' or 'deviant' (although the essays do stress the variety and possibilities of gender, religion, and ethnicity). This is not the same as

simply returning to the study of the male, elite, white, Eurocentric heterosexual, but to explore some of the ways in which such groups secured and maintained dominance.

Why not, as Lerner argued, make dominance the problem rather than difference?

### Dominance in the Christian West

For Lerner, dominance was initially established through force by small groups of men, usually military leaders, who had recently conquered another group. They dominate resources but 'allocate them to the women they have acquired as sexual property and to their children, to other less powerful men, and to a newly created underclass of slaves'.<sup>19</sup> Their dominance then becomes institutionalized in custom and law but it still needs to be accepted in order not to be overthrown. Constructing this or that group as 'Other' is one way to ensure that other people accept your right to rule over them. Within any given society, though, there might well be contrasting and competing forms of dominant masculinity. We see this in the medieval West with the dominance of those who fight (the aristocracy) being challenged by those who pray (monks and priests), with the latter group also having its own internal struggles for dominance. The late Jo Ann McNamara, in a wide-ranging and still influential essay, coined the term 'Herrenfrage' to describe a masculine identity crisis *c.*1050-*c.*1150, caused in part by an ideological struggle between celibate and married men for leadership of the Christian world, which she dates back to the tenth century.<sup>20</sup> The first three essays in this collection reflect on these arguments, while considering the relationship between different forms of masculinity (for example, secular/clerical, monastic/clerical, chaste/married) and their bids for dominance, and suggest various ways in which McNamara's arguments could be moved on.<sup>21</sup> The result is a nuanced

approach to masculinity, which pays particular attention to the interplay of gender, religion, and ethnicity within parts of Latin Christendom.

Carol Pasternack's essay illustrates the competition between different types of masculinity, with a detailed study of a mid-eleventh-century codex of Anglo-Saxon provenance, Corpus Christi College Cambridge 201b. She demonstrates the use of a complex document to 'govern' the different types of masculinity circulating in Anglo-Saxon England, chiefly the chaste masculinity being promoted by the Benedictine Reform movement and the procreative one that supported the power of the Germanic elite male, but also the distinctive practices of the Danelaw, settled by Scandinavians in the ninth century. Pasternack argues that the codex was compiled 'to serve the bishop(s) who served the king(s)', and that the incorporated texts together build an implicit argument through their sequencing. The focus throughout is on chastity, chastity as central to salvation and a key to maintaining and preserving the well-being of the state. Though the codex seems to incorporate various social groups and cultural influences into a single religio-political sphere, it also contains them, suppressing altogether the polygynous practices of elite males in order to enable the mutual social and political support of the two ruling bodies, the king along with his council and the bishops.

Rachel Stone's essay gives us a different chronological purchase on the debate about clerical celibacy, which had its origins in fourth-century discussions, with a focus on an early ninth century Carolingian capitulary. Following Conrad Leyser and Kate Cooper, she sets out how, between the fifth and the eighth centuries, the competitive use of celibacy lost its effectiveness as a political tactic, with other models taking its place. Stone argues that Carolingian reformers created a more inclusive masculinity (albeit religiously marked), which elided the differences

between religious and secular men. This became the dominant model of masculinity because Charlemagne was in the midst of a political and religious project which relied on consensus and cooperation within the ruling elite, whether counts, bishops, or abbots; 'If such men had to live in concord together, ... claims to superior masculine virtue were a divisive distraction.' Alongside traditional descriptions of manliness as demonstrated in warfare (both spiritual and physical) and the rule of others were new ways of showing masculinity, such as obedience. Christianity itself could become identified with manliness and this also allowed newly conquered and converted peoples within the expanded Frankish empire to 'share in masculinity and its political privileges as they came to share a broadly-interpreted Frankish and Christian identity'. While Stone comments that this did not happen with many other colonial projects, there is perhaps a parallel here with Pasternack's reading of the eleventh-century codex. In crucial religio-political contexts, it seems that emphasizing commonalities rather than differences was one way to keep control over a diverse group. Kirsten Fenton argues in her essay that William of Malmesbury, while aware of the different ethnic groups who answered the call for the First Crusade in 1095, also thought of the crusaders as making up a single Christian ethnic community.

These different models of masculinity also impacted on women, although they might seem largely effaced in some of these texts. McNamara argued that the *Herrenfrage* was resolved by reaffirming the fearfulness of women, an Other against which men could unite: 'The myth of women's uncontrollable sexuality and its disorderly effects justified the segregation of the clergy', and it gave laymen a clear role in governing such women.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Maureen C. Miller believes that the competition between lay and clerical men in the Gregorian era 'was a significant factor in the rise of misogynist discourse that is so pronounced in Western European

sources of the High and Late Middle Ages'.<sup>23</sup> Conversely, Stone argues that a 'desire to suppress, rather than encourage, elite male division' may also be the reason why Carolingian literature is less misogynistic than, for example, Merovingian literature. Pasternack finds rather that an emphasis on the importance of chaste masculinity in her mid-eleventh-century codex required women to be contained, with the female figure only appearing in the codex 'as an object to be avoided or contained'.

William M. Aird's essay, by contrast, analyses the positive role that feminine imagery played in religious texts, here the twelfth-century *Vita* of a monastic bishop, Gundulf, famous for his floods of tears. In his relationship with Anselm of Aosta, a fellow monk and later archbishop of Canterbury, Gundulf is said to take the part of Mary Magdalene to Anselm's Jesus. Here Aird treads in the path of Caroline Walker Bynum's influential work on gender and religion, particularly on twelfth-century Cistercian writers, but his focus is on Benedictine writers at the end of the eleventh century. While Bynum argued that the use of maternal imagery might have been a response to the exclusion of women, for Aird flexible gender representations are about inclusivity (perhaps appealing in particular to the nuns of the bishop's foundation at Malling).<sup>24</sup> His essay suggests the different possibilities in gender terms for reformist monks.

### Representing Others

In defining Christianity's difference from other religious traditions – especially Islam and Judaism – gender and sexual constructions often played central roles. Louise Mirrer found in her study of the Christian literature of Reconquest Castile that Muslim and Jewish women were depicted as sexually available and Muslim and

Jewish men as lacking in ‘manly’ qualities and argues that all these representations shore ‘up male Christian Castilian identity through images that displaced their reality and established difference within the dominant cultural body’.<sup>25</sup> For example, by repeatedly linking Muslim men to their mothers, and by portraying them as polite, rather predictably defeated, and incapable of ‘making good’ on threats of rape against Christian women, ‘the texts imaginarily disqualified male Muslims ... from holding or attaining positions of power in Castile’, which was one way to deal with an conquered enemy.<sup>26</sup> Further, the image of the ‘other’ women’s sexual availability reiterates the weakness of their men. While in reality Muslim women were kept veiled and guarded, the texts eroticize them and make them easily accessible to Christians, often as gifts, perhaps playing out the presumed ‘right’ of Christians to Muslim Spain.<sup>27</sup>

Kruger’s essay opens with a brief discussion of similar constructions but he then comments that many texts that stage the confrontation between Judaism and Christianity do not thematize gender or sexuality in any explicit way, although such texts are rich in representations of quasi-racial differences. For Kruger, feminist and queer medievalist scholarship should not limit itself to explicit depictions of gendered and sexualized subjects and bodies or it risks ‘potential complicity with dominant medieval self-conceptions, the belief that certain bodies can be taken for granted, are nothing special and therefore do not need to be put on display; or, obversely, that certain bodies do not deserve visibility, or are unimaginable, even in terms of monstrosity, exorbitance, and deficiency.’ His essay therefore considers how gender analysis might need to operate in relation to texts of Jewish/Christian debate, which do not generally put bodies ‘on stage’, specifically Gilbert Crispin’s *Disputatio Iudei et Christiani* (c.1092-3).<sup>28</sup> Gilbert’s introductory letter to Anselm explains that he

was sometimes visited by a Jew, sometimes on business but also to converse with Gilbert about the Scriptures and his faith, and that he was now committing their dispute to paper, as requested by onlookers. However, having evoked this real-world setting, Gilbert also tries to erase it; ‘I have written [this] and, with my and his name silenced, I have written under the persona of *Iudeus* and *Christianus*’. What follows is largely an abstract, intellectual debate on theological and exegetical questions. For Kruger, then, the debate ‘participates in a wishful reduction of Jewish presence from the complex figure of a man of business (enmeshed in secular masculinity) who is also a theological expert (and thus associated somehow with clerical masculinity), ... to the universalized voice of “Iudeus” speaking timeless, “Old Testamentary” positions.’

Hannah Meyer, in very different source material, also sees the use of the descriptor ‘Iud.’ as suggesting a de-gendering of real Jewish men and women. She argues that the method of classifying Jewish men and women in Exeter’s civic records changed in the years prior to the Expulsion of 1290 so that ‘Iudeus’ or ‘Iudea’, or the abbreviation ‘Iud.’, became the most common terms used, whereas Christians were always identified in some detail through their family name or toponym, occupation and/or familial or marital status; ‘In this climate of increasing animosity towards the Anglo-Jewish community, marking the Jewish creditor out as ‘other’ became more important than describing the individual concerned, whether male or female, son or widow.’ These two essays by Kruger and Meyer thus widen the debate about Christian depictions of Jews by looking at texts that do not thematize gender or sexuality in any explicit way.

By contrast, the essays by Yarrow and Fenton, which discuss two monastic chronicles from the time of the First Crusade, find more comparable representations

to those in Mirrer's Reconquest literature. Yarrow offers a new reading of an episode in Orderic Vitalis's early twelfth-century *Ecclesiastical History* - the story of Bohemond of Taranto's incarceration by a Turkish ruler during the First Crusade and subsequent liberation thanks to the intervention of the ruler's daughter, a Saracen princess figure, Melaz. In contrast with past historiography, Yarrow argues that Melaz is not an exotic other, an orientalist construct, and only shows superficial resemblances to the female leads in later epic romance. Indeed, she rather resembles a conventional Frankish aristocratic woman. Her main function in the story is as a cipher of God, allowing Orderic 'to emphasize the primacy of the Christian crusaders, as a new chosen people, over people of the Muslim faith'. Her inclusion also transforms 'Bohemond's ignominious incarceration into a triumphal story of his heroic deeds as a model of Christian manhood'. By contrast, the Turkish ruler and his nobles end up as the prisoners, 'like helpless slave girls' according to Orderic. It is the Muslim men who are portrayed as different, effeminized and enslaved, whilst Melaz converts and is married to one of Bohemond's kinsmen. Fenton's essay on another twelfth-century chronicler, William of Malmesbury, also argues that the differences between Christian and Muslim men are emphasized more than those between the women of different faiths. However, for her it is because the monastic chronicler was wary of women in general because of their supposed sexual nature.

While Orderic's Melaz might be rescued from the literary genealogy of exotic eastern femininity, this trope is examined further both in Dor's essay on some of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and in Kim M. Phillip's essay on travel narratives of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Dor's essay considers three of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* that contain 'virago' figures ('manly women') and situate an encounter between East and West at the heart of the tales. In the *Man's of Law's Tale*,

‘the stereotypical exoticism and attractiveness of the Orient have shifted to the West and the topos of the Western knight falling in love with a Saracen princess has been inverted. The seductive Saracen princess is replaced by a Roman one and here the Western knight wooing her is a Sultan.’ However, the key virago figure (and the only time Chaucer uses the term) is the Sultan’s mother, and her gender, religion, and ethnicity are used to make her a representative of monstrous alterity: she is so fiercely hostile to Christianity that she feigns conversion so she can assassinate her son and their fellow-countrymen who had converted. In the *Monk’s Tale*, the narrator stresses the gender and ethnicity of the Queen of Palmyra, Zenobia, but not her religion. And in the *Knight’s Tale* the triple otherness of the Amazon sisters is suppressed as they are displaced to the west by the duke and colonized. For Dor, what this suggests is that Chaucer uses the literary form of the *Canterbury Tales*, with its multiple voices, to undermine the perspectives of his narrators: ‘By discrediting the reliability of his narrators, Chaucer simultaneously blurs the categories of difference that they strongly advocate, thus creating a space in which the medieval racial and racist clichés concerning Oriental viragos may be reconsidered.’

Phillips also argues that we should not work with a single template of the eastern virago as medieval travel writers distinguished between Mongolian warrior women, Amazons, and those living on the Isles of Women. Phillips’ essay differs, though, in the works considered ‘represent European thinking on Eastern Otherness before colonialism, before Orientalism, and beyond the need to stereotype Islamic and Jewish Others’. The argument is that these narratives about distant lands, written before European colonial activity in central and east Asia, provided space for imagining strong, independent women, ‘fantasy figures of femininity’, which would not be acceptable closer to home. For Phillips, one part of the cultural work

performed by such figures was 'to allude to a past, or more primitive ... culture', pre- or non-Christian.

Our contributors, then, use a variety of sources and approaches in order to discuss the intersecting nature of gender, religion, and ethnicity in the Middle Ages. Taken together, they demonstrate the many ways in which these hierarchical structures might be used against particular groups in an effort to construct and maintain the dominance of the patriarchal Christian West. However, for many of the authors this also suggests – in their emphasis on variety and contradictions - the possibilities of gender, religion, and ethnicity for historical actors.

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<sup>1</sup> J. M. Bennett (2006) *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> I am following an established trend in putting 'race' in scare quotes to signify both that races do not exist and that 'race' as a social construct has had a powerful effect on the lives of many. See further G. Lerner (1997) *Why History Matters: Life and Thought* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 184-90.

<sup>3</sup> L. Gordon (1991) 'On Difference', *Genders*, X, pp. 91-111 (p. 91).

<sup>4</sup> Bennett (2006) *History Matters*, p. 25; the first quotation is Bennett quoting L. Gordon (1991) 'The Trouble with Difference', *Dissent*, Spring, pp. 41-47 (p. 46).

<sup>5</sup> L. Kerber (1989) 'Diversity and the Transformation of American Studies', *American Quarterly*, 41, pp. 415-31 (p. 429); Gordon (1991) 'On Difference', p. 106; M. B. Zinn and B. T. Dill (1996) 'Theorizing Difference from Multiracial Feminism', *Feminist Studies*, 22, pp. 321-31 (p. 323); Lerner (1997) *Why History Matters*, p. 133.

<sup>6</sup> Lerner (1997) *Why History Matters*, p. 198.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of this term see Zinn and Dill (1996) 'Theorizing Difference', pp. 323-9.

<sup>8</sup> Zinn and Dill (1996) 'Theorizing Difference', p. 326; P. H. Collins (1991) *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge), pp. 225-30; Lerner (1997) *Why History Matters*, p. 194.

<sup>9</sup> Sharon Farmer has referred to a 'grid of ... categories of difference': S. Farmer (2003) 'Introduction', in S. Farmer and C. B. Pasternack (eds), *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. ix.

<sup>10</sup> See here Zinn and Dill (1996) 'Theorizing Difference', p. 327.

<sup>11</sup> Lerner (1997) *Why History Matters*, pp. 136, 143.

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- <sup>12</sup> Farmer (2003) 'Introduction', p. xi.
- <sup>13</sup> See <<http://www.medievalgender.co.uk/>>.
- <sup>14</sup> R. Bartlett (2001) 'Medieval and Modern Concepts of Race and Ethnicity', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 31, pp. 39-56 (p. 42).
- <sup>15</sup> See the essays by S. Yarrow and K. A. Fenton below.
- <sup>16</sup> Bartlett (2001) 'Medieval and Modern Concepts', p. 41. In contrast, Lerner tells how in Austria and Germany there is a marked preference for 'ethnicity' as a synonym for 'race': Lerner (1997) *Why History Matters*, pp. 188 and 233 n.66.
- <sup>17</sup> W. C. Jordan (2001) 'Why "Race"?', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 31, pp. 165-73 (p. 168); Lerner (1997) *Why History Matters*, pp. 188, 149.
- <sup>18</sup> H. Meyer's essay perhaps differs in approach in that it assesses a number of non-narrative texts, sometimes using quantitative methods, but there is also an emphasis on the language used in the records.
- <sup>19</sup> Lerner (1997) *Why History Matters*, p. 134.
- <sup>20</sup> J. A. McNamara (1994) 'The *Herrenfrage*: The Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050-1150', in C. A. Lees (ed.), with the assistance of T. Fenster and J. A. McNamara, *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), pp. 3-29 (p. 3).
- <sup>21</sup> See also the essays by K.A. Fenton and S. Yarrow on crusading as a new kind of lay Christian manhood, which reconciles reform and established elite ideals.
- <sup>22</sup> McNamara (1994) 'The *Herrenfrage*', p. 11, and see also pp. 21-2.
- <sup>23</sup> M. C. Miller (2003) 'Masculinity, Reform, and Clerical Culture: Narratives of Episcopal Holiness in the Gregorian Era', *Church History*, 72, pp. 25-52 (p. 28).
- <sup>24</sup> C. W. Bynum (1977) 'Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writing', *The Harvard Theological Review*, 70, pp. 257-

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84 (p. 275); C. W. Bynum (1982) *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California).

<sup>25</sup> L. Mirrer (1996) *Women, Jews, and Muslims in the Texts of Reconquest Castile* (Ann Arbor; University of Michigan Press), p. 159.

<sup>26</sup> Mirrer (1996) *Women, Jews, and Muslims*, p. 53.

<sup>27</sup> Mirrer (1996) *Women, Jews, and Muslims*, p. 22.

<sup>28</sup> Gilbert was also a monk at Bec like Gundulf; see W. M. Aird's essay.