

Kitap Tanıtımı/ Book Review

Janina Ramirez, *Femina: A New History of the Middle Ages, Through the Women Written Out of It*, London: Penguin Books, 2022

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The general impression of the Middle Ages in contemporary popular culture reflects notions of limited social development with people fixed into a rigid social hierarchy. Academic historian and BBC presenter Janina Ramirez questions this perception of medieval society. In her book *Femina: A New History of the Middle Ages, Through the Women Written Out of It* (2022), she asks the reader to re-imagine a medieval world in which extraordinary women proved themselves accomplished leaders, diplomats, religious decision-makers, adventurers,

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entrepreneurs, artists, patrons, mystics, movers and shakers, warriors, polymaths, and scientists.

Ramirez's book is important because she makes us reassess how and why women have been written out of history. The book provides case studies – based on primary and secondary evidence – revealing how women of the Middle Ages emerged to lead, influence and challenge mainstream society. Ramirez says we can look beyond texts and explore the history of the many: *'developments in archaeology, advancements in technology and an openness into new angles have made medieval women ripe for rediscovery'*. The author is not rewriting history but *'...shifting the focus. The frame is now on female rather than male characters'* (p. xiii). The image of the Middle Ages presented is diverse and complex; however, the author emphasises its *'fluid, cosmopolitan, mobile and outward-looking'* nature (p. xii). Ramirez seeks to rediscover and reframe history and create new narratives. Indeed, how we look at the past can influence how we look at the present, which has many ramifications for social equality and justice.

Highlighted are the problematic rhetoric and propaganda of the past gatekeepers of history. This has led to discrimination against women in historiography. The word *'femina'* was used by medieval-era librarians to categorise books written by female authors as less worthy of preservation. Such long-term discrimination is not necessarily the *'product of the medieval world or pre-medieval periods, but of the last few centuries'* (p. 5). For several centuries, men have been the gatekeepers of history. In England, the religious reforms of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw convents closed for nuns, leaving women with restricted access to education. Later, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, society further divided the gap between gender roles and norms (p. 13). In an attempt to re-examine women's history and reconsider how medieval-era societies across Europe accommodated these women, Ramirez stresses women's power, agency, and voices.

Femina contains nine chapters (plus an introduction), covering chronologically the era from 500 to 1500 AD. The introduction clearly explains the book's aims and rationale and comprehensively outlines the author's point of view. The discussion is supported throughout the

book by useful images, photographs, paintings, and maps. These assist the reader in understanding what the author is debating in the text and highlight the remarkable skills of the craftspeople who produced them. The nine chapters contain background history and information to contextualise the women's case studies. The breadth of geographical studies from England to Poland and the detailed writing add value to each case study, emphasising how women had to contend with personal, economic and political challenges.

Chapter One reflects on an early-medieval-era (the Dark Ages) burial site of a 'princess' wearing Christian and pagan symbolism. The spread of Christianity in England is explained by the marriage of elite Christian women to pagan kings. Chapter Two considers political decision-makers like eighth-century Abbess Cynethryth, Queen of the British Mercians. Chapter Three explores warriors and leaders in Viking society and the tenth-century Birka, a woman warrior. Chapter Four highlights art and patrons, specifically the Bayeux Tapestry detailing the 1066 AD Battle of Hastings and woven by women.

Chapter Five discusses polymaths and scientists, notably the remarkable case of Hildegard of Bingen (1098—1179 AD). Chapter Six analyses spies and outlaws in the form of thirteenth-century France's Cathar women viewed as heretics by the Catholic Church. Chapter Seven reviews royalty and diplomats, discussing Jadwiga, late-fourteenth-century Poland's only female 'King'. Chapter Eight studies entrepreneurs and influencers, focusing on Margery Kempe, an early-fifteenth-century British woman merchant, mystic, and Jerusalem pilgrim.

The book's strength is its much-needed reinterpretation of the existing primary and secondary sources to address the problem of women's marginalisation from medieval history studies. The solution offered by Ramirez is to put the '*spotlight on women*'. The author remarks how researching and writing the book changed her understanding of the era: '*I had not anticipated how the much writing this book would change my own perceptions of a period I have dedicated my academic life to*'; indeed: '*the medieval world has taken on a different complexion*' (p. 332), says the author. Overall, books like this will encourage students and researchers to reinterpret historiography

at all levels bravely—and to speak out against the misuse and ideological use of history.

One minor criticism of the book is that the focus is generally on elite women from privileged backgrounds. Chapter Nine (Exceptional and Outcast) claims it will examine the experiences of the ‘lower classes’, but this is limited to two topics. One topic addresses racial and religious diversity in medieval-era London—broadening to cover the Crusades and European royal courts. All societies chosen prove to be quite diverse. The second topic reviews sexuality, transvestites, and prostitution in London, circa 1394 to 1395 AD. Chapter Nine chiefly provides ideas for future researchers to investigate race, slavery, migration, and gender identity.

Femina is a refreshingly new way to understand history and how one crucial group (women) has been marginalised in mainstream academic and popular historiography. Ramirez’s argument is part of a paradigm shift towards analysing how groups and communities have been deliberately or otherwise ignored in the intellectual world and the ramifications of this. *Femina* is recommended for students, scholars, and general readers of medieval studies and culture—mainly undergraduate and college students of social history, feminist and gender studies.