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Sharon Farmer, *Surviving Poverty in Medieval Paris. Gender, Ideology, and the Daily Lives of the Poor*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002. xiii + 198 pp. Maps, figures, notes, appendix, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8014-3836-5.

Review by John S. Ott, Portland State University.

It is something of an irony of medieval urban historiography that a city as populous and important as Paris was in the high and late Middle Ages—not only as a seat of the French monarchy and government, but as an economic hub essentially unparalleled in northwestern Europe—should have received relatively little concerted attention from historians in the past few decades. Certainly, urban history on the continent has lagged behind its English counterpart, but even then studies of Ghent and the Low Countries, Montpellier, and Florence (to name only a few) have surpassed research into the urban *réseaux* of Paris. The same historiographical dearth has prevailed to an even greater extent among studies of the urban poor and unpropertied, the tens of thousands of people who, in a city the size of Paris in 1300, lived beneath or outside the scope of most official record-keeping, only to appear fleetingly as recipients of institutional or individual largesse. Or as criminals: for works in English one has had to look back to the pivotal work of Bronislaw Geremek, *The Margins of Society in Late Medieval Paris*, for a survey of the city's "marginal" social elements, especially those who appeared before the judges of the Châtelet, whose records Geremek exploited.[1]

Now, happily, Sharon Farmer has offered us an alternative, a compact study (169 pages) of the intersections of social class and gender among the working and non-working poor of Paris in the late thirteenth century. From its introduction, *Surviving Poverty in Medieval Paris* sets out to complicate the binary model of sexual difference embraced by many historians of gender as representative of the medieval mindset—that is, that women were associated by medieval authors solely with the body and its negative qualities of lust, passion, and irrationality, while men reflected the spirit and its possibilities for self-control and rationality. Following the example set by modern feminist writers of color such as bell hooks and Carol B. Stack (pp. 2 n. 2; 41 n. 4), Farmer argues that medieval writers employed a far more variegated understanding of gender than that with which they are typically credited. Notably, they distinguished between the bodies and minds of the poor and elite men and women, occasionally according to elite women moral and spiritual qualities more usually associated with men, while conversely defining poor men according to the bodily weaknesses and duplicity usually attached to women. Moreover, she asserts, medieval constructions of gender and social class could fuse into a potent mix that ultimately constructed the lived experiences of the poor, conditioning the way that social elites and even the working poor responded to the most destitute among them (p. 1). These arguments and their implications for our understanding of medieval categories of gender are of great importance and are overdue.

Yet historical records for Paris, especially prior to the Black Death, are notoriously sparse. Farmer therefore brings to bear on the questions she raises a wide panoply of materials, including the sermons of Dominican preachers, tax records, a selection of thirty-two bourgeois wills dating from 1227 to 1332, and, most crucially, surviving records from the inquest preceding King Louis IX's canonization, conducted in Paris in 1282-83. Farmer's use of this latter source, and the relatively rich demographic

detail it provides, adds a novel element to the studies of medieval Paris written to date. Of the 330 witnesses the panel interviewed over an eleventh-month period, the inquisitors noted the social status of 52 residents of Paris and the suburb of Saint-Denis, from the very wealthy to the indigent. Farmer has assembled these data to learn where the witnesses lived, what they did, at what age they arrived in Paris, the extent of their familial, associative, and neighborhood social networks, the nature of their illnesses, and the measures they took to heal themselves. Relatively speaking, for the period and place, it is a rich cache. Farmer picks it over thoroughly. But do the statistical samples that result offer a convincing portrait of the lived experiences of the poor? More importantly, does their cumulative weight demonstrate, as Farmer concludes, that the working poor related more closely to their non-working brethren than the elites and that the very poor internalized elite constructions and expectations of their gender and social status?

Before turning to those questions, a word or two is necessary about the master source Farmer employs, the miracles of St. Louis. What survives is an original fragment concerning three of the sixty-three miracles, including the testimony of around twenty witnesses (about 6 per cent of the total), and a later summary of the inquest proceedings by Guillaume de Saint-Pathus, the Franciscan confessor of Louis IX's wife.^[2] Guillaume, in summarizing the record, filtered and suppressed material (p. 118). The nature of his editing perhaps unsurprisingly betrays Guillaume's own agendas and interest. But even when read for their broader cultural assumptions, canonization proceedings present something of a paradox to modern readers who would extract social and demographic data from them: can one safely use them as essentially faithful records of historical detail—as an accurate guide to self-professed relations among the poor, for example—while still fully acknowledging their constructed nature?

The very questions that panels of ecclesiastical judges asked were often crafted to elicit a particular response from witnesses. Farmer does note this difficulty (p. 10) but never returns to address its implications for the witnesses' own accounts. The words of the witnesses who were deposed are accepted as being essentially accurate recollections of their relationships to those who had been miraculously cured. But in some cases—notably that of Amelot of Chambly, a beggar woman whose cure and personal associations feature prominently in several parts of Farmer's book (pp. 56, 157-58, 163)—the subject of Louis' intercession was long dead before the inquest panel began its proceedings.^[3] Amelot, unfortunately, could not speak for herself. Given Farmer's interest in laying bare the different experiences of poor men and poor women, it is also somewhat surprising that she does not address, if only in passing, the ways in which social status and gender influenced how men and women remembered and represented past events in which they were personally involved. Laura Smoller's recent work on the canonization inquests surrounding the miracles of Vincent Ferrer offers one example of the ways in which gender and social class molded individual memories.^[4]

After a brief introduction, Farmer devotes five chapters to analyzing the lives and images of the poor that emerge from her sources. The first chapter, "Wealth, Migration, and Poverty," uses the inquest records to provide a demographic snapshot of Paris's poor and their patterns of migration to the city. The statistical sample employed to discuss migration patterns is small (32 individuals), but typical of what historical demographers often have to work with for this era.^[5] Farmer concludes that not only does the thirteenth-century Parisian evidence of household patterns, including migration patterns, generally fit the model for northern European households proposed by P. J. P. Goldberg and others for the period after the Black Death,^[6] but also that "substantial" numbers of widows (p. 29) migrated to Paris from its surroundings and that young women tended to migrate later in life than young men. For migration patterns of young men and women, she has a total of nineteen cases from the St. Louis evidence on which to draw, less than one-third of which are women (13 males : 6 females). Farmer is honest; she admits the sample is by itself perhaps too small to conclude safely that girls and women migrated substantially later than boys and young men. To corroborate her claims she draws on the much larger migration figures employed by Pierre Desportes for Rheims in the year 1422. Interposed between Farmer's and Desportes' statistics, the Black Death looms large, as does the basic difference in

the cities' size.[7] While the centrality of the Black Death to many historiographical and historical divides has for some time been questioned, one would be hard pressed to declare as roughly analogous the demographic circumstances of Paris in 1285 and Rheims in 1422.

This statistical incongruity is in fact a relatively minor issue, and not one on which the chapter as a whole turns, but it points to a broader problem Farmer faces in her project: how to extrapolate convincing conclusions from such a small amount of data. In places the evidence convinces and is very well presented. Her discussion of the panelists' insistence on visually examining poor women and poor men to corroborate their claims of healing (pp. 56-60) is a case in point. Although a larger number of poor women were healed at Louis' tomb than men (62 per cent vs. 38 per cent; the sex ratio is exactly reversed among the propertied), poor men were still more likely to be physically inspected than poor women. Here, the bodies of the poor of *both* sexes are taken as more authoritative than their verbal testimonies, a phenomenon also experienced by late medieval female saints as well as further evidence of weakness in the binary model of medieval gendered differences.[8]

Elsewhere, especially in chapter five, "Women in Need," Farmer makes a convincing case from the inquest evidence for the clustering of poor females, including recent migrants, into affinity groups whose members relied upon one another for financial and personal support (pp. 137-39, 155-56). Indeed, given that even the Parisian guilds dominated by women did not offer financial support to their members in dire straits, poor women could expect help only from the city's charitable institutions and their own social networks. The former were simply insufficient to handle the large numbers of needy, leading Farmer to conclude, to my mind accurately, that informal support was the most important source of assistance for poor women. One's friends and neighbors, not elite charity, were the crucial factor in women's survival strategies. Poor adult males were largely out of luck, burdened both by an absence of social institutions that catered to their needs and by prevailing intellectual categories that induced deep suspicion toward poor males who could not or would not perform physical labor.

But Farmer's larger contention, that the non-working poor in some ways resisted and/or internalized the discourses of the elites, is less persuasively demonstrated. In places she asserts that modest artisans and the working poor were more sympathetic to the plight of the non-working poor (e.g., pp. 104, 125). In individual cases, which she presents in chapter three, "Men in Need," that was undoubtedly true. It was also true in at least one instance involving a member of the propertied elite who left a sum of money to a beggar whom she saw on a regular basis (p. 34). Some artisanal masters also extended a charitable hand to poor apprentices who became afflicted with long-term illnesses and could not work (p. 100). So, too, might masters abuse their apprentices to the point that the young men and women sought relief from their contractual bonds (p. 98). It is probable, however, that the few cases in the inquest sources of personal intervention by the working poor in the lives of the non-working poor are a by-product of the records themselves, which as a matter of course would not likely have included testimony from individuals hostile to the poor who had been cured at Louis' tomb.[9]

The evidence for Farmer's argument that "clerical views of women's productive and reproductive labors seem to have had a considerable, though not always decisive, influence on the attitudes of the poor themselves" (p. 131) is, to my mind, not wholly convincing. Four cases where women may have internalized the sexual stereotypes of male clerics are presented in chapter four, "Eve's Curse" (Nicole of Rubercy, Avice of Berneville, Jacqueline of Saint-Germain-des-Près, and Ponce of Froitmantel; see pp. 23-24, 131-134, 136-138). All of the women were afflicted with guilt or troubled by their "sins"—unspecified—for extended periods of time before their cures. In two cases (Nicole and Jacqueline) the precise nature of the sin is explicitly repressed either by Guillaume of Saint-Pathus or the witnesses who testified on their behalf. Based on circumstantial evidence, Farmer believes their behavior was a response to clerical ideals about women's reproductive labor and denunciations of their perceived sexual excesses (as members of the poor).

An equally plausible explanation is that the women's "sin" was religious doubt or blasphemy. Jacqueline, for instance, did not wish to be touched by priests during her illness and preferred to pray to the devil than to the crucified Jesus. And ten-year-old Ponce suffered from a three-year illness brought on when she found a bloody cloth in a field and declared that it was covered in Jesus's blood (pp. 132-133). During her lengthy mental sickness, she became disruptive in church and insisted on singing with the priests. One therefore wonders which sin, sexual transgression or religious doubt, witnesses would be more fearful of admitting before an inquest panel of clerics at a time when the inquisition itself was present in Paris?^[10] Nevertheless, if the inquest evidence used to back two of Farmer's central assertions, that the working poor sympathized with the non-working poor more readily than elites and that the very poor internalized clerical constructions of their gender and class, was at times problematic, in raising those issues Farmer has opened the door to continued research on the subject of hierarchies of gender--so clearly manifest in the sermons of some contemporary preachers she cites--which is undoubtedly an area that needs greater attention from historian.

Surviving Poverty in Medieval Paris is a well-presented and well-written book. An appendix listing the bourgeois wills Farmer employs, as well as several maps and a number of black-and-white plates from the Parisian codex of Louis' miracles, gratify the eye and flesh out the sources. At points, I found myself wishing for an appendix containing a simple list of the *miraculés* at Louis' tomb and their chief witnesses, since readers are asked in places to remember the names of individual men and women mentioned in passing dozens of pages earlier (e.g., Nicole of Rubercy, discussed on pp. 23-24 and referred to again at length on pp. 136-138; or Avice of Berneville, noted in passing on p. 72, whom readers are asked to recall sixty pages later). Such a list would be an especially useful feature for undergraduate readers, who can, along with specialist and non-specialist scholars, benefit from reading Farmer's book. Above all, *Surviving Poverty* casts needed light on the lives and plights of the working and non-working poor from a perspective other than that of the jail cell, gibbet, or criminal trial. In so-doing, it surely presents a more representative image of the poor's lived experiences, their hopes, needs, and struggles.

NOTES

[1] Bronislaw Geremek, *The Margins of Society in Late Medieval Paris, Past and Present Publications* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Jean Birrell based her English translation on the 1976 French translation by Daniel Beauvois (from the original Polish), *Les marginaux parisiens aux XIVe et XVe siècles* (Paris: Flammarion, 1976). Geremek's study has been improved upon by that of Claude Gauvard, *De grace especial: Crime, état, et société en France à la fin du Moyen Age*, 2 vols. (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1991), as well as a series of articles on various aspects of urban life in Paris.

[2] Henri-François Delaborde, "Fragments de l'enquête faite à Saint-Denis en 1282 en vue de la canonisation de Saint Louis," *Mémoires de la Société de l'Histoire de Paris et de l'Ile-de-France* 23 (1896): 1-71.

[3] Amelot's cure is one of the three that survive in the fragment examined by Delaborde, "Fragments de l'enquête," pp. 9, 26. The second subject of the two surviving cases from the fragment, the young girl Mabilette, had also died by the time the inquest began. Her story was told by her father and mother.

[4] Laura Smoller, "Miracle, Memory, and Meaning in the Canonization of Vincent Ferrer, 1453-1454," *Speculum* 73 (1998): 429-54. Carlo Ginzburg raised important considerations about method and source when approaching inquisitorial documents; see most notably his *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath* (New York: Penguin, 1991; first published in 1989 in both Italian and English editions).

[5] The individuals are split evenly between men and women migrants. Twenty-seven lived in Paris;

twenty-one in Saint-Denis.

[6] The post-1348 northern European household model proposes a late age of marriage for non-elite men and women, remarriage of widows, and the formation of new conjugal households following marriage (p. 25).

[7] Rheims' population in the early thirteenth century was at or slightly higher than 10,000; Paris was perhaps 15 times that size. See Pierre Desportes, *Reims et les Rémois aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles* (Paris: Picard, 1979); Farmer, *Surviving Poverty*, p. 17.

[8] I would note, however, that the propertied individuals who appeared before the panel make a weak "control" group against which to measure the experience of the poor. Of the sixteen propertied individuals cured by Louis, five appeared before the panel and one was quizzed at length about her physical state. But three of those were cured of illnesses or problems that would have left no physical signs to inspect. Of the remaining eleven elites who were *not* called before the panel—which Farmer found a curious omission—eight either would not have offered the opportunity for a physical inspection even if they had been called or would have been unlikely to go altogether (miracles no. 12, 29 [swelling of the face], 38, 46, 53, 64-65 [the latter two cases in Italy]; to these I would add no. 60, who consulted a physician.) It was less likely for those who had consulted medical professionals later to undergo visual inspection, including among the poor, where only one in four went before the panel.

[9] It is worth remembering that King Louis' canonization was sought in many quarters, not only among his surviving courtiers and clerics, but in Rome as well. Indeed, the first attempt to recognize the king as a saint had been launched in 1273, two years after his death.

[10] Since 1233 Paris had been a regional headquarters for the inquisition, one of several in France. In a rather hasty search I was unable to turn up the connections and training of the bishops of Auxerre, Spoleto, and Rouen who headed the inquest into Louis' miracles, but one would like to know.

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