

H-France Review Vol. 11 (June 2011), No. 137

Alastair Minnis and Rosalynn Voaden, eds., *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition, c. 1100-c.1500*. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010). xii + 748 pp. Tables, notes, index. \$181.00 US (cl) ISBN 2503531806.

Review by Sean L. Field, University of Vermont

This long-awaited volume is a monumental achievement in the historiography of women's holiness and spirituality for medieval Western Europe. If the publisher's description of the book as "the first wide-ranging study of the remarkable women who contributed to the efflorescence of female piety and visionary experience in Europe between 1100-1500" seems slightly hyperbolic (there have certainly been a number of earlier "wide-ranging studies"), never before has such a large group of first-rate scholars compiled such a useful collection of essays on so many medieval women and their religious writings. This book will be an essential starting point for undergraduate research papers for years to come, but will also provide a perfect orientation for scholars needing to identify manuscripts, primary sources, and secondary bibliography for new projects. Given the heft and price of this hardback, the number of individual purchases may be somewhat limited, but certainly every academic library would do well to add this resource to its shelves.

The book contains three levels of essays. Five thematic introductory essays begin the volume, followed by twenty-two essays arranged geographically into seven "Parts": the British Isles, France, the German Territories, the Iberian Peninsula, Italy, the Low Countries, and Scandinavia. Each geographic area begins with a survey which is followed, in five of the seven cases, by essays on individual women. The coverage is certainly not numerically even: The number of sub-essays on specific women ranges from zero (the Iberian Peninsula and Scandinavia) to seven (the German Territories).

The "Introductory Essays" could form in themselves a book-length (162 pages) introduction to the religiosity of medieval women. Dyan Elliot's essay on "Flesh and Spirit" ably surveys and extends the strand of scholarship that has examined the ways in which medieval culture's association between women and the body could shape religious experience. Alistair Minnis's contribution on "Religious Roles: Public and Private" explores ways in which women were excluded from public roles in the Church, and what alternative roles opened up to them. The terminology of this opposition is at first surprising, as we have often been taught to think that modern lines between public and private did not exist in the Middle Ages. Yet, Minnis begins with a quotation from Aquinas perfectly upholding this very distinction in regards to women's proper religious speech. Women were formally denied the public role of preaching and the status of ordination by the time of the Gregorian Reforms, but Minnis shows that they did continue to find ways to preach, increasingly in contexts that male ecclesiastics could define as private teaching. At the same time, a few women were accorded a privileged status as prophetesses. These two positions—(supposedly) private spiritual teacher or inspired prophetess—allowed some women to do the "holy work" of advising public figures, intervening in politics, and using the power of private prayer to care for souls.

John Coakley provides an overview of a subject which he has done more than anyone to elucidate over the last two decades, "Women's Textual Authority and the Collaboration of Clerics." Not only did men write the *vita* through which we see holy women's lives (or mostly men, the author does not touch on *vita* written by women), but even texts ostensibly written by women about their own experiences passed through the hands of male scribes, confessors, or editors. John Van Engen's contribution on "Communal Life: The Sister-books" stands out as a more specialized subject (one might have expected a broader essay on something like "Genres of Women's Writing"). Yet, for this very reason, it is likely to be one of the most useful essays for specialists. It not only provides a handy overview of all nine extant Sister Books produced by German Dominican houses in the fourteenth century, but also expands the genre by including the three later sister-books compiled in the fifteenth century by adherents to the Modern Devotion in the Netherlands. This book-by-book summary of authors and manuscripts orients the reader while pointing out just how much work remains to be done. Finally, Peter Biller's essay on "Women and Dissent" offers a strong look at women in the Waldensian movement, particularly their role as keepers of historical memory, though only much briefer treatments of female Lollards in England and Good Women in Languedoc.

The seven geographic surveys are of uniformly high quality. The authors were obviously instructed to provide broad coverage including brief treatments of multiple women. Each survey ends with a handy reference chart comparing that chapter's women in terms of date, social status, and religious affiliation. The bibliographies are then specific to each woman, usually including the identification of key manuscripts. They thus make perfect entry points to the study of many of the women not accorded their own essays. When read consecutively, they present stark regional contrasts and highlight geographic patterns.

For France, the survey by Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski is excellent. In sixteen pages of text, she covers the lives of fifteen women, ranging from the twelfth-century peasant Alpais of Cudot to a slightly better-known peasant girl, Joan of Arc. In between, the women on whom she focuses range from thirteenth-century figures such as Isabelle of France and Douceline of Digne to the cluster of "visionaries of the great schism" Blumenfeld-Kosinski has done so much to bring to life in recent years. In this case no clear patterns emerge from this overview, since—as the author notes—the women come from north and south, elite and humble backgrounds, lay or religious affiliations, and displayed a whole range of spiritual inclinations, from asceticism and charity to politically motivated visions. Ronald E. Surtz's look at Iberian Holy Women will no doubt be eye-opening for many (certainly for this reviewer), since some of the women treated here are little known. These fourteen women came largely from the royal houses of Portugal and Castile. By and large this group was characterized not by mysticism, but rather by saintly models of asceticism, charity and monastic patronage. Particularly striking are the fifteenth-century authors (Teresa de Cartagena, Constanza de Castilla, Felipa de Lencastre, Isabel de Villena) whose works surely deserve to be better known to non-Iberian specialists.

Claire L. Sahlin's essay on Scandinavia is unavoidably organized as pre and post Birgitta of Sweden. Sahlin introduces several little-known precursors of Birgitta (dwelling on and lamenting themes of domestic violence in their *vita*) and provides a nice summary of the careers of not only the towering figure of Birgitta herself but also her daughter Catherine. Interestingly, all seven women here were married noblewomen. The "Low Countries" by Walter Simons offers a wonderfully concise look at the beguine movement (and the later tertiaries, canonesses, and sisters of the Common Life who followed), a general overview of the rich body of hagiography from the region, and then a tightly organized tour through the lives of fourteen saintly women. Partly because these fourteen women fall into identifiable clusters, and partly because Simons knows this material as well as anyone, he is able to draw out themes (divine love "in all its maddening complexities"; empathy with Christ's sacrifice; bridal mysticism) that

effectively tie together the spiritual experiences of several generations of women in the Low Countries.

By contrast, “Holy Women in the British Isles,” by Anne Clark Bartlett, mainly addresses the interesting question of why the British Isles “lack a canon of native late medieval female saints” (p. 167). For the period under discussion, Christina of Markyate is a rather lonely figure—pious widows such as Elizabeth de Burgh and Marie of St. Pol do not quite seem to measure up to any common definition of “holy.” Consequently, much of this chapter deals with literary representations of earlier female saints and virgin martyrs. The German lands surveyed by Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, however, find holy women thick on the ground. The approach here is thematic, focusing on a total of seventeen women in urban family settings, independent religious women and recluses, and then in rural and urban monasteries. Concluding with a brief section on women’s scribal and authorial activities, the author amply demonstrates that “. . . the promotion of female piety was not the exclusive prerogative of those ‘big names’ who are famous today” (p. 334). From Gertrude of Ortenberg (c. 1275–1334) and her friend Heilke of Staufenberg (who recounted Gertrude’s life to a younger sister who wrote it down) to the nun Margaret called “Regula” (d. 1478) who wrote new collections of female saints’ lives, this essay brings little-known women to light, in such a tantalizing fashion that my only complaint is the lack of specific information (the bibliography is not as complete for this survey as for most of the others) about the many references to unpublished manuscripts and work only recently undertaken. Finally, E. Ann Matter’s elegantly written treatment of Italy shows how the “cartography of political power and patronage” (p. 529) of Italy produced a string of holy women emerging from prestigious families and attaching themselves to powerful orders (notably the Franciscans) or other centers of influence. Passing through seventeen examples of the famous (Clare of Assisi, Catherine of Siena) and the not-so-famous (Bona of Pisa, Rita of Cascia), she shows how “in any Italian town of any size at all, between 1200 and 1500, there are records of at least one holy woman,” and ends with the apt exhortation to a new generation of scholars “to use the new critical editions, monographic studies, and translations to create a new cartography of medieval Italian Christianity, in which holy women are on the map” (p. 543).

The extended essays on fifteen individual holy women are all strong as well. One point that becomes immediately apparent is that the editors chose for the most part to commission essays on the most interesting female religious writers of the period, not necessarily on the most influential “holy” women. The choice of the two women to be accorded separate essays for France underlines this fact: Heloise and Marguerite Porete were surely two of the most important, fascinating female authors of the time. But was Heloise a “holy woman”? Certainly she was admired, but—even keeping in mind that contemporaries would not have read her letters to and from Peter Abelard—her reputation was not really saintly. And although it may well be that a few people (Guiscard of Cressonessart springs to mind) thought of Marguerite Porete as holy, she was, after all, burned at the stake as a heretic.

Nevertheless, we receive here two fine essays by leading scholars. Constant J. Mews provides a model essay on Heloise. While some who do not share his view that the *Epistolae duorum amantium* were really written by Heloise and Abelard may find that element of his presentation somewhat tendentious, the summary of Heloise’s career is lucid, up to date, and demonstrates how recent scholarship has just begun fully to reveal her accomplishments. The bibliography is a gift to anyone attempting to begin work on the subject; for each text attributed to Heloise (securely or doubtfully), all manuscripts, editions, and English translations are listed, and the secondary works are judiciously selected. Thus—rather remarkably—both scholars doing serious manuscript study and students looking for a term-paper subject will find this an ideal starting point. Michael G. Sargent’s look at Marguerite Porete and her book is also well-done. The beginning section on Marguerite’s life is brief, but that is understandable given the patchy

evidence. Several interpretive claims about how her trial progressed seem to me to go beyond the evidence, but these few pages are still a perfectly fine summary of what is known of her career. The rest of the essay analyses and summarizes her book, the *Mirror of Simple Souls*, a difficult task for a notoriously paradoxical and elusive text. Yet, Sargent (who has engaged with this text for decades) manages to evoke its complexities within a clear thematic framework, with a full look at the main elements and a few well-chosen quotations, and closes with the important subject of the book's later circulation in four languages.

The only woman from the Low Countries (so rich in *mulieres sanctae!*) chosen for an extended essay further demonstrates the trend of favoring interesting writers over lived holiness. Literally nothing is known about the life of Hadewijch beyond the sparse morsels of information in her letters, visions, and poems. Indeed, there has long been debate about whether one women actually wrote all the texts ascribed to her. Saskia Murk-Jansen ably discusses these controversies and summarizes the main elements of Hadewijch's theology—her exhortations to greater love of God, evocations of union with the suffering in Christ, and the image of the soul as “bottomless abyss.” For England, both Liz Herbert McAvoy's introduction to Julian of Norwich and Anthony Goodman's look at Margery Kempe can be recommended. Both lay out controversies and competing scholarly interpretations of these women and their texts, with McAvoy then focusing mainly on the theological imaginary of Julian's *Showings* and Goodman providing a fine historical analysis of Margery's social and religious surroundings in Lynn. The two women knew each other (according to Margery), and these two essays could be paired for undergraduates as a spiritual and social exploration of the world of female English mystics at the turn of the fifteenth century.

Germany receives the largest number of essays on specific women: Hildegard of Bingen (Kathryn Kerby-Fulton), Elisabeth of Schönau (Anne L. Clark), Margaret Ebner (Barbara Koch), Mechthild of Magdeburg (Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman), Mechthild [*sic*] of Hackeborn (Rosalynn Voaden), Gertrude the Great (Alexandra Barratt and Debra L. Stoudt), and Dorothy of Montau (Ute Stargardt). The essays differ considerably in their approaches. Kerby-Fulton takes on her challenging subject by posing a series of *Problemata Hildegardiana*, thus identifying areas worthy of further study even while providing a fine summary of Hildegard's life and work. Clark deftly illuminates the relationship between Elisabeth, her brother Ekbert, and the texts they produced. Koch treats “Margaret” in her *Revelations* as a literary construction rather than a historical person (a justifiable approach but leading this reviewer to wonder whether it might better fit a volume on “Medieval Holy Literary Constructions”). On the three holy women of Helfta, Hollywood and Beckman offer an in-depth treatment of Mechthild's theological vision, Voaden pleads (justifiably) for more scholarly attention to the lesser known of the two visionary Mechthilds, and Barratt and Stoudt emphasize Gertrude's confident and learned piety (these three essays complement each other nicely in presenting a picture of the range of writings and authors at Helfta). Stargardt's picture of Dorothy—a married peasant woman who eventually became an anchorress—is vivid if slightly credulous, paying close attention to the motives of Dorothy's biographer, John of Marienwerder, yet not reading the claims of his texts through this lens.

For Italy, Christina Mazzoni's essay on Angela of Foligno and that of Suzanne Noffke on Catherine of Siena are both engaging: Mazzoni is at times herself almost poetic in her appreciation of Angela's spirituality, while Noffke's essay is notably personal in describing her own engagement with (translating) Catherine's texts. I have saved for last perhaps the most intriguing essay of the entire volume, Barbara Newman's “Agnes of Prague and Guglielma of Milan.” The bursting of geographic boundaries here is justified by the apparent fact that these two women were—as Guglielma's followers claimed—sisters. Agnes (d. 1282) was one of Clare of Assisi's most devoted Franciscan admirers and a powerful royal patron along the lines of

Elizabeth of Hungary (her cousin) and Isabelle of France, while Guglielma (d. 1281) was a charismatic figure who ended up in Milan and may or may not have claimed to be the Holy Spirit; certainly her followers attributed this role to her. Although local supporters sought her canonization, she was instead posthumously treated as a heretic, with her bones burned and ashes scattered in 1300. Agnes, by contrast, was at last canonized in 1989. By taking seriously the possibility that these two women were really sisters, Newman is able to build a startling comparison that encapsulates the possibilities and dangers of medieval female spirituality and attendant claims to authority.

In sum, this is a wonderful volume, to be kept at hand by all scholars of the subject. Any major collection will of course have its minor weaknesses. This book had a notoriously long gestation period (it was originally commissioned by an American university press as a “Guide to Medieval Holy Women,” and a trace of this locution remains at p. 5) and clearly many of the essays were completed five or six years ago, with only bibliographic updates since then. The editors deserve enormous thanks for seeing such a mammoth volume through to completion (the number of typographical errors is quite small for a book of over 700 pages), but at times there is a feeling of having jumped back a few years in the flow of scholarship. The claim to be the first “comprehensive reference book on this vast subject” (p. 2) is no doubt impossible to fulfill to everyone’s satisfaction, but certainly the lack of coverage of Polish, Hungarian, and Bohemian (with the exceptions of Elizabeth of Hungary and Agnes of Prague) saintly women is notable. On a different level, the overt links made at the end of the introduction between medieval attitudes and modern discrimination against women within the Catholic Church will strike some readers as spot on but no doubt annoy others. If no collection is above criticism, however, this one is surely worthy of wide celebration.

LIST OF ESSAYS

INTRODUCTORY ESSAYS

Alastair Minnis and Rosalynn Voaden, “Introduction”

Dyan Elliot, “Flesh and Spirit: The Female Body”

Alastair Minnis, “Religious Roles: Public and Private”

John Coakley, “Women’s Textual Authority and the Collaboration of Clerics”

John Van Engen, “Communal Life: The Sister-books”

Peter Biller, “Women and Dissent”

PART 1: THE BRITISH ISLES

Anne Clark Bartlett, “Holy Women in the British Isles: A Survey”

Liz Herbert McAvoy, “Julian of Norwich”

Anthony Goodman, “Margery Kempe”

PART 2: FRANCE

Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, "Holy Women in France: A Survey"

Constant J. Mews, "Heloise"

Michael G. Sargent, "Marguerite Porete"

PART 3: THE GERMAN TERRITORIES

Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, "Holy Women in the German Territories: A Survey"

Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, "Hildegard of Bingen"

Anne L. Clark, "Elisabeth of Schönau"

Barbara Koch, "Margaret Ebner"

Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman, "Mechthild of Magdeburg"

Rosalynn Voaden, "Mechtild of Hackeborn"

Alexandra Barratt and Debra L. Stoudt, "Gertrude the Great of Helfta"

Ute Stargardt, "Dorothy of Montau"

PART 4: THE IBERIAN PENINSULA

Ronald E. Surtz, "Iberian Holy Women: A Survey"

PART 5: ITALY

E. Ann Matter, "Italian Holy Women: A Survey"

Barbara Newman, "Agnes of Prague and Guglielma of Milan"

Cristina Mazzoni, "Angela of Foligno"

Suzanne Noffke, "Catherine of Siena"

PART 6: THE LOW COUNTRIES

Walter Simons, "Holy Women of the Low Countries: A Survey"

Saskia Murk-Jansen, "Hadewijch"

PART 7: SCANDINAVIA

Claire L. Sahlin, "Holy Women of Scandinavia: A Survey"

Sean L. Field
University of Vermont
Sean.field@uvm.edu

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172