

H-France Review Vol. 16 (April 2016), No. 50

Maureen Barry McCann Boulton, *Sacred Fictions of Medieval France: Narrative Theology in the Lives of Christ and the Virgin, 1150-1500*. Woodbridge, Suffolk, and Rochester, N.Y.: D.S. Brewer, Boydell & Brewer, 2015. xii + 380 pp. Appendix, bibliography, and index. \$90.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1843844143.

Review by Rachel Fulton Brown, The University of Chicago.

If there is one thing that non-specialists know about the Christian culture of the European Middle Ages it is that it was dominated by, in Harvard linguist Steven Pinker's words, "a single content provider, the church," and imaginatively restricted to those genres and readerships that "the church" allowed.[1] If there is one thing that Maureen Boulton's modestly self-described "general (and preliminary) survey of the many texts which retell the lives of Christ and his mother in various French vernaculars (Anglo-Norman and Old Occitan, as well as Old and Middle French) between the middle of the twelfth century and the second half of the fifteenth century" (p. 1) shows, it is how varied in both audience and genre even the retellings of "the church's" most canonical narratives could be, putting paid (one can only hope) to the argument on which Pinker depends, that it was only in the early modern period (Pinker locates the change in the Enlightenment) that European Christian writers began to break out of "the church's" purportedly restricting confines on their imagination.[2]

Medievalists familiar with the Franciscan genre of meditations on the life of Christ will be unsurprised to find running throughout many of these narratives direct invitations for readers to imagine themselves into the everyday emotional and physical experiences of Jesus, Mary, and other figures of Christian history—a habit of empathy that Pinker, following Lynn Hunt, insists appeared only in the eighteenth century with the epistolary novel.[3] Other narratives that Boulton explores fit less easily into this affective style, and yet neither are they restricted to those genres that one might otherwise expect of "sacred narratives," whatever those genres might be, if solely sacred genres even exist. As Boulton shows, medieval authors writing in the French vernaculars and interested in exploring the lives of the Virgin and her Son experimented in both verse and prose across a wide variety of narrative forms. Boulton has classified the hundred or more works she has found according to the traditional genres of epic, romance, allegory, chronicle, and meditation, while at the same time cautioning that even here, the authors of the sacred narratives were inclined as much to subvert as to adhere to their original audiences' or modern scholars' expectations about genre.

Her larger purpose being above all to stimulate further study of these texts, Boulton confines herself in the present volume to giving detailed descriptions of some forty of these hundred works or compilations of works, more or less evenly divided among the five genres. As an introduction to this literature, arguably the single most valuable part of the present book is the appendix, where Boulton lists every manuscript exemplar of the works that she discusses, organized by genre in the order in which she describes them in each chapter. Specialists in medieval French literature will find some familiar authors (Wace, pseudo-Gautier de Coinci, John of Howden, Guillaume de Digulleville, Jean Gerson, and Christine de Pizan), but by far the majority of Boulton's examples will come as news, particularly to those including myself who have concentrated rather on the Latin tradition of retellings of the lives of the Virgin and Christ. For such

readers, Boulton's survey is a godsend, providing in a single volume a comprehensive guide to an enormously rich literature of which we (certainly, myself) have been only dimly aware.

With such a diverse literature, it is difficult to make any broad conclusions without careful reading of the texts. As the majority of these works has thus far attracted only very limited, if any, scholarly attention, Boulton's primary purpose is simply to make readers aware of their existence. For the most part, which is all to the good and fits well with the purposes of her survey, Boulton focuses on introducing the principle narrative themes and literary devices employed by the various authors, while pointing to the manuscript distribution of each text as an indication of its relative popularity and likely readership. Her summary descriptions of the various works are, however, somewhat less helpful the more she ventures into the evaluation of these works not just as narratives, but as exercises in theology, most particularly when these theological evaluations come up against her suggestions about what the works themselves and their manuscripts suggest about audience and authorial intent.

For example, at one point Boulton suggests that pious romances like Wace's mid-twelfth-century *Conception Notre Dame* or the anonymous early thirteenth-century *Histoire de Marie et de Jésus* "[reflect] the Church's failure to develop a model of lay piety" insofar as they represent Mary's mode of life before her marriage as one embracing virginity, poverty, work, and prayer (p. 24), while at another Boulton notes that at least one fourteenth-century manuscript in which both these works appear seems, to judge from its fifteenth-century flyleaf, to have belonged to a priest, "Jehan Girart prestre, curé de Sainte Florence" (p. 52). On the one hand, Boulton argues, it seems odd that a priest should have owned a book filled with so many "sacred fictions"—despite the fact that these fictions, by her own account, support a more clerical or monastic than lay representation of the Virgin. On the other hand, Boulton suggests, perhaps Jehan Girart used his book for preaching—that is, in addressing the laity, for whom, arguably, such a monastic image of Mary would have had little appeal.

Throughout, Boulton struggles with the very categories—"fictional" and "doctrinal," "clerical" and "lay," "Latin" and "vernacular"—that the texts she is describing would seem, by definition, to be almost purposefully designed to subvert. Again, for example, in talking about the anonymous *Histoire de Marie et de Jésus*, Boulton draws the reader's attention to a scene in which Joseph, Mary's elderly suitor, is mocked wickedly (*laidement*) by the other bachelors who have assembled with their rods to compete for her hand (cf. Numbers 17:8). "Ah, God," the poet imagines Joseph saying to himself, "why did I come here? Never have I seen so many handsome youths, so many knights and young noblemen who are of such elegant dress. Great folly brought me here, but the bishop ordered it; if I stay here longer, they will treat me without any respect" (trans. Boulton, p. 43). Much to Joseph's (not to mention everyone else's) surprise, however, it is Joseph's rod which flowers, leaps from his grasp, and gives itself to the Virgin. The poet explains: "That rod that flowered signified Saint Mary, who bore a child as a virgin; never did she touch a man; and the dove that sat above is the symbol of Jesus Christ" (trans. Boulton, p. 43).

What has just happened here in the poem? According to Boulton, by inserting this explanatory gloss into an otherwise "festive" and symbolically "phallic" episode, the poet is attempting an apology of sorts for letting his imagination get the better of him: "Blessed with a story-teller's eye for a vivid scene, not to mention a gift for dialogue, the author abandoned clerical decorum to give full rein to his imagination, salving his conscience with the occasional gloss or moralization" (p. 43). But who is to say that clerics in the Middle Ages needed to salve their consciences when they gave full rein to their imaginations in order to bring the sacred stories to life? (The story about Joseph's rod appears in the earliest apocrypha about Mary's childhood and was considered more or less canonical in the thirteenth century.) And why should we assume, as Boulton seems to, that lay audiences would not enjoy glosses in which the storyteller lifted the veil of history so as to give them a glimpse of the sacred mysteries concealed therein? Modern lay audiences might find such glosses difficult to follow, but medieval lay audiences may have found them just as refreshing as did their clerical authors.

The more prosaic problem here is that more of Boulton's examples of authorial fancy than she realizes (or, in some cases at least, than she implies) are in fact straightforward translations of arguments or images that were commonplaces in the Latin tradition. For example, in his account of the Virgin's Assumption at the conclusion to the first part of his *Histoire des Trois Maries*, the fourteenth-century Carmelite prior Jehan Fillous de Venette argued that if Mary's body were still here on earth, it would "be in a church, solemnly and with great distinction, like the other holy bodies which fill churches down here; and good Christians from everywhere would go, so I think, to adore that worthy body devoutly and solemnly" (trans. Boulton, p. 71). In Boulton's reading: "Although the absence of a cult might not seem a clinching argument, the rubric preceding this passage announces clearly that the author has adduced reasons to prove that the Virgin is 'en corps et en ame lassus en paradis' (above in Paradise in body and soul)" (p. 71).

Unpersuasive as it might now seem, this argument from absence of veneration had been standard in the homiletic literature for the feast of the Assumption since the Carolingian period, when the originally Eastern feast was adopted by the Frankish church.[4] As the Augustinian canon Absalon of Springiersbach (d. 1206) reasoned in the second of three sermons that he composed for the feast: if Mary's body had remained on earth, why would her Son then deny her relics that veneration that he allows to the bodies of the saints?[5] The Benedictine monk William of Malmesbury (d. ca. 1143) made a similar argument in the preface to his *De laudibus et miraculis sanctae Marie* with respect to the miracles worked at Mary's shrines.[6] Moreover, in the same passage in his *Histoire des Trois Maries*, Jehan de Venette himself mentions that he has drawn on others' arguments in the course of his narrative, most notably "St. Augustine, who never loved a quarrel," here referring to a pseudonymous twelfth-century sermon that preachers like the Dominican Jacobus de Voragine (d. 1298) regularly cited in support of the doctrine.[7] Far from eschewing "theological debate [or] the technical details of doctrine" (as Boulton argues, p. 70), Jehan by his own account creatively embraced them, putting "St. Augustine's" words into the mouths of the Apostles so as to bring them to life.[8]

Likewise, to give but one more example, the image of the Virgin as a glass or crystal filled with light, invoked regularly by the authors Boulton surveys, from Wace in his *Conception Nostre Dame* (p. 26) and the author of the *Histoire de Marie et de Jésus* (p. 39) to the Cistercian Guillaume de Digulleville in his *Pèlerinage Jhesucrist* (p. 159), the cleric Jean Henry in his *Gesine de Nostre Dame* (pp. 183-84) and the episcopal notary Jean d'Outremeuse in his *Ly Myreur des Histors* (p. 210): following Gérard Gros citing Anselm Salzer, Boulton notes that this image would seem to go back to the fourth-century bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, suggesting, if inadvertently, that it was relatively obscure.[9] It is, however, much more likely that the poets and their audiences would have been familiar with this image from the contemporary liturgy, perhaps from the sequences of the Victorine canon Adam of St. Victor (d. 1146) or even from those of the great Benedictine abbess Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179).[10] That is, in invoking these images, the poets were, in effect, quoting popular songs.

My point is not to fault Boulton as an historian or even a theologian--she never claims she is--but rather to challenge the very assumptions that all of us in the field of medieval studies too often have reinforced in our accounts of the tradition, limited as we are by the languages and literatures in which we have tended to work. To wit: that there was ever a sharp dividing line between the ideas, images, and stories enjoyed by clerical (or lay) authors and lay (or clerical) audiences during these most imaginative centuries, such that clerical authors must always be assumed to have been theological killjoys and lay audiences bored by the merest whiff of doctrine not disguised as something else. Clearly, to judge solely from the authors whom Boulton surveys, monastic authors like Jehan de Venette (a Carmelite) enjoyed a good story, while laymen like Jean d'Outremeuse (a notary) enjoyed the vivid imagery of doctrine.

Much as Boulton's survey challenges us to rethink how medieval European Christians imagined the lives of the Virgin and Christ as stories, even more so it challenges us to redefine their exercise of theology and devotion as bounded neither by assumptions about genre nor by attitudes of sobriety and decorum to

which they did not subscribe. Significantly, not one of the works which Boulton surveys seems to have occasioned even the slightest suspicion of heresy, at least to judge from the manuscript evidence Boulton cites. No matter how startling modern readers might find it to imagine (with John of Howden, a clerk in Eleanor of Provence's service) Jesus as a nightingale or (with Jean Henry, a Parisian cleric writing for Jeanne of France, the duchess of Bourbon) the shepherds at the Nativity looking round for the rich furnishings and little dogs they otherwise expected to find in a great lady's apartment, for medieval authors and audiences such imaginative devices were at once standard and refreshing, the stuff of the "serious entertainment" (in Nancy Partner's apt phrase, cited by Boulton, p. 216) they expected history, whether sacred or secular, to provide.

But there is more to learn from the texts that Boulton has done so much to bring to our attention. Just as these works sought to challenge the boundaries that their medieval audiences might place between themselves and the figures of sacred history, so they should challenge us to rethink the boundaries we have placed between ourselves as modern readers schooled in the empathetic exercise of the imagination and the medieval works we, children of the Enlightenment all, have tended to ignore. As the prologue to the thirteenth-century *Évangile de l'Enfance* promised its medieval audience: "You have heard many romances of diverse people and of King Arthur's Round Table, which have no truth. Now listen well, for this text is all about Jesus Christ and will profit you greatly" (trans. Boulton, pp. 6-7). "Lords," the otherwise unknown twelfth-century poet Herman de Valenciennes invited his audience, "listen now and you will hear fair speech, sweeter to listen to than harp or *viele*... I shall tell you marvels, and you will hear marvels; I will not tell you fables, rather it will be the truth" (trans. Boulton, pp. 85-86, 88). Let us hark!

#### NOTES

[1] Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 174.

[2] I know, this argument is something of a straw man, but that is rather my point: so is Pinker's. Reading his book alongside Boulton's this past autumn was a textbook exercise in cognitive dissonance, convinced as I otherwise am by Pinker's larger argument about the decline of violence—to which decline, as a medievalist, I would insist that the kind of literature Boulton has surveyed directly contributed, if Pinker is serious about the way in which the literary "habit of entering other people's minds, including their pleasures and pains" contributed to "the humanitarian revolution" of the modern age (*Better Angels*, p. 175).

[3] Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: Norton, 2007).

[4] Rachel Fulton, "'Quae est ista quae ascendit sicut aurora consurgens?': The Song of Songs as the *Historia* for the Office of the Assumption," *Mediaeval Studies* 60 (1998): 55-122.

[5] Absalon of Springiersbach, *Sermo XLIV: In assumptione gloriosae virginis Mariae*, ed. J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 211 (Paris: Migne, 1855), cols. 250-56.

[6] José M. Canal, ed., *El Libro 'De laudibus et miraculis sanctae Mariae' de Guillermo de Malmesbury, OSB (c. 1143): Estudio y texto*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Alma Roma, 1968), pp. 61-62.

[7] Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 2:83-84. For the sermon itself, see *De assumptione beatae Mariae virginis*, ed. J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 40 (Paris: Migne, 1841), cols. 1141-48.

[8] In full (p. 71): "Thus, truly the Virgin is worthily resurrected and crowned with great celebration, body and soul (so says the *geste*) in most perfect glory above. So I think and believe, and many reasons

move me, which it is time to relate. But I have written some of them above and have also said others in the person of the Apostles which are not mine, but rather those of St. Augustine, who never loved a quarrel; and I have said enough of many others which I have summarized." Boulton cites and translates here from Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, fr. 12468, fol. 149rb.

[9] Gérard Gros, "La Semblance de la *verrine*, Description et interprétation d'une image mariale," *Le Moyen Âge* 97 (1991): 217-57, at pp. 217-18, citing Anselm Salzer, *Sinnbilder und beirworte Mariens in der deutschen Literatur und lateinischen Hymnenpoesie des Mittelalters* (Linz, 1893), pp. 73-74, citing *Quaestio 19*, t. 2, 341 EF. Boulton comments that she was unable to confirm the attribution. The same passage appears in the *Opera omnia* of Athanasius, ed. J-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 28 (Paris: Garnier, 1887), cols. 789-90, among the Spuria, suggesting indeed that there is more work to be done in tracing the origins and dissemination of this image.

[10] For Adam's and Hildegard's use of this imagery, see Barbara Newman, ed. and trans., Saint Hildegard of Bingen, *Symphonia: A Critical Edition of the Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum [Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations]* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 115 and 272.

Rachel Fulton Brown  
The University of Chicago  
[rfulton@uchicago.edu](mailto:rfulton@uchicago.edu)

Copyright © 2016 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 edistribution/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