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Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001. xv + 335 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, appendices, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8122-3604-1.

Review by Megan Armstrong, University of Utah.

Clearly-structured, well-researched, and insightful, Walter Simons' *City of Ladies* is a welcome reexamination of the beguine movement in the Netherlands. The beguines have attracted substantial historical interest in the past few years, as Simons himself is first to admit. What makes his study important, however, is that he examines the interplay between social environment and spirituality to explain the unique character of this particular religious movement. Whereas previous interpretations have tended to focus on the beguines in terms of lay spirituality and gender, Simons does much more: he shows how these women created a religious life which suited, on the one hand, their own desire for a more flexible interpretation of religious life and, on the other, societal demands for charitable services and cheap labor. Spirituality, gender, and urbanization played into the creation of this new kind of religious movement: one originated and governed by women and that operated in a spiritual space somewhere between lay and monastic.

Chapter one provides an overview of the character of the Low Countries between 1200 and 1565. The region in which the beguine movement flourished was politically and linguistically divided as well as highly urbanized. Over one-third of the population of Flanders lived in cities by the fifteenth century. Urbanization was a crucial element in the formation of beguine communities, according to Simons, because it encouraged not only the emergence of more a complex, mercantile economic structure but also demand for public charitable institutions and literacy. Simons shows that beguine communities were uniquely suited to this environment. Beguines worked in hospitals, participated actively in the textile industry, and, equally important, many of them were literate.

Simons also examines women's social and economic roles, depending heavily on the work of scholars such as Claire Billen and Wim Blockmans. As was more typical of northern European countries than southern ones, women of the Low Countries generally married later and participated more visibly and actively in urban economic life. The textile industry was perhaps the largest employer of women, and it attracted a constant migration of rural women into the cities throughout the late medieval and early modern periods. At times women even outnumbered the male members of the population. Estimates vary from 122 to 156 women for every 100 men in certain towns. What this means is that many women never married. Women in the Low Countries also enjoyed comparably more legal and economic authority. Women could inherit property and did not always require a dowry to marry. Simons does not try to suggest, however, that female economic independence indicates a less misogynist society. Women were ridiculed constantly in sermons as well as printed polemics for their vanity and licentiousness.

The final force shaping the society of the Low Countries was religious dissent. A highly literate population, circulating vernacular religious texts, lay people demanding a life of apostolic poverty, and an episcopacy hampered by outdated jurisdictional boundaries—all of these elements opened up the region to new expressions of lay religiosity. The Low Countries swelled with charismatic preachers as

well as penitential and devotional societies. Men and women also sought spiritual perfection on their own through such practices as asceticism, charity, and even the "chaste" marriage. However, with the exception of Catharism and another dualist spin off in Arras known as the Populicani, these movements were more often anti-clerical than heretical in nature. The impulse towards voluntary poverty and asceticism made the Catholic clergy an easy target for these movements because clerics held personal incomes, owned property, and dressed much more extravagantly than did the lay reformers.

The second chapter focuses on the formation of the first beguinages in the Low Countries. We begin to catch sight of women who are leading a new kind of religious life at the end of the twelfth century. By 1230 these women were organizing themselves into communities, either small ones known as "convents" or larger complexes known as "court beguinages." Simons estimates that 298 such communities had been established in 111 towns by the start of 1566, and the vast majority of these appeared before 1320. The sources for the early years are problematic, as Simons himself is first to admit. Most of what we know about the first generation of beguines comes from eleven *vitae*, all of which were likely written by members of the clergy. Not surprisingly, these men filtered beguine spirituality through their own interpretation of female spirituality. Also complicating identification of "beguine" spirituality is the fact that from the start these women defined their spiritual life in multiple ways. They wore secular clothing. Some worked among the lepers and dedicated themselves to manual labor, while others preferred a life of contemplation and even complete isolation. They never took a vow of poverty, yet they viewed the commercialization of their own society with enormous suspicion.

Because the court beguinage was a creation unique to the Low Countries, Simons talks about this institution at some length. Whereas the typical convent might house as many as fifteen beguines, the court beguinage usually held several hundred. The court beguinages were different from typical monastic communities because, while they too included a bakery, brewery, a church, and other such institutional supports, they also included a mixture of independent houses and apartment-like units. Beguines, moreover, did not observe strict enclosure; visitors could enter and the beguines leave to perform their services. Their communities thus offered a permeable spatial retreat from the surrounding urban society. Furthermore, the court beguinage operated as a charitable and economic urban space. Many court beguinages included a public infirmary. Located by streams or rivers, furthermore, these institutions were ideally suited for the preparation of cloth and wool. Not surprisingly, the court beguinage was central to the economic, social, and religious life of many cities in the Low Countries.

In chapter three Simons focuses more specifically on the beguines' spiritual life in order to understand the appeal of this movement for women. Simons explains the movement's spiritual appeal in terms of its mixture of the active and contemplative lives. Beguines worked as care-givers, teachers, and artisans in the many urban centers of the Low Countries while pursuing a communal spiritual life of contemplation and worship with other like-minded women in the convents and beguinages. Simons describes the great court beguinages in particular as "islands of contemplation and seclusion whose inhabitants often worked in town and to which many outsiders had access during the daytime" (p. 62). Simons does not contest the interpretations of Carolyn Walker Bynum, Dyan Elliott and Clarissa Atkinson, among others, that associate this movement with female rejection of marriage and desire for a life of apostolic poverty. He points out that a number of the early beguines spoke of a passionate aversion to sex and that Mary of Oignies even managed to convince her husband to pursue a life of chastity. Beguine avoidance of materialism also was a visible characteristic of the movement from the start. Members such as Juetta of Huy expressed enormous disdain for profit, and she, like many others, gave away her property when she became a beguine.

Despite their aversion to sex and wealth, the beguines never took a vow of poverty; nor did they seek a cloistered existence. The kind of religious life which appealed to them was one which allowed them to pursue a life of chastity without entirely leaving behind society. Certain members, however, could seek a more isolated spiritual existence as anchoresses, and this particular model of spiritual life became closely

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identified with the beguine movement over time. Medieval historians argue that for women, the anchorite tradition functioned as a female eremitic existence. The church viewed wandering women with suspicion, and this tradition enabled women to make the cell their own personal "desert." Individual women built cells against the walls of parish churches. Here they could spend their days isolated in contemplation, while still receiving spiritual guidance from the clergy. Their cells usually looked out on the altar so that they could witness the mass, and anchoresses believed that their proximity to a spiritual space—the church and its relics—aided them in their progress towards spiritual perfection.

Whereas anchoresses such as Juliana of Norwich usually walled themselves into their cells—an act signifying their death to the world—beguine anchoresses granted themselves some mobility. Moreover, they played an important pedagogical function because they often trained young beguines. This role as educator played out in other sectors of the beguine community as well. Beguines were often hired as teachers in urban schools where they gave young girls instruction in reading, writing, and religious devotion. Because the Low Countries enjoyed a high literacy rate, such schools were not uncommon, even for girls. Some of the beguines were very highly educated, according to Simons, though this was hardly typical. However, the majority were at least functionally literate.

Manual work, teaching, and contemplation show the diversity of activities that could engage a beguine, but also central to their spiritual identity was charity. In fact, it was the work of many early beguines with lepers that first attracted popular attention to their movement. Beguines worked in hospitals, and Simons suggests that their early association with the care of lepers earned them reputations as "specialists in death" (p. 78). Contemporaries believed that beguines' prayers had special efficacy and often requested the presence of these religious women at their deathbeds. Beguines prayed at the bedside, laid out the body, and conducted wakes.

Chapter four discusses the social composition of beguine communities. Simons is quick to tell us that the sources are limited in their usefulness for statistical analysis. Legal contracts, lists of obituaries, and other such documentation tend to privilege the presence of the wealthier members in a community. Even with these limitations Simons is able to track down the social and economic status of many members. Simons finds a higher percentage of nobles and urban patricians during the early years of the movement, followed by a relative decline in their presence by the fifteenth century. These findings are typical of many religious movements, male as well as female, but interesting here is that the patrons and founders of beguine communities were predominantly women. Of the documented patrons he surveyed, at least 45 percent were women and usually singlewomen. As he notes, the beguine movement was the only one founded and governed by women. Nunneries, in contrast, were almost invariably placed under the supervision of a male order. However, Simons does see increasing pressure during the fourteenth century to contain beguine women. This pressure, he argues, explains the increasing popularity of court beguinages as a form of community because they enabled women to retreat from the "disorderly" outer world, while still allowing them access to the city when necessary.

Chapter five wrestles with the issue of religious orthodoxy and ecclesiastical authority. Although the beguine movement survived for several centuries, Simons tries to explain why it was persecuted during the fourteenth century. He turns to the distinctive character of beguine spirituality for answers, suggesting that beguines' self-perception as spiritual educators was one reason. The thirteenth-century church considered itself the official interpreter of religious doctrine. In consequence, the clergy were often suspicious of wandering lay preachers such as the Waldensians and of any lay reading and interpretation of religious texts. The position of women in relationship to spiritual authority was even more of a concern to ecclesiastical authorities because Paul of Tarsus specifically forbade women to preach. Church authorities were worried about beguines precisely because these women were willing to explain Christian teachings to others.

The thirteenth-century Paris master Peter the Chanter believed that some women could edify others on religious matters, but his view was hardly representative of the clerical establishment. The church believed that only men could receive the intellectual and spiritual training necessary for such an important office as preaching. With a few exceptions, beguines did not preach in public, though some did exhort other beguines on matters of faith within their own communities. Even such private exhortations, however, made church authorities nervous in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It did not help the beguines' cause that they seemed to be claiming a distinctly female kind of spiritual knowledge—knowledge which they held was no less valid than that of the clergy for all that it was intuitive, rather than university-trained, in nature. A telling sign that the beguines believed in their apostolic role was their choice of Mary Magdalen as their patron saint. According to the *Golden Legend*, Mary Magdalen proselytized in Gaul.

Simons shows how this concern about religious orthodoxy resulted in the trial of Marguerite Porète in 1308 for her contemplative work *The Mirror of Christian Souls* and underlay the formal condemnation of the movement at the Council of Vienne (1311-1312). He quotes the decree *Cum de quibusdam mulieribus*, which specifically attacked beguine discussion of religious matters. Certain beguines, the decree states, "discussed and preached about the trinity and divine essence and expressed opinions contrary to the Catholic faith as if driven by a particular insanity" (p. 133). According to Simons, this condemnation almost ended the beguine movement in the fourteenth century. Ecclesiastical authorities hounded beguine communities and forced many to close. Members of those that managed to survive often found their mobility and intellectual life seriously scrutinized and controlled.

Medieval and early modern historians are comfortable viewing religious institutions as social institutions. We know that medieval religious men and women shared many of the same values as other members of society and that their institutions participated extensively in contemporary economic, political, and social life. Refreshing about Simons' study is that he shows how those values were neither antithetical to one another, nor perceived to be so by contemporaries. The spirituality of the beguines was unique because it was an expression of the particular culture—or rather, cultures—of the Low Countries. It was the product of a highly urbanized environment, in which literacy for both women and men was valued and in which lay-driven reform movements flourished. Beguines interpreted the perfect spiritual life in a way that happened to be ideally suited to their own society.

Simons' emphasis on the uniqueness of the beguine movement similarly benefits from his decision to interpret it within the larger context of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century dissenting religious traditions. Beguines were a product of a dissenting culture. Simons shows similarities between them and the Humiliati of Italy, a movement that also dedicated members to a life of contemplation and manual work. Men and women in the humiliati movement were among many contemporaries who shared beguine and beghard enthusiasm for a life of holiness based upon the rejection of material goods and sexuality. At the same time, Simons underlines the essential differences between the beguines and other female religious communities. Beguines did not want to be cloistered, and somehow, despite clerical pressure, they managed successfully to resist efforts to impose strict enclosure throughout the fifteenth century. True, their mobility and spiritual activities were more limited when compared to the early years of the movement. Even so, the beguines continued to occupy a space between lay and religious, that vague in-between space that invariably made clerics nervous.

*The City of Ladies* is heavily informed by recent work on female spirituality and Christian spirituality more generally, most notably, the work of Carolyn Bynum, Bernard McGinn, Anneke Mulder-Bakker, Barbara Newman, and André Vauchez. Simons' study is nevertheless an important contribution because it makes a solid case for the unique nature of beguine spirituality. He shows how the distinctive social and cultural environment of the Low Countries fused with female desire for specific forms of worship and lifestyle to create a movement that served the spiritual, social, and intellectual desires of women who lived in that region. Simons points in particular to beguines' greater independence from

ecclesiastical authority compared to traditional female religious, their combination of manual work with sacred readings, their sacralization of routine female tasks such as weaving, and their desire to "educate" others spiritually. However, it would be interesting to know more about how these women worshipped together. Was dancing, for example, a genuine practice of the beguines or an aspersion cast by a suspicious cleric? This question raises the more general issue of spiritual authority. The beguines recognized the clergy as spiritual authorities and depended upon them for the usual services. At the same time, their distinct understanding of their own religious role in society periodically brought them into conflict with church authorities.

While Simons tackles the issue of spiritual authority in his discussion of the fourteenth-century heresy investigations, and, to a lesser extent, in his analysis of clerical-authored biographies of early beguines, he gives very little information on daily interactions between the clergy and the beguines. The very survival of this religious movement, however, suggests that these women found clerical supporters throughout their history. It would be interesting to know more about how these women defined themselves in relation to the clergy and how that relationship changed over time. As Jodi Bilinkoff and Barbara Newman have shown, relations between female and male religious were not always fraught with conflict. Confessors in particular played a crucial role in shaping, sustaining, and promoting female mysticism. Simons similarly finds the confessor a powerful influence upon the spirituality of Mary of Oignies and many other early beguine mystics. Beyond confessors, however, what other kinds of relations brought together beguines and parish priests? What about the mendicant friars? Clearly there was enormous tension at times between the beguines and these clerics, but was there not also intellectual and spiritual exchange? Simons himself points out that many of the early beguines located themselves near mendicant churches because of the friars' preaching role. His contention, furthermore, that the fifteenth-century *devotio moderna* movement steered beguine spirituality towards contemplation at the expense of the "active life" also points to the influence of certain clergy upon these religious women. Simons' argument is intriguing, and I would like to know more. I have one quibble with Simons. *Cities of Ladies* ostensibly covers the period 1200-1565, an admirable sweep of time. He focuses most heavily, however, on the first two centuries of the movement. Since by his own admission the fifteenth century saw dramatic changes in beguine spirituality, it would be interesting to learn more about the movement during that period. The sixteenth century must have been a fascinating time as well, but here it remains little more than a tantalizing phantom, a promise of exciting things to come but as of yet undelivered.

This is a minor complaint, however, because Simons' book is a lovely work. His grasp of the secondary material is impressive, and even more impressive is his exhaustive use of primary sources. The painstaking and thorough nature of his research is particularly evident in the two appendices. By weaving together notarial documents, inventory accounts, correspondence, and chronicles--among many other sources--Simons is able to identify and reconstruct the somewhat shadowy establishments we call beguinages. Appendix I lists all beguine communities founded prior to 1566. In addition to the location and dates of each establishment, Simons includes (where possible) information on the size and nature of the community, number of members, and patrons. Appendix II provides information on the changing population of nine court beguinages during the period of this study. These appendices alone are enormously useful for any social analysis of beguine communities during the late medieval and early modern periods.

*Cities of Ladies* is a fine scholarly achievement. It highlights the centrality of beguine communities to urban economic, social, and intellectual life in the Low Countries while showing how this environment contributed to the distinctive character of beguine spirituality. Even more important, Simons' book reminds us that the beguine movement was not simply an important female religious movement. It was an important religious movement.

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