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Suzanne K. Kaufman, *Consuming Visions: Mass Culture and the Lourdes Shrine*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2005. viii + 255 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$34.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0 8014 4248 6.

Review by Sarah A. Curtis, San Francisco State University.

Nineteenth century religious apparitions, shrines, and pilgrimages are finally getting the serious historical attention that their counterparts in earlier historical eras have long enjoyed. To cite just two examples, in 1993, David Blackbourn published an important study on the apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Marpingen, Germany, that situated them in the political, economic, and social contexts of early imperial Germany, and, in 1999, Ruth Harris did the same for Lourdes and the Third Republic in an important book that set the standard for the study of nineteenth century religious pilgrimage.^[1] Now Suzanne K. Kaufman follows with a second book on Lourdes, whose origins as a doctoral dissertation actually predate Harris's study.^[2] It is a testimony to the historical richness of the Lourdes shrine and of pilgrimage that her book is neither a repeat nor a refutation of Harris's work (though she disagrees with Harris on some specific points of interpretation) but instead breaks new ground for the study of Lourdes and French religious history.

As the title of her book implies, Kaufman positions her study of the Lourdes shrine within the development of a modern market culture in the late nineteenth century, drawing on insights made by scholars of consumerism, gender, spectacle, and the press. She rejects the notion that the Catholic church merely represented a backward or traditional culture, rather it was surprisingly resilient in the face of modernizing and secular forces. Indeed, the development of Lourdes into a national shrine and pilgrimage depended on the church's ability to harness those same forces—especially the railway infrastructure and up-to-date publicity mechanisms—for their own ends. But Kaufman also rejects the notion that those ends were necessarily traditional, arguing instead that “the very success of Lourdes...depended on erasing its identity as a local holy site and linking the practices of Catholic pilgrimage to the emerging mass culture of urban France” (p. 18).

Kaufman spends relatively little time on the apparitions themselves or on the process by which they became accepted by the Catholic church as authentic (for that, one still needs Harris's book), beginning her story with the transformation of the sleepy village of Lourdes into a tourist town that resembled France's secular tourist destinations, particularly spa towns. She pays particular attention to the ways in which guidebooks, postcards, and advertisements mediated the pilgrimage experience, teaching pilgrims—especially those from rural or lower class backgrounds—how to see and experience the shrine. Unlike earlier local or regional shrines that were embedded in traditional religious practice, Lourdes was an “inviting modern spectacle for pilgrim tourists” (p. 40). As in any big French city at the end of the nineteenth century, tourists could stroll through the rebuilt Lourdes, linger in its cafés, and gaze upon its lively street life. Kaufman is heavily indebted in her interpretation here to such works as Vanessa Schwartz's *Spectacular Realities*, and, in fact, she traces some of the same visual forms that Schwartz analyzes for modern Paris, such as a wax museum, pictorial dioramas, and the cinema, in Lourdes itself.^[3] “Although Lourdes was no Paris,” Kaufman argues, “it produced a parallel experience for Catholics” by turning them into modern spectators (p. 56).

These transformations were not without critics, both clerical and anticlerical. Although Catholic shrines and pilgrimages had long been associated with a certain level of commercial activity, many Catholic

authorities and elites became concerned that the new Lourdes had forsaken the sacred for the profane. Anticlericals, as the church state conflict of the Third Republic reached its peak, mocked the marketing of Lourdes, while fretting over its success. Especially notable, of course, was Émile Zola's 1893 novel *Lourdes*, whose influence Kaufman evokes in several chapters. To republicans like Zola, the modern commercial practices at Lourdes only threatened to draw yet more Frenchmen and women (especially women) into the clutches of an anti-modern church. The safety of the Republic depended not only on controlling the crowds visiting the shrine but also those buying souvenirs and bottles of Lourdes water in the shops and stalls around it. In her analysis of Zola and Republican journalists, Kaufman draws interesting parallels, however, with their archenemies, devout Catholics such as Léon Bloy and Joris Karl Huysmans, who also found fin-de-siècle Lourdes too commercial, too vulgar, and too superficial. Gone was the authentic spirituality they imagined in the past, available only--perhaps--in the grotto itself where the Virgin still worked miracles. In short, although Kaufman does not make explicit parallels with other forms of nineteenth-century travel or even other pilgrimages, her account makes clear that neither church nor state saw Lourdes as just another tourist destination but one whose holy status (for better or worse) needed to be taken seriously despite--or perhaps because of--its commercial ethos. In her view, Lourdes became the site where rural pilgrims, especially women, entered "into the world of mass society and consumer culture" (p. 19).

Kaufman extends her interpretation of the primacy of commercialism at Lourdes to the medical cures themselves. The crowds pouring into Lourdes mainly sought physical healing, and the efficacy of the shrine and its water remained a key point of contention between clerics and anticlericals, believers and non-believers, priests and physicians throughout this period. She argues that most scholars have reproduced the nineteenth-century Catholic view that the grotto itself was part of a separate sacred realm untouched by modernity, whereas she finds "that the new rituals of healing and care of the sick were themselves the products of a commercializing and modernizing world" (p. 96). Kaufman's chief interpretative tool (somewhat under-explained) in her analysis of the miracle cures at Lourdes is the melodrama, whose narrative structure she sees as key to understanding the case studies of individual pilgrims and patients. Here again, spectacle links the Lourdes experience to parallel developments in secular France. The *miraculées* (mainly women), as they were called, became objects of a "curing drama" that owed much to the "aesthetic practices of the mass press and the theater" (p. 117) and that turned some of them into minor celebrities. In the religious press, accounts of cures functioned, according to Kaufman, in much the same way as the *fait divers* did in the secular press, promoting the sale of newspapers along with the miraculous in everyday life. Indeed, both the promoters and the detractors of Lourdes were dependent on the national press to shape French discourse surrounding the shrine, and when necessary, the press was a convenient target for both sides who thought the truth was being distorted to meet the commercial needs of the mass media. The debate over the healing properties of Lourdes water, which raged for half a century, Kaufman argues, became mass entertainment rather than a serious religious or scientific debate.

Kaufman is particularly interested in the role that Lourdes played in the lives of the women who were its most numerous pilgrims. Although she evokes women's experiences throughout the book, she devotes an entire chapter to the analysis of the testimonials written by women who believed they had experienced a miracle cure at Lourdes (produced for the jubilee pilgrimage in 1897). These testimonials she sees as "literary performances in which the women drew on and combined multiple discourses to assert the truth of the cure and thereby articulate a public identity for themselves" (p. 136). She finds again the influence of popular melodrama as the primary textual form adopted by these writers. Doctors served as villains and the women themselves as heroines, which allowed them to "write themselves into Christian history as actors, spiritual authorities, and objects of grace" (p. 154). She argues that the female *miraculée* was, like the New Woman, "a distinctly modern figure" who "transgressed traditional models of womanhood based on modesty and self abnegation, embracing instead an assertive and achieving feminine subject" (p. 161). In this way, Kaufman suggests, Catholic women, especially rural

and lower-class women, were able to create and shape public identities in the fin-de-siècle as much as the female journalists and Parisian actresses studied by scholars such as Mary Louise Roberts.[4]

The great contribution of Kaufman's book is precisely these kinds of comparisons to secular transformations in fin-de-siècle France, from the New Woman to innovative commercial practices to the "spectacular realities" of the new visual and print culture. Her reading of the evidence suggests that Lourdes did not succeed because it represented a sphere separate from "modern France" but because it was part and parcel of that same modernity. This interpretation has the very useful function of writing the church back into the history of the Third Republic as something more than a sparring partner for the French state.

Yet Kaufman's interpretation carries with it some dangers as well, chief among them that she underestimates the religious core of the Lourdes experience. Reading the *miraculées'* testimonies as melodramatic texts, for example, privileges their narrative form over their spiritual content. In those texts, these women may have imagined themselves as new religious heroines, but this book does not consider how that imagining might have been influenced by past religious heroines and martyrs or even their contemporary lives within the Catholic Church, where assertive Catholic women were rather the rule than the exception. Nor does Kaufman ever really explain how the new commodity culture changed the devotional practices of the Catholic Church in a sustained or permanent way. This is perhaps because her book is not situated within the history of Catholic practice in France, to which she devotes very little attention. As a result, in *Consuming Visions*, the intense spiritual experience of a pilgrimage to Lourdes in the nineteenth century is eclipsed by the sightseeing and the buying. In short, Kaufman's Lourdes is not primarily a site of religious belief, but, as the last line of her epilogue proclaims, "a modern site where key contradictions of modernity itself are produced, contested, and obscured" (p. 201).

For historians looking to understand the Lourdes phenomenon within the context of mass culture in fin-de-siècle France, however, this book provides an insightful and persuasive argument for the centrality of Lourdes to the development of modern France. Historians of religion can only rejoice that their objects of interest have finally gone mainstream.

NOTES

[1] David Blackbourn, *Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in a Nineteenth Century German Village* (New York: Vintage, 1993). Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York: Penguin, 1999).

[2] Suzanne K. Kaufman, "Miracles, Medicine, and the Spectacle of Lourdes: Popular Religion and Modernity in Fin de Siècle France" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1996).

[3] Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin de Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

[4] Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

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