

Valerie G. Spear. *Leadership in Medieval English Nunneries*. (Studies in the History of Medieval Religion.) Boydell, 2005. pp. iv + 244.

Deileen Power's monograph *Medieval English Nunneries* (1922) and her essay "Madame Eglentyne," which appeared in *Medieval People* (1924), have cast long shadows over the historiography of medieval English nunneries. Power argued that late medieval nuns were ill equipped intellectually, financially, and spiritually for monastic life. Her portrayal of Madame Eglentyne, Chaucer's prioress, focuses on Eglentyne's frivolity and love of luxury and fashion. Since this condemnation of late medieval English convents, scholars in a variety of disciplines have tested Power's hypothesis, largely concluding that she overstated her case in the extreme. Valerie Spear's *Leadership in Medieval English Nunneries* continues in this vein, providing numerous examples of mother superiors exercising competent and even inspired leadership for their nuns. Although critical of Power's overall assessment of the quality of late medieval convent life, Spear remains hesitant to state outright that convent leadership was strong because of the fragmented nature of her sources and the examples of incompetence that she does find. English nunneries were, by and large, less wealthy than male houses, and the Reformation saw the dispersal and

destruction of much of their archives. Those sources that do remain relate primarily to problems and, therefore, offer a one-sided view of convent life. This makes studying the social history of nunneries challenging.

The chronological parameters of this book are 1298, when Pope Boniface VIII issued his bull *Periculoso*, which demanded that nuns remain perpetually enclosed, and 1539 when King Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries in England. Spear places her work in the context of changing ideas about women's authority. After the twelfth century, medieval society viewed women in power as manly or exceptional. The Benedictine and Augustinian *Rules* followed by nunneries, however, laid out obligations for monastic leaders that directed the leaders to garner and manage resources and to provide discipline. Until the late fifteenth century, there were few attempts to reinterpret these rules for women. Yet in reality, all abbesses and prioresses exercised their position while remaining under the supervision of male ecclesiastics. Spear thus defines leadership in this context as an "interactive situation in which the elected woman was permitted or required by her community to direct its energies towards an agreed goal or range of goals." (2) Abbesses and prioresses had to balance humility and authoritarianism in a search for a management style.

Spear focuses on sixteen nunneries from across England. All but Syon followed either the Benedictine or

Augustinian *Rules*. In the first chapter she argues for a contrast between how leadership looked from inside the nunnery with how it looked from outside the nunnery. She nicely captures the contrasting priorities of male supervisors and female superiors in two diagrams of power networks. As laid out by the rule and by ecclesiastical law, the pope and other members of the male hierarchy figure quite prominently in dictating the abbess' or prioress' duties and responsibilities. As Spear argues, however, the hierarchy was an ideal that did not exactly match reality. Daily proximity to the poor, boarders, and the household of nuns made their demands and needs figure more prominently in the superior's daily life. The pope might be at the peak of the Church hierarchy, but he was a remote figure off in Rome or Avignon and had little immediate impact on convent life. This diagram sets up the seven following chapters, which address various aspects of this dichotomy.

Chapter 2 looks at how women came to their position as superior. While *Rules* allowed for the election of an abbess or prioress, family status and connections also played a role in promoting some women to their positions of authority. Yet, Spear's evidence discounts Power's view that leadership of late medieval convents was solely a bastion of noble privilege. Chapter 3 examines the relationship between nunneries and their episcopal supervisors. Spear argues that the various educational and ecclesiastical backgrounds of prelates make it difficult to generalize

about their attitudes toward and treatment of female religious houses. Chapter 4 takes up the relationship between nunneries and the monarch. Many convents were royal houses, so their relationship with kings was close. Yet while royal patronage conferred some benefits, it also came with some added attention and responsibilities. Chapter 5 considers the daily administrative concerns of abbesses and prioresses. Instead of the female ineptitude argued by Power, Spear finds that many prioresses and abbesses were competent and skilled at managing their houses. The lack of formal training was not a barrier to effective administration. Chapter 6 moves to clerical attitudes towards nunneries. Here Spear makes use of many of the same visitation sources used by Power. Spear finds that while the clergy were continually concerned about breaches in monastic discipline, particularly violations of enclosure, there is not enough evidence to substantiate Power's negative assessment. Moreover, the importance of clerical misogyny needs to be considered when reading these records. Chapter 7 compares Chaucer's depiction of the frivolous and worldly Madame Eglentyne with the devout and conscientious Euphemia of Wherwell as she is portrayed in her eulogy. By contrasting such different women, Spear is able to show the range of leadership styles, highlighting successes and failures. The last chapter takes up the dissolution and the different responses abbesses and prioresses had to the crisis of the Reformation. She makes the

important point that no one knew how far reaching or long lasting the reforms would be, and this uncertainty shaped women's responses to the closure of their houses. Spear also provides four appendices: a list of nunneries and their income, a list of the superiors in each house, the election license of Cecily Willoughby as Abbess of Wilton Abbey, and Euphemia's eulogy.

Overall this book contains a great deal of meticulous research. If I have one criticism, it is that Spear might have filled in some of her gaps with parallel examples from outside convents. Women managed households, and towns, parishes, and guilds all held elections. Some consideration of the dynamics of these analogous situations might have fleshed out her argument. Spear has covered a vast territory and has successfully argued for the competency of nunnery leadership in the late Middle Ages, yet she continually hedges her assessments because the fragmentary nature of her sources makes it difficult for her to make generalizations. Her argument that leadership looks very different when viewed from within the nunnery as opposed to the idealized ecclesiastical hierarchy is very compelling and adds a valuable dimension to the scholarship on female monastics.

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Louise Labé. *Complete Poetry and Prose: A Bilingual Edition*. Edited with critical introductions and prose translations by Deborah Lesko Baker and poetry translations by Annie Finch. (The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe.) University of Chicago Press, 2006. pp. xxxi + 274.

The 1555 *Oeuvres* of Louise Labé are remarkable in many ways. Written by a ropemaker's daughter, they combine erudition with feminist polemic and frank eroticism and comprise a startlingly wide range of genres: an introductory manifesto addressed to a woman, a prose allegorical debate, three elegies in the tradition of Ovid's *Heroides*, and the first female-authored Petrarchan sonnet cycle in French. Nevertheless, as Deborah Lesko Baker observes in the introduction to her new edition of the *Oeuvres*, the complete corpus of Labé's work has not hitherto been readily available to English speakers. In a trend that began within Labé's own lifetime, analysis of her texts often came second to speculation about her colorful personal history (was she or was she not a courtesan?); and from the nineteenth century onward, critics preferred to read her sonnets as erotic autobiography, privileging them over the rest of her work. Accordingly, the sonnets have been translated into English five