
Ellen F. Kittell and Mary A. Suydam state three goals for their edited collection *The Texture of Society: Medieval Women in the Southern Low Countries.* They write that they intend to bring attention to these women, to the scholars who work on them – particularly European scholars whose work is primarily in Dutch – and finally to “raise significant conceptual issues” (xi). While I think they achieve the first two goals admirably, I am not certain that the volume as a whole broaches entirely new theoretical ground. However, the volume presents a lot of interesting historical data and information that is very useful for anyone working on the Low Countries. There is a very brief introduction to the Southern Low Countries’ region and culture followed by a description of the two divisions of essays: “Community Norms” and “Art and Performance.”

Kittell’s essay, “Reconciliation or Punishment: Women, Community, and Malefaction in the Medieval County of Flanders” (pp. 3-30), opens the “Community Norms” section. Mariann Naessens’ “Judicial Authorities’ Views of Women’s Roles in Late Medieval Flanders” (pp. 51-78) pairs so nicely with it that I wondered why it did not follow immediately. Kittell examines R. C. van Caenegem’s 1956 assertion that women and men were treated very differently under Flemish criminal law in the Middle Ages and finds that, in fact, Flemish law and courts made less distinction between the genders than had been believed. The cases Kittell examines include the very interesting and rare instances where women were condemned to death such as the 1306 execution of a woman for murdering her husband with her maid’s help.

Naessens examines judges’ descriptions of female identities focusing on penalized behaviors such as cross-dressing, infanticide, adultery, and brothel
keeping. She concludes that expectations of a woman’s family role determined how “transgressive” the judge perceived her crimes. Focusing on a later period than Kittell, Naessens’ essay shows that gender did eventually affect views of crime and punishment.

Katrien Heene’s “Gender and Mobility in the Low Countries: Traveling Women in Thirteenth-Century Exempla and Saints’ Lives” (pp. 31-49) seeks to demonstrate that in spite of a general belief that women did not travel and were confined more or less to their home villages, many medieval Low Countries women did travel between holy sites and make pilgrimages. The article summarizes preliminary results from the Itineraria project, on which Heene works, which is compiling evidence of women’s travels from “proverbs, sermons, exempla, didactic and moral treatises as well as saints’ lives and miracle collections” (31-2). Heene tantalizingly points to the possibility for further theorization in her conclusion, where she states that the male authors are clearly operating from their own masculine expectations of what women’s travels would be when they write about the Low Countries’ women, but how that operates in the examples she has given is not fully explored.

Linda Guzzetti, “Women’s Inheritance and Testamentary Practices in Late Fourteenth- and Early Fifteenth-Century Venice and Ghent” (pp. 79-108), and Eric Bousmar, “Neither Equality nor Radical Oppression: The Elasticity of Women’s Roles in the Late Medieval Low Countries” (pp. 109-128) look at women’s roles in the context of inheritance and property rights law. I found Guzzetti’s comparisons between the two cities useful, but clearly her real expertise and interest is in Venetian practices. One of her conclusions is that Venice is not as unique in this regard as is commonly held because of similarities in Ghent’s medieval society. Bousmar covers a slightly later period than most of the other essays, spanning the late fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries. He concludes that women’s roles were not rigidly set, and that, indeed, various circumstances allowed them some elasticity.

The “Art and Performance,” section begins, like the first, with an essay by one of the
section begins, like the first, with an essay by one of the co-editors, Mary Suydam’s “Visionaries in the Public Eye: Beguine Literature as Performance” (pp. 131-52). Suydam applies a trend that she locates in sermon studies, the relationship between text and oral performance, to the vernacular literature of the beguines in the Southern Low Countries. Suydam argues persuasively that the visionary texts produced by and about the beguines can and should be read as performance pieces. She further argues that some of the visionary beguines themselves —like Marie d’Oignies— should also be considered as performative texts to be read. Suydam examines how reading through this lens will open our understanding of these women’s ecstatic acts.

Ulrike Wiethaus follows with what I consider the best essay in the volume and one that opens up a new avenue for the exploration of mystical texts, “The Death Song of Marie d’Oignies: Mystical Sound and Hagio graphical Politics in Medieval Lorraine” (pp. 153-80). Wiethaus states that “sound is possibly the least studied aspect of medieval Christian mysticism today, neglected in favor of textual and visual data” (153). Focusing on Marie d’Oignies’ “death song,” as described in detail in the vitae of Jacques de Vitry and Thomas de Cantimpré, Wiethaus examines Marie’s role in the beguine community, in the lives of her two hagiographers, and, indeed, in the medieval religious world as far as Palestine (where Jacques eventually became an active force). Wiethaus argues effectively that song plays a central metaphorical role in Jacques’ vita of Marie because his patron, Bishop Fulk, was once a troubadour and was attuned to the role of music in religious devotion.

In her “On the Artistic Nature of Elisabeth of Spalbeek’s Ecstasy: The Southern Low Countries Do Matter” (pp. 181-202), Joanna E. Ziegler treats Elisabeth’s performance as more theater than dance as she and Susan Rodgers have previously argued. It seems to me that dance is still how Ziegler reads Elisabeth, and a subtext of Ziegler’s article that Elisabeth’s theater is really a kind of dance. Having read Rodgers and Ziegler’s 1999 article, I did not find much that was new here—although Ziegler spends
someone new to the beguines and Elisabeth, this article will be very helpful, and it certainly belongs in this volume.

The volume closes with Laura D. Gelfand’s “Regency, Power, and Dynastic Visual Memory: Margaret of Austria as Patron and Propagandist” (pp. 202-26), which looks at the use of devotional diptychs during Margaret of Austria’s regency in the Netherlands from 1507-30. Gelfand points out that diptychs had been commissioned, until Margaret’s rule, mainly by Burgundian men, and that Margaret used her commissions to promote herself, her links to the Valois dynasty, and her political agenda. While Margaret was considered weak upon assuming the regency, as a woman and over a region opposed to her family’s reign, she subtly positions herself—through the diptychs’ imagery—as the rightful leader and a woman of power.

Overall, I found the volume uneven from essay to essay. There were some that were fascinating, important contributions to the study of gender in the medieval Southern Low Countries. Others, however, were not quite as informative or well written. As a whole, this area of medieval studies should be further examined as it is a region and time rich for gender and devotional studies. Other than the 1999 volume edited by Juliette Dor, Lesley Johnson, and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *New Trends in Feminine Spirituality: The Holy Women of Liége and their Impact*, there are few complete collections discussing the range of Low Countries topics and people touched on in this volume, and the book belongs on any scholar’s shelf who studies this region.

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End Note