GUIDANCE FOR WOMEN IN 12TH-CENTURY CONVENTS. TRANSLATED BY VERA MORTON; WITH AN INTERPRETIVE ESSAY BY JOCELYN WOGAN-BROWN. (LIBRARY OF MEDIEVAL WOMEN.) BOYDELL AND BREWER, 2003. PP. X, 203 + 1 B/W ILLUSTRATION.

This book comprises a selection of translated letters written by a variety of churchmen and theologians to individual enclosed women in England and northern France during the High Middle Ages. It also includes extracts from male-authored biographies of abbesses of Barking Abbey in England, commissioned by some of their successors. The purpose of the collection is, in the words of its compiler in the Preface, "to show medieval women administrators using the traditions of institutionalised female virginity and chastity in their own projects and responsibilities," In addition, it aims to demonstrate the extent to which "the literary conventions of virginity and chastity writing could shape and express the working lives and ambitions of women as well as men in the twelfth-century church." In this capacity, it promises a more informed gendered appraisal of these letters and the themes running through them than it actually delivers – although there *is* much of great value offered within the realms of historical context and socio-religious ideological concerns.

Morton's introduction begins by providing the reader with a useful and informative examination of the meanings of chastity and virginity during the Middle Ages, both of which comprise the most insistent of discourses within many of the letters selected for inclusion, as one might expect in letters written to women by men during the period. However, although furnishing much information, an opportunity to further interrogate the inclusion and import of such discourses in these letters by theorizing them as socio-religious constructs – and malleable ones, at that – has been lost here. Disappointingly, much of the content of these letters on occasion seems to have been taken at face value, and at other times, the analysis in the introduction threatens to become over-simplistic or misleading. When offering reasons for women entering the convent in the first place, for example, Morton ventures: "sometimes a girl might seek refuge from a repulsive marriage: not infrequently postulants were offered to the nunnery for family convenience widows might choose to retire to a nunnery as might women separated or divorced from their husbands. So too, could women who actively sought and chose religious careers."(6).

This, of course, does not serve to explain the extraordinary upsurge of highly able women keen to enter religious houses which Morton rightly proceeds to document, although it is clear that the primary momentum of this volume *does* aim to illuminate likely reasons

for this phenomenon. More useful within this introduction, however, is the recognition of the striking correlation between the experiences of women within the nunneries of northern France and England during the period in question and that, in many ways, the letters concerning virginity and chastity should be examined as the products of a single culture, rather than having arbitrary lines of demarcation imposed upon them by historiographic convention.

The included letters themselves cover those of Osbert of Clare, writing in the twelfth-century to a selection of religious women, letters from Abelard to Heloise, a letter penned by Peter the Venerable to his enclosed nieces, and extracts from Goscelin's account of the Lives of the Abbesses at Barking. In this sense, the content cannot be faulted; not only do these letters demonstrate the warmth of relationship and the frequent mutuality which existed between male writer and female recipient, but also emphasize the rich veins of potentially empowering imagery and discourses used to construct the narratives. Again, however, both in the volume's introduction and in the concluding Interpretive Essay by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne – about which I will comment later – a second opportunity for a more nuanced appraisal of the varieties of reading practices which make this "empowerment" a possibility within what is essentially a patriarchal discourse, has been largely overlooked. In addition to this, the chosen format (which is justified by Morton in her introduction) is an ordering of the material according to female recipient, rather than male author. While the logic of this is impeccable, the practice makes for a rather disruptive internal structure (the three letters of Osbert of Clare, for example, are separated by ones by Abelard and Peter the Venerable). From my own perspective, I would have preferred a grouping according to writer, in order to facilitate a more immediate and better appraisal of the dis/continuities of style, imagery, and interpellative strategies employed by the author of the letters in each case. More importantly – and herein lies my primary concern about the collection – it tends to exacerbate a potentially prescribed reading of these letters set up initially within the otherwise admirable and lengthy section introductions to each letter or set of extracts. On occasion, Morton seems to be telling us *how* to read the source material, rather than offering interpretive strategies, although the wealth of contextual information she also offers in each case again provides areas of strength. That also said, the translations themselves are fluent, fluid, and fully accessible, and Morton's scholarly approach to this task has entirely succeeded in retaining the epistolary vibrancy, the enthusiasms and energies of the original texts.

The volume's interpretive

essay has been written by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, whose work on women and enclosure during the High Middle Ages needs little introduction. Much of this is a comprehensive reworking of some of that earlier material – her work on women's cultural roles and virginity, for example, as well as the role of the nun within women's history. She also draws on earlier scholarship on the significance of death in the Middle Ages, all of which – particularly in the essay's early stages – threatens to render this essay more context than interpretation. However, as the essay gathers momentum, Wogan-Browne successfully begins to draw some of the more unruly threads of this volume together, finally underscoring the arbitrary nature of the wall between the enclosed woman and the world which is revealed beneath the surface reading of these letters. This, along with her assertion that "the representation of women (in these letters) mirrors the cultural importance of women's roles in death, burial, and commemoration more generally" (173) both salvages the volume as a useful one for the medieval feminist, and points towards an area of more concerted appraisal which has been left untapped by this volume. In this very positive sense, the collection offers the opportunity for further feminist study in this area by interested readers who may feel somewhat short-changed by it and wish to pursue it further.

Finally, in spite of these few reservations, a particularly comprehensive annotated bibliography and highly useful index of references concerning the letters themselves (included in addition to the general index) render this a most welcome contribution to our understanding of how agency may have been encouraged and achieved, not only for the more literate of enclosed medieval women, but by all women who were offered the opportunity to read the narratives of their own particular cultures empoweringly "against the grain."

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