Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition c. 1100–1500. Edited by Alastair Minnis and Rosalynn Voaden. Brepols Essays in European Culture 1. Turnhout: Brepols, 2010. Pp. vii + 748. ISBN: 7825035318099.

WITHIN CHRISTIAN TRADITION, women were often visible proponents and active advocates for the transmission of belief and doctrine. However, throughout the medieval period the voices of women were circumscribed, regulated, and often censored by the patriarchal power structures of the Catholic Church. Holy women, whose sanctity, humility, piety, and knowledge inspired countless Christians during the Middle Ages, found a variety of ways to be heard, some orthodox and others more controversial. *Medieval Holy Women* brings together for the first time a wealth of information on the nature of female holiness and modes of faith, teaching, and preaching, providing a comprehensive study of religious women in reality and practice.

Medieval Holy Women is an extensive and occasionally daunting collection of scholarship on female mystics, saints, heretics, religious scholars, and authors covering every geographical region of medieval Europe. The volume opens with the words of Julian of Norwich and her challenge to Church authorities who had, for centuries, attempted to suppress the autonomous female religious voice. She asks, "Because I am a woman, ought I therefore to believe that I should not tell you of the goodness of God, when I saw at the same time that it is his will that it be known?" (1); the editors take her words as a starting point for addressing the realities and mythologies surrounding the production of texts by medieval holy women, questions of authorship and authority, and the fine line trodden by many who had something to say about divine revelations but felt that they either could not or should not speak out.

Editors Alastair Minnis and Rosalynn Voaden deal with the difficulties of devout women who found "theological voice and profoundly influenced the spiritual practice of those around them" (1), in their introduction, which clearly and correctly justifies the need for such a study. In terms accessible to both students and scholars, they explain the historical evolution of female piety, the Church's response to it, the prohibitions against its public expression (like the Pauline prohibition against female preaching that was the foundation for a great deal of medieval religious thought concerning women), and how holy women got around masculine biases, finding ways to exercise their power and reveal their message.

The introductory essays concentrate on major issues and concerns for the medieval Church and for the devout women who sought to serve the established

religious authorities or challenge, reform, and chastise them. These essays provide the theoretical and historiographical framework for understanding and interpreting the narrative accounts that follow.

Dyan Elliott provides an apt introduction to the concepts of the female body that informed medieval perceptions of female sanctity, how it was defined, who defined it, and the mutability of that definition. She argues that there is no *one* way to discuss the female body in the Middle Ages, and that clerics often struggled with the contradictions between perceived feminine weakness or defilement and spiritual authority. The specific spheres in which women could exercise that authority, or any form of religious instruction, are succinctly and thoroughly examined by Alastair Minnis in his essay on the public and private forums for religious education. Women were bound by doctrine that became increasingly restrictive and sought to limit their interaction with male audiences on matters of faith or spiritual revelation. Minnis's analysis challenges modern conceptions of these spheres, explaining how the definitions of each were applied to facilitate or circumscribe female ministry. He points out that many women defied restrictions placed upon them, but maintained their orthodoxy by operating within private spaces and readjusting the boundaries of what was "public."

The question of authorship and voice in the case of *vitae,* biographies, and other written works by and about holy women is the focus of John Coakley's essay on women's textual authority and the collaboration of male clerics who often changed or filtered the words of the women whose lives they inscribed. Male authors and scribes frequently shaped the voice of holy women and often usurped or promoted female textual autonomy and authority, depending on how those accounts served them. However, Coakley notes that it is not a simple case of controlling the female voice; these men, as hagiographers or literary assistants, sought "to present the women as figures of legitimate influence in their own right" (84). In some cases, like that of Birgitta of Sweden, women controlled their own texts; in others like that of Dorothy of Montau, their voice is subsumed by the agenda of the male collaborator.

Women also wrote about themselves and their fellow nuns in the rarely studied genre of sister-books investigated by John Van Engen. These German and Middle Dutch collections were written to document the history and spirituality of individual religious houses and seem to indicate female autonomy in providing instruction for specific communities of women. Dissenting groups, specifically the Cathars, Waldensians, and Lollards, feature in the final introductory essay by Peter Biller, who interrogates the realities and mythologies surrounding heretical sects and their perceived appeal for medieval women as

doctrinally equal and tolerant of female devotion and proselytizing. All of the essays challenge modern misconceptions about medieval holy women and their place in religious power structures and suggest a much more nuanced approach to reading these women's lives.

Arranged according to geographical regions, the British Isles, France, the German territories, the Iberian Peninsula, Italy, the Low Countries, and Scandinavia, the rest of the collection is a stunningly comprehensive assessment of the complex and diverse corpus of texts and contexts regarding medieval holy women. Each geographical segment begins with a survey, a contextual discussion of female sanctity and devotion in that geo-political space, providing a specific context for the discussion of the individual lives that follow. The clear, organized structure allows for easy reference and forms a connective tissue of time and geographical as well as political space.

Overall, *Medieval Holy Women* is a compelling and fascinating study on cultures of devotion that are often overlooked in discussions of the Middle Ages. It is a valuable work for students and scholars, and though its price may relegate it to institutional libraries rather than personal ones, it is an essential and foundational work that greatly enhances modern understandings of medieval women.

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