
Since the publication of Ann Warren’s influential *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England* (1985), studies of medieval anchoritism have tended to agree with her claim that this form of piety flourished in Britain but floundered on the Continent, where it encountered opposition from churchmen concerned about heterodoxy. Mulder-Bakker’s study comes as a welcome challenge to this view. In it, she outlines the social and institutional place of anchoritism from 1100 to 1311 in the area between Paris and Magdeburg, which she claims as a discrete “cultural-religious region, with a political center in Lower Lotharingia” (22). She provides five case studies of holy women from across this region whose careers suggest the development (or repeated negotiation) of ideas about the status of female recluses in urban communities and about the role of the laity in religious discourse. Liège and locales in Brabant are the urban communities that feature most in *Lives of the Anchoresses*, a focus not surprising given the recent attention to eremitically inspired female piety in these locations, especially Liège (the focus of a major 1999 collection, *New Trends in Female Spirituality: The Holy Women of Liège and their Impact*, to which Mulder-Bakker is a contributor).

The earliest of the five women is the mother of Guibert of Nogent, a figure of considerable interest in Guibert’s autobiographical writing, but about whom we have no other sources. Though not enclosed as an anchorite in an official ceremony, Guibert’s mother had herself and members of her household ensconced in the abbey of St. Germeer-de-Fly, where she would become a model of the “wise old woman” (28), who Mulder-Bakker sees as a kind of pre-anchoritic type. The beguine widow Yvette of Huy follows next. Like Guibert’s mother, Yvette became a recluse later in life, though in her case the transition from secular life
to anchoritism was achieved via a mid-life career of civic charity work at a leprosarium. Two women in the Liège area, Juliana of Cornillon and her follower Eve of St. Martin, allow Mulder-Bakker to discuss the theological contributions of reclusive women. Highly educated and bookish, Juliana devoted her life to arguing for the introduction of the Feast of Corpus Christi and entered the reclusive life after being disappointed in her situation as a nun. Juliana’s protégé, Eve, saw Juliana’s dream realized, receiving a papal bull from Pope Urban IV announcing universal celebration of the festival. Mulder-Bakker’s last case study is Lame Margaret of Magdeburg, who was enclosed as a young girl, yet demanded a cell where it would be possible to have regular contact with visitors, embarking on a life as a civic spiritual advisor.

The spiritual careers of these women were quite varied, and Mulder-Bakker’s selection includes two women who were not officially enclosed as anchors (Guibert’s mother and Juliana of Cornillon). Yet one of the book’s main contentions is that the status and shape of anchoritic life in this region was not achieved as a result of official ceremonies or written direction from churchmen. Anchoritism, Mulder-Bakker argues, was not defined by canon law, but by custom and practice. Custom knit together a reclusive life inspired by the eremitic movements of the eleventh and twelfth centuries and a practice of providing spiritual advice. The advisory role of anchoresses is what Mulder-Bakker emphasizes most in her selection of cases. Guibert’s mother acted as an instructor of her household and a corrective model for her son; Yvette critiqued the dean and canons of her town’s main church; Juliana and Eve engaged in theological debate; and Margaret instructed the citizens of Magdeburg. Though she sees anchoritic authority as something confirmed in the “public orality” of civic/religious communities rather than by written regulation, Mulder-Bakker does locate two traditions informing the perception of anchors as teachers. She argues that anchoresses occupy the institutional place of the “deaconess,” as well as the
unofficial yet important role of the prophet. The profile of the “deaconess” helps us to think about spaces for women’s ministration in their communities. Mulder-Bakker notes that “the fourth-century Constitutiones Apostolum even ascribed to deaconesses a rank in the Church order equal to that of male deacons, including a liturgical ordination (p. 17). While a written history of the deaconess is difficult to trace after this, Mulder-Bakker argues that “the medieval prophetess, especially in the person of the urban recluse, took on this role of diaconal meditator, that she followed in her footsteps, even though she had to do without the official liturgical confirmation” (17).

Mulder-Bakker’s claim that anchoresses had a “quasi-clerical” status is a significant contribution to the study of medieval women’s piety as a whole. The focus on anchors as teachers provides a welcome alternative to classifying medieval holy women primarily by sexual status (as virgins, widows, mothers, etc). Sexual status is still important in Mulder-Bakker’s case studies, but it is not the unifying thread tying these spiritual careers together. Consequently, readers will find more discussion of women’s education (about which Mulder-Bakker has written extensively) than discussion of chastity or mystical sexuality.

While devoted to the particular lives of the five women it studies, the comparisons Lives of the Anchoresses also draws with other, better-known female religious in northern Europe, such as Christina the Astonishing, Marie d’Oignies, and Mechthild of Magdeburg provide further context for Mulder-Bakker’s case studies. This is especially helpful for thinking about the conditions for writing the vitae that provide Mulder-Bakker with her information. Mulder-Bakker notes, for example, that Yvette of Huy’s biographer undoubtedly had access to Jaques de Vitry’s Life of Mary d’Oignies. Connections like this make for interesting comparison and further the number of lines that can be drawn between members of a textual community spread across the region surveyed by Lives of the Anchoresses.

However, textuality itself appears as something of a bête
noire in Mulder-Bakker’s work. The majority of information about the five women comes from biographies (or autobiography in Guibert’s case) written by churchmen close to them. Mulder-Bakker does discuss the authors of these vitae, as well as their probable intentions and the genre conventions they followed. Yet, the outcome of this discussion is frequently the negation of author, genre, and audience as important determinants of meaning. Guibert of Nogent, for example, is labeled “a true historian,” who “recorded exactly what he saw, even if that fell outside the normal pattern” (31). Guibert’s styling of himself as an author is little discussed, and the influence of autobiographic convention (though, admittedly, this is scant in the eleventh century) is not addressed. Clearly Mulder-Bakker’s intention is to keep the focus on the women she profiles, rather than cede it to their male biographers (the book’s chapters begin with biographical sketches of the women, without immediate mention of the source text being used). However, the desire to separate the women from the texts in which we know them closes down some methods of discussion. In the case of Guibert’s mother, for example, Mulder-Bakker makes no mention of the fact that this medieval mother of a struggling churchman bears more than a passing resemblance to Monica, the mother of profligate young Augustine in that earlier autobiography, The Confessions. Acknowledging the shaping power of influences like these would not diminish Mulder-Bakker’s main contentions, which are after all, about representations of anchoresses, but it would layer them further.

Mulder-Bakker also leaves aside the significant amount of work recently done on English anchoritism, but that is outside the bounds of her study. Nonetheless, Lives of the Anchoresses will provide scholars of reclusive female piety a wealth of material from which to draw comparisons with anchoritism in other regions. And that will help us draw maps of devotion that needn’t stop at national boundaries.

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