
This fine volume of nine essays, plus the editor’s introduction, brings together European and American scholars, chiefly historians of medieval women and religion, to elucidate the extent and nature of non-academic learning and literacy acquired by women religious. The authors expand the definition of women’s learning providing significant additions to and revisions of what it meant for medieval women to be learned and to transmit their knowledge. Holy women composed a substantial body of devotional works for each other and conceivably a wider public to convey their versions of the path to inner perfection without recourse, by and large, to academic Latin literacy. The essays primarily concern nuns, beguines, and solitary religious women from the Low Countries, France, and Italy. Five pieces are ably translated from the Dutch by Myra Scholz. A strength of this volume lies in plenty of new and eye-opening information regarding how crucial a part reading and writing played in the life of women’s religious communities of the region. Readers may be struck by the wealth of medieval women’s writing in Dutch this volume reveals (a good reason to learn Dutch). Additionally, the footnotes cite a quantity of significant Dutch scholarship on medieval religious women. The Dutch material provides the single most compelling reason to read this book. Like Volume 2 in this Brepols series, New Trends in Feminine Spirituality: The Holy Women of Liége and Their Impact, Juliette Dor, Lesley Johnson, and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, eds. (1999), this volume contributes to medieval studies and feminist scholarship in English by exploring European religious women’s culture. Several essayists in Seeing and Knowing benefit from another recent work, Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters, Catherine Mooney, ed. (1999).

The volume explores the relationship of gender to the transmission of knowledge and learning in the Middle Ages. “Knowledge” is differentiated
from the formal academic education of the elite male clerical *litterati*, and the essayists engage with the distinction throughout. Denied access to traditional scholastic training in theology and argument, women found equivalent means of acquiring understanding and made, the volume argues, important if different contributions to the apprehension of the divine. This mode of female knowledge, “seeing and knowing” unmediated by formal book-learning, opposed to scholastic knowledge yet an important addendum to it, was admired and authorized by some male theologians. Visionary women and textually learned men were unequal as well as kindred spirits in their desires to find a path to God. Both studied, both wrote. Women were highly trained in “common theology” (like “common law”) as Mulder-Bakker renames vernacular theology, possibly educated in reading and writing Latin, and had a firm enough grasp of their vernacular to compose edifying treatises, sometimes about their own experiences, for the spiritual improvement of their sisters, thus creating textual communities. The knowledge such texts represent, often attained through visions/illuminations, years of study and rewriting (one thinks of Julian of Norwich’s long hiatus between the two versions of her *Revelations*) was treated as valid spiritual insight, attested to by the transmission and preservation of such works. The volume asks us to imagine the different ways of knowing that highly intelligent women had to employ in order to be legitimized and to commit their wisdom to paper (or vellum) for posterity.

Providing a context for differentiating masculine and feminine kinds of learning, Ruth Mazo Karras considers the theological quodlibets from 1210-1320 at the University of Paris. She finds—unsurprisingly—that in the exclusionary world of male university study, women simply did not matter, with disputation a matter of proving one’s intellectual manhood. The rest of the essays consider either individual female mystical writers, or wider problems of female readership and transmission of knowledge.

The “knowledge” of Beatrice of Nazareth is scrutinized by Wybren Scheepsma, whose interesting essay explores why Beatrice wrote and how her works recording sacred wisdom were
preserved and disseminated as part of Church tradition. Scheepsma first raises questions about Beatrice’s authorship of the Middle Dutch *Seven Manners of Loving*. Then he argues that the *Vita Beatricis*, written in Latin and not in Middle Dutch—as she probably left her writings for her nuns’ instruction—shows that Beatrice’s works may have been revamped from their dialect into the authorized *vita* to legitimate them for clerical reading and Church acceptance. In a nice piece on Alijt Bake (1425–1455) of Ghent from the *Devotio Moderna* reform movement, Anne Bollman poses that Bake’s autobiography displays the origins of her spiritual self-confidence and her authority as a reformer. Bollman disputes scholarly opinions that Bake, who read Latin, was an incidental and exceptional figure in that primarily male movement with books and writing at its heart. She thinks Bake, despite her prickly and controversial nature, an underappreciated religious leader and author. Bake’s feisty conversation with an obviously sexist God in her *Autobiografie*, demanding to be given the necessary strength to understand the mysteries of the Passion, was a great quotation to include.

Kirsten M. Christensen warns feminist scholars about separating “clerical support for the richness of female spirituality from clerical complicity in the establishment and perpetuation of its many strictures,” (118) a topic touched upon by other essayists. She seeks to reclaim Maria van Hout (d. 1547) from obscurity to restore her “rather profound reputation” as an “utterly orthodox” holy woman (99). After the Reformation, “feminine” ways of knowing God appealed to clerics as responding to new devotional needs of the faithful for more affective piety, including connection to the Passion. For this reason, van Hout’s mystical teachings on the Five Wounds and the Virgin were authorized and transmitted by the Carthusians.

Writing on textual communities of learned women, Thom Mertens, in “Ghostwriting Sisters: The Preservation of Dutch Sermons of Father Confessors in th Fifteenth and the Early Sixteenth Centuries,” determines that nuns not only copied, but recreated from their
notes, edited, and emended sermons they heard or read and preserved them for the use of the community. In some cases a nun assumed the role of author/father confessor, making changes in style and content. An appendix contains an engaging prologue (written by a nun) to a sermon collection she compiled, recognizing fellow nuns who “as accurately as possible” contributed their versions of sermons (140). Bert Roest’s “A Textual Community in the Making: Colletine Authorship in the Fifteenth Century” challenges historians who diminish Collette of Corbie’s direct responsibility for the reforms in her order. He shows Collette’s writings as a “guarantor of collective memory” sustaining the nuns in her community. Within the limits of sanctioned feminine religious models, feminine vernacular theology in Colettine houses renegotiated religious identity. Similarly interested in uncovering dynamic nuns as educated religious leaders, Leslie Knox writes on the problem of academic study versus divine inspiration in the Franciscans’ desire to follow Francis’s ideals. She interprets Sister Battista Alfani’s fifteenth-century *La leggenda della srafica vergine santa chiara*, a rewriting of a thirteenth-century Latin *Legenda*, as empowering for the Poor Clares. Battista situates the nuns in a tradition of learned women by placing Clare herself as a crucial participant in the debates shaping the nature of Franciscan life and learning. How Henry Suso’s *vita* instructed well-educated nuns against excessive ascetical self-destructive practices is explained by Werner Williams-Krapp. Mulder-Bakker considers the affiliation of the anchoritic woman to the Virgin, demonstrating that recluses identified with Mary principally as the powerful Queen of Heaven, not as the submissive maiden. Accordingly, they situated themselves in a lineage of female prophets, erudite women, headed by Mary, passing living wisdom of “common theology” through their shared maternal nature.

The volume presents complex arguments and substantial evidence and is a strong contribution to research on the lives and education of medieval religious women. Readers will find interesting matter here about the texts medieval religious women felt authorized to write, read, and preserve.

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