

BOOK REVIEWS



Mary Jeremy Finnegan. The Women of Helfta: Scholars and Mystics. Athens, GA.: The Univ. of Georgia Press, 1991. x + 171.

THIRTY YEARS AGO, when the first edition of this book was published, relatively little was known about the women mystics of the Middle Ages. The fact that women mystical authors have become a recognized part of our reconstruction of the medieval intellectual world owes much to Finnegan's groundbreaking work. This revised edition, which takes into account three decades of scholarship, including much from a feminist point of view, ensures that Finnegan's analysis of the scholars and mystics of Helfta will continue to be read and appreciated.

Finnegan begins with a description of the foundation of the Saxon monastery of Helfta. She moves quickly into an overview of the four most important inhabitants of the house: three Cistercians—the abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn and the mystics Mechtilde of Hackeborn and Gertrude the Great; and the Beguine mystic Mechtilde of Magdeburg, who sought refuge at Helfta at the end of her life. The focus of the book is on the two Cistercian mystics, Mechtilde of Hackeborn (1241-1299), “the Nightingale of Christ,” and Gertrude the Great (1256-1301 or 1302), one of the most important mystical authors of the thirteenth century. Finnegan dedicates two chapters to Mechtilde of Hackeborn and the final six to Gertrude the Great. In comparison, her discussion of Mechtilde of Magdeburg (13-22) is far more cursory, and one could say that Finnegan has left further study of the Beguine Mechtilde to others.

This stress on Gertrude is understandable from a modern perspective, since she has been the most famous of the women of Helfta since the first editions of her work in the sixteenth century. Gertrude was also probably the author of the Liber specialis gratiae, the book which records the visions of Mechtilde of Hackeborn. From a medieval perspective, however, Mechtilde “the Nightingale” was by far the most widely known of this remarkable community. Finnegan makes a good case for identifying Mechtilde of Hackeborn as the “Donna Matelda” of Canto 28 of Dante's Purgatorio (56-61), although she does not insist on the identification. It seems obvious that more serious work on Mechtilde of Hackeborn and more study of the diffusion of the Liber specialis gratiae would be a welcome contribution to our understanding of the medieval reception of the writings of women mystics.

Finnegan's extensive discussion of the works of Gertrude the Great is a nuanced analysis of mystical language and imagery. I was especially struck by the sensitivity to synthesia in Gertrude and Mechtilde (49) and by the attention given to the relationship between the symbolism of wedding and passion (51, 115 ff.) Anyone who wishes to undertake a detailed study of Gertrude's works would be well advised to use Finnegan's reading of Gertrude as a tuning of the ear to a particularly elegant Latin mystical rhetoric. As Finnegan points out (71), the loss of Gertrude's letters and vernacular treatises has deprived us of knowledge of another side of this formidable intellect.

I do want to raise a few points of criticism, however. It is strange, first of all, that such an excellent Latinist as Finnegan habitually cites Mechtilde of Hackeborn from the modern French translation of the Liber rather than from the edition of Solesmes. Similarly, while Finnegan shows very well the breadth of influence of writing from

thirteenth-century Helfta (quotations from Gertrude in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, 77; allusions to Gertrude in Teresa of Avila, 111-112), there is a slight tendency to historical anachronism in the interpretation of Gertrude's spirituality. This is especially evident in Chapter 9, which compresses the intricate development of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus into a well-established biblically-based tradition unfolding through the centuries in the Western Church. Finnegan's handling of early Christian material (for example, the discussion of Origen of Alexandria and his profile in Latin Christianity, 41) is not nearly as strong and insightful as her understanding of medieval theology. To pick a small nit: the name of Origen's English translator should be Rowan A. Greer, not Green (154, note 23).

These are very small complaints in the face of what this new edition has to offer: a thorough literary overview of the writings of Mechtilde and Gertrude. Should the new edition of Finnegan's book appear in paperback, it could be read together with Caroline Walker Bynum's essays on Helfta in Jesus as Mother, and the Cistercian Publications' translation of the writings of Gertrude the Great. This combination of books would make it at last possible to teach an in-depth course, or at least a section of a course, on the scholars and mystics of thirteenth-century Helfta.

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David Herlihy. "Opera muliebria": Women and Work in Medieval Europe. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990.

AT FIRST GLANCE, Opera muliebria seems to be just the sort of textbook every teacher of medieval women's history has been waiting for. Short (just over 200 pages), reasonably priced, clearly organized, and embellished with just enough illustrations to revive a student's flagging attention, David Herlihy's latest (and, sadly, last) book is intended to provide a survey of women's work throughout the Western Middle Ages, covering every aspect of women's day-to-day labors from weaving and spinning, cooking and cleaning, to tavern-keeping and retailing, preaching and healing. For such a book to be written by one of the most eminent social historians of the day—and a pioneer in the field of women's history—seemed to give this book every promise of success. It is with great regret, therefore, that one must issue the warning caveat magistra: let the teacher beware! For despite all its excellent ingredients, Opera muliebria is a fundamentally flawed book that can be recommended as a teaching text only to the wary few willing to take the time to separate the wheat of new information and intriguing interpretation from the chaff of error and omission.

Opera muliebria is part of a series entitled "New Perspectives on European History." The series editor, Raymond Grew, introduces Herlihy's book with a statement of the intentions of the series. Among other objectives, books in the series are meant to provide modern syntheses that can be of use to student and teacher alike. "The modern synthesis," Grew writes, "must relate the latest findings to the relevant theories, [and] is also expected to address the scholarly debates from which central questions derive" (viii). One would expect, therefore, that Opera muliebria would situate itself squarely within, or at least alongside, the historiographical tradition of feminist analyses of women's work in the Middle Ages, which has recently produced such invaluable studies as those of Barbara Hanawalt, Maryanne Kowaleski, Judith Bennett, Martha Howell, and Herlihy's