

Rhetoric of the Anchorhold: Space, Place and Body within the Discourses of Enclosure, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy. University of Wales Press, 2008. Pp. xv + 224. ISBN: 978-0-708-32130-0.

THIS COLLECTION of essays, which came out of the Rhetoric of the Anchorhold conference held at Gregynog Hall, Newtown, Powys in 2005, examines the different types of rhetoric that are associated with the medieval anchoritic experience. Its aim is to show the connections between this literature and the wider community of laity, arguing that anchoritic spirituality is central to the medieval religious climate “in spite of the rhetorically marginalized status of the anchorite within the social community which housed him or her” (2).

The volume is organized into three sections: “Public Performance: Rhetoric and Place,” “Private Performance: Rhetoric and Space,” and “Bodily Performance: Rhetoric and Corporeality.” Furthermore, essays are grouped, whenever possible, around texts and authors, such as Julian of Norwich and *Ancrene Wisse*. It is also helpful that each writer has read the contributions of the others, adding to a sense of unity in the collection.

Liz Herbert McAvoy’s introduction has an excellent discussion of definitions of rhetoric from the Greeks through Augustine. She argues that the anchoritic body played an active role as the producer and shaper of rhetoric and was also shaped by the larger community of social and religious rhetoric. The anchoritic space was not merely physical, but rather a “semiotic, non-verbal set of signifiers” which was transformed into a “representation space” (8-9). This idea frames the set of essays that follow.

In the first section on public performance, Allison Clark uses archival records of alms to show the evolution of eremiticism from an individual to a communal pursuit, as witnessed by the increasing number of hermits living in urban areas of central and northern Italy. E. A. Jones, using the *ordo* in Cotton Vespasian D XV, gives the reader a fascinating glimpse into the earliest version of the enclosure ceremony. The three essays that follow discuss *Ancrene Wisse*. The first, by Bella Millett, shows how, with its many layers of rhetoric, it was adapted early on for purposes other than as guidance to anchoresses. Cate Gunn also emphasizes the public nature of this text, arguing that its author took the clerical Latin *pastoralia* and adapted it for a vernacular and female audience, intended both for private meditation and public discourse.

The discussion of *Ancrene Wisse* continues into the second section on private performance. Anna McHugh shows how its many metaphors of enclosed space indicate that it was used as a memory system: not only was the text itself memorized, but it was used to organize other spiritual material. It was, she

indicates, a charged erotic female space. Michelle Sauer describes the anchoritic life as a paradoxical vocation, one built on solitude, but not allowing for privacy. Although she was enclosed in her cell, the anchoress was never truly alone. In the next article, Liz Herbert McAvoy looks at texts that were specifically written for male anchorites, arguing that their rhetoric was different from those written for women. Because anchoresses were considered more problematic than their male counterparts, they needed closer monitoring. In the male texts, temptation was seen as belonging to those outside, whereas in *Ancrene Wisse*, the female body houses sin. McAvoy recounts the fascinating case of Christina Carpenter, who, after leaving her anchorhold, was ordered by papal edict to return on pain of excommunication or death. The final two essays in this section discuss Julian of Norwich. Laura Saetveit Miles compares her to St. Bridget of Sweden, arguing that Julian sees her cell as a communal enclosure for all souls, whereas Bridget, who is not enclosed, experiences revelations that create their own architectural space, which is private and not communal. Fumiko Yoshikawa takes a linguistic approach to Julian, delineating her two constructions of the verb “to think,” one personal and the other impersonal. Julian, she demonstrates, uses the impersonal “think” frequently, which shows her own “lack of confidence which comes from a perception of the imperfection of the human being when confronted by God” (152).

In the final section on bodily performance, Anne Savage uses a wide range of English anchoritic texts, including *Ancrene Wisse* and *Hali Meidhad*, to argue that the idea of the body as virginal or non-virginal is not important. Rather, all women could adopt the notion of the “maidenhood of the soul” (162), which overwrites the virginity imperative. Robin Gilbank examines Aelred’s *De Institutione Inclusarum*, arguing that its image of the infant Jesus runs throughout Aelred’s works and is not limited to his anchoritic text. The final essay by Karl-Heinz Steinmetz compares the hermit and the robber as liminal characters: both are the consummate “other.” The robber represents the destructive side of human freedom, whereas the anchorite symbolizes its eschatological dimensions.

This broad range of essays works remarkably well. In it the reader comprehends the realities as well as the implications of the anchoritic experience, making the anchorhold come alive. Whatever one’s theoretical approach to medieval studies, there is something to be learned from the contributors to *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold*, not least of which is the fine eye for organization that McAvoy has brought to its vision.

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