

Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Hull Dialogue. Edited by Virginia Blanton, Veronica O'Mara, and Patricia Stoop. *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts* 26. Turnhout: Brepols, 2013. Pp. xxxiv + 370; 25 b/w ill., 6 b/w tables. ISBN: 9782503539720.

Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Hull Dialogue is a volume of conference proceedings comprising work presented in late June 2011 at the University of Hull. Although such collections of essays have a reputation for displaying dubious quality, the studies presented in *Nuns' Literacies* consistently provide well-researched, well-written, valuable presentations of women's education in medieval Europe. The limitations in the scope of the projects (namely, religious women in Germanic and Anglophone regions of Northern Europe) produce enough unity in the topics of the essays to provide coherence despite the wide array of methodologies. Indeed the presentation of various approaches to richer and poorer sets of evidence constitutes the greatest significance of this volume.

The essays are divided into four loosely organized sections based on broad topics. The first section comprises essays primarily concerned with the evidence of nuns' literacy both in the manuscript record and in narrative sources and how literacy might be defined based on this evidence. The choice of a plural "literacies" in the title of the volume is justified by the differing analyses in this section, which remind us that "literacy" does not necessarily entail authorship in Latin. Marilyn Oliva, for example, argues from the extant household accounts of several English convents that many of the nuns holding offices were able to read and write at least enough to keep their own accounts, an ability she terms "pragmatic literacy." Bruce Venarde, in the absence of any evidence that Fontrevaud abbess Petronilla de Chemillé could read or write in Latin, nevertheless describes her "practical literacy" as an ingenuity in commissioning and manipulating written documents in order to reinforce her Order and her own position within it. It is a strength of this volume that these two scholars use synonymous terms to designate very different kinds of literacy, namely facility in bookkeeping with no evidence of exposure to literature and cultural fluency with no evidence of an ability to write. Similarly, the close conjuncture of studies relying primarily on manuscript evidence and those drawing on literary sources allows a broader understanding of what counts as "evidence" for female literacy.

The second section contains essays that address literacy as a function of linguistic fluency, i.e., varying levels of ability in Latin and the vernacular. Each of the three essays takes a reading population as its point of departure and explores the extent to which these readers were familiar with Latin, but

the contributors do not allow limited Latin comprehension to diminish their evaluations of a group's overall literacy. This section's greatest strength is the nuanced understanding of variable literacy levels between the convents within a city (Vienna in Cynthia Cyrus's contribution) or even within a single convent (the Birgittine convent at Vadstena for Monica Hedlund). The careful case studies presented in these chapters argue against an all-or-nothing verdict on nuns' Latin literacy, proposing instead that individual nuns (or religious women of the *Devotio moderna* in Thom Mertens's essay) would have occupied different places along a spectrum of capability both in Latin and the vernacular.

The third section is by far the longest and to me the least unified, containing essays that explore the reading practices and scribal activities evident in various convents. As in the first section, the approaches of the contributors vary from theory-driven literary analysis to strict paleography. The most successful chapters combine these approaches. Regina Dorothea Schiewer, for example, both analyzes passages from the German sermon collection known as the *St. Georgener Predigten* and reviews its manuscript transmission for hints about the sermons' reception history. Stephanie Hollis employs a similar approach to English saints' lives, comparing manuscript evidence, literary reference, and the testaments of medieval authors in order to argue for a more developed tradition of education in royal English convents than has previously been assumed. One of the major contributions of this volume as a whole is the variation in the definition of "literacy" from chapter to chapter. The third section displays this multivalent understanding of "literacy" as encompassing everything from knowledge delivered orally in table readings (Jonas Carlquist) to scribal activity (Ingela Hedström) to patronage (Alfred Thomas). Nevertheless, the whole is somehow less than the sum of the parts here. The section may have held together better if it were organized by theme or definition of literacy rather than geographically.

The final section contains two essays about female authorship, although even this term is broadened and redefined. The authorial activities explored here are perhaps less *innovatio* than *renovatio*, as the contributors examine women's roles in editing a collection of sisters' lives (Wybren Scheepsma) and of sermons (Patricia Stoop). Such studies of authorship bring far more to the field than essays on, for example, Hildegard of Bingen, since both contributors open new avenues for thinking about women's agency in the creation and distribution of texts.

Although this volume only presents research on women of Northern Europe, two further conferences have already been held at which the scope of papers

expanded to include communities from Iceland, Ireland, Italy, and Iberia. The stated purpose of the conferences and publications is to foster dialogue across disciplinary and regional boundaries, both in order to paint a fuller picture of medieval female literacy than a single scholar could accomplish and to expose scholars working on women to the discourse and methods of differing fields in hope of fertile cross-pollination. I fervently hope that the presentation of work on the women of Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands to an Anglophone audience together with work on England will heighten awareness of and interest in these regions among American and British scholars.

Although the essays may be individually mined for information on a particular case, the reader will derive the greatest benefit from reading through the complete volume or at least an entire section in order to experience an array of methodological approaches. I would recommend such a reading for early-stage graduate students interested in women's history and curious about the kinds of sources, resources, and theories that are available for this area of research. If the future volumes meet and maintain the quality of the first, the editors will have produced an excellent encyclopedic teaching tool for graduate study of medieval religious women. Taken individually, the essays represent the latest work but may not advance their fields greatly. As a whole, this volume has the potential to invigorate future research on medieval women by exposing young scholars to the numerous questions that remain to be answered, or even asked, about medieval women and the many creative ways one may uncover their stories.

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