

The Strange Case of Ermine de Reims: A Medieval Woman Between Demons and Saints, by Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. Pp. 236. ISBN: 9780812247152.

The Strange Case of Ermine de Reims: A Medieval Woman Between Demons and Saints (2015) by Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski is an extension of her article “The Strange Case of Ermine de Reims (c.1347–1396): A Medieval Woman between Demons and Saints” (*Speculum* 85, no. 2 [2010]: 321–56). As the title indicates, Blumenfeld-Kosinski’s work is a case study of a fourteenth-century woman, Ermine de Reims, whose visions play an important role in examining female piety and women’s religious experiences in the fourteenth century. For Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Ermine was a medieval woman whose frequent interactions with demons made her a precursor to the early modern witch of the fifteenth century. Through Ermine’s experiences, the author successfully argues that the fourteenth century was a period of transition between the medieval and early modern period with respect to the cultural construction of female piety. The strengths of this argument come not only from the author’s effective use of evidence from *The Visions of Ermine de Reims*, but also from her contextualization of Ermine in the religious and cultural history of the fourteenth century.

Significant to Blumenfeld-Kosinski’s analysis is Ermine’s classification within the social hierarchy of the fourteenth century. Chapter 1 of the book analyzes peasant women as rural migrants, merchants, wives, and widows because Ermine belonged to all of these categories. However, Blumenfeld-Kosinski is ineffective in her assertion that Ermine was a “common woman” because she assumes that this status did not change throughout Ermine’s life. Blumenfeld-Kosinski derives this phrase from Peter Biller who has applied it to average laywomen who were not excessively religious or were not religious at all (3). After chapter 1, it is clear that Ermine was only a “common woman” before she received visions and engaged in extreme ascetic practices during her widowhood. Despite this oversight, Blumenfeld-Kosinski’s discussion of female social identities effectively provides a social and cultural background for her argument.

Blumenfeld-Kosinski’s investigation of the religious culture of the fourteenth century relies upon Ermine’s spiritual experiences. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the role of gender both in Ermine’s relationship with her confessor, Jean le Graveur, and in her religious practices. Blumenfeld-Kosinski reaffirms the argument made by historians, including John Coakely and Amy Hollywood, that hagiographers and confessors of holy women ultimately possessed authority over

them. She demonstrates that Jean's authority depended on his pastoral duties as Ermine's confessor, which ranged from his tutelage in her memorization of the Pater noster to his counsel for the interpretation of her visions (59-69). The strength of the author's analysis lies in her guidance of the reader through the obvious and subtle ways that Jean expresses his authority over Ermine.

Chapter 3 further locates Ermine within the tradition of female mysticism in its focus on her spiritual practices. Blumenfeld-Kosinski identifies Ermine's eucharistic piety, *imitatio Christi*, and self-mutilation as similar to the religious practices of other female mystics including Catherine of Siena, Christina of Markyate, and Christina of Stommeln. Despite her contextualization of Ermine in the religious culture of the Middle Ages, Blumenfeld-Kosinski is not convinced that Ermine can be considered strictly as a medieval holy woman. Blumenfeld-Kosinski emphasizes that Ermine's demonic attacks were relatively more numerous and sexually explicit compared to those experienced by other medieval female mystics. Therefore, Blumenfeld-Kosinski alerts the reader to the complexities behind Ermine's demonic attacks and what they reveal about her time.

Chapter 4 represents the core of Blumenfeld-Kosinski's case study of Ermine's demonic attacks. She asserts that Ermine's visions conveyed a heightened fear of demons and their ability to corrupt women. For Blumenfeld-Kosinski, this was not a regular feature in the religious culture of the Middle Ages but one that was more characteristic of the Early Modern period. Although demonic attacks were common tropes in the visions of holy women, Ermine's case was strange in comparison to the experiences of other medieval women because of their frequency. Consequently, Blumenfeld-Kosinski interprets this element in Ermine's visions as evidence of a transitory phase in the construction of female piety: the gradual shift from the medieval female mystic to the early modern witch.

This historical framework was established by Dyan Elliott who traces the origins of the witch to female mystics of the late Middle Ages through her investigation of the Inquisition and its concerns with the establishment of distinctions between holy women and heretics. Blumenfeld-Kosinski contributes to Elliott's arguments in her demonstration that the nature of Ermine's interactions with demons anticipated the characteristics of the witch in the fifteenth century. Blumenfeld-Kosinski presents fourteenth-century social anxieties surrounding people, particularly old women, who were suspected of summoning demons to perform evil deeds, Ermine's seduction by several demons, and the concept of aerial kidnappings of women by demonic animals as early manifestations of

witchcraft. In this sense, Blumenfeld-Kosinski is successful both in supporting her argument that the fourteenth century was a period of transition and in establishing clear connections between medieval and early modern constructions of female piety.

The final chapter of Blumenfeld-Kosinski's work is an examination of the discernment of spirits. The practice of discernment involved the judgement of visions and spirits as diabolical or divinely inspired. The study of this practice is a well-developed field in the study of medieval and early modern culture because of the contributions of Barbara Newman, Nancy Caciola, Simon Ditchfield, and Jan Machielsen. Blumenfeld-Kosinski contributes to this scholarship in her argument that discernment in the fourteenth century was considered a religious practice to the extent that Jean Gerson presented it as a virtue. Indeed, Gerson's admiration of Ermine's abilities to discern between demons and saints and his recognition of her as a pious woman reiterates the main premise of the title of Blumenfeld-Kosinski's work: Ermine was a woman caught between demons and saints.

Blumenfeld-Kosinski's book successfully argues that the fourteenth century represented a time of transition between the late Middle Ages to the Early Modern period. Ermine's demonic attacks not only provide an engaging narrative as the structural framework for the book but also allow Blumenfeld-Kosinski to demonstrate that subtle but profound changes in the construction of female piety in the fourteenth century anticipated witchcraft in the fifteenth century. Blumenfeld-Kosinski's work reasserts established concepts in the study of female piety in the Middle Ages. However, her study also contributes to the existing scholarship by raising the questions of how strange or common Ermine's case truly was compared to the religious experiences of other fourteenth-century women. In this sense, Blumenfeld-Kosinski's work opens new avenues for historians to explore in the connections between the late Middle Ages and the Early Modern period.

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