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Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Kansas City Dialogue

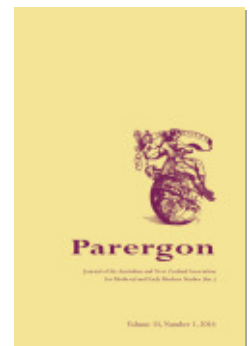
eds. by Virginia Blanton, Veronica O'Mara, and Patricia Stoop (review)

John Beston

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Blanton, Virginia, **Veronica O'Mara**, and **Patricia Stoop**, eds, *Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Kansas City Dialogue* (Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts, 27), Turnhout, Brepols, 2015; hardback; pp. xlv, 415; 8 colour, 27 b/w illustrations, 6 tables; R.R.P. €100.00; ISBN 9782503549224.

This is the second of three books in a planned series proceeding from three conferences on nuns' literacies in medieval Europe: the first was held in 2011 in Hull; the second, 2012 in Kansas City; and the third, 2013 in Antwerp. The purpose of the conferences has been to promote and bring together research by an international group of scholars on the subject of medieval nuns' acquisition and spreading of education in a range of fields throughout Europe. Before this century, research mostly considered medieval nuns to have known religious literature only in their vernaculars and doubted that they were familiar with scholarship in Latin, but research in our own century has demonstrated that nuns in many areas knew Latin and had a long tradition of scholarly education. Unlike the monks, however, they rarely made it known publicly, but research into monastic women's intellectual contribution to Western culture is one of the fastest-growing fields in medieval studies.

The present volume, proceeding from the Kansas City conference, covers a time frame from the late seventh century to the middle of the sixteenth, and concentrates geographically on the Germanic-language areas in northern Europe, extending in the far north to Iceland, in the west to Ireland, and reaching south to include France, Spain, and Italy. In the Introduction, the editors discuss difficulties experienced in their use of key terms in the overall project, most notably 'nuns' and 'literacies'. 'Nuns' means all enclosed or semi-enclosed female religious who lived communally and so includes lay sisters. 'Literacies' covers a wide range of literary practices, referring to the formal education of the nuns, their writing practices, their skills in illustration, works that they read, and works that they wrote.

As the history and culture of convents has received increasing scholarly attention in our century, a strong international network of distinguished scholars, chiefly but not exclusively women, has established itself. Fourteen of the essays in this book are by women, four by men. There is no sense whatsoever of any discrimination against men in the book. But Eva Schlottheuber in her splendid essay on the Benedictine nuns of Lüne in northern Germany in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries points out that the reason we are well informed about the education of monks of that time yet know little about the education of nuns is that the monks did not speak of it. Medieval texts written independently by nuns, too, are hard to find because the Church banned nuns from commenting publicly on religious issues. Patricia Stoop, in her essay on the multiple levels of literacy of nuns in the Brussels convent of Jericho, establishes that the nuns regularly wrote manuscripts for their

fellow sisters and other people outside the convent walls. Andrea Knox, in her impressive essay on the literacies of Dominican nuns in sixteenth-century Ireland, tells how the Dominican nuns were warmly welcomed in Spain, where they passed on their education with great efficiency. Andrew Rabin points out, in his essay on monastic women's legal literacy in early Anglo-Saxon England, that nuns in Godstow Abbey very near Oxford included law in their reading and learned how to use their legal texts to their advantage.

Academic standards in all the essays in this volume are extremely high. One is deeply impressed by the consistently careful scholarship and the clarity of the writing, quite free of the pretentiousness and obscurity that has insinuated itself into much contemporary academic writing in English and in French. Footnotes are abundant and helpful. A bibliography of primary and secondary studies covers forty pages at the end of the book, where there is also an extensive list of manuscripts, archival documents and incunabula, and an index of European convents referred to in the book.

The volume is admirable as a work of art, with beautifully reproduced colour plates of manuscripts from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries and, especially, one of an eleventh-century Gospel Book's stunning front cover. The work is a treasure for any library.

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Brown-Grant, Rosalind, Anne D. **Hedeman**, and Bernard **Ribémont**, eds, *Textual and Visual Representations of Power and Justice in Medieval France: Manuscripts and Early Printed Books*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2015; hardback; pp. 344; 111 colour, 6 b/w illustrations; R.R.P. £75.00; ISBN 9781472415707.

The eleven essays in this volume are united under the broad themes of power, political authority, and justice in France, predominantly during the late Middle Ages. As Rosalind Brown-Grant notes in her Introduction, the collection is interdisciplinary and cross-cultural, with contributions from social and political historians, art historians, literary studies scholars, and a museum curator, variously based at institutions in France, the USA, and England.

The contributors explore the subject by examining both textual and visual evidence, and all discuss specific illuminated manuscripts or illustrated printed books. As academic and legal texts were rarely illustrated, most of the manuscripts under discussion are luxurious illuminated copies destined for princely patrons, and as such tend to expose the attitudes of the most powerful in medieval society.

Several essays examine how particular texts and illustrations reflected contemporary politics or implicitly criticised unpopular rulers. These include