

**VIRGINIA BLANTON, VERONICA O'MARA AND
PATRICIA STOOP, EDS.**

Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Hull Dialogue.

Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts.

Turnhout: Brepols, 2013.

xxiii + 367, 19 figures (with subdivisions), 6 tables.

This important collection of seventeen essays had its origins in the conference of the same title held at the University of Hull in June 2011. "Medieval Europe" is a strength of this volume: it has taken a long time for scholars in England sufficiently to recognize medieval religion as a European religion, and the willingness of European scholars to travel to England and speak in English is much to our benefit. The slightly odd subtitle is justified, in that a dialogue (perhaps "conversation" would be a more accurate word) does appear to have emerged at the Hull conference among a range of scholars of European women's orders and houses.

The volume is divided (perhaps unnecessarily, given that nuns' literacy is the topic of each essay) into four sections. "Literacy and Nuns: Finding and Interpreting the Evidence" includes five essays, three relating to Europe and two to England: "Reading Women at the Margins of Quedlinburg Codex 74," by Helene Scheck; "Making History at Fontevraud: Abbess Petronilla de Chemillé and Practical Literacy," by Bruce L. Venarde; "Mathild de Niphin' and the Female Scribes of Twelfth-Century Zwiefalten," by Alison I. Beach; "Rendering Accounts: The Pragmatic Literacy of Nuns in Late Medieval England," by Marilyn Oliva; and "The Late Medieval English Nun and her Scribal Activity: a Complicated Quest," by Veronica O'Mara. The arrangement appears to be chronological, with the first three essays specific (and outside this *Journal's* remit, being early medieval) and the final two more general. Literacy covers a range of issues: a much studied manuscript of the letters of Jerome at elite Quedlinburg (Scheck), a political campaign conducted through the

written word in unorthodox Fontevraud (Venarde), a female scribe at upper-class Zwiefalten (Beach), English nuns as administrator-managers (Oliva), and English nuns as (or not as) copyists (O'Mara).

Marilyn Oliva undertakes one of the less explored literacies, the keeping of accounts. Convents appear, unsurprisingly, to have been run as any other institution, with the obedientiaries taking on the same roles as household servants on a secular estate. Just as nuns were kitcheners, cellarers, bursars, and so on, they were also accounting obedientiaries. It is at this point (53) that the reader may wish that Oliva provided the actual term used for such accountants (and other obedientiaries), especially since, firstly, her footnote (n. 5) indicates a variety of titles (gendered and not gendered). Secondly, all the accounts she deals with (except for Barking) are in Latin (55, n. 9), and, thirdly, she displays later in her essay an interest in the languages used in the accounts. More than one account was kept, and more than one obedientiary was involved in the keeping of accounts, whether in the form of journals, daybooks, "papers," books of provision, books of the household, accounts books, or whatever (Latin terms are not given). Outside auditors seem usually to have prepared the final accounts, but the nuns themselves prepared the intermediary accounts. Oliva suggests that the code-switching between Latin, French and English is the result of the nuns' interventions: "Latin is the formal language of business documents drawn up by the auditors, and the French and English words the language of the women rendering their accounts, which the auditors saw and examined" (62-3). I wonder whether this is true; if so, it nevertheless needs modification, since household accounts from indisputably male households regularly display the features she suggests ("lez saltfisse," to take one example). Nevertheless, this is an important essay and provides considerable food for thought. A nunnery was a business, managed as efficiently as its abbess or prioress was efficient (Petronilla de Chemillé, the twelfth-century abbess of Fontevraud, was formidably efficient, "an expert property manager," as Venarde's essay demonstrates). Nuns had to handle administration and management and were not left entirely to follow their vocation without interference from secular matters.

Veronica O'Mara's essay attempts to explain and remedy the paucity of evidence for female scribes as copyists in England in contrast with the abundant European information (some evidence for which is found in Beach's essay which focusses on the twelfth-century female scribe Mathilde von Neuffen at Zwiefalten and even proposes a scriptorium for each sex at this double monastery). Only two indisputable cases of nuns as scribes are known from medieval England (one, at Syon, discovered by O'Mara herself), and her zealous attempt to add to this number offers a potential three more (Margery Byrkenhed of Chester, Elizabeth Trotter of Ickleton, and Alice Champnys of Shaftesbury), and a fourth for later consideration. O'Mara's research is

meticulous, and her arguments are weighed and balanced to such an extent that hers is indeed “a complicated quest,” as her subtitle suggests. Such careful work is essential, and tenuous results are better than tendentious ones.

The second section (“Language and Literacy: Latin and the Vernacular”) is self-explanatory. Its three essays consider the level of Latin literacy in Vadstena and Vienna, and the use of Dutch prayer books in the diocese of Utrecht: “Nuns and Latin with Special Reference to the Birgittines of Vadstena,” by Monica Hedlund; “Vernacular and Latinate Literacy in Viennese Women’s Convents,” by Cynthia J. Cyrus; and “Praying in the Vernacular: Middle Dutch Imitative Forms of the Divine Office from the 1370s to 1520s,” by Thom Mertens. Hedlund and Cyrus concur on the level of Latin understood by their respective nuns. As the former points out, with great common sense, medieval nuns were constantly exposed to Latin, and an ability to read Latin should not be compared with an ability to read Cicero (her example) today. (One might add that medieval Latin was syntactically much easier than classical Latin, and the nuns never had to read Latin poetry.) Hedlund suggests that Vadstena sisters were trained in Latin and that literacy in Latin was the norm; at least half of the thirty-four nuns who are known in a book-related context must have had some such literacy, of whom most are recorded as scribes, mostly of Latin as well as Old Swedish texts. Hedlund demonstrates their competence in copying the Latin material and notes that almost half of the thirty (at least) manuscripts extant from the sisters’ convent are in Latin.

In her essay Cyrus reviews the extant manuscripts from the seven main Viennese convents in order to assess what monastic literacy entailed. Nuns understood the Latin of the liturgy and were provided with aids to do so, and they were able to read and comment on the texts. Literacy entailed access to liturgical and vernacular books, which were the focus of study as well as performance, and the standards required of performance encouraged careful and deliberate study. Reading was a communal activity and might be in the vernacular or Latin, but the division between the two was not complete: German rubrics in Latin service books established “a bivalent literacy, one in which the materials of one linguistic culture overlapped with and informed their reading in another” (132). Finally, in this section, Mertens discusses Middle Dutch versions of the monastic office which developed for the use of the various female communities of the *Devotio moderna* movement: “In the private prayer of less-educated people, as most of the religious women were, the *Devotio moderna* preferred competent vernacular literacy to superficial Latin literacy. This is a striking difference to other language areas, where the less-educated people said their hours in Latin” (143).

Mertens’s essay leads naturally into the discussions of the next, and largest, section, “Literate Nuns: Reading and Writing in the Convent.” Arranged

chronologically, the first two are outside the *Journal's* time-period: "Conceiving the Word(s): Habits of Literacy among Earlier Anglo-Saxon Monastic Women," by Lisa M.C. Weston ("absence of evidence should not be read as evidence of absence," 167) and "The Literary Culture of the Anglo-Saxon Royal Nunneries: Romsey and London, British Library, MS Lansdowne 436," by Stephanie Hollis. Virginia Blanton ("The Devotional Reading of Nuns: Three Legendaries of Native Saints in Late Medieval England") also deals with Romsey in her survey of the twenty-two legendaries associated with English nunneries, "six written in Latin, four in French, and twelve in English" (188)—perhaps "recorded" in such languages would be more accurate here, since only six of them are extant. The three she discusses and analyzes by tables are the Latin legendary from Romsey dealt with by Hollis, one in Anglo-Norman used at Campsey Ash, and one in Middle English from East Anglia currently being edited by Blanton and O'Mara. The remainder of the essays in this large section deal with Europe. These include Bohemia in "Between Court and Cloister: Royal Patronage and Nuns' Literacy in Medieval East-Central Europe," by Alfred Thomas; Germany in "Books in Texts – Texts in Books: The St. Georgener Predigten as an Example of Nuns' Literacy in Late Medieval Germany" by Regina Dorothea Schiewer; and two complementary essays on Sweden, "The Birgittine Sisters at Vadstena Abbey: their Learning and Literacy, with Particular Reference to Table Reading" by Jonas Carlquist and "Vadstena Abbey and Female Literacy in Late Medieval Sweden" by Ingela Hedström.

Finally, with "Authorship and Nuns: Writing by the Nun for the Nun," we at last reach undisputed writing (perhaps not exactly "authorship") by nuns in just two essays, "Writing, Editing, and Rearranging: Griet Essinchghes and her Version of the Sister-Book of Diepenveen" by Wybren Scheepsma and "Nuns' Literacy in Sixteenth-Century Convent Sermons from the Cistercian Abbey of Ter Kameren" by Patricia Stoop. Scheepsma's essay is interesting and wide-ranging, dealing with not just the sixteenth-century editor and scribe herself but the interesting genre of sister-books and the phenomenon of the *Devotio moderna* from which the convent at Diepenveen (and hundreds of others) sprang. In such a milieu "one's literacy determined whether a new postulant could become a choir nun or lay sister" (285), and one nun was so overwhelmed by the burden of literacy that she appealed for prayers to help her master cases and tenses. Stoop in turn deals with the genre of convent sermons at a slightly later period, specifically, the fifty-seven sermons delivered by the popular preaching friar Johannes Mahusius, which were copied as he delivered them ("from the mouth") in the 1560s by the Cistercian nuns of Ter Kameren near Brussels.

This book, with its excellent reproductions of several of the manuscripts discussed, offers full and important coverage of a topic for which there can

be no final conclusions, other than to say that nuns were more literate than has previously been thought, particularly in certain convents and in the Low Countries and Germany. Not surprisingly, like all institutions, some were more competent, more academic, and more literate than others.

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