

Book Reviews

Blanton, Virginia, Veronica O'Mara, and Patricia Stoop, eds. *Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Hull Dialogue*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2013. Pp. xxxiii, 367; 25 black-and-white figures. €90.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9782503539720.

Until recently, the principal sources in studies of the everyday life of medieval women were wills and records of criminal court proceedings. Yet neither of these sources contains substantial documents written by women themselves. For that, one must delve into the remnants of convent archives that preserve the largest number of books and records about and by women in the Middle Ages. It is by sifting through these collections of artifacts that researchers have begun to form a picture of medieval readers and of their responses to what they read.

The seventeen essays in this collection of case studies, presented at the international conference on "Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe" held at the University of Hull (2011), focus on religious women of the eighth to mid-sixteenth centuries. The studies draw on archival sources stemming from convents in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Bohemia, England, and Sweden, areas in which significant research is underway.

Divided into four parts, the collection deals first with the difficulties encountered in researching women's literacy. It begins with indirect evidence in ninth- and tenth-century women readers' underlinings and the marking of important points in the margins of manuscripts at the royal convents of Chelles and Quedlinburg. Viewing manuscripts as "processes rather than products" (p. 4), Helene Scheck studies how nuns read intensively and—in responding to texts—altered

them. Bruce Venard examines records at Fontevraud in the twelfth century that show how abbesses were instrumental in "making" history by constructing cartularies to create a "paper trail" of their cloister's rights, privileges, and holdings. In these document rolls, one can sketch the outlines of abbesses' pragmatic reading. Marilyn Oliva turns to account keeping, a skill that convent women needed and usually acquired through holding a succession of offices. Six well-documented cases in English convents demonstrate code-switching between Latin—the language of business documents—and the French or English preferred by sisters preparing the accounts. Concentrating on twelfth-century nuns in the German-speaking area, Alison Beach unearths evidence of women copying books intensively at the double convent of Zwiefalten to replace the library that was destroyed by fire. One of the named scribes was Sister Mechthild von Neuffen, who is commemorated in a marginal notation written one hundred years after her death that acknowledges the "many books" she copied for the convent. The notation testifies to her community's esteem for the scribal work of its nuns. The final paper in this section turns to England, where few books and records from convents have survived. Here Veronica O'Mara demonstrates the possibilities of a "taxonomic" approach. Searching out inscriptions, insertions, and prayers copied by users into manuscripts, O'Mara shows how "what is added, what is marginal" (p. 92) can be mined to reconstruct the profile of cultural literacy among the nuns who owned the manuscripts.

In section two, "Latin and the Vernacular," Cynthia Cyrus introduces the term "bivalent literacy" in reference to the use of translations from Latin that many women's houses owned. Yet in the cloisters of Vienna, the site of Cyrus's case study, a kind of tri-lingual literacy applies, if one includes practical facility in the language of musical notation. This appears in examples of emendations that nuns made to the music, such as a highly dramatic addition composed by the

nuns of St. Lorenz. Turning to Sweden, Monica Hedlund studies the use of Latin by nuns at the Birgittine convent of Vadstena, pointing out that each sister there was expected to copy her own set of service books. Novices were taught grammar and a formal textualis script, evidence that a practical understanding of Latin was the norm. In a study of the Low Countries in the "long fifteenth century" (1370–1520), Thomas Mertens shows that, although the Canonesses Regular of the Windesheim Congregation continued to sing the Divine Office in Latin, other women's groups practiced an individual, inward piety that centered on simplified readings and intense personal prayer in Middle Dutch. These communities preferred Dutch translations and competent vernacular literacy to a "superficial" literacy in Latin.

In section three the book focuses on the evidence for advanced Latin literacy among nuns. Lisa Weston reviews the letters that eighth-century abbesses and monastic women wrote to Boniface. Even though later eras have fewer such examples, Weston cautions, "Absence of evidence should not be read as evidence of absence (p. 167)." Stephanie Hollis surveys English royal nunneries in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Her study concentrates on the surviving evidence for a Latin literate culture in the monastic schools at Wilton, Barking, Nunnaminster, and Romsey. It questions the popular assumption that educational attainment at medieval English nunneries was generally low. Virginia Blanton estimates that, of the 110 surviving nonliturgical devotional books connected to women's communities in England, saints' lives (legendaries) made up 20 percent. Her study compares three collections in Latin, Anglo-Norman, and Middle English. Blanton concludes that the emphasis given to native saints in these legendaries indicates a distinct interest among nuns in reading about the Anglo-Saxon forebearers of English vowed religious.

Alfred Thomas's study surveys the trilingual literacy of aristocratic women in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries at the court of Prague and considers the competence of

women who commissioned or owned manuscripts written in combinations of Latin, German, and Czech. In a study focused on the Swiss-German region, Regina Schiewer examines the St. Georgener Predigten, a collection of sermons made ca. 1300 for women associated with the Cistercian order. Schiewer demonstrates that these sermons—extant in twenty-nine manuscripts and used as readers and devotional books in many women's communities—assume a significantly high level of education and of theological interest on the part of their users. The texts anticipate the popular interest in mystical thought later refined in the theology of Master Eckhart.

In two case studies of the Birgittine house at Vadstena, Jonas Carlquist and Ingela Hedström argue that bilingual literacy among the nuns was more pervasive than has been assumed. Carlquist points out that, besides owning one set of service books each, the sisters at Vadstena were allowed unlimited books for learning and study. Even though table readings were conducted in the vernacular, Latin phrases and quotations from the Bible are employed without direct translation. Hedström emphasizes that more than sixty scribal hands of women at Vadstena have been distinguished. Copying books was clearly one of the nuns' most important duties.

In the last section, "Writing by the Nun for the Nun," Wybren Scheepsma profiles the work of Sister Griet Essinghe at the canoness house of Diepenveen. Sister Griet edited a Middle-Dutch "Book of Sisters" which, while it confirms the canonesses' Latin literacy, states that the sister-book was written in Dutch in order that the lay sisters, too, could benefit from the example of these virtuous lives. Patricia Stoop deals with vernacular sermons transcribed by the canonesses regular at the Brussels convent of Jericho (ca. 1456–1510) and the Cistercian nuns at Ter Kameren (ca. 1560), who themselves transcribed sermons from their "preacher's mouth." In both convents several sisters collaborated as redactors, editors, and copyists in making the col-

lections. The Ter Kameren sisters, while reconstructing the preacher's words, nevertheless produced a strikingly personal retelling.

The case studies in this collection go a long way to establishing that medieval nuns were by and large literate in Latin, the vernacular, or both. Specific texts that they read are identified. As more such manuscripts come to light, the next step will be to explicate the passages that women read intensively, highlighted, marked as important, commented on in the margins, or themselves wrote into manuscripts. Analysis of these readers' responses will begin to open the window on the nuns' values and concerns.

Bringing together in this volume studies on medieval nuns at religious houses in eight countries and integrating work by scholars in many disciplines (who deal with archival sources in seven languages) is a broad and ambitious undertaking. The book lays the groundwork for future studies of the thousands of manuscripts and documents left by nuns in the Middle Ages. The approaches to studying them, the array of issues addressed, and an extensive bibliography make this volume an essential part of any introduction to medieval women and their books.

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