
Review by Mitylene Myhr

van Wyhe, Cordula, ed. *Female Monasticism in Early Modern Europe: An Interdisciplinary View*. Catholic Christendom 1300-1700. Aldershot; Burlington, VT: Ashgate; London & New York: Routledge, 2008. 302 pages.

This volume joins a growing number of essay collections examining the experiences of religious women following the Council of Trent. The chapters underline the viewpoint that Tridentine reforms were not enforced evenly across Europe and that there were a wide variety of experiences. Including chapters from the fields of history, art history, theater, musicology and literary studies, each adds a fresh perspective. They all share the basic assumption that nuns played an active role in shaping their communal lives instead of passively accepting the rules and reforms emanating from Rome.

There are four sections examining “key areas” of research: “Femininity and Sanctity,” “Convent Theatre and Music Making,” “Spiritual Directorship” and “Community and Conflict.” These areas have received scholarly attention in other books and articles, but the chapters add to and enhance the body of primary research by including other national or regional viewpoints, particularly those of France, Germany and the Low Countries, which have not received as much attention as those of Italy and Spain. What emerges from the collection is a rich picture of female monastic life in the seventeenth century that encourages further research.

One theme that unifies the essays is the question of spiritual authority. How much autonomy did nuns exercise in terms of how their communities were run? Who organized or led their spiritual lives, or regulated their ability to inspire or influence the faithful outside the convent enclosure?

Religious women found various ways to provide both those within and outside of the cloister with spiritual direction. Helen Hunt highlights how the Basilian nuns of San Gregorio in Naples exercised spiritual authority through the procession of their

treasured relics of St. Patricia around the city and into the Treasury Chapel of San Gennaro cathedral (25-26). In similar fashion, the creation of hagiographies for public consumption in Germany demonstrates that “female charismatic sanctity continued to be valued in Catholic German lands not only in spite of, but also long after the Council of Trent” (Strasser, ch. 2, 41). Two essays examining biographies of St. Theresa, from early 17th century Brussels and late in the 17th century Low Countries, explain how images of St. Theresa of Avila were constructed and then suggest how they might have been consumed by religious and secular readers (Thøfner, ch. 3 and van Wyhe, ch. 9). These images of St. Theresa, together with relics and hagiographies, allowed nuns to serve as spiritual role models, despite the clerical monopoly on preaching and spiritual direction.

The chapters on theater and music illustrate tensions that could develop as female communities pushed the boundaries between silent and unseen, as demanded by the cloister, and the chanting of the services or performance of morality plays that also could be enjoyed by the secular community. Tensions also developed between the monastic vow of humility and the exercise and enjoyment of musical or dramatic talent. These chapters agree that church officials often approved of this blurring of the boundaries between enclosure and performance because music and theater edified both religious and secular audiences (Baade, ch. 4 and Weaver, ch. 6).

The last two sections also address the question of female spiritual direction through formal and informal means. Spiritual biographies and lives produced by male and female authors in Early Modern Spain illustrate the close spiritual friendships that developed between female penitents and male directors. These friendships not only edified both parties directly involved, but also their readers (Bilinkoff, ch. 7). In France, exceptional women, such as Barbe Acarie, could act as informal spiritual directors of women in their communities as well as of individuals outside of the convent. Barbara Diefendorf suggests that in France there may have been room for women like Acarie to play more active roles than in other places in Europe (ch. 8).

Conflicts, both those experienced within and those occurring outside of convents, could also become opportunities for spiritual edification. Cloister walls could not prevent the disruptions

caused by boarding students, gossip and invading armies. Instead, the realities of family connections and convent finances, as well as “God’s plans for little girls,” could cause the leaders of even the most reformed of orders, the Spanish Carmelites, to bend Tridentine legislation (Weber, ch. 10). Similarly, nuns used gossip, something religious Rules warn against, to challenge authority, express dissent, participate in secular political debates and then rebuild communal unity (Walker, ch. 11). Two eye-witness histories of the Thirty Years’ War written by nuns provide examples of how individuals and communities made sense of the horrors of war. They served a therapeutic purpose, both strengthening the faith of readers, religious and secular, and offering consolation in times of great upheaval and distress (Herold, ch. 12).

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