



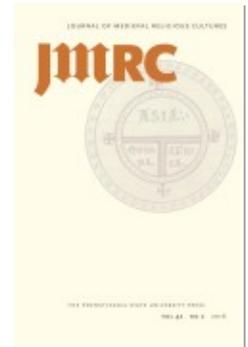
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INTRODUCTION: MEDIEVAL WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS TEXTS IN THE GERMANIC REGIONS

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This special issue of the *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* is devoted to a range of essays about women's involvement with spirituality—as readers, illustrators, copyists, and authors—in the Germanic regions from the thirteenth to the first decades of the sixteenth century. The focus is on texts and authors from England, Germany, and the Low Countries. The impetus for these studies was a colloquium titled “Medieval Female Writers in the Germanic Regions” held on April 4, 2014, at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, which I organized during my time there as a Brueghel Visiting Professor. The conference was sponsored by the Department of Germanic Literatures and Languages, with the assistance of Simon Richter, then head of the department, Martina Bale, and Taylor McConnell. Contributors to the original conference explored a series of case studies that served to highlight the variable nature of women's spirituality in complementary and contrasting ways. The essays here, which include some by colleagues who presented at the colloquium plus other specially commissioned articles, focus on a broad spectrum of devotional texts, from mystical treatises over a book of saints' lives and devotional compilations to sermon literature. They are organized in broadly chronological order.

In concentrating on the rationale for *Uan seven manieren van heiliger minnen*, Kris Van Put (University of Antwerp) provides a clear and focused analysis of the production of a vernacular mystical text by one of the most well-known female writers out of many operating in the Low Countries. Beatrice (1200–1268), who was the abbess of the Cistercian abbey of Nazareth, produced her text around 1250; it is transmitted in three manuscripts, but the evidence for Beatrice's authorship derives from her vita. Setting aside some problematic critical dependence on the vita, Van Put shows that Beatrice was a self-conscious author and a teacher who produced this “mirror of the contemplative life in love” in Dutch for her fellow nuns or other *mulieres religiosae* less proficient in Latin.

In the next two essays we move from a Dutch vernacular text where a clear case can be made for the authorship—albeit not one accepted by all scholars—to completely anonymous devotional texts produced in fifteenth-century England. Whereas in Beatrice's case we can point with certainty to an identified author but can only speculate about the audience for whom she wrote her text, in their essays on *The Chastising of God's Children* and the *Mirror for Devout People*, Marleen Cré (University of Lausanne) and Paul J. Patterson (Saint Joseph's University) are nevertheless able to argue from textual and contextual evidence for female readers. *The Chastising of God's Children*, a devotional compilation that survives in twelve manuscripts and an early printed edition, was written most likely after 1391 and before 1409 for female religious. In an essay that focuses on the trials of the contemplative life, Cré explores the ways in which female agency can be acquired through the transmission of knowledge, arguing that such instruction enables the female reader to exercise true spiritual discernment.

With regard to the *Mirror for Devout People*, a text that had a much smaller circulation, being extant only in two manuscripts, Patterson argues that it is possible to obtain a firm sense of the *Mirror's* historical reader by focusing on the role of aristocratic laywomen in the commissioning of religious texts. Through his careful itemization of the book-owning activities of the Scopes and Chaworths, specifically John Scrope and his wife, Elizabeth Chaworth, Patterson is able to demonstrate that such aristocratic lay families, with their ties to royalty and to important religious houses, such as the Birgittines of Syon, were well placed to acquire religious reading for themselves.

While the valuable contextual information about the owners of the *Mirror for Devout People* may only be used as a way into its potential readership, the evidence in the next essay is altogether more definite. Sara S. Poor (Princeton University) concentrates on Anna Eybin, provost of the Augustinian convent of Pilleureuth near Nuremberg from 1461 to 1476 and an active compiler and scribe of books for her religious community. In this particular case we are fortunate to have a detailed table of contents in a book of saints' lives that Eybin assembled. Poor is therefore able to compare the description of the texts as they occur in the table of contents with the texts as they appear in the book and so to underscore Eybin's agency as a writer/compiler while at the same time demonstrating how the texts were meant to function devotionally for the readers.

Whereas textual authorship is the focus of Poor's essay, Anne Winston-Allen (Southern Illinois University, Carbondale) is concerned with visual authorship among various female communities in German-speaking lands, particularly in the Dominican convent of Kirchheim unter Teck in Baden-Württemberg, where Sister Magdalena's engaging account of the struggle for reform of the cloister in the years 1478–89 shows her knowledge both of the history of the reform and of the religious order itself. In focusing on the ways in which women's writings and book illustrations reveal a polemical

reform mentality, Winston-Allen demonstrates how these female illustrators and writers found a voice and a way to exercise agency.

The wealth of information about female religious scribal and writing activity in the German regions is well matched by a tremendous amount of evidence available about religious women and their literary activity in the Low Countries, throughout our period. Because of the wealth of detail available, I (University of Antwerp and University of Utrecht) have been able to go beyond a general overview and to focus on textual analysis. I therefore offer a comparison between the writing strategies of two sisters, Maria van Pee and Janne Colijns, respectively living and working in the Brussels convent of Jericho, in the second half of the fifteenth century. Focusing on two sermons that are based on the tenth *lectio* from the *Speculum beatae Mariae virginis* by the Franciscan author Conrad of Saxony, I am able to compare aspects of their compositional technique.

And so with this last essay we come full circle, back to the Dutch vernacular with which the collection opened. In this series of essays the authors have tried to move away from stereotypical views of women in medieval society and the restricted notions of their involvement in literary activity. Instead we see women who are responsible for their own learning and who are able, like Beatrice, Anna, and the nuns working as illustrators or copying sermons, to set their own agendas. In this way the essays in this issue provide further insight into the topics that my fellow collaborators Virginia Blanton (University of Missouri, Kansas City) and Veronica O'Mara (University of Hull) and I have addressed in the project "Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe" and that have been the subject of other publications over the past few decades. As such, this issue hopes to be another stepping-stone in the much larger ongoing interdisciplinary and international project on medieval women's religious texts.

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I am very grateful to the Flemish Interuniversity Council for offering me the opportunity to take up the Brueghel Visiting Professorship at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia in the spring semester of 2014. This enabled me to extend my network of valuable contacts in North America, to witness the lively engagement of the postgraduate community it was my pleasure to teach, and to work alongside a range of very interesting colleagues in the Departments of Germanic Literatures and Languages, English, History, and Religious Studies. I have many fond memories of the collegial and supportive atmosphere at Penn. In particular, I should like to thank Martina Bale, Rita Copeland, Christina Frei, Andrea Grafetstätter, Katryn Hellerstein, Lindsey Johnson, Catriona MacLeod, Ann Matter, Simon Richter, Tom Saffley, Irina Savinetskaya, Erika Smith, Peter Stallybrass, Jonathan Stavsky, Emily Steiner,

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Like the organization of a conference, the editing of a journal issue is a joint venture in itself. In editing these essays I have received help from various quarters. I am especially grateful to Christine Cooper-Rompato and Sherri Olson, the general editors of the *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures*, for their enthusiastic willingness to publish the essays on the theme “Medieval Women’s Religious Texts in the Germanic Regions” together as a collection in this special issue and for their help throughout the editing process; to the peer reviewers, who made pertinent comments at every stage; and, finally, to all the contributors both to the conference and to this special issue for all their hard work. In many ways this issue is connected to the “Nuns’ Literacies in Medieval Europe” project. The collaboration with Virginia Blanton and Veronica O’Mara has given my academic career an important impulse and opened up a worldwide network of inspiring academic contacts. As a token of my gratitude for their continued support and friendship I would like to dedicate this special issue to them.