

Nuns' Literacies – Medieval to Modern
University of Glasgow
29-30 August 2014

The 13th annual conference of the History of Women Religious of Britain and Ireland, this year addressing the complexities of nuns' literacies, took place at the end of August at the University of Glasgow. Before the conference even started, exchange was exciting and fruitful at a workshop for postgraduates, hosted by the School of Critical Studies, on Textual Culture and Manuscripts, led by experts in the field Veronica O'Mara from the University of Hull and Jeremy Smith, professor at the University of Glasgow. The group of postgrads was quite international, hailing from the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the UK. We enjoyed presentations that brought us up to speed on the ins and outs of medieval as well as more recent philological theory. Jeremy Smith presented some interesting manuscripts and resources for editorial work and reflection while Veronica O'Mara discussed the continuity between manuscript and print cultures and the unique nature of specific nunneries and female hands. Useful and enlightening, the discussion set a very friendly and engaging tone for the rest of the conference. The workshop was followed by a trip to visit Glasgow Cathedral and the Necropolis, whose tombs seemed to shine under a bright blue sky and late summer sun.

The papers began early the next day in the Glasgow University Union building, a beautiful nineteenth-century tribute to higher education. The first four talks focused appropriately on the most material aspect of literacy, books. Andrea Knox introduced us to how Irish nuns in late medieval Spain actively supported reading and translation, asserting their intellectual autonomy and overt independence from the universities in surprising ways, devoted to study in order to know their place in the larger scheme of things. Elizabeth Goodwin talked about the textual communities of fifteenth century English women, which were based on shared devotional reading of texts like the *Prickynge of Love*. After Clarck Driessen's paper on how visionary literature was personalised for use in communities, this fascinating panel ended with Janet Jones' overview of book ownership in six London convents from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, providing a useful bibliography for this elusive subject on which much research still remains to be done.

The afternoon panel was on shaping literacy and devotion, and we moved to a more theoretical discussion of how books were used in convents. Julie Ann Smith, from the University of Sydney, talked about the rewriting of the Benedictine Rule for women in the later Middle Ages, showing that from an initially genderless early medieval Latin text, arose first the need for a vernacular version and then a feminized one, the first of which was composed in the mid-eleventh century. This then, strangely enough, gave rise in turn to a masculine version, from which feminine gender markings had been erased. These then come back again in the fifteenth century, proving that such rules were meant first of all to fulfill the needs of the communities that relied on them. Diana Denissen's paper that followed looked at late medieval spirituality read through various compilation manuscripts which were sometimes given from sister to sister, showing that individualized readings of works, such as the *Tretyse of Love*, exist within a larger collective history of nuns' literacies, demonstrating that women had flexible religious role models and dynamic relationships to texts. My own paper discussed a 13th century manuscript that

probably belonged to Wilton Abbey, which begs the question of how nuns read vernacular works on love and for what purpose.

After lunch, in the no longer forbidding – though once forbidden – room of a male only fraternity, there was a roundtable on the association and how to develop its network for sharing and disseminating information. This was followed by Veronica O'Mara's keynote lecture on the extensive work she has recently been doing on Nun's literacies. Despite a long battle for funding, after three international conferences and their volumes of essays (published by Brepols in their "Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts" series), we can say that the field of nuns' literacies now has a good base for future research on the topic. The whole room held their breath in appreciation of the extensive work Veronica O'Mara and her colleague's around the world have done to get this field off the ground.

The following day was just as rich, as we moved into nuns' literacies in the modern period. Victoria Van Hyning, Caroline Watkinson and Liise Lehtsalu showed how the ability of nuns to read could question authority but also serve the state. After this first panel, the second keynote speaker was Amanda Haste who plunged us into the contemporary world of nuns' musical literacy with a fascinating overview of the kind of music composed in today's convents, stressing how judging such music with exterior criteria misses the varied roles music plays within communities of women. The second panel of the day introduced us to more personal nuns' writing: Tonya Moutray presented the 17th century *Diary of the Blue Nuns* and Deirdre Raftery discussed how missionary nuns wrote of the trials, tribulations, and pleasures, of travel. On the final panel, the only nun to give a paper at the conference, Sr. Patricia Hariss, discussed how to trace the history of reading nuns and Catriona Delaney spoke on how the vocation was presented for recruitment purposes in Ireland in the 20th century, sharing with us some jems of her oral history project. This last paper reminded us of the continuity of nuns' literacies; how vocational teaching has influenced and encouraged generations of readers, up to today. Perhaps this is the spirit that influenced this conference, which stands out for me as one of the best I have attended in terms of the quality and quantity of exchange and mutual encouragement. The organizers, and especially Kimm Curran, did an exceptional job of seeing to all the particulars, and I hope to be able to participate in another HRWB conference again soon.

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