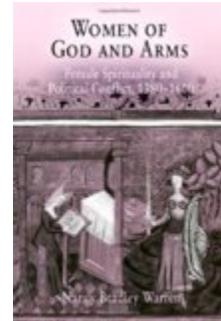


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nancy Bradley Warren. *Women of God and Arms: Female Spirituality and Political Conflict, 1380-1600*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. 272 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3892-1.

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## Transgressing the Borders

By labeling something, providing limitations, we make it more manageable, easier to describe, refer to, and study. The danger, of course, is that labels and limits inevitably exclude some important element and therefore never quite do justice to reality. Nevertheless, scholarship relies on maintaining borders—genres, regions, time periods. The Holy Roman Empire, for example, underwent almost constant redrawing of its physical boundaries, both on its edges and amongst the principalities within it, but historians tend to specialize in certain modern-day regions—Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands. While late medieval Burgundy is the closest Nancy Bradley Warren comes geographically to the empire, she does capture its spirit by trying to transgress borders constructed during modern times. As a literary scholar, she examines ideas and texts but in relation to their historical contexts, linking texts to specific women who lived in a specific time and place. The women Warren considers hailed from various regions of Europe—Burgundy, Northern France, Spain, and England—and lived between 1380 and 1600, on both sides of the medieval/early modern divide. Regarding the approach to her topic, choice of regions, and range of time periods, Warren argues both implicitly and explicitly that modern-day divisions are artificial.

The six chapters of *Women of God and Arms* progress chronologically to examine the deconstruction of two barriers, women's involvement in the "male world" of politics and the division of medieval and early modern. In chapter 1, Warren lays the groundwork for her first

thesis. The Burgundian Saint Colette of Corbie's life illustrates how a religious woman and her supporters could harness the spiritual authority of the religious woman for non-spiritual goals. In particular, Warren analyzes how the Burgundian ducal family allied themselves with Colette in order to bolster their own power in unstable regions. Warren acknowledges that this argument is not new, but the chapter serves an important role as a foundation for the following chapters.

Chapter 2 contends that religious women were not the only women who converted spiritual capital into political power. Warren argues that previous scholarship is mistaken in presenting Margaret of York, duchess of Burgundy, as a pious lady who eschewed participation in the political arena in favor of performing pious works. Warren points out that many of these same scholarly works recognize that the dukes realized the potential of religious deeds as both a display of personal piety *and* a tool for political manipulation. Asserting that women, too, understood these dual benefits, Warren illuminates the political gains of many of Margaret's spiritual acts. Lest modern readers doubt that medieval society would have acknowledged female piety as a viable route to political action, Warren includes in this chapter a discussion of the "Dialogue of the Duchess of Burgundy with Jesus Christ," in which the medieval author advises the duchess on the compatibility of religion and politics.

While chapter 2 broadens the original thesis of female spiritual power as a basis for political clout by includ-

ing secular women, chapter 3 adds complexity. It is easy enough to imagine that many men would have appreciated the political repercussions of women's well-placed piety, but a politically successful woman could also prove threatening to manhood in general. In this chapter, Warren looks at how English writers reacted to the political accomplishments of three northern French women—Joan of Arc, Christine de Pisan, and Margaret of Anjou. (For purposes of this study, Christine's long association with France trumped her Italian birth.) A common theme throughout medieval life viewed the foreign as an effeminate other, but the achievements of these three foreign women in the face of English defeat and weakness threatened the manhood of the English psyche. English writers, therefore, needed to re-present these women in safer, feminine terms, which they accomplished by reinscribing the women in religious terms. Joan and Margaret were especially threatening in that Joan successfully led French troops against English armies and Margaret, as the English queen, took up the reins of power when her husband lapsed into madness. To combat the French female dominance, the English wrote polemics against these two women and then tried to appropriate Christine's writings to bolster male supremacy. They rewrote Christine's works to fashion women as transmitters of power rather than wielders, and they glossed over the troubling fact of Christine's sex by declaring that Christine was a pious lady (sometimes they fashioned her as a nun) who had acted merely as patron to a group of male clerics, the real authors of her works.

Chapter 4 returns to the theme laid out in chapter 2 to look again at a political woman who used her religious acts for political gain. Isabel the Catholic, queen of Castile and wife of Ferdinand of Aragon, presided over a very bloody time in Iberian history. She herself led armies in the reconquest of the peninsula over the Muslims. Rather than just rehearse again the connections between a specific woman's religious actions and her political dividends, Warren analyzes how Isabel manipulated the medieval stereotypes that relegated women's power to the spiritual sphere and how Isabel's supporters used the stereotypes to legitimize Isabel's political participation. Indeed, Isabel's success in the political sphere depended on her self-portrayal as a chaste and spiritual woman, whose duties included defending her land and people (in particular against the religious "other").

With chapters 5 and 6, Warren moves on to address her second main thesis, that late medieval female piety remained a viable route to female political power long after the Middle Ages supposedly transitioned into the

early modern period. To prove this point, she looks at the Catholic nun Elizabeth Barton, who protested against Henry VIII's rule once he broke with Rome, and the nuns of Syon, who similarly agitated against Henry's daughter Elizabeth I. Elizabeth herself, Warren argues, with her emphasis on virginity, demonstrated that the medieval views on the efficacy of female piety still held political influence.

Warren is at her best when reading chronicles, letters, and literature for medieval and early modern opinions about women's use of piety for political ends. Chapters 3 and 4 are particularly interesting in this regard, as she analyzes how the authors responded to specific women who were politically active. For the women themselves, Warren relied heavily on secondary literature to provide details about their lives and actions; Warren's contributions, therefore, reside less in unearthing new facts about these famous women than in refocusing modern perceptions about them. Just as scholarship relies on boundaries to contain and define studies, past scholars have not seen how secular women's spiritual endeavors could work outside of the religious milieu.

While Warren does a good job linking texts to the specifics of her individual women, the reader never gets a sense of the differences, not so much between the women themselves—religious reformers, abbesses, duchesses, military leaders, queens, and nuns—as between the reactions of the texts' authors. Warren's study only hints at how different geographical origins impacted the authors' understandings of politically active spiritual women. The different reactions of the English and the Spanish to Joan of Arc cause some speculation into how the authors' backgrounds could have predisposed them, or not, to politically active women.

The deconstruction of modern-day imposed borders has many wider repercussions, not necessarily examined in *Women of God and Arms*. In some areas, Warren could have benefited from a fuller bibliography. For example, there are large bodies of work debating the artificiality of the medieval/early modern divide<sup>[1]</sup> and those that focus on the long tradition of discrediting individual religious women.<sup>[2]</sup> Warren's work simply increases our data in these arenas, but a broader historiography could have moved the theses beyond the confines of the book. Studies on the non-spiritual power derived from religious women's spiritual authority, for instance, stretch back much earlier than the late Middle Ages. The parallels with early female Christian saints, who lived during late antiquity, could also prompt one to wonder how "me-

dieval” female spiritual capital was.[3]

With its emphasis on the enduring efficacy of political clout achieved through female spiritual authority, *Women of God and Arms* encourages discussion of several debates of interest to scholars today. Did women experience a Renaissance, a rebirth as Warren emphasized in her conclusion? How should scholars approach traditional divisions between historical periods? How useful are modern labels; do they conceal more than they reveal?

#### Notes

[1]. See, for example, Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Transformation in Early Modern Eu-*

*rope* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Anthony Grafton, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[2]. Clare of Assisi, Catherine of Sienna, Marguerite Porete, to name just a few.

[3]. The literature is vast, but one could start with Elizabeth A. Clark, “Early Christian Women: Sources and Interpretation,” in *That Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity*, ed. Lynda L. Coon, Katherine J. Haldane, and Elisabeth W. Sommer (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), pp. 19-35; Jo Ann McNamara, “Living Sermons: Consecrated Women and the Conversion of Gaul,” in *Peace Weavers: Medieval Religious Women*, ed. Lillian Thomas Shank and John A. Nichols (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), pp. 19-37.

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