

Anne Winston-Allen. *Convent Chronicles: Women Writing about Women in the Late Middle Ages*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005. xvii + 238 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-271-02460-8; \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-271-02852-1.

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Real-Life Cities of Ladies

In this engaging, lucidly written work, Anne Winston-Allen uses a wide range of sources written by and about late medieval and sixteenth-century nuns to investigate the lives and situations of the inhabitants of over fifty convents in German- and Dutch-speaking Europe. Her focus is on the Observant movement, a reform-oriented religious movement that swept Northern Europe in the fifteenth century, part of the same currents of increasing piety and spirituality as the more widely studied *devotio moderna*. For nuns, the Observance brought stricter practices, claustration and a notable increase in written text production, particularly in the vernacular (a key element in Winston-Allen's exploration of female voice and agency). The women presented here both supported and resisted reform, with varying degrees of success. This study goes beyond simplistic interpretations that women who resisted were immoral or irreligious or that women who supported the Observance were mere naive pawns in the hands of men. Using plentiful examples, Winston-Allen shows how much more nuanced the relationship of nuns to reform was, and how rich cloister life could be. Angela Varnbuehler, a Nuremberg prioress, praised the benefits of enclosure, enthusing, "Oh, inwardness, what a help thou art to spirituality" (p. 158). Verena von Stuben opposed Nicholas of Cusa because she believed his attempts at reforming Sonnenburg were thinly veiled moves to curtail her authority over the convent's substantial territorial holdings. *Convent Chronicles* also serves to fill the strange gap in previous research between medieval female mystics and women in the sixteenth century.

What makes this book an invaluable contribution to the field is its status not only as "the first [study] to survey nuns' convent chronicles and historical writings collectively across orders and regions in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries," but also the depth and breadth of Winston-Allen's work (p. xiii). In six chapters, she explores daily life within convents; the concept of a "women's religious movement" in the late Middle Ages; women who supported and worked on behalf of the reform; women who opposed the reform movement; the debate about enclosure; the literary and library-related activities of the nuns; and the nature of the "female" or "feminine" voice presented by these texts. Throughout the book, Winston-Allen engages both her primary sources as well as the full range of historiography, from Victorian writers who accepted satirical descriptions of "convent cats" as historically accurate to more recent feminist historians who have lamented the lack of female agency and voice. Discussing Wilhelm Oehl's dismissive characterization of sister-books as "typically female, without a trace of objective historical writing," she remarks, "[o]ne wonders if a truly 'objective' view would include such a categorization of what is female" (p. 75). There is a considerable amount of negative historiography to be dealt with through careful examination of the evidence provided by convent women themselves. *Convent Chronicles* reveals the complexities of nuns' lives, thoughts, and relationships in the society in which they lived.

One of the key points made is the extent to which

these women *were* involved in wider society, creating “multiple, interlocking social, financial, and spiritual links between religious houses and the lay community” (p. 9). The most obvious ties were familial. Winston-Allen makes excellent use of Jutta Sperling’s work on patrician nuns in Venice to draw parallels about how families used convents as part of their dynastic strategies, both in terms of property control and to provide a suitable option for placing daughters who could not be married to husbands befitting their rank.[1] Families would often maintain connections with specific religious institutions, sending daughters there over generations. Canoness houses, often more like “seminaries for young ladies or elegant boarding houses” than what we think of as convents, are difficult to classify: they did not require formal vows or the wearing of habits, allowed private property and servants and let sisters travel or even leave to marry with the abbess’ permission. The chief duties of the sisters were to recite the canonical hours and attend religious services, as well as maintaining chastity and obedience to the abbess. However, as Winston-Allen makes clear, this did not mean that the sisters saw themselves as living a less valid type of religious life; when faced with the stricter rules of the Observance, in many cases, they mounted a vigorous defense of their religious rights and privileges. From the great royal foundations like Quedlinburg to the many canoness houses with strong ties to the local nobility, nuns remained connected to their relatives on the outside through correspondence, donations and prayers. Women in convents were also closely tied to the community. Nuns ran schools, offered up prayers, kept written records and produced copies of religious texts that were circulated to the laity (particularly in houses that had adopted strict claustration with the Observance).

Convent Chronicles demonstrates how crucial economic and financial issues were to the relationship between convents and their communities. The convoluted battle to reform Klingental hinged on the importance of the cloister for Basel’s economy; when the fight between sisters who wanted to hold to their long-established practices and those who brought the Observance threatened to ruin the house altogether, a panicked town council switched positions and ceased to support the reform. The weavers’ guild in Münster forced the sisters at Marienthal to destroy their looms in 1525, depriving the convent of its chief source of income in order to stop its affecting local trade. Winston-Allen returns again and again to the costs of instituting the reforms, incurred typically when some sisters preferred to leave for other houses and in-

sisted on the return of all the property they had brought with them upon arrival. In many examples, such withdrawal of convent dowries represented a near-crippling blow, from which newly Observant convents took years to recover, and which often resulted in drawn-out legal battles over property and pensions.

From the outset, Winston-Allen makes it clear that she is seeking to counter the traditional “master narrative” of the male voice and prove that women were neither completely repressed nor incapable of speaking. By deftly incorporating significant excerpts from the work of convent women themselves, she lets the women speak as much as possible, demonstrating the range, variety and character of Observant women’s writings. Readers get to know people such as the enterprising prioress of Preetz, Anna von Buchwald (1484-1508), who engaged in continual struggles with the “habitually negligent,” “rude and sarcastic” Provost Dornebusch (p. 42). When she finally succeeded in providing the convent with a new fireplace that provided heat rather than smoke, Anna declared in the handbook she kept for future prioresses, “This comfort, Beloved, you have obtained through my efforts, therefore remember me to God in your prayers!” (p. 43). Prioress Ursula Haider of Villingen regularly arranged dramatic productions with religious themes and imaginary “pilgrimages” within the convent to Rome or the Holy Land (p. 53). Winston-Allen also emphasizes the voices of fifteenth-century women reformers, whom previous historians have “characterized as pawns and victims, described as ‘pitifully naïve’ and ‘unbelievably otherworldly’ ” (p. 102). By actually looking at the words of women reformers, Winston-Allen provides a very different picture for the reader. Katharine von Muellheim, for example, was an experienced reformer, sent on multiple missions to bring the Observance to other cloisters (a phenomenon which Winston-Allen notes on many occasions). Careful reading of the convent documents shows that the sisters sent on reform missions were generally not young or naïve, but older, experienced women who had held positions of authority in their original foundations.

Many of the texts produced by these nuns are classified by Winston-Allen as “hybrid” texts combining record and narrative, generally written in the vernacular, in regional dialects closer to spoken idiom and with a “vividness of affect and more intimate tone” than male chronicles (p. 218). She makes the very interesting point that male chronicles tend to focus on power conflicts which affect the standing of their houses, while women “concentrate more on internal events and on the spiritual-

ity of the members,” as well as spending considerably more time talking about food (pp. 219; p. 47). The outside world becomes a subject when attempts are made to influence negatively their rights, privileges and power. *Convent Chronicles* also looks at nuns as transcribers and distributors of sermons; that is, as participants in the increasing currents of religiosity within late fifteenth-century European society. Winston-Allen argues that these were conscious choices made by women for whom the previous avenue of mystical visionary writing was no longer open, demonstrating that convent women could and did choose their literary mode according to what was

necessary and appropriate, not because writing in a certain style was intrinsic to their nature. When women wrote foundation stories a century later, for example, they were producing fiction as much as writing history, seeking to inspire the current generation with stories of past piety and maintain the traditions of their houses.

Note

[1]. Jutta Gisela Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

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