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Querciolo Mazzonis. *Spirituality, Gender, and the Self in Renaissance Italy: Angela Merici and the Company of St. Ursula (1474-1540).* C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007. xvii + 247 pp. $35.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8132-1490-0.

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Most western civilization textbooks describe the Ursulines as female counterparts to the Jesuits. Created expressly to educate others in Christian doctrine as a weapon in the war against spreading Protestantism, the Ursulines differed mainly in that they focused their mission on teaching poor girls. Yet, just as recent scholarship has reevaluated the history and purpose of the early Jesuits, Querciolo Mazzonis, in *Spirituality, Gender, and the Self in Renaissance Italy*, proves that a similar reassessment of the Ursuline order has been sorely needed.[1] While Ursuline nuns did staff the schools of Christian doctrine in the latter half of the sixteenth century, Mazzonis argues that education was not the aim of Angela Merici when she founded the order in 1535. Through a close reading of Merici's rule and other early sources, Mazzonis demonstrates that the mission of the company changed after papal acceptance of their *regula* in 1544. This work, thus, is a significant and welcome addition to information regarding Merici's original conception of the role and purpose of her company in Brescian society. Yet, Mazzonis is so dedicated to demonstrating how Merici's ideas were "radical" and innovative that some of his points tend to be overstated, while other interesting lines of inquiry are not pursued, leaving the reader desiring more information.

The first chapter traces the early history of Merici and her Company of St. Ursula. Merici's life is set against the backdrop of late medieval female spirituality, a topic that Mazzonis discusses further in chapter 3. Like her predecessors, the beguines, anchoresses, bizzoche or pinzochere, and tertiaries, Merici, according to Mazzonis, sought to live a religious life in the world rather than in cloister. Merici was a Franciscan tertiary who had become renowned for her devotion by 1524 and had garnered a group of female companions by 1532. That same year, she asked to be released from being buried as a tertiary, suggesting her focus had shifted to the order that she ultimately founded in 1535, five years before her death. Members of her company, called the *Colonelle*, were considered brides of Christ and had to be virgins but did not live together in a community. Nonvirgins could participate in this spiritual life by serving as administrators or advisors (called *Matrone*) to the Colonelle. Although members lived an active life in the world, what constituted this active life was not dictated in the rule. In other words, there was no provision that the women must focus on education. Nor did Merici intend the company to be a charitable institution for lower-class women. All of these points serve to demonstrate, in Mazzonis's view, that Merici and her company were singular and unique. This conviction is perhaps why Mazzonis does not explore how Merici's experience of being a Franciscan tertiary influenced her concept of a company of virgins who lived as brides of Christ in the world.

Following chapters develop the points laid out in the first. Chapter 2 examines how the Ursulines fit into pre-Tridentine Brescian society. For example, most of the early Colonelle were of the artisan class, while the matrons were primarily from the aristocratic class. The incorporation of the Matrone in the company's structure reflects the early sixteenth-century belief that the role of aristocratic women was to educate their families. Since the virginity of their aristocratic daughters was not deemed to be protected enough within the company because the Colonelle were not in cloister, it was women of the artisan class who opted to join as brides of Christ. The Company of St. Ursula allowed them a spiritual vocation while still being able to help support their families. The issue of how Merici's ideas fit into the contemporary discourse about family and gender roles is so intriguing that more analysis on these points would be welcome.

Chapter 3 identifies the medieval antecedents of Merici's company and the hallmarks of female spirituality in pre-Tridentine Italy, which Mazzonis identifies as a "mystic spirituality." This chapter is perhaps the least persuasive, due primarily to issues of terminology and historical context. Mazzonis never clearly defines

what lifestyle a tertiary, bizzoche, or beguine led. This omission makes it difficult to understand and assess the comparisons being made between these medieval antecedents and Merici's company. In addition, the inclusion of some of these predecessors is problematic. Beguines, for instance, lived in communal houses, could be married, by and large did not engage in what could be called "mystic" religiosity, only existed in northern Europe (primarily the Low Countries), and had been repeatedly condemned. How this group, different from the Company of St. Ursula in so many ways, relates to the development of Merici's ideas needs to be clarified. In addition, the discussion of the late medieval roots of Merici's sixteenth-century mysticism could perhaps engage more with recent scholarship. For instance, Dyan Elliott (*Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* [2004]) and Nancy Caciola (*Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* [2003]) have shown that the connection between women and God was not generally considered "privileged" through the fifteenth century as Mazzonis suggests, and John Coakley has demonstrated in *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators* (2006) that even confessors who rode the coattails of mystics never relinquished their supreme authoritarian role.[2]

Chapter 4 is a closer examination of Merici's ideas regarding charity, humility, and poverty and how they fit into the larger trends of early sixteenth-century spirituality. This is a chapter of broad strokes, pulling together a variety of examples to argue that the period saw an emphasis on spiritual interiority. The fifth chapter echoes much of what Mazzonis had already discussed in chapters 1 and 3. It concludes with an examination of the history of the company after the death of Merici. It is here that Mazzonis proves his thesis: it was not until after Merici's death that the company became dedicated to education, following its "institutionalization" within the Roman Church. This process led to a division within the order reminiscent of that which emerged between the Spiritual and Conventual Franciscans after Francis's death. A discussion of this parallel would have been appreciated, particularly as it dovetails nicely with Merici's own involvement with the Franciscan Third Order.

In sum, Mazzonis sets out to argue that the Ursulines were not conceived as a specifically charitable order focused on the education of poor girls, and he proves this point. The underlying, yet unstated, argument that the Company of St. Ursula was "exceptional" and "radical" is not as persuasive. Constant reiteration of this theme, at times, leads the author away from potentially profitable lines of research. Nevertheless, Mazzonis's attempt to trace the evolution of premodern female spirituality is to be commended. Instead of retreating behind the "medieval" or "Renaissance" battle line, Mazzonis seeks to discover the medieval lineage of the Ursulines without undercutting the fact that the company was solidly a product of the early sixteenth-century Italian scene.

Notes

[1]. As, for instance, in John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[2]. Gabriella Zarri, in contrast to Mazzonis, emphasizes the novel aspects of sixteenth-century female spirituality, most succinctly in "The Third Status," in *Time, Space, and Women's Lives in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Anne Jacobson Schutte, Thomas Kuehn, and Silvana Seidel Menchi (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2001), 181-201.

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