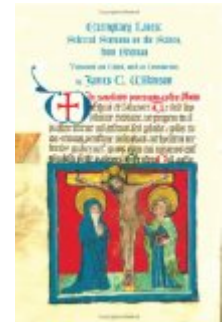


James C. Wilkinson, ed.. *Exemplary Lives: Selected Sermons on the Saints, from Rheinau*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2006. 191 pp. \$20.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-87462-709-1.



Reviewed by Beth Kreitzer

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Although the texts here collected, from the fifteenth-century *Rheinauer Predigtsammlung*, fall into the time period covered by the series, Reformation Texts with Translation (1350-1650), a first impression of the sermon collection suggests that it is not quite appropriate subject matter for such a series. Should these sermons be translated and published? Absolutely. Are they significant for the Reformation and those who study that period? Without a doubt. But actually "Reformation Texts?" A reader might be misled into thinking that the sermons somehow discuss making changes in the church, or that perhaps they were given by a reforming preacher. Series editor Ian Levy makes the argument, however, that "if we are to understand the Reformation properly, we must gain a deeper understanding of the whole world from which it was born," and these sermons are a fine exemplar of the kind of preaching many people heard before and no doubt during the Reformation (p. 4). So these texts are "Reformation texts" in the sense that they are examples of the kind of beliefs and devotional practices current on the "eve" of the Reformation and help to

deepen our understanding of the world and church in which the Reformation was born.

That being said, the sermons collected in this text and presented both in their original German (with added punctuation and a few other useful changes well explained in the text) and in modern English translation are fairly short, presented in simple language with vivid illustrations often drawn from Voragine's *Golden Legend*, and seem quite standard for medieval preaching. Of course in this lies their strength for the modern scholar, who is able to find in these texts common topoi of medieval preaching and could easily use them for comparison with later popular preaching. The book contains only a portion of the sermons from the *Rheinauer Predigtsammlung*: the original text contains eighty-three sermons covering much of the church year, the *De Tempore* section with fifty-three Sunday and feast day sermons, and the *De Sanctis* section with twenty-eight sermons on the lives of the saints. *Exemplary Lives* presents only fourteen of the saints' day sermons, thereby somewhat limiting its usefulness.

The editor and translator of the text, James C. Wilkinson, is thoroughly familiar with the material, having written his 1988 dissertation on the sermon collection's *De Sanctis* section. The introduction provides a helpful orientation to the specific material presented here, with background information on the manuscript and description of the text, its orthography, (lack of) punctuation, and so on, as well as editorial decisions related to its presentation. Several small errors can be found in the text (the most egregious being the lack of the final footnote), but generally the technical presentation of the text is excellent. Several of the explanatory footnotes seem unnecessarily obvious, and I would quibble with the translation of a few words ("torture" for *marter*, instead of "martyrdom," pp. 33-34). But the translation is well done, and the editor has worked to preserve the simple, often repetitive nature of the language. Unfortunately, as Levy mentions in his preface, due to serious illness the editor was unable to finish the project himself, and the change in editors in the very final stages may be the cause of a few infelicities in the introduction ("I decided" in a few places, but "the editor decided" in others).

Exemplary Lives is a fine scholarly project that provides easy access to some fascinating material, useful for both scholars and more general readers in its original language and translation. I do have two criticisms whose remediation would have extended the usefulness of the volume and its significance as well. The first is related to a no doubt practical decision on the part of the editors, that is the limited number of sermons included from the collection. Ideally all of the sermons from the *De Sanctis* section should have been included, so as to allow a wider field for comparison, both within the text and outside it with other sermons. The scholarly application of the material is limited by the somewhat superficial selection of which sermons to include. The sermons are representative of the whole, but are in fact not the whole. While this limitation will only affect a few readers, the second point is something that will

affect the wider audience of the book—it lacks a broad view of the context of the *Rheinauer Predigtsammlung*. How does this sermon collection compare with others of its time, both within its region and more widely? Are its contents similar to others, or unique in some way? It will be difficult to use these sermons really effectively in comparison with later sermons or sermon collections without having a greater sense of the commonness or uniqueness of the text. This lack of broad comparison is reflected in the bibliography, with not quite two pages of references. These criticisms unfortunately mitigate somewhat the value of the book, which still stands on its own as a useful tool and fascinating collection, but which could have made an even greater contribution to the readers of the series.

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