

**Catherine Sanok.** *Her Life Historical*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 280 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-3986-7.



**Reviewed by** Alla Gaydukova

**Published on** H-Women (May, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Holly S. Hurlburt (Southern Illinois University Carbondale)

Vernacular female saints' lives were a popular genre in the Middle Ages. In her monograph, Catherine Sanok examines assumptions, both medieval and modern, around this literary genre. In questioning its exclusion from modern women's literary history based on the perception that the genre is misogynistic, she finds that, on the contrary, the expectation of a female audience helped make vernacular female saints' lives central to women's literature. Sanok analyzes the fifteenth-century English collections of saints' lives and other medieval literary sources through the lenses of gender, history, and religion. She argues that the fifteenth-century authors of these vernacular legend collections deliberately created an imagined female audience, and used their texts both "to reflect on historical differences separating the sacred past from the social present" and also to encourage their audience to think about their community in light of the political and religious instability of the time (p. x). She shows how exemplarity, the expectation that medieval women would imitate saints' lives they read, through its ac-

knowledge of a varied past and creation of a feminine audience, allows the explorations of historical continuities and discontinuities in premodern times. Additionally, she argues that the imagined feminine audience increased women's visibility in the literary culture. Sanok's theoretical positions on how to read vernacular saints' lives through an imagined female audience not only place this literary mode in an important place in fifteenth-century literary canon but also allow new readings of many other medieval works.

Sanok's monograph is divided into three parts. The first two chapters are grounded in theory. By focusing on the author and the audience of vernacular saints' lives, she explores the differences in ethics and historical reality between the time when the saints lived and the time when the women who were encouraged to imitate these saints read their lives. Using the narratives of Julian of Norwich and Julian's use of the legend of St. Cecilia, for example, Sanok shows how fifteenth-century women practiced selective exemplarity by focusing on the parts of the legend that

did not directly contradict contemporary social mores. Julian of Norwich focused on the three wounds of St. Cecilia instead of on the saint's virginity or defiance of male authority, which would have been more problematic. Sanok posits that saints' lives encouraged their readers to think historically by noticing, even implicitly, their differences with the early saints, which further led to the redefinition of social relationships. All of these modes, in turn, depended on the assumption and creation of a fictional female audience that then could be used to explore the agenda of the fifteenth-century authors.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore the role of the imagined female audience and its construction of community as a whole. Through case studies of Osborn Bokenham's *Legends of Holy Women* (written in the fifteenth century) and Henry Bradshaw's *Life of St. Werburge* (1521), Sanok shows how both authors responded to political and social instabilities of their times, albeit in two different ways. The former wished to create a new and stable political community through his female audience in response to the political instability of the Wars of the Roses by emphasizing an alternative unwavering history through female patronage. The latter aspired to establish a coherent English identity that went beyond history and was unchanging, as represented in the incorruptible virgin body of Saint Werburge and its defense of a nation. In both examples, Sanok visibly connects the chapters to the ideas in the previous ones, examining the use of exemplarity and historical awareness to provide alternatives for the female audience.

The last two chapters study the role of exemplarity in history and contested community through imitation and drama in the public performance of saints' lives. The fifteenth-century *Book of Margery Kempe* and twelfth-century *Life of Christina of Markyate*, which provide concrete examples of medieval women's use of saints' lives in their own spiritual quests, show how exemplar-

ity and saints' lives could also be employed to criticize community in addition to unifying it. Christina of Markyate criticized religious and social institutions by comparing them to persecutors of the saints while simultaneously acknowledging the inability to imitate the saints completely in a public role. Margery Kempe offered the most direct challenge to historical exemplarity of the saint by imitating all features of saints' lives, even those not accepted by fifteenth-century mores; however, she proves the exception that focuses on the specific use of exemplarity in late Middle Ages and incidentally raises questions of an actual female audience not just an imagined one. Chapter 6, veering from the idea of a feminine audience, examines Chaucer's "Second Nuns' Tale" (1478) and the stagings of St. Katherine's play in 1393 and 1501. Sanok proposes that we know little of the public staging of saints' lives because they challenged the powerful political and religious institutions. However, the lack of evidence from which Sanok is forced to draw conclusions emphasizes the inherently problematic nature of analyzing the public staging.

The afterword locates the book firmly in historiography and challenges the divide between medieval and early modern based on the latter sense of identity and historical consciousness. According to Sanok, since medieval exemplarity encouraged historical thinking, this divide is an invention of the Renaissance and should be ignored. Vernacular saints' lives offer more opportunities for modern scholarship than that scholarship allowed so far. Numerous textual examples, clear prose, and reiteration of points at the end of each section underline and elucidate her arguments throughout her monograph. Through her attention to historical context and evidence, she broadens her audience from strictly those engaged in literary scholarship to scholars interested in history, religion, and women's lives.

current

ing

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-women>

**Citation:** Alla Gaydukova. Review of Sanok, Catherine. *Her Life Historical*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. May, 2009.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=22950>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.