

Book Reviews

Susan Powell, *The Birgittines of Syon Abbey: Preaching and Print, Texts & Transitions* 11, Turnhout: Brepols, 2017, pp. xxii + 345, ISBN: 978-2-503-53235-6.

Susan Powell has been a leading scholar of late-medieval religious writing and book history over the past forty years. Her interest in the transition from manuscript to print has seen her co-author a volume of the Index of Middle English Prose,¹ and co-edit the recent *Companion to the Early Printed Book in Britain*.² Her extensive research in medieval English sermons has yielded significant editorial work including the monumental edition of Mirk's *Festial* for the Early English Text Society.³ And her more recent focus on Lady Margaret Beaufort will soon issue in a book based on Beaufort's household accounts for the British Academy's Records of Social and Economic History series. The node through which all these lines of enquiry pass is Syon Abbey, but Powell's work on Syon has not yet yielded a single summative volume.

The Birgittines of Syon Abbey: Preaching and Print both is, and is not exactly, such a volume. In many ways it is more interesting, in showing the ways in which Syon has been woven in with the various strands of Powell's research. At the book's heart are five chapters that reprint, or in some cases substantially rework, previously published studies. Chapters on 'Preaching at Syon Abbey' and 'A Rare survival of sermons preached at Syon Abbey' are updated versions of articles originally published in *Leeds Studies in English* and *Medieval Sermon Studies*, and 'Manuscript and print at Syon Abbey' first appeared in a volume of conference proceedings published in 2010. A chapter on 'Lady Margaret Beaufort: books, printers, and Syon Abbey' deftly merges Powell's landmark essay on Lady Margaret in *The Library* (1998) with a subsequent paper from the more niche journal *Birgittiana*, while 'Links to Syon Abbey in Caxton's editions of John Mirk's *Festial*' is assembled (a little less smoothly, I thought)

¹ O.S. Pickering and Susan Powell eds., *The Index of Middle English Prose Handlist VI: Manuscripts containing Middle English Prose in Yorkshire Libraries and Archives* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1989).

² Vincent Gillespie and Susan Powell eds., *Companion to the Early Printed Book in Britain, 1476-1558* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014).

³ *John Mirk's Festial: Edited from British Library MS Cotton Claudius A.II.*, ed. Susan Powell, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, 2009-11).

from material mostly taken from the introduction to Powell's 2007 edition of *Three Sermons for Nova Festa*.⁴

The previously-published material is book-ended by two substantial chapters. Chapter 1 introduces St Birgitta (Bridget) of Sweden, the order she established, and Syon Abbey, the Birgittine order's only English foundation. It also discusses in more depth the sisters and brothers, and the books produced by and for them, from the Abbey's foundation in 1415 through to the 1530s. There is important primary work here on Syon's relations with printed books (as readers, authors, and promoters), seen in the context of the order's mission of outreach. Chapter 7 also looks to Syon's relations with the outside world, though, since its central focus is on the 1530s, the emphasis is not so much on Syon looking outward, as the unwelcome attentions of the agents of the Crown looking in. The essentials of this story, especially as it relates to the brothers, have been told before, but it is given a new slant through Powell's focus on members of Margaret Beaufort's household, including Margaret Windsor and Margaret Pole. (Some of the material comes from another previous publication, Powell's 2005 essay on 'Margaret Pole and Syon Abbey'.) The chapter also continues past the Henrician suppression to include the brief restoration under Mary, presided over by Margaret Pole's son, Cardinal Reginald Pole. At the Abbey's second closure and exile to the continent, the community took books with them. But others were dispersed at various points in the sixteenth century and Powell concludes the chapter with a set of fascinating case studies, tracing the journey of eight extant printed books down to the present day. Two appendices present very useful lists of printed texts associated with Syon authors, and of the woodcuts of St Birgitta that often accompany these texts and others in print, as a marker of their Syon association.

So, a good proportion of the material that appears in this volume has been published before. But we are not talking about a simple *sammelband*. The acid test for collections such as this must be: is the whole book greater than the sum of its parts? The answer in this case is an emphatic yes. The framing chapters are substantial contributions, of course, but I particularly enjoyed the headwords and afterwords that are provided for each of the previously-published chapters. They have their immediate function of helping to give a context for the chapter, but they also provide a fascinating insight into the journey of an article from early conference paper, through revision, and on to publication, then reception, reflection, and revision. And cumulatively, like all the best retrospectives, they give a series of academic explorations a sense

⁴ *Three sermons for Nova Festa, together with the Hamus Caritatis*, ed. Susan Powell (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 2007).

of narrative. Would I have liked to see (do I still hope to see) all of the learning and expertise demonstrated in this volume brought to bear on Powell's definitive monograph on Syon? Yes, but *The Birgittines of Syon Abbey: Preaching and Print* is the next best thing.

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Barbara J. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women and the Fabric of Piety, 1450–1550*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018, pp. 266, €85.00, ISBN: 9789462985988

Barbara J. Harris's *English Aristocratic Women and the Fabric of Piety, 1450–1550*, makes an immensely useful contribution to the study of religious change across this period, as well as to our understanding of the role played by elite women in this arena. The book owes much to Harris's previous work on the political, social, and economic aspects of aristocratic women's lives across the same late medieval–early modern cusp, not least to the unmatched amount of archival sleuthing that she has undertaken over the course of her career. No other historian can have amassed such an enormous body of information about a group of pre-modern women in the way that Harris has done, and this has allowed her to move seamlessly into new, yet familiar, terrain. The book, in Harris' own words, is 'the first comprehensive study of Yorkist and early aristocratic women's role in the flowering of religious art—architecture, sculpture, stained glass, engraving, textiles, and plate ornaments—that transformed English churches in the century before the break with Rome' (p. 17). It argues not only that much of the fabric of religion was chosen and provided by women during this period, a fact that has gone largely unnoticed, but that it can be used as a lens through which to study the subjectivity of these women, defined here as 'women's outward expression of their identity and the actions they took as a consequence of it' (p. 19). As Harris explains, identity, for women, was complex; born into one family and often marrying multiple times, they accumulated families as they moved through life, retaining old ties while forming new ones. The choices facing them at the end of their lives, namely where and with whom to be buried, and precisely how they wished to be remembered and commemorated, were choices about perpetual identity and self-definition as much as they were about religion. The book therefore reinforces research arguing that religious and secular motivations were not mutually exclusive. It also taps into the existing debate concerning the state of the Catholic Church in England on the cusp of the Reformation, and Harris finds that the activities of these