

## Book Reviews

Eva von Contzen and Anke Bernau eds., *Sanctity as Literature in Late Medieval Britain*, Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2015, pp. x + 277, £70, ISBN: 978-0-7190-8970-1

*Sanctity and Literature in Late Medieval Britain* is the product of a 2010 conference on ‘Sanctity and Literature’ held at the Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany. The volume contains eleven essays as well as an Introduction by one of its editors, Eva von Contzen, and an afterword by Catherine Sanok. *Sanctity and Literature* will be of considerable interest to scholars working on Latin and vernacular hagiography.

It was a deliberate decision by the editors of the present volume to use the term ‘literature’ – rather than the more ubiquitous, and safer, term ‘texts’. For the editors and contributors, ‘literature’ signifies authorial self-awareness, textual playfulness, and a willingness to transcend genre. As Sanok describes in her concluding remarks, literature is ‘timeless, universal, non-instrumental’. The ‘literary’ takes many forms in the essays presented, but in each case it signifies a text, or element of a text, that has been disassociated from its cultural remains – that no longer simply bears witness to its historical, social and religious context, but which is recognised as the conscious product of authorial intent. It is, as Contzen notes in her introduction, a ‘purposeful employment of textual means, an employment that follows some kind of superordinate aim or plan’ (p. 11).

The central themes of the volume are clearly articulated in the conversation that emerges between Contzen’s essay, ‘Narrating vernacular sanctity: the *Scottish Legenday* as a challenge to the “literary turn” in fifteenth-century hagiography’, and Anke Bernau’s essay on ‘Lydgate’s saintly poetics’. Over the course of these two essays the editors articulate and refine a concept of ‘saintly poetics’. These saintly poetics are, in effect, the constituent parts of saints’ lives which may be consciously manipulated by the writers of hagiography, and adapted and transplanted into other genres. This is an approach that has been adopted by scholars of Anglo-Norman hagiography. Judith Weiss, for instance, has demonstrated how accounts of pilgrimage in saints’ lives were transformed into elements of romance by the author of the thirteenth-century *Gui de Warewic*. But here the concept is taken one step further: saintly poetics are not necessarily derived from hagiography, but from any writing that deals with concepts associated with sanctity.

In Jessica Barr's essay on the fashioning of first-person narration in the mystical writings of Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich and the *Book of Margery Kempe*, for instance, sanctity is a measure of bearing witness to the divine. The narrative strategies of the mystical writers examined is presented as a conscious textual choice that enhances the efficacy of meditative instruction in these works. In Helen Fulton's survey of Welsh and Irish dialogues between the body and the soul, sanctity is defined as suffering analogous to that experienced by the saints. Her authors' familiarity with tropes inherited from hagiography permits them to explore suffering as a means of commenting on, and even parodying, the pain of death that is a necessary part of the pursuit of salvation. Andrew Lynch's essay on 'Good Knights and Holy Men' explores the ways in which 'chivalric prestige' may be translated into the demands of a religious life. For Lynch there is a tension in the process of transferring elements of hagiography into other genres. This is manifest in textual anxiety about the dual obligations of military service and service of the lord.

By reducing sanctity to a collection of disparate literary devices, the scholars in this collection are able to challenge its accepted limits. However, by detaching sanctity from the cultural residue of sainthood – from salvation, prayer, pilgrimage and the cult of saints – these essays do not always engage with wider debates to which they might otherwise offer nuanced perspectives. By focusing on the literary there is a tacit assertion that saintly poetics are confined to the written word. Might there not be a saintly poetics of liturgy, sermon, pilgrimage, ritual, community?

Sarah James' essay demonstrates this tension. She offers a fascinating exploration of John Capgrave's *Life of St Katherine*, concluding that from the basis of textual evidence alone, one could argue Capgrave was familiar with Virgil, Ovid, Aristotle, Chaucer. But textual evidence alone cannot confirm this reading and James is forced, in a sense, to break the fourth wall and turn to documentary evidence to support her interpretation (in this case, the catalogues of the Franciscan libraries accessible to Capgrave). However, in the absence of sustained study beyond the confines of the written word, James' essay does not engage with recent scholarship on England's fifteenth-century monastic Renaissance. This is no criticism of James' scholarship. The lack of engagement beyond the text feels like the product of an editorial decision, and while it gives the essays in the volume a greater sense of cohesion, it may seem stifling to scholars working outside of the literary canon.

There is always a concern with a collection of essays produced by a conference that the contributions might be diffuse and might not engage in dialogue. It is a credit to the editors that they have ensured each contributor hold true to the brief. One gets the impression this volume was the product of heated and enthusiastic debate between

panels and papers which has, for the most part, made its way onto the page. *Sanctity as Literature* offers a welcome perspective on late medieval hagiography, and its focus on the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries illuminates a range of texts rarely studied. Its focus on disassociating sanctity from sainthood produces a range of interesting essays, but may make it more challenging for the essays within to engage in the current trends in the cultural history of the Middle Ages.

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Peter Marshall ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Reformation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. x + 303, £25.00, ISBN: 978-0-19-959548-8

As we approach the 500th anniversary of the nailing of Luther's theses to the door of Wittenberg cathedral in 1517, this collection presents a cohesive assessment of current understanding of this epochal event. Introduced by a brief but detailed foreword from the editor, the seven contributions move in a broadly chronological manner. - Bruce Gordon - examines late medieval Christianity on the eve of the Reformation, followed by a detailed analyses of the life and works of Martin Luther from Lyndal Roper - and from Carlos Eire - an exploration of, Calvinism and the reform of the Reformation. Three different perspectives on the Reformation follow: Brad Gregory on the 'Radical Reformation', Simon Ditchfield on Catholic Reformation and Renewal, and Peter Marshall on Britain's Reformations. Finally, Alexandra Walsham presents something of a conclusion, examining the legacy of the Reformation, and assessing its long term implications and ramifications.

Each chapter is beautifully illustrated. Although only 12 of the 123 illustrations are colour plates, the 111 black and white illustrations are well chosen for their respective chapters, each illuminating a relevant and important visual aspect of the topic at hand. Woodcuts, illustrated manuscripts, paintings, portraits, reliquaries, altar screens, and sculptures are all presented in stunning detail. The inclusion of such a rich variety of visual aids adds a vital and often overlooked element to the analysis, drawing attention to the importance of including visual and material culture in the broader discussion of early modern religion.

Gordon's vivid account of late medieval Christianity, "a world bewildering in diversity of belief and practice, complex in theology" (p. 1) sets the tone for the volume as a whole: there is no one single