

Partners in Spirit: Women, Men, and Religious Life in Germany, 1100–1500.

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The study of female religiosity in the German- and Dutch-speaking lands of the later Middle Ages has grown tremendously over the past thirty years, stimulated by the gradual recognition of the extraordinary plenitude in which the pertinent evidence survives. Much of this scholarship has been predicated on two central assumptions. The first is inherited from the seminal German scholar Herbert Grundmann: that the responsibility for the *cura monialium*, the pastoral care of nuns, was actively resisted by

the male religious orders from the thirteenth century onward; this resistance created a fundamental tension between burgeoning communities of religious women seeking incorporation into or other association with those orders, and the monks and friars who refused to shoulder the concomitant burden. The second is a product of the more recent interest in the lives, works, and letters of those women touched by the aura of sanctity: namely, that strict boundaries determined by gender demarcated the limits of female authority, and sharply restricted the extent to which women could establish the contours of their own religious life and experience. These twin assumptions are, of course, conditioned by the types of evidence that have hitherto been privileged: the former by normative texts and the records of the monastic hierarchies; the latter by hagiographical accounts and mystical literature. The essays collected in this volume turn away from these types of sources, and instead interrogate the archival record to illuminate the relationships between men and women in the religious life.

The results are striking. The first of these assumptions (resistance of monks and friars to the burden of the *cura monialium*) emerges as wholly untenable. Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane interrogates this assumption most intensively in a very fine essay on communities of female semireligious in Würzburg. It is not merely the case that no evidence is to be found to support it. There is even evidence that actively speaks against it, in the form of a long-standing rivalry between the Franciscans and Augustinians fought out in the years 1460–72 to secure the responsibility for the provision of pastoral care to a particular convent. The second assumption (female authority strictly delimited by gender) proves to be a more complicated case. This can be seen most readily in Eva Schlottheuber's contribution, which considers how nunneries were affected in terms of their autonomy by the monastic reform movement from the later eleventh century onward. In the Saxon lands the introduction of male provosts did indeed constrain the authority, standing in regional political life, and capacity for religious leadership of late Ottonian abbesses. Yet evidence from the mid-thirteenth-century register of Eudes Rigaud, the Franciscan archbishop of Rouen, shows that in his archdiocese such reforms had had no traction. Not only were the Benedictine and Cistercian nunneries subject to his inquiry run by their abbesses without male oversight, but they existed in a surprisingly unreformed state, from the education of children to the reception of child oblates, the freedom for nuns to leave the convent at will, and even the (not uncommon) pregnancy of nuns. Schlottheuber counters that the twelfth-century monastic reform was more contingent on region than hitherto acknowledged, only imposed rigorously where the Investiture Controversy bit hardest and reform was a political tool.

This collection as a whole is free from the rigid thinking that characterizes much (especially anglophone) scholarship on religious women. There is no room here for the unreflected imposition of the typical language of transgression, marginality, deviance, and so on. Quite the opposite, in fact: in their most useful introduction the editors state firmly, for example, that “collaboration between women and men did not necessarily represent a transgression of enclosure” (28). This is borne out in the practice; the detailed and thoughtful study by Shelley Amiste Wolbrink of the Premonstratensian abbeys of

Füssenich and Meer in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries works out from the evidence in an exemplary fashion to open a thoroughly refreshing perspective on gender relations in monastic communities. The integration of the rich German scholarship into this English collection is similarly exemplary, although it highlights some contradictions that might have been ironed out. Sigrid Hirbodian's account of what the observant reform actually meant brings together all of the most recent German-language studies into perhaps the most nuanced and helpful statement currently available (314–19), but stands quite at odds with the older position still taken by Sara S. Poor (341–42); Hirbodian, for her part, relies essentially on Grundmann's understanding of mendicant resistance to the *cura monialium* (305–06) in a manner that Deane's account implicitly rejects.

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