

and strategy is drawn upon (though Brian Stock is cited). The parallels with the *Quête du Graal* (and thus the post-1220 dating) are not quite so tight as claimed. The discussion of the magical sword that turns on its wielder would have profited from further reading—there are many magical swords in medieval literature (to cite just a few, a tale called *Le Chevalier à l'Épée* features a magical sword that leaps off the wall to wound Gauvain when he tries to approach a maiden, thereby saving Gauvain from a trap set by the girl's father; Heinrich von dem Türlin's *Diu Crône* likewise features a magical sword; and of course there's a magical sword-hilt in *Beowulf*). It is surprising to see such a confident assertion that no Hebrew text earlier than the twelfth century would employ direct discourse (38), given the prevalence of direct discourse in Hebrew scripture. A survey of the currencies cited in twelfth- or thirteenth-century romance would perhaps have been more enlightening than the extended reconsideration of actual practice (which, in any case, neglects the ample twelfth- and thirteenth-century documentary evidence for coinage use). The argument is not helped by the book's loose organization and considerable repetitions; the confusing writing, sometimes to the point of opacity; and the unnecessarily contentious tone. The book would have been stronger, more useful, and more persuasive had the author spent less time refuting every dissenting opinion ever articulated by other historians, and more time clearly presenting and analyzing the text and locating it in its social and cultural context.

In sum, *Levi's Vindication* offers an interesting new approach to a fascinating text. And although it does not fully realize the promise of that approach, it does suggest exciting new avenues for further research.

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Women, Art and Observant Franciscan Piety: Caterina Vigri and the Poor Clares in Early Modern Ferrara. Kathleen G. Arthur.

Visual and Material Culture, 1300–1700. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018. 244 pp. + 8 color pls. €95.

Influenced by the innovative methodologies of Jeffrey Hamburger and Vera Fortunati, scholars of the last two decades have reassessed and reinterpreted the artistic production of mystic saint, writer, and nun-artist Caterina Vigri (1413–63) within the context of the experience of the sacred in the female cloister. Kathleen G. Arthur's book aims to develop this mode of analysis by integrating Vigri's principal works, *Sette Armi Spirituali* and her *Breviary*, into the spiritual and visual culture of the Observant Franciscan Poor Clares' convent of Corpus Christi in Ferrara, where Vigri was spiritually formed and where she wrote and produced visual images. Arthur's volume expands beyond a consideration of Vigri's well-known works to engage in a broader contextual study that

examines the interrelation between spiritual women, visual culture, and Observant Franciscan piety at Corpus Christi and traces the evolution of the convent's character from its beginnings in the early fifteenth century to the early sixteenth century.

Chapter 1 discusses the origins of Corpus Christi as an Augustinian-inspired house of semireligious women (*pinzochere*), which Caterina Vigri entered in 1426 after serving as a lady-in-waiting in the d'Este court in Ferrara. Based on a 1426 inventory, Arthur reconstructs the material culture of the *pinzochere* house and relates its devotional objects and art to the women's spiritual engagement. Examining the roles of women in Corpus Christi's foundation and transformation into a cloistered convent of Poor Clares, she elucidates new connections to networks of Observant Franciscans and female patrons of Observant reform.

The following chapter considers the creation of a public imagery of piety at Corpus Christi. Discussing the physical structure of its concurrently built convent and church, Arthur notes how architecture, along with the nuns' reputation for strict observance, projected an image of Franciscan piety to the city. Analyzing Franciscan and Eucharistic themes in altarpieces of the *Entombment* (ca. 1450–60) from the public church and the *Adoration of the Host* (ca. 1450–70, now lost) in the nuns' choir, she demonstrates that the presence of Franciscan saints among the holy persons in the *Entombment* strongly relates the altarpiece to Clarissan spirituality. Although one might question Arthur's claim that the central figures of Saints Clare, Mary Cleofa, and Salome all wear Franciscan habits, given that the garb of the latter two women differs from Clare's "short black veil and the Franciscan grey-brown habit" (60), she rightly observes that the centrality and veristic faces of these three women enabled them to represent the nuns within the community.

Focusing on Vigri's *Sette Armi Spirituali*, written as a manual to guide novices to spiritual perfection, chapter 3 examines this work within the context of its convent audience. Demonstrating one of the strengths of her book, Arthur defines this context by examining the demographics of the convent community, the state of women's education and literacy in northeast Italy, and the access to books within the convent. She contends that Vigri drew inspiration from both written religious texts and from "contemporary visual experience and devotional culture" (76), using techniques of "visual imagery, anecdotal narratives and personal disclosure to guide the novices" (85). However, her claim of Vigri's use of visual imagery rests more on similarities between saints or themes in the text and those represented in visual culture that she speculates nuns might have known, than on specific, descriptive visual references.

Arthur analyzes Vigri's *Breviary* in chapter 4 as an "integrated creative work" that unites holy scriptures, Vigri's prayerful rubrics, and her miniatures of Christ and Franciscan and penitential saints to probe "close relationships between visual form and the written word" (89). She cites sources in Franciscan literature, transalpine devotional woodcuts, and convent needlework designs, asserting that Vigri invented an *arte povera* style expressive of Clarissan dedication to poverty. The final chapter considers

Corpus Christi's religious and civic identity after Vigri's departure in 1456. Arthur assesses the diffusion and legacy of the *Sette Armi Spirituali* and examines transformations to the convent's character in the late fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries under the patronage of d'Este noblewomen—Eleonora of Aragona, Bianca Maria d'Este, Lucrezia Borgia, and Isabella d'Este.

Arthur's book makes an important contribution to our understanding of female convents, Observant Franciscan piety, and religious women's engagement with visual culture. By integrating Caterina Vigri's written and artistic production into the social, spiritual, and visual context of the Ferrarese convent of Corpus Christi, Arthur enriches our perceptions of both Vigri's devotional works and female piety.

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Il carisma della magnificenza: L'abate vallombrosano Biagio Milanese e la tradizione benedettina nell'Italia del Rinascimento. Francesco Salvestrini.

I libri di Viella 265. Rome: Viella, 2017. 762 pp. + 32 color pls. €70

This is a monumental study of Abbot Biagio Milanese of Vallombrosa (1445–1523), with a first edition of Milanese's *Memoriale*. Part 1 has fourteen chapters on the life and work of Milanese in the context of Florentine and Renaissance church history; part 2 offers an edition of the *Memoriale*; and part 3 provides eleven documentary appendixes. A bibliography and indexes of persons and places complete the volume. Salvestrini's thesis is that a study of Milanese can cut through, or open up in new ways, the commonly held belief that a conservative Benedictine culture was left behind by secular humanism and challenged by new centers of monastic reform. His book does that and more.

The author does a masterful job of interpreting Milanese through a thorough familiarity and careful reading of all available documents. His notes are exhaustive. He demonstrates that "a representative [Milanese] of contemplative religion vested with high dignity of government can figure among the great men of the period" (359). His abbot is a conservative Benedictine doing all that he could to preserve both the independence and the holdings of Vallombrosa and the unity (*vinculum caritatis*) of its widespread congregation. With respect to humanist studies, Milanese strove to provide an education that would enable his coreligionists to hold their own before secular powers. The abbot himself emerges as a capable leader of a community that was a protagonist in Florentine history. Part of Milanese's vision of leadership was the practice of the Aristotelian virtue of magnificence ("the magnificent man is like an artist; for he can see what is fitting and spend large sums tastefully" [*Nicomachean Ethics* 4.2, trans. Ross (1984), 86]). The pathways of these expenditures were in the commissioning of