

Wybren Scheepsma.
*Medieval Religious Women
in the Low Countries: The
Modern Devotion, the
Canonesses of Windesheim,
and their Writings.* Trans.
David Johnson. Boydell,
2004. pp. 280.

It is wonderful news that Wybren Scheepsma's 1997 study is now available in English. Students of medieval women's history and the development of religious movements in northern Europe in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries need to understand the trajectory of religious devotion after that period. Scheepsma's study is clear, accessible to non-specialists, and a treasure trove of information about the diversity of reading and writing practices of women associated with the religious movement known as the Modern Devotion [*devotio moderna*]. Considerable attention has been paid to the men who originated and participated in the Modern Devotion, but little work has been done heretofore on the women. This is puzzling given the extensive scholarship on women of the previous period, such as Hadewijch of Antwerp, Mechtild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete. According to Scheepsma, the movement itself tended to eschew mystical expression and regarded women's works as receptive and individual rather than preaching or pastoral. Further, modern scholars, especially those who wrote the histories of Dutch

literature, have tended to ignore women's religious prose texts, judging them inferior to other genres of writing. Yet, as full participants in the Modern Devotional movement, it is important to examine more carefully the women's written contributions to religious life.

Scheepsma focuses on the best-known Modern Devotional institution: the monastery of Windesheim, founded in 1387, with a Chapter General (established in 1395) that included monasteries and convents of both canons and canonesses regular. The Chapter of Windesheim admitted thirteen convents to its union (by comparison, by the end of the fifteenth century, there were nearly a hundred affiliated monasteries). The book's first chapter explains three critical facts about the Modern Devotional movement that are pertinent to the study of women within it: its distrust of the institutional church, its skepticism about mysticism, and convents' lack of access to female writing from the earlier period. The belief that the church was deeply tainted explains the movement's preference for a semi-religious lifestyle, similar to the earlier beguine movement. Fear of heresy caused mystical expression to be "banished to the margins" (23). Yet the Modern Devotion retained an emphasis on monastic methods for the development of the religious individual. As such, books and writing were a key element of that life. Yet which books? Scheepsma notes, "most striking in their absence from the literature available

to the canonesses of Windesheim are the mystics of the first religious women's movement" (89). This lack of continuity in religious women's lives is a striking testament to what Walter Simons has termed the lack of "institutional memory" that was typical of the beguine movement in this area.

Chapters 2 and 3 detail aspects of convent life and forms of communal expression. Scheepsma explains how the movement's high regard for monasticism affected their approach to communal devotion. Although semi-religious in nature, canonesses participated fully in a monastic lifestyle of prayer, liturgy, and meditation. Of particular interest are the levels of learning attained by the young girls who joined. Statutes stipulated that, in order to join the group, postulants must be able to sing well, assuming that women would know how to read not only vernacular, but also enough Latin to understand the liturgy. Basic literacy in Latin was available to most girls in Dutch and Belgian cities, but it often stopped at the *Donaet* (Donatus). Convents themselves thus provided further Latin instruction. Scheepsma notes, "reading Middle Dutch or Middle Low German would have posed no great obstacle for the canonesses regular of Windesheim." This fact explains the importance of the vernacular in women's houses. Communal reading, including translation of popular religious works from Latin to Dutch, was often conducted in the vernacular. Chapter 4, "Living with Texts,"

considers the monastic influence of *lectio*, *meditatio*, and *oratio* upon the canonesses. Scheepsma examines when and what sisters at the Windesheim convents read as well as the role of reading in intensifying individual meditation. A few catalogues of convent library books have survived, but most of the manuscripts have been lost. Canonesses also practiced the art of "reading with the pen," that is, copying, memorizing, and reflecting upon excerpts of works that had spiritual importance of them. Enough of these collections, known as *rapiaria*, have survived for Scheepsma to distinguish different types. Such collections individualized communal devotion by selecting and grouping particular excerpts to help create one's own inner life.

Chapter 5, "Written Instructions," explains "for the Windesheimers, books and writing constituted exceptional and effective instruments of reform" (111). Like religious *Rules*, "instructions for living" [*vivendi formulae*] shaped religious life. However, these instructions were written by women for other women. Sometimes sisters created and collated such instructions in honor of an important founder such as Johannes Brinckerinck. Chapter 6, "Devout Biography and Historiography," describes the particular type of *vitae* generated within the movement. Sisters at these convents were not regarded as saints, so there was much less emphasis on the pre and post mortem miracles typical of hagiographies. Instead, Devotional

vitae tended to emphasize “living in the world,” especially contributions to communal life. Histories of each convent displayed the self-awareness of each community and the desire to record its accomplishments, thus providing the “institutional memory” so lacking in the beguine movement of the earlier period.

Chapter 7, “Two Spiritual Friends from Facons,” analyzes writings that, unlike those above, resemble the spiritual outpourings of the earlier period: an account of a journey through hell and a recounting of conversations with Christ. Scheepsma devotes Chapter 8 to Alijt Bake (d. 1455), one of the women in the movement who most resembles those earlier beguines. In pursuit of the mystic life Bake entered the convent of Gallilea in Ghent. Reading, writing, reflecting, and eventually writing for others were important steps on her spiritual path. However, she was eventually deposed as prioress and banished from the convent, and after she died the Chapter at Windesheim issued a prohibition that forbade nuns to write down visions or other mystical phenomena. Bake clearly regarded her writing as part of a reform movement to inspire others, and although she was banished, her works continued to circulate. Five manuscripts of her treatise on the Passion have survived from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, attesting to her widespread influence in the region.

The final chapter, “Literature and the Choir Nuns of Windesheim,”

examines the role of books, reading, and writing in the lives of the convents’ most educated members, the choir nuns. For these nuns, spiritual literature played a key role in the process of interior transformation. Scheepsma’s study demonstrates that by the fifteenth century, religious women in Northern Europe carefully negotiated the line between the flamboyant individualism of their predecessors (and may have had, indeed, little knowledge about them), and the creation of a deeply personal spiritual life that depended upon reading, writing, and reflecting. Their achievements, the types of writings they produced, and the institutional memories they created came with the cost of limits on individual expression and authority.

Mary Suydam
Kenyon College



Anne Bagnall Yardley.
Performing Piety: Musical Culture in Medieval English Nunneries. (The New Middle Ages.) Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. pp. xvii + 326.

Anne Yardley addresses the place of music and liturgy in the lives of English medieval nuns, covering the broad chronological span of tenth through the early sixteenth century and adopting a perspective that (helpfully) cuts across