

Virginia Nixon. *Mary's Mother: Saint Anne in Late Medieval Europe*. Penn State Press, 2004.  
pp. 216 + illustrations.

This book traces the popularity of the cult of Saint Anne, which peaked between 1470 and 1530 in northern Europe. The author explores the status of the saint across a spectrum of social classes, analyzing the iconography and symbolism most often seen in *Anna Selbdritts* (depictions of Anne, Mary, and Jesus) and Holy Kinships (the extended maternal family). At the apogee of her cult, Anne occupied a central position in these artworks, which range from paintings and sculpures to reliquaries and household furnishings. This saint, although known in Poland, Bohemia, Scandinavia, France, Italy, and Spain, was most venerated in Germany, Switzerland, Flanders, and Holland. Her following appears strongest of all in Germany, which Nixon chooses as her focus.

Chapter One introduces Saint Anne as the apocryphal figure first mentioned in the second-

century *Protevangelium of James*, with a story loosely modelled after that of Hannah. There are two polemics associated with this cult figurehead: since Anne was not free of Original Sin, how did one counter the Augustinian contention that this blemish was passed on to her offspring? Furthermore, Anne was thrice-married (the *Trinubium*); how were these marriages legitimized in accordance with the model of a chaste holy matriarch? Nixon presents several medieval views on these issues, explaining how neither Original Sin nor the *Trinubium* prevented Anne's cult from becoming widespread. This is further discussed in Chapter Two, which explains how by the end of the 1400s Anne had become associated with the primary preoccupations of German bourgeois life: money, social status, and salvation anxiety. Nixon points to the activities and writings of some of Saint Anne's promoters—including a young Martin Luther—as

evidence of the cult's expansion. This sets the scene for Chapter Three, which builds on research showing that Anne's cult flourished as a result of fervent promotion, going beyond this to claim that its success was based on the medieval German's acute salvation anxiety, an "intense concern with personal salvation that characterized late medieval religion in Germany" (42). This anxiety found some relief in the idea of Anne's salvific power, a concept that began to appear in late fifteenth-century German texts.

In Chapter Four, Nixon explores the images associated with Anne's new role as an agent of salvation whose status approaches that of Mary's. She also clarifies that the Saint Anne of artworks is a separate Anne from that of textual tradition: "What is of interest to the artists is Anne herself and her family, whether Jesus and Mary, or the extended family of husbands, daughters, sons-in-law, and infant grandsons" (55). Thus, the artworks rarely represent scenes from Anne narratives, but instead create their own array of compositional structures that are repeated

through various media, as the *Anna Selbdritt* (translated as "Anne with two others" or "Anne herself the third") becomes a trope in and of itself. The compositions show the miniaturization of Mary and the Christchild; Anne as the most imposing figure of the three; Mary and Anne sharing physical proximity to Christ; and expressions on Anne's face—her eyes may not meet Christ's, or she may gaze at abstract space—that echo Marian images. This last feature, the author hypothesizes, implicate the saint in the economy of salvation, as "[b]oth Mary and Anne share in the salvational process, not only by producing the Redeemer but also by sharing in the foreknowledge and pain of his crucifixion" (58).

Chapter Five explores the reasons why Anne's devotees were so eager to support her, showing that Anne was described in texts such as Trithemius's *De laudibus* as a model for virtuous behaviour, particularly for middle class women. It was reasoned that although she had married several times, she had done so only to increase the Holy

Kinship, and that none of her sexual acts had involved “fleshly lust.” In this chapter, Nixon also explores favorable maculatist and immaculatist opinions about Anne, as well as the idea that she was not particularly a patron of women in Germany, since “numerically speaking women’s concerns are relatively minor in comparison with Anne’s other late medieval patronages” (77). Instead, Anne appears to have been a patron of wealth, and it is in light of this that her connection with the bourgeois is best understood.

In Chapter Six, the author’s focus is on two medieval German towns, Augsburg and Annaberg, and the measures that their churches took to promote the cult for their economic survival and prosperity, attracting churchgoers with beautiful artworks of the *Anna Selbdritt* and soul-saving membership in Saint Anne confraternities. This chapter supports one of Nixon’s most interesting arguments: that devotion to Saint Anne was not born of popular enthusiasm, but rather was a strategically produced phenomena led by the Church. Artworks, relics,

confraternities, and the like had a financial return dependent on the successful promotion of sanctity in the form of the holy grandmother.

Chapter Seven, the most valuable in terms of what it reveals about medieval devotional practices, examines how medieval Germans prayed and their interaction with images as they did so. Nixon posits that prayer involved a conflation of image and referent as medieval Germans anthropomorphized the works of art they beheld—for example, by removing their hats in front of them, kissing them, and kneeling before them.

The penultimate chapter of the book methodically attributes Anne’s fifteenth-century decline to three factors: the dissolution of the *Trinubium*, Anne’s loss of her position as the central figure in the Holy Kinship, and her loss of salvific power. These changes are attributed to humanists’ questioning Anne’s multiple marriages, changing ideas about family structure, and new compositional artforms in which Anne receives salvation instead of being an instrument

of it. The final chapter concerns a variety of mostly German artworks produced during the flourishing of the cult, and Nixon delves once more into iconography, trends in composition, and regional variations among the works. In her epilogue, the author calls for further research on the *Anna Selbdritt*, which she says has been paid scant attention in England and Italy and remains unexamined in Spanish, Eastern European, Scandinavian, and French contexts.

*Mary's Mother: Saint Anne in Late Medieval Europe* provides a wealth of material for the study of artworks depicting Saint Anne, but its obvious limitation is that apart from its initial chapter, it is confined to one geographic area—a drawback that is not conveyed by its title. This book is of value primarily to scholars of art history and religious iconography concerning females (though unfortunately, not all of the works the author analyses are included). Those researching holy mothers and the place of saints and relics within medieval German society will also find something. Although women

and their relationship to Saint Anne are addressed, as is the importance of Saint Anne as a powerful female presence within the holy family, an in-depth feminist analysis of the narratives and lives of Saint Anne seems lacking, and would have greatly complemented the discourse on the *Anna Selbdritt*, helping to illustrate how the trope took on a visual life of its own.

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