

V.C. Raguin and S. Stanbury, eds. *Women's Space: Patronage, Place and Gender in the Medieval Church*. State University of New York, 2005. pp. x + 261.

Critical analysis of space and gender in medieval studies is an important and developing field attracting scholars from a variety of backgrounds. The editors of this collection of essays are to be commended for assembling an exciting group of contributors to address the topic. By analyzing the spatiality of gendered religious experiences, the essays in this collection open up avenues for deeper understanding of laywomen and the church in medieval Europe.

The introduction to the volume sets out the intellectual underpinnings of the collection, starting with analysis of the central importance of the spaces of the parish church to women's religiosity in medieval Europe. Gendered spaces were invested with meaning by not only the material artefacts used to define them, such as chapels and windows, but also through the spatial practice of communal worship. As the editors point out in their introduction, the

essays in *Women's Space*, set out to engage with debates over the use and meaning of buildings and places in community life—investigating the spatial practices inherent within women's experiences of their particular parish or monastic church. Stanbury and Raguin articulate the background to their collection through a review of the theoretical works of Pierre Bourdieu and cultural geographer Doreen Massey. The pioneering and widely influential work of archaeologist Roberta Gilchrist also sits in the background of several of the essays on the uses of gendered ecclesiastical spaces.

Stanbury and Raguin's own work centers on the spatial interpretation of the work and life of Margery Kempe, and they each contribute an essay on Margery in this volume. Stanbury's article, "Margery Kempe and the Arts of Self-Patronage," analyzes the descriptions of locations and devotional images in *The*

Book of Margery Kempe. She argues that Margery's use of descriptions of devotional space and her own locality within it was akin to the imagery of patronage that was evolving in fifteenth-century English parish life. This is an acutely argued article using both visual and literary materials. Raguin's article also analyzes the use of spatialized imagery in *The Book of Margery Kempe* by examining how Margery locates herself within descriptions of devotional places, primarily churches. She analyzes Margery's narration of her own religious performance within privileged liturgical and devotional locations. This is an interesting and highly nuanced article, which finds fresh aspects of the well-known story of Margery Kempe.

Ruth Evans takes the York cycle as the focus for her article on the spatialization of gendered performances. Her analysis focuses on both the locale of the performances—the city of York—and the effect of the control by certain groups of generally male civic leaders of these spaces. She then

links this with performances of the plays themselves allowing for an analysis of the gendered nature of the acting and the audience. Using the theoretical underpinning of Judith Butler's analysis of gender and performance, she analyzes the women's roles in the York plays as they were performed by male actors. She explores the implications of this transvestitism for the reading of the plays by the audience.

The second essay in the collection analyzes another popular form of devotional literature—hagiography. Virginia Blanton analyzes the *vitae* of St Æthelthryth through the needs of the community of monks who were negotiating the important political shift from Anglo-Saxon to Norman patronage. She argues that the twelfth-century hagiography locates St Æthelthryth, and therefore her community at Ely, as uncorrupted and inviolate in order to gain protection, both moral and political, from the encroachments of new Anglo-Norman ecclesiastical organization. While political uses of hagiography are well attested in many different

contexts, this is a finely attuned analysis that is all the more interesting because the saint is female and her community male. This means that there is more than the usual amount of gender slippage recorded in her *vitae*.

While analysis of literary texts for their spatialized performative information is interesting, analysis of documents of practice also reveal much about the use and meaning of gendered space in medieval churches. Katherine French's article using the churchwardens' accounts of two fifteenth-century English parish churches demonstrates the strikingly localized meaning of gendered devotional contexts. She finds two quite different methods of both allocating church seating and the associated gendered social and devotional uses of the church spaces.

There are two articles in the collection analyzing art and architectural sources to uncover women's location in later medieval church practice. The article by Ena Giurescu Heller analyzes the construction and patronage of the fourteenth-

century Florentine chapel Santa Maria Novella. She examines the complex relationship between the actual role of the widow of the commissioner of the chapel and the public and historical assessment of her patronage. She argues that women like Monna Andrea "assumed a subordinate position even when actively involved in an act of patronage" (167). Heller uses her case study to further examine the legal and economic ability of Florentine women to patronize religious art and the ambiguity of the historical record of their patronage.

Corine Schleif uses a wonderfully broad group of sources to analyze the genesis and historical development of the positioning of women to the left in churches and men on the right. She finds the association to have considerable antiquity and traces it through both literary and particularly religious art. While the association remains remarkably stable, she does analyze some ambiguities and alternative representations in her discussion.

In a wide ranging article reprinted from a 1998 collection of essays, Jane Tibbets Schulenburg analyzes the gendered prohibitions to access to early medieval sacred space particularly to saints' relics housed within male monastic houses. She details the large number of these restricted sites attested most frequently in hagiographic texts and some of the strategies that women used to counteract these prohibitions.

Though the essays of Heller, Schleif, and Schulenburg use continental European sources, the geographical focus of the collection remains English. While there is no doubt much that can and should be said about gendered devotional practice in England, a wider geographical focus would have been particularly interesting. Each of these essays provides a nuanced reading of space within women's devotional practices, while connections between them illuminate laywomen's access to and participation in devotional practice and ecclesiastical power. This provides a good counterbalance to the recent

studies of women's monasticism that have incorporated analysis of space. Innovative use of sources and new interrogation of well-known texts will provide new readings of laywomen's devotional culture and deepen our knowledge of women's social and devotional interests in medieval Europe.

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