

Maud Burnett McNerney. *Eloquent Virgins: From Thecla to Joan of Arc*. (New Middle Ages Series.) Palgrave MacMillan, 2003. pp. 250 + illustrations.

This book is concerned with what virginity means not just for women of the Middle Ages but also to them. Examining misogynist writings on virginity alongside hagiographical accounts of virgin martyrs, both male- and female-authored, the author seeks to uncover the “evolution of the virgin martyr as icon in a specific historical context,” and thereby “to recover a vision of virginity not as an always empty negative, but as a real livable choice, which shaped the experience of women as material historical subjects over a very long time – for good and for ill” (7). With good reason the SFMS First Book Prize Committee gave this informative and sophisticated study an honorable mention.

Chapter One juxtaposes the anti-feminist writings of Tertullian with accounts of two holy women: Perpetua, who was not a virgin but was martyred in 203 and Thecla, companion to Paul, who was a virgin, but survived her martyrdom. Interweaving these texts, McNerney illustrates that control over the telling of women’s stories and the dispositions of their bodies was foundational for the Early Church. This chapter illuminates the complex relationship between virginity as a bodily and mental state on the one hand and women’s authority on the other. Perpetua defies imperial authority and

dreams of becoming a man in the arena when faced with the lions; Thecla meekly follows Paul, but then so embraces his message that she, too, goes out into the world to preach it. Perpetua presages the later virgin martyr narrative in that her ultimate religious act is to die for her faith. Thecla presages the inherent danger of the virgin, martyred or otherwise: for she lays claim to male authority and the right to preach.

Chapter Two charts more paradoxical relationships. Once Christianity was established in Rome, asceticism (self-inflicted torture?) replaced martyrdom (torture and execution by a pagan emperor) as the litmus test for “true” Christians. Christian writers thus considered how to make virginity a state that could characterize both men and women, but they also fetishized the absolute quality of female virginity. Analyzing the works of such authors as Methodius, John Cassian, Jerome, Ambrose, Prudentius, and Augustine, McNerney traces how the legend of the virgin martyr becomes “rewritten from one that promised freedom from male domination to one that inculcated female submission to male authority and especially female silence” (50). This change corresponds to the transition from texts describing the “experience” of martyrdom to tales of sainthood

(hagiography). "The reduction of the virgin martyr narrative to such a restrictive paradigm," argues McNerney, "was required precisely because the ideal of virginity seemed capable of becoming the ground either of an exclusively feminine access to sanctity or a radical equality between the sexes" (82).

The restrictiveness of the virgin martyr narrative does not change until Hrotsvitha (tenth century) and Hildegard of Bingen (twelfth century) rewrite the martyrologies in their own words. This change is the subject of Chapters Three, Four, and Five, which offer wonderfully rich and nuanced textual analyses. Chapter Three focuses on how Hrotsvitha takes fourth-century, traditionally misogynistic sources and recasts them in order to present the virgin as a medium for creating authority rather than a model of silent passivity. Chapter Four provides a captivating reading of Hildegard's musical text, the *Symphonia*, in which virginity, equated with the prelapsarian state, is the exclusive domain of the female. Focusing on the figures of Mary, Ursula and the ten thousand virgins, and Sophia, Hildegard imagines a female subject rooted in the female body and yet separate from the theological tradition about that body, eroticized and yet freed from genital sex. The female (virgin) body thus becomes "normative and authoritative rather than other and lacking in authority" (141). Chapter Five examines Hrotsvitha's and Hildegard's

writings on male virginity. Hrotsvitha's *Life of Pelagius* and Hildegard's *Life of St. Rupert* represent male virginity as like female virginity in certain ways but not the same. The articulation of these differences contributes to both authors' attempts to re-imagine female virginity as something inspirational for women.

The book concludes with a chapter on vernacular saints' lives from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries followed by an epilogue on Joan of Arc. The vernacular legends show that the split noted between the early writers on virginity (sanctity lies in physical virginity submitted to torture and death) and Hrotsvitha and Hildegard (holy virginity is a means to authority) persists. Wace's legend of Margaret portrays a passive martyr without a voice whose body is the sole means to her sanctity, while Clemence of Barking's legend of Catherine shows her actively pursuing martyrdom and becoming a figure of intellectual authority. Perhaps in response to legends like the latter, Jacobus de Voragine re-inscribes the restricted notion of virgin sanctity in his *Golden Legend*. Nevertheless, the vernacular legends continued to inspire women as the case of Joan of Arc illustrates. As McNerney argues, "Joan's life suggests the power for self-determination that remained immanent in the icon of the virgin martyr for women, in spite of all the efforts of patristic writers [...] to convert a symbol for active and subjective

speech into one for passive and objectified silence" (211).

Although this book clearly deserves high praise, it is worth mentioning a few minor flaws, two of which are editorial, the third more substantive. First, some confusion arose when Prudentius's poems were said to have been composed around 420CE (73), while both he and Ambrose are said to have been dead by 410CE (78). Second, the book provides an index, but, unfortunately, no bibliography. Third, the usage of the terms of feminist analysis ("feminine" and "female," "masculine" and "male") was sometimes imprecise. This last quibble requires further explanation. The distinction between these terms is rooted in feminists' efforts to reject biological determinism, that is, to elucidate the independence of gendered behavior from sexed human beings. This study clearly contributes to these efforts by analyzing the relationship between virginity (or its lack) and ideas about what it meant to be a (holy) man or woman in a wide range of medieval texts and contexts. Yet the distinction occasionally collapses, which is potentially confusing as well as distracting. For example, the introduction discusses the apprehension with which patristic writers approached "feminine speech" (17 and 18). If the speech is "feminine," then presumably either men or women could be producing it (there is no description of just what is "feminine" about it), but the author is clearly

talking about the anxieties produced by the prospect of women speaking publicly, as stated explicitly on the following page as "the danger of female preaching" (19). Similarly, in sequential references about a theory that the *Acts of Thecla* might have been written by a woman, McNerney refers to "the thesis of feminine authorship" as well as the "imagined female author," (220, n. 50 and 51). This same problem arises with "masculine" and "male," which are used synonymously (modifying two appearances of the word "maturity") in the same paragraph (158). This slippage is unfortunately symptomatic of a problem with the terminology itself.¹ But in the end, I found this and the other flaws easy to overlook in light of the fine literary analysis, the subtlety of the overall argument, and the scope of this ambitious study.

Sara S. Poor
Princeton University

¹For a compelling discussion of this problem, see Toril Moi, *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), especially pp. 99-112.

Editor's Note: This book was a runner up for the 2004 SMFS Prize for "Best First Feminist-Medievalist Book."



Maiden, Mother, Crone by Alison Lyne Davis
(Reproduction)

Original: NFS- Acrylic paint & dutch leaf on gessoed board: measures 8 x 11 inches.