

in separate houses, but in close conjunction with male monasteries. Reformers at Hirsau and elsewhere throughout Germany believed that the apostolic life required men and women to live in common. Thus for houses reformed under the leadership of Hirsau, “the women’s community either formed part of a double monastery with the monks or was established as a dependent priory under the direction, legal and spiritual, of the abbot. Independent houses for women, observing the Benedictine Rule and subject to the authority of a bishop instead of an abbot, had no place within this monastic revival” (65). As Hotchin goes on to show, these particular features of the Hirsau reform account for the *Speculum*’s emphasis on the need to protect against unseemly relations between religious men and women through proper behavior and the structuring of space and on the character of the men engaged in the *cura monialium*. At least in its first instantiation, then, the *Speculum virginum* dealt with male religious leadership of women as much as with women’s religious life. For the Hirsau reformers, Hotchin shows, the two issues were indeed inseparable.

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<sup>1</sup> For this exchange and the citation from Heloise’s letter, see Barbara Newman, “Flaws in the Golden Bowl: Gender and Spiritual Formation in the Twelfth Century,” in *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1995), p. 19.

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**Salih, Sarah. *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*. Cambridge, U.K.: D. S. Brewer, 2001. Pp. ix + 278.**

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This book, the latest entry in a sudden boom in studies of subjectivity and virginity, raises valuable questions and provides some valuable answers. The question at the heart of the work is this: Is virginity a “natural” or “constructed” quality? In discussing virginity as a potential category of gender instead of a subcategory of woman, as a performance rather than a physical attribute, Salih makes an important contribution to clarifying the intricacies of religious devotion and its reverberations throughout the rest of medieval society. And in acknowledging that perhaps categorizing virginity as a gender may be too overarching, she illustrates the reason for undertaking such scholarship—that is, to encourage open, informed discussion.

The body of the text is divided into three main sections or “portraits”: the Katherine Group, monastic communities, and Margery Kempe. Salih describes this progression as moving from a more “perfect” virginity to a more “compromised” one. I find that distinction quite revealing, particularly since the discussion begins with openly acknowledged physical virgins (the martyrs) moving into the realm of “should-be” physical virgins (nuns) to a “reconstructed” virgin (Kempe). Does this mean, then, that earlier virginity was “better”? Salih obliquely addresses hierarchical issues, mostly in terms of societal perceptions. For instance, she devotes quite a large number of pages to discussing Kempe’s difficulties with slander and reputation, whereas these areas are not as fully discussed in the other two sections. Nevertheless, it is thought provoking to examine the evolving idea of constructed virginity and to see a progression beyond the need for physical intactness. The topos of the virgin martyr hagiography is a thread that runs throughout the book.

In the Katherine Group discussion, Salih concentrates mostly on the idea of “who defines the virgin?” Some answers, at least, lie in the relationship of virgins and romances. Many scholars have noted hagiographers’ cooptation of romance language, and discussions thereof have taken just as many paths. Salih pursues the idea of subjectivity and language—if selfhood is understood only as social positioning, what does it mean that committed virgins are being described in the language of romance? Ultimately she concludes that the “pressure of romantic elements in the legends foregrounds the importance of reading” (64). Romance discourse is aligned with the pagan, forcing the reader into an awkward position. This leads naturally to a discussion of the potentially pornographic elements of virgin martyr hagiographies, the conclusion of which suggests that nakedness is central to creating and maintaining virginity.

The second portrait, that of the traditional nun, begins rather aseptically with an analysis of enforced virginity through enclosure. The latter half of this section, however, is fascinating. Salih readily makes apparent the complexities of virginity and enclosure in her discussion of the case of the Nun of Watton. This case is both graphic and revealing and is an ideal illustration of the historical turning point in the trajectory of virginity—no longer was it lost forever once gone. The Nun of Watton, who not only had sexual relations, but also gave birth, was miraculously physically restored after her co-offender was physically punished. Though her fellow nuns are then aligned with the pagan torturers of the hagiographies, Aelred uses this example to solidify his lesson about the dangers of the outside world and about the possibilities that exist in God.

The final portrait tackles the ubiquitous Margery Kempe, an intriguing choice of virgin. However, Salih does an admirable job of discussing Margery as a reclaimed virgin, concentrating on the idea that the reclamation process necessarily includes a public display. Thus, not only is the *Book of Margery Kempe* a “record” of a remade virgin, but it is also a “technique” used for reclamation. In order to reclaim her virginal state, Margery borrows from many devotional traditions. Just as she combines and redefines those paradigms, she does the same to herself. Salih’s most significant contribution to this discussion is an extended examination of Kempe’s use of the virgin martyr hagiographies to recreate her own virginity. In doing so, she connects Kempe’s lack of penitence with virginity and addresses an often less-investigated aspect of the *Book*, its lack of closure.

Salih’s book certainly adds to feminist studies in that it makes an important contribution to the academic conversation about the construction of self and gender—both individual and communal, and formed and performed. For instance, outside trappings, like veils, rings, and clothes, are used to construct—publicly, socially—self and gender. Similarly, words, spoken and written, and routines are tools of construction and perception. In fact, Salih’s claim that routines can be equated with [virginal] bodies is a significant statement, and I also particularly appreciated the phrase “willed virginity” as descriptive of virgins in spirit as it lends a stronger sense of personal choice and self-definition.

On this final note, I turn to concerns about the language used in this work. The text is littered with clichés and colloquial language (for example, “they [nuns] punch above their numeric weight [...]” (107)) which is quite distracting in an academic text. Secondly, it reads much like a traditional dissertation. It opens with a review of literature (rather easily dismissing other studies as limiting), then examines the main theoretical perspectives, and from there moves on to individual chapters. Though this does not lessen the usefulness of the volume, again it is somewhat distracting. Finally, the use of the dated and exclusionary terms “man” and “mankind” seems jarringly out of place in a text so otherwise centrally focused on the subjectivity of women.

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**Weaver, Elissa B. *Convent Theatre in Early Modern Italy: Spiritual Fun and Learning for Women*. Cambridge, UK, New York: Cambridge UP, 2002. Pp. xiii + 304.**

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The massive increase in the number of convents in early modern Italy, established to advance and consolidate the interests of powerful families, forms the backdrop for the subject of this book: the curious and fascinating development of theatrical practice in female monasteries from the late fifteenth to late seventeenth centuries. At its very outset, the book performs a scholarly service by bringing this body of material, largely preserved in manuscripts in the *Biblioteca Riccardiana* and *Nazionale* in Florence, to our notice. As Weaver highlights in her subtitle, the purpose of these dramas was two-fold: release from the tedium and strictures of convent life and medium for (and display of) education – spiritual as well as humanist. In her careful documentation of the relationship between these plays and the secular culture which they both drew from and commented upon, Weaver also advances a theory of “sublimation.” After the Council of Trent, which enforced strict enclosure, the expansion of convent drama appears to function as compensation for the loss of worldly privileges formerly allowed to the nuns. Perhaps this was the reason why the ecclesiastical hierarchy tolerated it, albeit grudgingly.

In recent years there has been much rethinking of female monastic life in the field of medieval studies. The truism which once labelled convents “dumping grounds” for unwanted daughters of the nobility has been displaced by increased scholarly attention to the complex ways that nuns participated, socially as well as spiritually, in their broader environment. The concern with “vocation” has been sidelined, partly in recognition that apparent lapses in contemplative practice fail to take into consideration the interpenetration of spiritual and secular life in the Middle Ages. When Weaver raises the issue in her book, it is in a different context – the Florentine world of merchants, mobility, and money, where monastic life was indeed autonomous, sharply severed from the world of secular power and pleasure. The number of monasteries in Florence quadrupled between 1368 and 1595; Weaver cites one study which suggests that half of the women of “the urban propertied class” were destined to become nuns in the sixteenth century. In the wake of the Council of Trent, with its program of cementing in convent walls and prohibiting visits