

Chapter Seven, "Contemporary Novelists," turns to a series of male authors, from Bernard Malamud to John Updike, who continue to adapt Arthurian motifs, producing a greater variety of approaches than perhaps any other literary period. Unfortunately, the division between this chapter and the final one, "Arthurian Tradition and Popular Culture," reinforces the contemporary canon, especially as it denies authors such as C. J. Cherryh or Andre Norton equal status, seemingly only because their works are labeled "fantasy" or "science fiction." This produces an odd disjunction: Lupack and Lupack provide a surprisingly sympathetic reading of Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Mists of Avalon*, for example, but juxtapose all Arthurian fantasy and science fiction with board games, computer role-playing games, and film both serious and silly. The result is that none of these sources really achieves the sustained critical attention it deserves.

Nevertheless, *King Arthur in America* is a significant achievement and succeeds admirably in tracing the evolution and cultural status of Arthurian legend in the United States. It pays more attention to overlooked authors, especially female authors, than is usual and will certainly inspire further scholarly work in this area.

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¹ Alan Lupack, ed. (New York and London: Garland, 1992).

² Alan Lupack and Barbara Lupack, eds. (New York and London: Garland, 1999). For review, see *MFF* 33 (Spring 2002): 51-52.

Ranft, Patricia. *A Woman's Way: The Forgotten History of Women Spiritual Directors*. New York: Palgrave, 2000. Pp. 254.

Ranft's work looks at how Christian women through the centuries have guided others in their spiritual quest. Early on, Ranft explains what she means in calling these women "spiritual directors": "Every time a woman helped, advised, guided, inspired by example, instructed, preached, cajoled, reared, chided, or directed another to reach the...conclusion [that humans were created to find happiness in God], she was in fact offering spiritual direction" (5-6). Certainly there is truth in Ranft's statement, but I question whether it is the most useful definition, since it leaves open the possibility that every Christian woman who has ever discussed faith issues with another person could thus be defined as a spiritual director. In the context of her research, though, Ranft looks more narrowly at women who have offered advice and guidance to other adults for the purpose of helping them along their own spiritual path, which provides her with a coherent group for study.

Ranft situates her understanding of spiritual direction within a framework of logotherapy, a school of psychology that posits the search for meaning as the primary motivational force in humans (3). Applied to religious history, Ranft understands this to mean that spiritual direction has the goal of guiding a person to happiness. She rests her understanding of spiritual direction on the

logotherapeutic model expressed in terms of imago dei theology: "Spiritual direction is that which helps us figure out how best to 'reform' our lives, to become imago Dei once again and thus be happy" (20). Seeing the will to meaning as the central drive in humans allows Ranft to argue that women spiritual directors were "a major force in society" (7) because they helped people find meaning.

Having laid out her methodology, Ranft turns to the women themselves starting with Jesus' mother Mary, whose instructions to the servants at the Cana wedding Ranft sees as the first instance of Christian spiritual direction. She follows this by examining the roles of Mary Magdalene and the Samaritan woman to whom Jesus spoke. If these seem more like notes on women's history in earliest Christianity than something we can recognize as spiritual direction, read on, because Ranft quickly begins to delve into meatier instances of women as spiritual guides.

In the era of the Church Fathers, Ranft is able to present portraits of women such as Macrina and Monica by examining the writings of the men they influenced. These women usually directed by word or example, but Ranft shows that they were clearly accepted as spiritual directors. As she turns to the chaotic period from 300-600, Ranft invokes her logotherapeutic model stating that Christianity "had to present a definition of life that was meaningful" (49), a need that was in part fulfilled by the creation of monasticism. The desert abbas and ammas accepted that direction of others was part of their office and began to define the qualities necessary in a director. Although women did play a prominent role in desert monasticism, Ranft's conclusion that "the ascetics had no doubt that women were spiritually equal to men" (53) may be stretching it.

Ranft's survey becomes much richer and broader when she reaches the Middle Ages. She finds the extraordinary emergence of women's voices in the thirteenth century indicated in directors such as Hadewijch, in whose hands spiritual direction was "self-conscious, articulate, and focused" (73); in fact, direction as a whole became more "explicit and specialized" (84). Armed with portraits of powerful directors such as Hildegard, Clare, the women of Helfta, and Angela of Foligno, Ranft shows that women directors came from all levels of society and were influential through their direction.

In the late medieval and early modern era, a time when both confession and direction grew more popular and the latter "came into full maturity" (87), Ranft turns again to the most famous religious women of the era, such as Julian of Norwich and Catherine of Siena. Ranft notes that while these women are recognized as leaders of the mystical movement, they have not received their due as leaders in spiritual direction. As she points out, though, the two are connected: "The mystical movement became such a pervasive phenomenon during the period because mystics were able to direct so many people toward it" (87).

Ranft sees the roles of confessor and spiritual director converging in the Reformation era and argues that this conjoining gave women leverage since they were now encouraged to choose a confessor carefully. Ranft believes that women gained a buffer from societal critics when they entered the penitential system, and shows how a powerful personality like Teresa of Avila (who receives more attention than any other woman in this work) could effectively become the director of her confessor. Still, Ranft seems to bypass the point that women could not serve in this merged confessor-director role since they were not allowed to perform sacramental duties. Those duties were de-emphasized in Protestant circles, and while this meant women directors were known and accepted, it also meant that both confession and direction were less common overall.

Ranft is at her best when she is describing the women she counts as spiritual directors. She examines their varying methods of direction, giving readers a chance to see how these methods changed over time. Less successful, I think, is her thesis that “spiritual direction...is the vehicle Christians utilize to address the issues of meaning” (194). Spiritual direction can address these issues, but Ranft’s statement passes over the vast majority of Christians past and present who do not participate in spiritual direction. Most laypersons fall outside the system of direction, a fact made clear when we notice that Ranft’s work focuses almost exclusively on women engaged in the religious life. While this often cannot be helped given the resources, it leaves us lacking a portrait of how women who followed other paths in society might have engaged in direction.

I was disappointed to see typos and some jarring sentences in this work, something unexpected from a fine writer like Ranft and a well-known publisher. These are merely blips, though, on what is overall a thoughtful, engaging, and well presented work. Thanks to Ranft, this “forgotten history” has been brought enjoyably to light.

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Shahar, Shulamith. *Women in a Medieval Heretical Sect: Agnes and Huguette the Waldensians*. Trans. Yael Lotan. Rochester: Boydell Press, 2001. 129 pp + appendix.

Women in a Medieval Heretical Sect: Agnes and Huguette the Waldensians attempts to fill a gap that Shahar perceived in the history of women in the Waldensians. It will disappoint those expecting a history akin to Shannon McSheffrey’s treatment of Lollard women,¹ with its application of Judith Butler’s performativity theory, but Shahar states that she did not intend to examine gender in the Waldensian sect. The book, she asserts, is about women and as such, it does provide an excellent basic introduction to the history of women’s participation in the Poor of Lyons.