

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.

—Cynthia Stewart, Nashville, Tennessee

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.

Shahar challenges feminist historians' assumption, one she herself made in *The Fourth Estate: A history of women in the Middle Ages* (1990), that women enjoyed more rights and opportunities for leadership roles within heretical groups than in the orthodox Church. Now she argues that women in the Poor of Lyons were doubly marginalized; once as heretics and again as women (xiii). She begins with the foundation of the Waldensians, by Peter Waldes, a wealthy burgher, and the movement's early history. As Shahar notes, the reluctance of Waldes' wife to join the group did not augur well for female followers. Waldes' chronicler condemns Waldes' wife for choosing earthly values over spiritual ones. In addition, Waldes' daughters were sent to the convent at Fontevrault, clearly showing that Waldes himself did not direct his call for the *vita apostolica* to women.

In chapter two, Shahar examines the role of women in other sects as well as concepts of the masculine and feminine elements of the divinity in such groups. The Guillelmites are the only medieval group used in this comparison. Oddly she uses the eighteenth-century Anglo-American Shakers and Quakers in her comparison, a move perhaps best relegated to the footnotes. One cannot help wondering why she did not choose other medieval groups such as the Lollards and the Cathars as a better, more historically valid comparison. The Cathars do appear in a later chapter, when Shahar points out that the Waldensian Brothers did not share the dualistic Cathars' fear of female pollution (101-2). Unlike the Shakers and the Quakers, the Waldensians did not accept a female element in their concept of the divinity, nor did they believe in either a spiritual or earthly equality between men and women. The assumption that women enjoyed equality originated with historians who looked only at the accusations made in inquisitorial and other Catholic sources and not at Waldensian chroniclers.

Women did preach in the early days of the movement, but this was an expression of Waldensian enthusiasm. Women's equality was never one of the Waldensians' tenets. These female preachers, the "Sisters," were not allowed to administer the Eucharist, allocate funds, or attend councils with the Waldensian Brothers. Shahar assumes that because the Sisters did preach and teach some of the time, they must have received some kind of instruction from the Brothers. She proposes that the Sisters must have found "greater spiritual satisfaction" (64) than Catholic nuns because the Sisters chose to join the Waldensians, while nuns often did not choose their religious communities, concluding that "a consciousness of choice and the voluntary participation in a persecuted community, requiring a major commitment from its members, and the tension of clandestine life, probably shielded them from monotony and inner dissatisfaction"(64). Despite the Sisters' ability to preach to the Believers, "essentially the same hierarchy and gender roles prevailed between the Brothers and Sisters as between the nuns and the monks or canons in the Catholic Church" (64-5).

Chapter four brings Shahar to the two female Believers at the center of her study, Agnes Francon and Huguette de la Cote. Pointing out that Jacques Fournier's inquisitorial records do not indicate that inquisitors addressed

different questions to women and men, Shahar asserts that there is no “gender perspective” in these records (88). The questions asked of Agnes and Huguette varied little from those asked of the male members Raymond and Jean. It is difficult, Shahar argues, to find a “distinctive feminine identity” in these interrogatories, although at least one other historian, Peter Dronke, has found such an identity for Cathar and Catholic women (88). Agnes and Huguette were not questioned as *women* but as *Waldensians*. Thus the Waldensian women were marginalized as the heretical “other,” not the female “other.”

In Chapter five, Shahar describes the differences in spiritual practices between Waldensian women and their Catholic counterparts. Waldensian women, like Protestant women, were deprived of the feminine element and symbol present in Catholicism. Waldensians in general did not venerate the Virgin Mary or female saints, but there was a “blurring of the ‘otherness’ of women” among the female Believers (100). The teachings of the Brothers did not refer to gender concepts or boundaries, and the Brothers did preach to both men and women.

Shahar argues that the Waldensians fit the profile of a persecuted, clandestine group kept alive by the cooperation of its members. In such a group, traditional gender categories tend to be “neutralized” even if female equality is not a tenet of faith. Shahar concludes her study with a chapter on the method of execution used for male and female Believers. Having established that gender roles were “blurred” or “neutralized” for women, she states that “in the execution of heretics the difference was blurred in the opposite direction, the men being treated in the same way as women usually were” (119).

Shahar’s study contributes to the field of women’s history by making available the translations of the interrogatories of Agnes and Huguette, which can be used by undergraduate and graduate students alike, and for its exploration of women’s participation in the Poor of Lyon. Its contribution might have been greater if Shahar used feminist theoretical tools to glean a “feminine” voice from the interrogatories. Shahar relies heavily on Peter Biller’s work on the Waldensians, agreeing with and reiterating it to the extent that, at times, very little seems original. Good editing might have tightened her thesis and made her conclusions sound less contradictory to each other; but this could very well be due to the English translation. Shahar denies that Waldensian women enjoyed special privileges or rights; yet, she asserts frequently that they preached and that there was a blurring of male and female roles among the Believers. In this reviewer’s opinion, it sounds as though these particular heretical women did enjoy a status and privilege not enjoyed by many of their Catholic counterparts.

This study will be useful for undergraduates studying heretical groups. For scholars expecting a well-documented and tightly woven thesis, it is less so.

—Jennifer D. Thibodeaux, *University of Kansas*

¹ Shannon McSheffrey, *Gender and heresy: women and men in Lollard communities, 1420-1530*, (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).