

he sees nuclear families but they were connected to a wider kin network, he sees Puritanism but not as a movement separate from the Church of England, and he sees patriarchy but it did not always work in practice and there was no gender crisis. I would say Cressy's book has more of an argument than he concedes. It is a defense of the status quo in English social history—heavy on description instead of analysis, continuing a focus on the English and not on the British, and inadequate in its attention to diversity—whether that diversity be made up of regional, class, or gender differences. Most problematic for historians of women, this is a work of social history, of birth, marriage, and family no less, that continues to be told almost entirely from a male perspective.

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¹ Ralph Houlbrooke, "The Making of Marriage," in his *The English Family, 1450-1700* (1984); John Gillis, *For Better for Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (New York, 1985); Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640* (Cambridge, 1987); Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (Oxford, 1977) and *Uncertain Unions: Marriage in England 1660-1753* (Oxford, 1992).

² Mary Abbot, *Life Cycles in England 1560-1720* (New York, 1996); Christopher Daniell, *Death and Burial in Medieval England 1066-1550* (New York, 1996); Mary Dobson, *Contours of Death and Disease in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1997).



Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997. pp. xxiii, 228; 5 black and white illustrations.

Late antique and early medieval hagiography has increasingly become a major source for women's history. Women's roles in the early church, their missionary activities, and their important functions in monastic foundations are some of the areas of particular interest of recent studies.¹ Coon herself lists a number of different focal points in her Introduction: she wishes to investigate the paradoxes and inversions resulting from the contrast between women's bodies (often considered repulsive) and notions of women as brides of Christ. From a theological perspective Coon wants to focus on three major patterns: that of male altar space, of a comparison between female and male models of sanctity, and of the relationship between clothing and theological roles. The last area of

concentration, listed on p. xvi, concerns the use of biblical discourse in the composition of saints' lives and the construction of sacred models. These rather diverse focal points are both the strength and the weakness of this book: it is wide-ranging and useful through the many topics it touches on, but it is also somewhat disperse in its multiple lines of inquiry.

In Chapter 1, "Hagiography and Sacred Models," Coon analyzes the different models for early hagiography. After an illuminating discussion of the origins of hagiography, its authors, and audiences, Coon concentrates on the patterns of the Life of Christ, "Adam and Eve of the Desert," the patrician intellectual (which includes an excellent discussion of the transference of Roman civic ideals to a Christian context), and the pastoral bishop and cloistered nun. For all these paradigms Coon teases out the differences between the depiction of male and female saints, finding a number of crossgenderings and paradoxes. She shows, for example, how Jerome adapts some of the ideals he extolled for a Roman senator to his Life of Paula. And we see that some Merovingian saintly queens appropriated the "pastoral responsibilities of urban bishops" (25), but that their hagiographers overlaid these activities with more typically feminine traits of sanctity.

Chapter 2, "Gender, Hagiography, and the Bible," traces the transformation of some women from vehicles of sin to vehicles of repentance. Much of this metamorphosis is effected through clothing, and Coon here draws on Marcia Colish's notion of "cosmetic theology." In the Old Testament male clothing, especially if it is opulent, is a sign of power, while for women clothing is used to indicate sin and subordination to male authority (31). Christian writers took over the topos of clothing and expanded it into a "theological exegesis on the fall" (38). Coon's remarks on the early condemnations of crossdressing are well-taken, but her exploration of the ramifications of this topos is rather disappointing; merely to state that hagiographers and their audiences were intrigued by these stories (40) does not illuminate a complex problem. The next parts of this chapter focus on biblical spinning and serving women as models of later Lives and on the symbolism of biblical women as "simple faith" (44). Coon's analysis of the rhetorics of inversion is convincing. She shows how women's supposed irrationality and emotionalism made them the perfect representatives of Christian "foolish wisdom," that is, of perfect faith. But this simplicity, although praiseworthy and commendable, also subjects them to divine and male authority.

Chapter 3, "The Rhetorical Uses of Clothing in the Lives of Sacred Males," is somewhat out of place in this book with its focus on gendered models. Some points fit into the scheme of the book: for example, the analysis of the masculinization of sacred space with its resulting marginalization of women and

laymen. But others, such as the rhetorical uses of clothing in Martin of Tours and Germanus of Auxerre, are too tangential to the topic of sacred fictions.

Chapter 4, “God’s Holy Harlots: The Redemptive Lives of Pelagia of Antioch and Mary of Egypt,” first explores the differences between male and female hermits, showing that in male Lives the themes of heroic combat and apocalyptic prowess dominate, while the female Lives are more earthbound and focus on the redemptive power of the cross. Coon demonstrates that the Lives of female desert saints could also provide models for male monks and are anchored in a profound biblical metaphoric of the relationship between “contrite women and spiritual men” (80). In the Life of Mary of Egypt we find a gender reversal where Mary becomes a confessor and prophet, while the monk Zosimas’s piety is now female gendered. While subscribing to the often stated moral of these Lives—that they spell redemption for even the worst sinners—Coon’s subtle analysis nevertheless sheds some new light on the complex lives of these reformed harlots.

Chapter 5, “‘Through the Eye of a Needle’: Wealth and Poverty in the Lives of Helena, Paula, and Melania the Younger,” traces the development of a distinctly feminine model of sanctity in the early Christian centuries. Coon’s thesis is that these women “exorcise the demons of feminine self-indulgence through their philanthropy, ministry to the poor, and ascetic attire” and thus “reverse the patristic theology of the cosmetic” (96). Especially interesting are Coon’s remarks on the refashioning of Roman republican and imperial forms of philanthropy into offerings to new Christian cults. Helena, the new model of the charitable, aristocratic widow; Paula, who transforms Roman virtues into Christian charisma; and Melania the Younger, whose asceticism was as extreme as it remained ambiguous and whose “overbearing philanthropy” (116) was criticized by Gerontius—these women transformed the topos of the pious Roman matron into a wide-ranging arsenal of Christian virtues that continued to be rewritten, adapted, and relived for centuries to come.

This is most visible in the Lives of the Merovingian queens who occupy Chapter 5, “Civilizing Merovingian Gaul: The Lives of Monegund, Radegund, and Balthild.” In many ways they embody earlier ideals (e.g., ascetic practices, rejecting royal attire), but through their powerful positions they usurp some male pastoral and administrative functions. Coon shows very well how biblical models function here to both “empower and bridle female sanctity” (121). The most important development in Christian Europe at the time, monastic foundations on a larger scale are also bound up with these saintly women. The cloister now becomes the place of refuge for pious noblewomen whose entry into the religious life could have many motivations: true piety, political expediency, or flight from various conflicts. Not all noblewomen entered the cloister

voluntarily. Coon uses three women to illustrate the workings of Merovingian sanctity and hagiography: Monegund, Radegund, and Balthild. Monegund develops her power in an institutional setting, furthers the cult of Saint Martin, but also performs miracles and practices asceticism. The increasing containment of this charismatic saint in the *vita* is a fascinating example of one of the functions of “sacred fiction.” For Radegund, Coon contrasts the Lives by Fortunatus and the nun Baudovinia.² Fortunatus depicts Radegund as a prophet and female Christ with some sacerdotal functions, but also emphasizes that her charismatic asceticism is contained in a domestic and feminized environment. Baudovinia stresses her role as astute politician, destroyer of pagan shrines, and her administrative achievements. Yet Radegund always remains the perfect nun. Balthild, finally, is depicted as a woman who channels (or is forced to channel) her political power into charity contained within a setting of domestication and claustration. Coon intriguingly sees her Life as an “*apologia* for a provocative career in politics” (140).

The conclusion is a model of the genre. Coon articulates many *caveats* concerning hagiography as a source for historians and summarizes the pivotal roles of late antique and early medieval hagiography. Owing much to biblical discourse, these Lives bring “piety down to earth” (148) by providing new saintly models, shaped to some extent by new political and cultural demands. A look into the future closes the book. Coon stresses the continuity of saintly legends, their many possible meanings, and their eternal appeal. Coon’s final quote of Zosimas encouraging Mary of Egypt to continue her “life-giving narrative” provides a wonderful ending to this rich and illuminating book.

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1 Some important recent works are Anne Jensen, *Gottes selbstbewusste Töchter: Frauenemanzipation im frühen Christentum?* (Freiburg, 1992); Robert Folz, *Les saintes reines du moyen âge en occident (VIe - XIIIe siècles)* (Brussels, 1992); Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 1994); Susanne Wittern, *Frauen, Macht und Heiligkeit: Lateinische Frauenviten aus dem 4. bis 7. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 1994); Gillian Cloke, *This Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age* (London, 1995). Wittern’s very useful book, not mentioned by Coon, uses many of the same sources as Coon and provides a good complement to *Sacred Fictions*.

2 This analysis is adumbrated in Frantisek Graus, *Volk, Herrscher und Heiliger im Reich der Merowinger* (Prag, 1965) 409. It is interesting that Coon and Wittern in *Frauen, Macht und Heiligkeit* (100-07) come to very similar conclusions after a systematic comparison of the two Lives. Wittern shows especially well that Fortunatus stresses Radegund’s admirable aspects while Baudovinia, writing for an audience of cloistered women, adds many imitable qualities (100). The two emphases thus reflect the two basic functions of hagiography.