

Barking Abbey and Medieval Literary Culture: Authorship and Authority in a Female Community. Edited by Jennifer N. Brown and Donna Alfano Bussell. Woodbridge, Suffolk: York Medieval Press, 2012. Pp. xii+350. ISBN: 9781903153437.

While Jennifer Brown and Donna Bussell modestly claim in their introduction to this volume that its essays “do not offer a grand narrative of literary production at Barking Abbey,” the collection actually does provide a thorough and nuanced examination of textual production, patronage, and usage at the abbey throughout its existence from the seventh to the sixteenth centuries. As such, it provides critical information and analysis in the burgeoning field of the study of medieval English women’s monasticism.

It is almost *de rigueur* for a reviewer of an essay collection to complain that the essays do not interact with one another well, if at all; these essays do provide occasional cross-citation in footnotes but do not substantially engage with each other in their main texts. This is not a complaint, however, as it seems the editors have bowed to the inevitable, that most readers will closely read only a chapter or two of this (or any) collection rather than the entire text. Furthermore, each essay can indeed stand alone, providing its own necessary background information and contextualization (with the odd consequence that a reader of the entire collection experiences multiple introductions to, for instance, the situation surrounding Henry II’s appointment of the sister of the late Thomas Becket to the abbacy at Barking). Bussell and Brown introduce the collection with an overview of Barking Abbey’s history and context through its foundation in the early Anglo-Saxon period to its dissolution under Henry VIII. The abbey’s financial stability and its connections to the secular world of the aristocracy allowed literary and cultural production to flourish.

The first section of the collection is titled “Barking Abbey and its Anglo-Saxon Context,” although only one of the four essays remains firmly in the Anglo-Saxon period. Stephanie Hollis’s essay explores the level of learning at Barking from the late seventh to the early twelfth centuries, stating that the abbey “maintained a respectable standard of functional literacy” throughout the period. It is worth noting here a probable typesetting or editing error at the end of Hollis’s essay, which does not conclude so much as simply end in the midst of a discussion of vernacular *versus* Latin literacy at Barking during the twelfth century.

Lisa Weston’s essay stays firmly in the Anglo-Saxon period. She uses an impressive variety of evidence, including Bede, Aldhelm, Boniface, and the

early Barking charters, to show how Hildelith, Barking's second abbess, successfully exploited the abbey's "complex political and cultural context" (59) to make the abbey an important institution in the early eighth century. Kay Slocum similarly focuses on the ways that the cults of three Anglo-Saxon abbesses fostered the abbey's prestige immediately after the Conquest. Slocum's analysis of Goscelin's texts very interestingly connects the architecture of the church to the texts' liturgical usage. Slocum convincingly suggests that Goscelin may have composed the music for the lections as well. Thomas O'Donnell's essay astutely argues that the patronage relationships of authors Goscelin and Guernes with Barking were beneficial to all parties: Barking became textually associated with "cutting-edge" authors who defined the nuns as players at the highest level of cultural expression; Guernes and Goscelin, in addition to receiving good food, warm beds, and financial reward, gained or confirmed entry into Barking's political, religious, and cultural networks that included Wilton, the Canterbury churches, the city of London, Westminster, and the royal court.

The second section, "Barking Abbey and its Anglo-Norman Context," moves firmly into the second half of the twelfth century, focusing mainly on the two Anglo-Norman texts known to have been composed by Barking nuns: the anonymous *Life of Edward* and Clemence's *Life of Catherine*. Delbert Russell makes a strong linguistically-based case for Clemence as the author of both texts. Thelma Fenster focuses on *Edward's* expansion of the role of Queen Edith, as compared to her role in the poet's Latin sources (especially Aelred's *Vita*). Jennifer Brown places the Barking *Edward* and its female recipients of Edward's miracles within the constellation of versions available in England during the High Middle Ages.

Diane Auslander's excellent essay situates Clemence's *Catherine* within the political and religious tensions around the murder of Thomas Becket. Auslander draws intriguing and convincing parallels between the characters in the *Life* and those in the murder of Becket to see Clemence's work as a critique of royal power. The lack of dialogue among the essays is most egregious in the contrast between Auslander's essay and Bussell's, which similarly focuses on Clemence's contemporary political world but avoids definitive political conclusion as Bussell reads Clemence's sources for the *Catherine* to elucidate Clemence's model of spiritual friendship.

Emma Bérat's informative essay focuses on *Le Gracial*, an Anglo-Norman miracle collection that was probably (but not definitely) composed for the nuns of Barking. Despite a somewhat gratuitous reference to Cixous midway

through the essay, Bérat is convincing in her reading of the miracles as presenting “women’s literary authority” for both religious and secular audiences (217).

“Barking Abbey and the Later Middle Ages,” the final section of the essay collection, very usefully addresses a diversity of relatively unknown textual artifacts from Barking. Alexandra Barratt’s essay focuses on *The Charge to the Barking Cellaress*, an unusual text from the second half of the fifteenth century that details the responsibilities of the cellaress at Barking, probably written by the cellaress herself. Barratt’s succinct and perceptive analysis enumerates the very comfortable lives of the nuns at this point in the abbey’s history.

The final two essays focus on liturgical and hymnal texts, and thus on the nature of performance in the abbey during services. Jill Stevenson’s analysis of the Barking Easter Plays shows how the performance of the plays allowed physical (as well as intellectual and spiritual) engagement with the narratives for both the audience and the performers. She applies this point to Clemence’s *Catherine* as well, reminding us that the rhythmic and rhyming text would have been read aloud in groups. Stevenson unnecessarily refers repeatedly to modern cognitive theory, while her very good points about the audience’s physical engagement with textual content could have been made simply by focusing on the texts at hand.

Anne Bagnell Yardley proves that the nuns regularly created new work for the Barking liturgy, as recorded in the Barking *Ordinale* (Oxford, University College, MS 169) and the Barking hymnal (Cambridge, Trinity College, MS 1226). She has identified six hymns unique to Barking and provides here words and music for two of them. Yardley’s work thus delineates a creative space previously unexplored by modern scholarship.

Jocelyn Wogan-Browne’s afterword lauds the collection’s collaborative focus, noting that it brings together scholars of history, liturgy, performance, language, and literature. I would point out as well the generational diversity of the essays’ authors, who range from graduate students to emeritae professors. The collection provides essential reading for all students of women’s monasticism. Hollis’s forthcoming volume of Modern English translations of many of the Barking texts will be a strong primary source companion to this collection.

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