

*The Life and Miracles of Saint Margaret of Cortona (1247-1297)*, translated by Thomas Renna and edited by Shannon Larson. Saint Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications. 2012. ISBN: 9781576593011.

This review deals with a book that contains a new translation of the *legenda* of one of the most interesting women mystics in the late medieval Italian peninsula. We know that Margaret of Cortona forms part of a wider mosaic of Franciscan Tertiaries, alongside other historical figures like Angela of Foligno (ca. 1242-1308) and Clara of Montefalco (ca. 1268-1308). As such, and in keeping with the standards of what G. Épiney-Burgard and É. Zum Brunn called the “silent tradition,” Margaret’s inner life was put into words by her confessor, Fra Giunta Benegnati, under the original title *Legenda de uita et miraculis Beatae Margaritae de Cortona*.

As a modern English version of the “biography” of Margaret, Thomas Renna’s translation is, without any doubt, the reader’s best choice. Philologically, it is based on the critical edition produced by Fortunato Iozzelli (1997), which reproduces the text of the oldest manuscript containing the *Legenda*. Renna’s version achieves transparency and accuracy with respect to Fra Giunta’s Latin sentences. However, while the plain English style makes it extremely readable for any scholar looking into the experiences of late medieval women, at the same time it gives rise to a series of doubts during reading that a short corpus of critical notes would have solved. In general, the translator includes problematic terms (such as *baiulo*, *virtus*, or *intelectum*) in the original Latin between brackets following his modern translation. This is a wise choice, but on some occasions we feel that we need further explanation, because of the complexity that any late medieval Latin text implies. To put it briefly, this work rings neat and true in the translation, but we often feel the lack of contextual support in making the cultural jump between medieval Latin and modern English.

On the other hand, the volume provides us with a short but very informative “Introduction,” an absolutely necessary element in reading the medieval saints’ lives. The section devoted to the “purposes” of the *Legenda*, where Renna lists and explains Fra Giunta’s and Margaret’s possible objectives in writing this book, is especially important. The answer, of course, is not at all simple, but rather entails a group of possibilities that takes into account the presumed horizons of expectations at the end of the thirteenth century in southern Europe. We should not forget that Margaret formed part of the “Franciscan boom,” and specifically the second generation of poor mendicants that grew up after the death of Francis in 1226, or that the situation of the order was politically unstable in those times.

As such, the book presents her as an ideal member of the Third Order, outlining her exemplary behavior (for instance, the negation of her family as a symbol of her rejection of the worldly life); her early Franciscan aspirations (for example, Francis's idea of serving and not being served); and her ascetic practices, which are explained in detail. Concerning this last point, one of the most remarkable issues in Margaret's text is the relationship that she establishes with food. Not for nothing was she one of the sources that Caroline W. Bynum used in her classic *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (1988).

From the hagiographic point of view, this work is extremely interesting. Like any other late medieval woman's *legenda*, it continuously shows the inner and outer realms of the represented character's life events, articulating these in a very subtle manner. Margaret's mystical experiences are both profound and extreme, and one of the rhetorical preoccupations of her transcriber, of course, is to describe the relationship between Margaret's inner narrative and the effects that this had on her daily life in as faithful a manner as possible. We are faced, therefore, with a closed discourse: if we compare it with the confessions of a contemporary mystic Tertiary, like Angela of Foligno, we can assert that Margaret's experience seems to have been shaped by the discourse of her confessor. In addition, like other late medieval Franciscan women's texts, understanding the role of the different "filters" through which we read such a text is one of the most attractive reasons for studying this book.

Another aspect the introduction underlines is the difficulty we have in understanding why Margaret or Fra Giunta (or both) decided to include certain "dangerous" fragments in this living portrait. Besides the prophetic-political side of Margaret, explicitly rooted in the historical context of her time, we find passages that might have been problematic for an orthodox reader. Frequently, direct divine revelations can imply a high degree of heterodoxy: in the case of Margaret this could be related to her charismatic authority, which is described in detail in several parts of the text, and her relationship with the so-called Franciscan spirituals and their conception of the *usus pauper*. As we know, dealing with poverty issues has always meant dealing with power: in fact, this Franciscan Tertiary talks about greed, earthly goods, and the prosperity of the institutional church in an explicit manner. In Margaret and Fra Giunta's vineyard, specific figures, places, and dates root some discourses (and performances) about power directly in the events of her time. However, understanding how close these writings are to the *zelanti* is still, as D. Burr points out in his instructive work (2001), a matter of future research.

By way of conclusion, we can assert that this new translation of the *Legenda*

is a deeply interesting work. It deals with the representation of an authoritative woman from the thirteenth century and the representation of her inner life. Deconstructing all the *media* that transmit to us her character and experiences could present us with a daunting but deeply attractive undertaking. However, always keeping the Latin edition at our side, this translation provides us with a modern, clear version to work with.

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