

The Beguines of Medieval Paris: Gender, Patronage, and Spiritual Authority, by Tanya Stabler Miller. The Middle Ages Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. Pp. 304; 8 ill. ISBN: 9780812246070; E-ISBN: 9780812209686.

Building on recent work on the beguines and late medieval women's religious life, Tanya Stabler Miller's book, *The Beguines of Medieval Paris: Gender, Patronage, and Spiritual Authority*, makes an important and original contribution to the scholarship by firmly situating the Parisian beguines in their social and religious context. Miller has three objectives for her analysis of the beguines of Paris. First, she challenges the binarily opposed interpretation of the beguines as religious or secular (6). Miller opts for a more nuanced interpretation to show how they were both religious women and engaged in their urban community. Second, Miller refutes the assumption that becoming a beguine was a "second-best" option to marriage or becoming a nun (8). Finally, she emphasizes "intersection and collaboration over marginality and persecution" (13) as characteristics of the beguine experience. Since much of the beguines' history has been read through the lens of the persecution of the most famous beguine, Marguerite Porete, this is a fresh and interesting approach.

The book consists of seven chapters moving from the foundation of the Parisian beguines by Louis IX to their eventual decline in the fifteenth century. Chapter one establishes one of the most important connections for the beguines: that with the French royal house. The next two chapters focus on the beguinage itself where Miller offers an engaging glimpse into life inside. She establishes that women could move in and out of the beguine community as they chose. The reason for this autonomy, Miller posits, is that women in Paris inherited property and controlled their inheritance. As a result, they enjoyed economic independence, which allowed them a certain degree of autonomy in their life choices and religious expressions. Miller also fleshes out the close relationship that the Parisian beguines enjoyed with members of the Dominican order, who were frequent visitors to the beguinage. Chapter three moves from the beguinage into the wider world to examine the role that beguines played in the economy of medieval Paris. Miller shows just how central the Parisian beguines were in silk production, a vital part of the urban economy, which enables her to situate the beguines within the larger urban setting. Chapters four and five consider the religious life inside the beguinage, as well as the beguines' contribution to the spiritual and intellectual life of Paris. These chapters successfully develop Miller's purpose of moving beyond "marginality and persecution"

to show that many clerics—particularly Dominicans and the scholars of the Sorbonne—interacted with and respected the beguines. Here Miller refutes the notion that the male clergy was always inherently hostile to the female religious. Indeed she shows that the Dominicans recognized that the beguines, by virtue of their gender, were able to reach an audience that they could not. The final two chapters of the book, chapters six and seven, trace the aftermath of Marguerite Porete’s trial and execution. Criticism of the beguines, even from those who had previously supported them, developed and became embedded in the clergy’s concern over who could preach. Chapter seven shows how the kings of France continued to support the beguines in the aftermath of Marguerite’s trial, the Council of Vienne and the Clementine decrees. Miller demonstrates how the royals deployed the Franciscans and Dominicans to help protect the beguines. By 1471, however, the downward spiral of the economy and shifts in religious preference placed the beguine community in such dire straits that King Louis XI transferred them to the Tertiaries.

Miller succeeds in achieving her objectives. Miller proves that the beguines were crucial players rather than outliers in the economy and intellectual life of medieval Paris. She does a fine job of analyzing their role in the silk industry, demonstrating that these were not poor women who fell into silk work or life as a beguine as a means of support. Rather she shows that these were professional women with a unique skill. As a microhistory, Miller’s book is able to dig deep and address aspects of beguine life that have been lacking heretofore. Her analysis furthers feminist scholarship in several ways. She depicts them as empowered women rather than women who became beguines because they had no other options. Indeed, Miller shows how beguines could determine the course of their lives. Building on the work of John van Engen, Miller also breaks the gendered binary that women’s religious experience consisted of emotion and visions while men’s centered on interacting with texts.

Miller’s analysis is strengthened by the diversity of sources she consults: tax records, economic sources, lay literature, material culture, traditional and nontraditional religious texts. Miller’s objective of situating the beguines in their context necessitates such a comprehensive approach, which the author executes very well. Moreover, these sources allow her to subvert the traditional dichotomy of “secular/religious” so that the Parisian beguines emerge as women who were both. The maps and visual sources also helped in placing the beguines in their geographic context and showing the organization of the beguinage. It is my hope that other scholars will adopt Miller’s methodology and begin in-depth investigations of beguinages in other medieval cities.

The Beguines of Medieval Paris is an important book that adds to the scholarship on women, religion, and urban life. Miller has succeeded admirably in her objectives for this book. She has challenged assumptions and moved the Parisian beguines from the sidelines to the heart of medieval society. As a result, she has advanced the scholarship both on beguines and women's religious life.

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