

Meditations on the Life of Christ: The Short Italian Text, by Sarah McNamer. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018. William and Katherine Devers Series in Dante and Medieval Italian Literature, v. 14. Pp. clxxx + 264; 2 tables. ISBN: 9780268102852

Written in the first half of the fourteenth century for a Poor Clare, over two hundred manuscripts of the *Meditations on the Life of Christ* (*MVC*) survive, in multiple translations, making the *Meditations* the most influential devotional text in Western Europe. In *Meditations on the Life of Christ: The Short Italian Text*, Sarah McNamer offers a critical edition of the Italian text of the Oxford, Bodleian MS Canonici Italian 174, along with a facing-page English translation, followed by commentary and preceded by her argument, which is composed of the following sections: Introduction, Textual History, Authorship, Date and Place of Composition, The Manuscript, Linguistic Analysis, Editorial Principles, and a Note on the Translation. In this volume, McNamer argues for the primacy of the Italian short text, or *testo breve*, and for its authorship by a Poor Clare.

Traditional scholarship has held that the long Latin text of the *Meditationes*, often attributed to Johannes de Caulibus, is the first text. In the “Textual History” section, McNamer argues that the long Latin text is neither the original, nor composed by a single author. Rather, the MS Canonici Italian 174 is a witness to the original *MVC* (from which the *Meditationes* expands through various stages in the vernacular) and leads to its expansion in the *testo minore*, and then its translation into the long Latin text. McNamer identifies two distinct writing styles in the *testo minore* and long Latin text, and she identifies these different registers as authored by Authors A and B. Rather than viewing the short Italian text as a version of the long Latin text in which sections are redacted, she argues that the interpolations of didactic passages, e.g., the insertion of quotations from Bernard of Clairvaux and the addition of Jesus’s public ministry into the narrative, are actually digressions from the original narrative. These interpolations are added by an Author B, whom she identifies as a Franciscan friar. She argues that the added material, attentive as it is to sermonizing and the explication of the meditations on the Infancy and Passion of Christ, makes the devotional text more accessible to male readers, and the expansion of the text by a friar makes possible its wider dissemination and readership.

In the section “Authorship,” McNamer further argues that the Italian short text, sans interpolation, presents a more vivifying and coherent image from the life of Christ or the Virgin. The *testo breve* is appealing to the community of

Poor Clares because of its focus on the woman's point-of-view, its first-person account in the present, and its attention to the domestic. Women are central in the drama and the narrative style invites the reader to enter into the devotional scene and to experience emotion without interruption. While there is no external evidence that the author of the *testo breve* is a woman, McNamer speculates that its authorship by a Franciscan friar would have included attempts to promote the order and allusions to the religious debates. Her argument also hinges on the inclusion of the phrase *nostro dolce sposo miser Iesu*, "Christ is our sweet spouse," when the author refers to herself, Cecilia, and the reader as having a shared spousal relationship to Christ. While a friar (male author) would have metaphorically considered himself a bride of Christ, the designation of Christ as spouse is institutionalized for female religious. This phrase is absent from the *testo minore*, and, therefore, McNamer believes the *testo minore* to be an adaptation by a friar, since the spousal relationship is not literalized. This adaptation makes the meditations more accessible to a male readership.

In the section "Date and Place of Composition," McNamer dates the *testo breve* to the first quarter of the fourteenth century. The terminus ante quem comes from the reference to the *Revelations of Elizabeth of Hungary* in the *testo minore*, which are absent in the *testo breve*, and the terminus post quem for the *testo breve* comes from a description of Christ's face as he lies in the lap of the Virgin after his descent from the cross. His hair is described as being shorn. McNamer argues that this description does not come from Mechthild of Hackeborn's *Liber specialis gratiae*, in which Christ is described as beardless, but rather from the *Memoriale* of Angela of Foligno, in which Christ's beard, eyebrows, and hair are described as plucked out. Angela's *Memoriale* dates from the late thirteenth to the early fourteenth century, and given the "networks of textual transmission" among the Poor Clares, this passage from the *testo breve* more likely alludes to the *Memoriale*, since it is written by Angela, who is a Third Order Franciscan, and whose work, which is officially sanctioned, would have been readily available to a Franciscan friar, rather than Mechthild's *Liber* (cxiiiv).

McNamer includes a section "Linguistic Analysis," written by Pär Larson, who concludes that the text contains a mixture of Northern Italian and Tuscan features, and that it was likely written by a Tuscan and Veneticized by copyists.

By arguing for the authorship of the earliest form of the *Meditationes* by a Poor Clare, McNamer situates a woman as being the most influential devotional writer of the late Middle Ages. McNamer suggests that this volume will be of interest to anyone researching the study of early Franciscan women, the early interorder circulation of devotional texts among religious women's

communities, the role of women in the textual community of Pisa, the artistic and cultural history of the Trecento, vernacular theology, and the history of emotion. McNamer argues that the authorship of the *MVC* by a Poor Clare situates the text among the writings of other great female authors—Heloïse, Julian of Norwich, Angela of Foligno, Catherine of Siena, Hildegard, Christine de Pizan, and Marie de France.

While some might find some of McNamer's evidence subjective, e.g., that Franciscan friars would only see their spousal relationship to Christ as metaphorical and not literal, overall, McNamer succeeds in making a strong case for the authorship of the *MVC* by a Poor Clare, and for the primacy of the *testo breve*, an argument she makes in an earlier article "The Origins of the *Meditationes vitae Christi* in *Speculum*, 2009, and expands here. Italianists will find the Italian text and glosses useful, and the English translation makes the *testo breve* accessible to a wider audience of scholars, especially those interested in women's authorship and women's reading and devotional practices.

Anne Spear
University of Mississippi