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Review Essay: Confident Readings: Medieval and Early Modern (Christian) Spirituality and Its Recent Interpreters

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ological challenge it represents. No matter how often we say (to ourselves and our students) that an edition is not a “real” medieval artifact, that it is only one possible “reading” of a text, we still often forget and read as if what is printed on the page is what Milon de Nanteuil heard when “Jean Renart” presented him with his “romans de la rose.” This “edition” helps us remember the truth.

Kathy M. Krause
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Confident Readings: Medieval and Early Modern (Christian) Spirituality and Its Recent Interpreters

Catherine M. Mooney, ed. *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999. xiii + 277 pp.

Richard Rambuss. *Closet Devotions*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998. xiii + 193 pp.

What is at first most striking about these two books are their differences. Catherine M. Mooney’s edited volume takes on medieval saints (or, really, in most cases, near saints), beginning with Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) and ending with Dorothea of Montau (d. 1394); central to this inquiry are the genres of hagiography, autobiography, and visionary writing. Richard Rambuss’s study focuses largely on the seventeenth century and devotional poets like John Donne, Richard Crashaw, and George Herbert, though he also examines “popular prayer books, devotional manuals, and guides to godliness” (105). The contributors to Mooney’s book represent for the most part the disciplines of history and religious studies, though literary scholars are also included; Rambuss, author of *Spenser’s Secret Career*, approaches his material largely from within English studies. The title of Mooney’s book announces gender as its primary theme, and her introduction situates the volume in relation to “the vibrant research conducted since the 1970s in the field of women’s history” and, more specifically, “religious women’s history” (2). Rambuss’s title points us, via the figure of the closet, to an interest in sexuality and particularly male homoeroticism; his book is importantly informed by Georges Bataille’s “ecstatic theorems on the complementarity of the sacred and illicit” (3) and by queer theory, particularly the work of Michel Foucault, Jonathan Goldberg, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

Nevertheless, in their focus on religious expression, on the “voices” of devotion, these two books also share much, and both their shared areas of interest and their differences may be instructive as to the current state of critical/historical work on gender and sexuality in medieval and early modern Christian spirituality. In reflecting on these two books, I would like—rather than reinforce the distinctions history/literature, gender/sexuality, women’s studies/queer theory, medieval/early modern—to consider how such apparently opposed terms might be repositioned, as contrasting but also complementary, as distinctive but intersecting. If, in the works at hand, such terms do tend to be treated as largely separate or oppositional, might there be ways more productively to bring them together in our considerations of the spiritual practices of the past?

Mooney clearly sets out the agenda of *Gendered Voices* in her introductory essay, “Voice, Gender, and the Portrayal of Sanctity”: the essays she gathers together are to examine how saints and their interpreters, differently gendered, differently experienced, reported, and interpreted exceptional spiritual states. At the center of the volume are three “interrelated methodological questions”: [1] how we can “distinguish the voices and the points of view of saints ... from those of their interpreters” (1); [2] “whether or not the voices one hears in these texts are ‘gendered’” (1); and [3] “to what extent portrayals of sanctity are influenced not so much by gender as by genre” (2). Mooney presents the method of her volume as essentially experimental, asking what happens if we identify a set of medieval texts—similar in genre, in content, in the gendered dynamics of their production—and rigorously analyze these in light of the questions of voice, gender, and genre.

The contributors to *Gendered Voices* have closely adhered to this overall project, though, of course, with some significant differences of approach and voice. The result is a collection of essays that is unusual in its unity. Barbara Newman’s “Hildegard and Her Hagiographers: The Remaking of Female Sainthood” presents a careful, detailed reading of the triple-authored *Vita S. Hildegardis*, showing how Hildegard’s self-understanding “as a prophet” modeled “on biblical heroes” is rewritten by her male hagiographers, as, first, “aristocratic abbess and foundress,” and then, according to a “newer model,” “feminine bridal mystic” (19). Anne L. Clark’s “Holy Woman or Unworthy Vessel? The Representations of Elisabeth of Schönau” similarly discerns different, and gendered, depictions of the saintly woman in the different voices of Elisabeth and her brother Ekbert, though Clark also sees the two as participating in a “mutually reinforcing dynamic” (39) in which each significantly shapes the other’s view of Elisabeth’s experience. Mooney’s own contribution to

the volume, “*Imitatio Christi* or *Imitatio Mariae*: Clare of Assisi and Her Interpreters,” takes on an even more complex comparative analysis, examining both Clare of Assisi’s and Francis of Assisi’s writings in comparison to each other and in relation to their various hagiographers. Mooney shows how, despite Clare’s own representation of her life in terms of *imitatio Christi*, “hagiographic texts and iconography tended increasingly to portray Clare,” in sharp contrast to Francis, “as a follower of Mary,” reinforcing the “secondary position” of Clare and her female followers “vis-à-vis Francis and his male followers” (76).

In the most theoretically interesting and challenging of these essays, “Inside Out: Beatrice of Nazareth and Her Hagiographer,” Amy Hollywood shows how Beatrice’s male “biographer consistently translates her internally felt experience into external, visible markings on the body of the saint” (81), while Beatrice herself insists on the interiority of her experience, “claim[ing] the autonomy of the internal self in order to free herself from cultural demands for a visibly suffering female body” (98). Hollywood consequently cautions materialist historians and theorists that their attacks on an “internalized self” associated with modern subjectivity may serve an unintended purpose—an erasure (like that performed by Beatrice’s biographer) of the importance, for at least some medieval women, of an interior experience that might resist the simple identification of female sanctity with bodiliness. John Coakley, in “A Marriage and Its Observer: Christine of Stommeln, The Heavenly Bridegroom, and Friar Peter of Dacia,” argues that Christine’s “autohagiography” emphasizes “the trials both external . . . and internal . . . that demons inflicted upon her,” while Peter “make[s] much of Christine as a bride of Christ—a woman in privileged mystical contact with the divine, as evidenced in observable episodes of rapture” (100). Frank Tobin’s “Henry Suso and Elsbeth Stigel: Was the *Vita* a Cooperative Effort?” reverses the gendered situation of the other studies in *Gendered Voices*. Considering the question of how to distinguish real and fictional presences in a text like Suso’s, Tobin suggests that Stigel, no matter how fictionalized, leaves “her imprint on the *Vita*” (133), “function[ing] as a kind of ever-present literary and spiritual super-ego to whom [Suso] must answer” (134).

Karen Scott, in “Mystical Death, Bodily Death: Catherine of Siena and Raymond of Capua on the Mystic’s Encounter with God,” argues that Raymond’s hagiography focuses on “paranormal bodily experiences and visions . . . to prove [Catherine’s] holiness and establish her cult as a saint,” while Catherine herself “usually preferred to write a more sober theology of the ordinary soul’s encounter with God” (136). Finally, Dyan Elliott, in “Authorizing a Life: The Collaboration of Dorothea of Montau and John Marienwerder,” examines a case where the woman’s voice is much harder, perhaps impossible, to locate, suggesting that Dorothea’s confessor John,

in trying to authorize her mystical life as well as his own judgment of that life, “virtually obscures the independent contours of [the] mystic’s spirituality” (169).

All the essays collected by Mooney are thus concerned with distinguishing the voices of saints and their interpreters, with considering how gender inflects these, and with examining the ways in which voice is determined by the genre of hagiography, by the demands of presenting a saint *as* a saint. At the same time, each of these analyses depends upon a very specific historical and textual investigation—a disentangling of complicated composite texts in order to reveal different voices at work. In the process, sometimes the essays become, for quite long stretches, more about specific textual or historical problems than about the larger questions at the heart of the volume. Nevertheless, because of the similarity of concern across the essays, they do resonate with each other, and Mooney, in her introduction, is careful to lay out the more general conclusions regarding gender difference she feels can be drawn from the volume’s experiment: [1] “where women appear to speak in their own voices, they speak of themselves in decidedly more active and assertive terms than do their male promoters” (10); [2] “Male hagiographers... were wont to see their female subjects as mysterious and otherworldly” (10); [3] male writers tend to use “nuptial imagery” more frequently than do the holy women they depict (11); [4] medieval writers “regularly describe holy women” in corporeal terms, but at least some women resist such characterization (13); and [5] “female saints... tend to pattern themselves after male exemplars,” while “their male hagiographers are likely to enhance or sometimes replace these male models with female exemplars” (13–14).

Closet Devotions takes a very different approach to its material, one that we might call experiential rather than experimental. What shapes Rambuss’s book, in other words, is not so much a programmatic laying out and investigation of questions about a particular body of material as a set of desires articulated by the author in an insistent first-person voice. For one striking instance, among many: “Although this line of my discussion becomes more speculative—some no doubt would even say wishful, an appraisal that I would not take entirely as a rebuff—I want to pursue this sodomitical Christ” (61). At the same time that he asks, “What did it mean for these seventeenth-century Christians to envision and to speak of themselves as being ravished by God or lusting after Christ?” Rambuss is concerned with “Another question—one no less legitimate to my thinking”: “what *we*, centuries later, may want to make of, how *we* may experience, this historical inheritance of sexualized devotion, with its erotic Christ” (5).

Rambuss's brief introduction, "Sacred Eroticisms," lays out the book's overall concern with "devotion... as a form of desire" (1). Of the three chapters that follow, the first, "Christ's Ganymede," is the longest and most complex. In a series of close readings, Rambuss argues that we find seventeenth-century devotional poets "more or less self-consciously reassigning in same-sex configurations (male God, male devotee) the erotic postures and blandishing conceits of the Renaissance love lyric" (13). Christ's body is put on spectacular display in these poems, and not just, Rambuss emphasizes, as human and wounded but as erotic object and subject. Thus, Crashaw "envision[s] Christ in his Passion as a highly fertile somatic field, one generative of numberless kissing mouths and tearful eyes, of countless orifices and dilated valves, of a literally promiscuous, hypersemantic mix of bodily fluids" (34). And Rambuss resists seeing Christ's body, wounded and penetrated, in feminized terms, a move that "effac[es] the primary maleness of his body and its operations, as well as, perhaps more important, the possibilities a male Christ affords for a homoeroticized devotional expression" (38). He "insist[s] that any account of the erotics of Christian devotion, whether premodern or modern, needs to consider as well its homoerotics. Stimulated by a spectacularized, denuded, and penetrable male form—the ravished, ravishing body of Jesus—the amorous expression of the prayer closet requires as much" (58).

In his second chapter, "Devotion and Desire," Rambuss moves to consider a broader range of erotic conventions used in seventeenth-century devotional contexts, in order to "accord a more unsettled meaning to such Christian commonplaces" (74). Lovesickness, marriage, friendship, the affective bond between master and servant are all, Rambuss argues, turned to use in an eroticized devotion. Most interestingly, Rambuss suggests that these tropes may "exceed a framework of 'mere metaphor' ... to authorize ... perspectives and behavior that are themselves far from conventional" (83); that is, living one's life *literally* as Christ's lover or friend or servant, conventional though the idea may be, can disrupt a whole set of social expectations. (Witness, in an earlier period, a life like Margery Kempe's.)

In chapter 3, "The Prayer Closet," Rambuss moves more intently to consider the "closet" of the book's title, showing how a growing emphasis on the private devotion of the "prayer closet" shapes seventeenth-century spiritual life. Arguing (after Foucault) that "Closet devotion... is the technology by which the soul becomes a subject" (109), Rambuss further suggests that the work of private devotion not only leads to a "deepening, individuating inwardness" (107) but also potentially "disrupts" and "disarticulates" a sense of self: "Under the heightened pressures of prayer and introspection uniquely engendered here, the self is repetitively, almost ritually, undone" (115). And the subjectivity effects of the early modern

prayer closet, Rambuss emphasizes, involve not just “inwardness” but body and voice, and the (homo)erotic.

A significant feature of Rambuss’s argument throughout is its linking of early modern texts and tropes to modern, postmodern, and often queer ones. Thus, in the first chapter alone, Rambuss compares seventeenth-century devotion to the gay porn video *More of a Man* (11–13), Andres Serrano’s photography (21, 25–26, 32), Martin Scorsese’s *Last Temptation of Christ* (63, 65), Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* (65–66), Marsden Hartley’s “Christ Held by Half-Naked Men” (67), Juan Davila’s “Holy Family” (67–68), and Freud’s case history of Schreber (70–71). In part, Rambuss here is concerned to make a political intervention, “stag[ing] a historical salvo in Christianity’s own terms . . . against its mobilization on behalf of a censoriously normalizing social and cultural vision” (6). Queer works like Serrano’s *Piss Christ*, rather than profaning Christianity, are, in Rambuss’s view, firmly within Christian devotional tradition. Perhaps, however, Rambuss’s introduction of such twentieth-century and contemporary works into his argument too often levels differences between the early and postmodern. Is it really the case, for instance, that Schreber’s “religious fantasia” serves “as a striking recapitulation of the orthodox postures and tropes of Christian devotion in their most hyperbolized presentation” (71)?

While I am quite ready to accept the main conclusions of Rambuss’s argument in *Closet Devotions*, too often I find myself, in reading, asking questions about how Rambuss has chosen his material. How typical are the texts he analyzes? What kinds of countertexts might one adduce? Is early modern devotion so *fully* the hothouse, eroticized realm that Rambuss constructs? Is there not, too, an austere side to seventeenth-century English devotional practices? Rambuss himself cites early modern texts that warn against “eroticized devotional enticements” (96)—but he does so only to show that early modern readers were able to recognize the erotic in the devotional, not to analyze any antierotic impulse within seventeenth-century spiritual discourse. Rambuss’s readings would be more persuasive if we had the sense that he were considering not just texts that so easily support his argument—or if, more often, he were willing to grant the *partial* nature of his readings. In discussing a (balanced) line like Herbert’s “Shame tears my soul, my body many a wound,” Rambuss focuses our attention firmly on the body *rather* than the soul (16). One might wish, in sum, for a more “experimental” design to *Closet Devotions*—an examination of a body of material in order to discover what it might yield rather than, as it so often feels, a marshalling of material designed to support an already constructed and decided argument.

But, conversely, Mooney and her contributors might benefit from engaging with a more “experiential” side of their project. That is, they might engage more fully with the desires that lead them to study a particular set of figures, texts, and questions. The volume, after all, does not really constitute an objective experiment: a selection of materials and a narrowing of questions have been made here on the basis of certain interests. Why these particular materials and questions? What are the current interests that these studies serve? More specifically, what is the place of this set of studies in a feminist project (of “religious women’s history”) that is admitted by Mooney as foundational but that is largely implicit and unmentioned in the individual articles. While we might read in essays like Hollywood’s and Elliott’s a clear feminist commitment, and while Scott engages (negatively) with “postmodernism,” most of the authors keep their late-twentieth-century positioning and interests outside the scope of their work.

The differences between Mooney’s “experimental” and Rambuss’s “experiential” approach are at least partly disciplinary, reflecting differences between historical and (postmodern/queer) literary methodologies. Each might learn something useful from the other, as I have just suggested and as I will sketch further here, thinking particularly about the two books’ relation to period divisions and to the categories of gender and sexuality.

1: *Medieval/Early Modern*. If there is a significant difference in how these projects are articulated in relation to the late-twentieth-century moment of their production, there is also a striking difference in how they navigate the traditional period divide between the medieval and the early modern. Mooney’s study clearly focuses its attention on historical change, noting a “steady and striking shift...in depictions of female sanctity from the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries” (14). But the volume resolutely remains within the bounds of the high and late Middle Ages. Rambuss’s treatment on the other hand glances from its seventeenth-century vantage point back to the Middle Ages, even as it moves forward to the (post)modern. The medieval, however, is consistently subordinated by Rambuss to the early modern, either as *difference*—“the forms of piety we find in the religious cultures of early modern England tend to be quite different from the medieval Catholic extravaganzas that light up Bynum’s account” (17)—or *sameness*—“the body’s homoerotic possibilities [are]...as richly present in the medieval religious materials [Bynum] studies as they are in the seventeenth-century devotional verse to which we now return” (49). What we don’t find here is a real engagement with the complexities of partial similarity and difference between the two moments. Yet, the work in both Rambuss and Mooney often suggests, to this reader

at least, ways in which the medieval and early modern might be productively read with and against each other. For just one example, Rambuss sees a certain “modern subject” emerging in the seventeenth-century prayer closet, while Hollywood sees the emphasis on interiority in the thirteenth-century writings of Beatrice of Nazareth moving toward a similarly modern sense of self. What might we discern if we brought Rambuss’s Donne and Hollywood’s Beatrice together in thinking spirituality’s role in the development of modern subjectivity?

2: *Gender/Sexuality*. In Mooney’s volume, the categories man/woman and male/female tend to be treated as unproblematic: “Since each essay concerns at least one woman and one man... we can ask to what extent women’s experiences of sanctity and ideas about it, on the one hand, and men’s experiences of sanctity and ideas about it, on the other, are influenced and therefore distinguished from each other by their respective experiences of themselves as females and males in societies that attached very particular meanings to being women and to being men” (1–2). And yet the essays collected here strongly suggest some important complexities in these categories. To take just one example: if, as Mooney argues, men had difficulty “in thinking of women, even an extraordinary woman such as Clare, as their spiritual equals” (67), what do we make of Peter of Dacia’s imagining himself, as Coakley notes, as Leah, “the bridegroom’s rejected wife” (107), to Christine of Stommeln’s Rachel? Perhaps in thinking this through, we might benefit from some of the gender flexibility, complexity, and excess that Rambuss emphasizes especially in his treatment of Crashaw’s poems on Teresa of Avila: “Teresa... seems not to transcend but rather to occupy all imaginable gender space” (42). The treatment of gender in Mooney, too, might benefit from a stronger attention to sexuality. Is there a certain homoeroticism in Peter’s self-presentation as wife? Mooney depicts Clare and Francis as “a couple” (54), as does Elliott Dorothea and John, whose “union” she sees as “imbued with nuptial overtones” (168); yet neither pursues a full reading of the presumably chaste and yet potentially eroticized relations thus implied.

On the other hand, while Rambuss attends to sexuality and to a malleable “ecstatic” gender (39–42), he fails really to consider how gender is stabilized, how the gender play of the texts he considers operates beside and perhaps in conflict with insistent and coercive systems of compulsory gendering. Here, the emphasis in Mooney on how certain gender stabilities do shape spiritual experience might be useful. Further, Rambuss is able to discern some gendered/sexualized possibilities more fully than others. In treating Crashaw on Teresa, for instance, he insists on a homoeroticism, but one that is male; refusing to admit a feminized Christ here forecloses on a female/female possibility that seems to me to inhere in the verse. At other moments, Rambuss does focus on female/female desire

(46–48, 92–95), but this is secondary to his emphasis on male erotic experience; summarizing the variety of eroticism active in devotion, he tellingly neglects lesbian desire: “In one devotional conjunction we have Christ and Christian in ecstatic congress with each other as males; in the other, they come together as male and performative female. Then again, in still other eroticized devotional scenarios, gender, at least as a defining status or position, hardly seems a determinative denotation whatsoever” (68, 70).

Caroline Walker Bynum, in her foreword to *Gendered Voices*, notes the “excitement” of the essays collected by Mooney as emerging in “their engagement with the full complexities of both ‘gender’ and ‘voice,’” and she goes on to suggest: “Even more exciting...is their confidence. For the eight authors of this collection, empowered in part by their philological skills, in part by their deep historical knowledge, listen hopefully, certain of catching genuine echoes of the whispering voices of the past. They know that texts can be authenticated, strands of transmission sorted out, better and worse readings of manuscripts established. They know also that any text tells us first and foremost about itself but that we see very little in any text if it is the only one we read; the more we know, the more context we have; texts do tell us about the world from which they come” (xi).

Here, there’s a whole lot of knowing going on. Bynum is concerned (as is Scott in her essay) with countering the claims of a postmodernism that would in her view believe, after the “linguistic turn” (x), that we can’t really know anything about the past. Yet, when we move to a postmodern writer like Rambuss, we also see knowledge being strongly claimed; Rambuss no more hesitates to draw conclusions about early modern sensibility and practices than do the contributors to Mooney’s volume hesitate to know the medieval past. Indeed, both *Gendered Voices* and *Closet Devotions*, though in quite different ways, evince a strong “confidence,” which I would emphasize in the etymological sense of a *believing with*. The essays in Mooney try to enter the religious world of the texts they treat; Rambuss’s insistent juxtaposition of early modern and postmodern queer texts suggests a belief in their mutually informing qualities.

While valuing each of these approaches, I would call for a bit more *diffidence* in each. Do we really know what medieval gender is, as is usually the assumption in the essays collected by Mooney? Are the things that seem similar in early modern and postmodern culture really expressions of the same sort of impulse, as Rambuss repeatedly suggests? And is the way to understand medieval Christian devotion really to *believe with*—to immerse ourselves in the practices, beliefs, assumptions of those being studied? Both Rambuss and Mooney’s contributors do this, in their radically different ways. But might other, equally useful things be learned, for

instance, by means of a less confident *standing outside*—with those who might not have wanted, been able, or been allowed to participate in the Christian sanctity and devotion at the heart of these two studies?

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Jeffrey Powers-Beck. *Writing the Flesh: The Herbert Family Dialogue*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998. 290 pp. incl. bibliography, 3 appendices, and index. \$54.50 cloth. ISBN 0-8207-0283-5.

Jeffrey Powers-Beck's *Writing the Flesh* is organized around the refreshing proposition that the settlement of one's family affairs has a measurable effect on one's poetry. This idea, delivered with the force of a manifesto, is derived not from Freud but from historicist, materialist, and feminist critiques of cultural and women's histories (although Freud makes a welcome appearance). By observing that "writing sometimes takes family conflict itself as its subject, portraying the domestic scene as a locus of natural and supernatural crisis," Powers-Beck moves the discussion of Herbert's witty religious lyrics from ecclesiastical and political concerns to the more insistent demands of siblings, parents, and near relations, in this instance Herbert's scandalously young stepfather, Sir John Danvers. Herbert was the seventh of ten children and fifth of seven sons, at least three others of whom, Lord Edward of Cherbury, Sir Henry, and Thomas, also left literary remains. Their mother, Magdalen Herbert Danvers, married young and was widowed in 1596 when Herbert was three. When she remarried in 1609, the year Herbert entered Trinity College at age sixteen, Danvers was twenty-one.

The text chiefly scrutinized here is *The Temple*, with particular attention paid to "The Church Porch," "The Family," "Affliction I and V," "Love III," and "The Church Militant." Powers-Beck also translates some of the elegiac Latin written for Magdalen's funeral and occasionally calls upon *The Country Parson*. His methodological forebears are Lawrence Stone's 1977 *Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* and Gary Waller's 1993 *Sidney Family Romance*. His impressively deployed critical pretexts include Martz, Patrides, Schoenfeldt, Shuger, Summers, Strier, Vendler, Watson, and many others; biographical details derive from Aubry's 1669 *Brief Lives*, Isaac Walton's 1670 *Life*, and a 1652 biography by Barnabas Oley.

This last account lends the book its title and nominal argument. As Powers explains, "Oley observed that the poet 'writ Flesh and Blood' in