

Virtual Pilgrimages in the Convent

Review of:

Kathryn M. Rudy, *Virtual Pilgrimages in the Convent. Imagining Jerusalem in the Late Middle Ages (Disciplina Monastica. Studies on Medieval Monastic Life 8)*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2011, 475 pp., XIV colour plates, 93 b&w illustrations.

In 1417 Sister Tryude Schutten asked another sister in her community in Diepenveen to accompany her on a pilgrimage to Rome, leaving on January 7th. The other replied declining her invitation because she thought she might be slow and hold up Sister Tryude, but asked how long she was planning to stay. Tryude said she had visited before and remained three days but this time she was not sure how long she would be there. The interchange seems unremarkable, but in the context of the subject of Kathryn Rudy's book it becomes intriguing, for the pilgrimage referred to is not a real journey across Europe, but a virtual journey in the mind and carried out within the convent walls. One of the reasons this is intriguing for the modern reader is because of its resonance with twenty-first-century virtual experiences pursued by millions in cyberspace, who, like the Dutch nuns, rely on visual aids designed to stimulate the imagination to make the adventure as real as possible.

Those visual aids developed to assist the journeys of the late medieval cyber pilgrims are the focus of Rudy's study: *Virtual Pilgrimages in the Convent. Imagining Jerusalem in the Late Middle Ages*. Specifically she looks at a group of Middle Dutch manuscripts and late medieval artefacts related to the lives of female religious which were created to aid their imaginative journeys. Many of her textual sources are not available in print, and very few in modern translations, and one of the services to scholarship which this book provides is the transcription and translation of eleven unpublished manuscripts, taking up about a third of the book. After an introduction, the main text is divided into four chapters which explore, in turn, the earlier medieval travel literature and pilgrims' diaries upon which the virtual pilgrimage aids were based ('Souvenirs Recontextualised'); the texts themselves and their accompanying images ('Interiority: Stationary Pilgrimage Devotions'); those examples which required the votary to physically engage with these spiritual exercises ('Exteriority: Somatic Pilgrimage Devotions') and finally the relationship of this material with devotional trends in Western Europe as a whole ('A Wider View').

Much of the secondary literature which Rudy uses is in Dutch, though Jeffery Hamburger and James Marrow are both Anglophone scholars to whom she pays tribute. The highly emotional responses called for from the votaries which she discusses are predicated on an understanding of visual imagery as part of a real human narrative, a development traced by Marrow in his book on Passion imagery

and which transforms the nature of religious art in the Late Middle Ages.¹ Hamburger's numerous publications on the place of art in the spiritual life of medieval nuns raise and examine the question of specifically gendered approaches to this subject matter.² The work of Henk Van Os on late medieval devotional imagery and Caroline Walker Bynum also inform these pages, especially the latter's account of the sensationally somatic religious practices of certain female religious in 'The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages' published in her volume of essays entitled *Fragmentation and Redemption*.³ However, the precise field investigated here is remarkably untilled in the academic literature. Rudy herself explains this in her opening acknowledgements where she describes how, having sifted through the existing printed catalogues of manuscripts relevant to her research, she found a number of significant items in the originals omitted. As she puts it, these 'became as interesting as those listed' because at the time they were published there was 'no existing category to describe (them)' (p.15).

The cultural background to virtual pilgrimage is the affective piety of the late Middle Ages, particularly evident in Northern Europe and manifested in the literature of mysticism and *compassio*, notably Thomas of Kempen's *Imitatio Christi*, in religious movements particularly the *Devotio Moderna*, and in new models of communal life such as the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life. Other religious groups especially the Franciscan Tertiaries and Augustinian Canonesses, ranging from loosely knit communal groups to strictly enclosed orders, also loom large in this account. Rudy notes that the cumulative results of these developments were attractive to women as they were communicated largely in a vernacular language, emotionally explorative, and conducive to female fellowship. She demonstrates also that the virtual pilgrimage was a response to the limited freedom of women, and especially cloistered women, during the period. Their vows forbade them to travel and so their desires too were expected to conform to these strictures. The virtual pilgrimage was supposed to be a preferable option to the actual alternative which, in any case so far as the Holy Land was concerned, was vastly curtailed from 1453 when Constantinople fell to the Turks. A further motive, returned to several times throughout the book, was the indulgencing of such devotional activities promoted particularly by the Franciscans.

Skilfully structured, the four chapters painstakingly trace the origins and development of a complex phenomenon which shows how travel literature, where sites were referred to in relation to their topography, was developed into texts where holy sites were visited chronologically in the imagination of the votary, as

¹ James. H. Marrow, *Passion iconography in Northern European art of the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance: a study of the transformation of sacred metaphor into descriptive narrative*, Kortrijk, Belgium: Van Ghemmert, 1979.

² Jeffrey Hamburger, *Nuns as artists: the visual culture of a medieval convent*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997; _____, *The visual and visionary: art and female spirituality in late medieval Germany*, New York: Zone Books, 1998; _____, *St John the Divine: the deified Evangelist in medieval art and theology*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002; _____ (ed), *Frauen, Kloster, Kunst: neue Forschungen zur Kulturgeschichte des Mittelalters*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2007.

³ Henk van Os, *The art of devotion in the Late Middle Ages*, London: Merrell Holberton, 1994; Caroline Walker Bynum, 'The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages' in *Fragmentation and Redemption. Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, New York: Zone Books, 1991, 181-238.

they were experienced in the lives of Christ and the Virgin; and how texts designed for spiritual contemplation in the mind came to be complemented by those which required physical interaction such as pacing prescribed distances or imitating the posture of Christ as he moved painfully along the *Via Crucis*. The focus on textual content which opens the first chapter increasingly shifts to the book as material object in subsequent sections as other aspects of material culture are integrated into the account. Marginal comments, evidence of handlings, erasings and smudges become part of the story of physical interaction between the user's body and the manuscript. The mostly male-authored travel literature written as a result of first hand or mediated experience of pilgrimage sites is complemented by a section on souvenirs from those sites, contact relics consisting of earth and pebbles representing the sacred geography of the areas where they were found. In this section too the measurements of journeys made by the cast of the sacred dramas enacted in these pilgrimage locations, and lengths of objects such as the clothes they wore, and the cross Christ carried, themselves become objects of devotion. Rudy makes a telling distinction at this point between the abstract measured lines incised into the cloister walls of a Cistercian monastery representing the measurements of Christ's sepulchre and the highly rubricated lines in a manuscript made for nuns, giving the dimensions of Christ's wounds, the red ink on animal skin evoking torn flesh and oozing blood.

The materials brought together in chapter two to consider the development of virtual pilgrimage texts includes biographies of some of the particularly devout sisters who used this form of devotion to enhance their empathy with the suffering of Christ and the Virgin, and visual devices employed as devotional aids. Multi-episodic Passion paintings from Lisbon and Louvain are here chosen as case studies explaining how such devices stimulated and directed the imagination, acting as 'memory houses of the Passion'. This section provides a fascinating dimension to Mary Carruthers' ground-breaking work on medieval memory and her contribution to the literature on the medieval idea of *ductus*, or journeying through a work of art.⁴ Moreover, the conventional image of the donor at her prie-dieu in the Lisbon painting can be related to many such images of the late medieval period and is a reminder that even much less complex compositions than this one should be considered first and foremost as visualisations of the donors' imaginations.

The somatic devotions which are the subject of chapter 3 build on the foregoing material and provide some of the most remarkable insights into virtual pilgrimage devotions. As Rudy remarks, in the same way as modern method acting, the movements and postures recommended as part of these holy exercises had an impact on their emotional quality in terms of the amount of *compassio* they evinced from the votary. The nun moved through her own architectural spaces which were marked out as a model of those paced by Christ and the Virgin. In order to identify the imaginative model with the actual pilgrimage sites a text, in one instance, even provided the votary with a phrase book of Middle Dutch phrases translated into the

⁴ Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: a study of memory in medieval culture*, 2nd ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008; _____, 'The concept of ductus, or, journeying through a work of art' in Mary J. Carruthers, (ed.), *Rhetoric beyond words: delight and persuasion in the arts of the Middle Ages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 190-213.

language spoken by the Saracens. Not only did the nuns walk with the subjects of their devotions but they were also enjoined to share with them fundamental human activities, notably the partaking of meals. Such texts became 'stage directions for a passion play for one person' (p.195)

The final chapter contextualises these intense devotional practices and considers how they translated into different social, cultural and geographic milieux. Essentially lay religious phenomena, such as the widespread use of books of hours, and the much later development of the Stations of the Cross are shown to be in some respects parallel devotions to those described in the earlier chapters, sometimes more emotionally diluted and much abbreviated. A fifteenth-century book of hours from southern Holland for instance, not only contains somatic instructions attached to one of its prayers but also includes decorative and textual additions supplied by the owner herself. These show the importance she attached to the somatic use of the text and the indulgences granted when prayers were literally enacted, in this case by the devotee walking prescribed distances as she prayed. The owner was asked to walk with the Virgin as she visited her son during the last stages of his life in Jerusalem. The impact of the widespread use of print is considered and, in this context, the popularity of a kind of pilgrimage literature related to, but essentially different from the virtual pilgrimages experienced by late medieval nuns which are the focus of the book. These are texts such as the Cistercian Guillaume de Digulleville's trilogy on the pilgrimages of human life, of the soul and of Jesus Christ, which were widely transmitted in the period and reveal that pilgrimage was frequently understood as a metaphor of the experience of life itself. The virtual pilgrimage falls between actual pilgrimage on the one hand, and on the other the notion of the practice adopted as a pious construct in order to explain life's experiences and comment upon the choices it offers. In society as a whole virtual pilgrimage was never as widely popular as its actual and metaphoric forms.

However the spirit in which these devotions were performed is deeply relevant for our understanding of the emotional and physical nature of late medieval religious life. They bring a culture which survives in subdued form today in artefacts such as faded wall-paintings or sculpture deprived of its polychromy, vividly back to life. The picture they give of the period needs of course to be tempered by other considerations. It would be interesting to know for instance more about how the votaries' general theological and intellectual understanding was brought to bear on the subject of some of these devotions. The complex visual commentary on Salvation and the Second Coming set out in the *Besloten hofje* in chapter 1 is as cerebrally challenging as it is physically stimulating to the senses. The combined response would be a rich experience indeed. As with every good book, there are various trails laid which are not followed up. Of particular interest was the frequent linking of the site of Catherine of Alexandria's shrine at her monastery in the Sinai desert with pilgrimage to the Holy Land which seems not to be explained simply by their relative geographic proximity.

This fascinating and scholarly account is a valuable addition to Brepols' *Disciplina Monastica* series, and has set up a signpost to further interdisciplinary study in this and related fields which other scholars will be eager to follow and emulate.

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