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Tanya Stabler Miller. *The Beguines of Medieval Paris: Gender, Patronage, and Spiritual Authority*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. 304 pp. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). | ISBN 978-0-8122-4607-0. |

Review by Cecilia Gaposchkin, Dartmouth College.

Of the many manifestations of urbanization and lay religiosity in the decades around 1200 were the beguines, non-professed unmarried religious woman who lived and worshipped communally, and often supported themselves through manual labor. Their aim was to live religious lives of charity and devotion in the world, not to be cloistered from it. The cluster of individual houses in which they gathered became known as beguinages. Often under the guidance of a senior beguine, or “mistress,” they were founded all over Western Europe, but were primarily concentrated in the Low Countries and Germany. Individual beguines were revered, with Marie d’Oignies as perhaps the best-known example. But, predictably, in time, as women claiming to live religious lives but untethered by a rule, they came under suspicion and, following the trial and execution in Paris in 1310 of Marguerite Porete who was reported to be a beguine, were subject to papal censure at the Council of Vienne in 1311-1312.

The broad lines of this phenomenon are well known, traced influentially by Herbert Grundmann (1935), Ernest McDonnell (1954) and most recently Walter Simons (2001).^[1] It is a history whose gravity centers north. But students of (Saint) Louis IX and the Capetians (among whom, me) will know that among Louis’ charitable activities was the foundation of the Grande Beguinage of Paris sometime after 1254. Tanya Stabler Miller’s elegantly structured and carefully argued study of the Paris beguinage in the second half of the thirteenth century and early fourteenth century is the first monographic treatment of this important institution since Léon LeGrand’s “Les béguines de Paris” in 1893, more than forty years *before* even Grundmann placed beguine history within the wider context of gender and religious change.^[2] We know a lot more now than we knew then, and our perspective has shifted enormously. Stabler Miller not only places the Grande Beguinage within a story wrought by over a century of study, but integrates this with archival discovery to push that historiography further. In addition to the standard institutional and narrative sources, she draws on sermons, tax records, and testaments. Often reading against the grain, she seeks to uncover the lives of the women themselves behind the sermons preached to them, the exempla based on them, or the tax notation recorded about them. She dissects evidence of the personal and professional lives of individual beguines, showing how they formed community, integrated and profited from the Paris economy, and participated in urban spiritual life while maintaining their unique mission and identity. Among her most interesting findings are that the beguines of Paris were concentrated in the silk industry; that they were closely connected to, and respected within, the university circles at the Sorbonne; and that royal support of the Grande Beguinage was a part of the Capetian construction of identity even in the years after Vienne.

The first chapter treats Louis IX’s foundation of the Grande Beguinage. The foundation (one of a spate of royal support for new forms of religious life) appears to have been modeled on the court-sponsored beguinages of the north, from which early mistresses were imported to oversee the Paris foundation.

The king provided not only the land, but also ongoing forms of material and financial support, including probably stipends for poorer women. Louis arranged for Dominican oversight of the community. Stabler Miller makes the nice point that the spiritual aims of beguine women resonated neatly with Louis' own--to live a truly religious life devoted to God while still actively living and working in the world.

Chapter two treats the foundation itself. Joining the beguinage did not involve permanent vows or the relinquishing of property, and it thus provided beguine women with greater flexibility and autonomy than other options for a religious life. The community, overseen by a mistress and supported by the advice of senior beguines, was made up of women of different classes and ages. The royal beguinage was located close to the heart of Paris' wool quarter, probably allowing a number of women to support themselves through their own labor in the textile industry. This was in keeping with the beguine valorization of manual labor. "Life in the beguinage, then, did not entail a break from the economic and social world outside the enclosure" (p. 49).

Chapter three, entitled "Beguines, Silk, and the City," is perhaps the most exciting of the book. Based largely on the tax records of Philip the Fair, and triangulating with testamentary evidence, this chapter moves outside of the Grande Beguinage and into parts of the city, particularly the silk district, where, as Stabler Miller shows, groups of beguines set up shop, creating networks engaged in silk production and commerce. This was skilled (not menial) work that allowed beguines to practice a valued trade and thus integrate into the economic and social fabric of the city. Groups of beguines clustered into smaller communities, and beguine women of different statuses and resources produced communities of affection and profit, supporting themselves through skilled labor in a lucrative profession in which they were able to gain status and autonomy.

Chapter four explores connections between masters at the Sorbonne and the Beguinage. Based mostly on the evidence of sermon and other preaching materials, Stabler Miller highlights the role that the image of the beguine served in masters' sermons (and especially those of Robert of Sorbonne) as a model of piety. These mentions of the beguine also serve as evidence for masters' preaching throughout the year at the Beguinage. Even though, for the most part, the evidence is of male clerics exhorting female religious to proper work and piety, Stabler Miller insists that the Beguines in return provided the masters with eager subjects for instruction and exemplars of probity.

Chapter five treats the religious and intellectual life of the Paris beguines. The author examines slivers of archival and sermon evidence in light of recent work on beguine spirituality and mystical writing, drawing comparison with better known sisters in the Low Countries but trying to carve out a picture of literacy and intellectual life as manifested in Paris. The beguinage had a school; beguines sang and prayed in common. They owned books as prized possessions. The chapter title, "Religious Education and Spiritual Collaboration," underscores the author's constant search for beguine agency as she finds evidence of beguine voices and views in even texts written by clergy. The core of this chapter is the careful discussion of evidence of the beguine *magistra's* sermons excerpted in Raoul of Châtauroux's collection of *reportationes*, which serves both to illustrate the particular emphases of her teaching (along with its ties to larger beguine themes and differences for authoritative preaching), and the esteem which the inclusion in the florilegium suggests. As a whole, this chapter argues that, "Even as clerics sought to instruct beguines, they consciously and deliberately drew on beguine teachings, which did not always fall in line with the teachings of their clerical advisors" (p. 105).

Chapter six turns to the ways in which beguines' particular form of religiosity exposed them to suspicion and charges of heresy. Drawing again largely on the sermons from Parisian preachers, the author examines the various ways beguines were understood as religiously worthy, both in comparison to secular clerics and monks. Their lack of formal education highlighted their greatest virtues, especially their *caritas*, which was thus considered instinctual rather than merely intellectual. But this lack of intellectual grounding might be associated with mystical knowledge that was, in the clerics' view,

suspect. Certainly, this ongoing discourse was tied up with a broader clerical anxiety over a lay and especially feminine apostolate. The internal contradictions and deep suspicions of these women exposed by the preaching material establishes the context for the sad story of Marguerite Porete, since, in her assertive claims to special knowledge, she confirmed precisely the concern expressed over the four previous decades by the university elites engaging with and preaching to beguine women.

Chapter seven, the bookend to the first chapter, is on the Capetian's continued support of the Beguinage after the devastating decrees of Vienne in 1311-12, as part of the sanctified legacy of Louis IX. After tracing the institutional history and the fallout of the Vienne decrees, the author chronicles continued Capetian support for the Beguinage through the middle of the fifteenth century. This support, connected to the memory of Saint Louis, was part of Capetian, and then Valois, saintly identity. The pressures of the Hundred Years' War however tested and diminished royal support. The foundation's physical buildings were ultimately transferred to a branch of the Observant wing of the Order of St. Clare, becoming the *Filles de l'Ave Maria*.

There is no formal conclusion; only a final paragraph at the end of the last chapter. A short appendix follows, entitled "Beguines whose occupations are known," that supports the author's argument about the silk economy. Careful readers of LeGrand, McDonnell, Simons, and Nicole Bériou (on sermons) might often feel on familiar ground, but Stabler Miller integrates this scholarship, as well as new archival work, into sustained and focused study of the unique Parisian context.[3] Sometimes, Stabler Miller seems to me to push her search for agency a bit too far. But this is often a feature of histories that read between the lines and against the grain. And without interpretive imagination, these courageous women and the meaning their lives brought to history, would be lost to us.

NOTES

[1] Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: the Historical Links Between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women's Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century, with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism*. Translated from the German by Steven Rowan (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995). Ernest William McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture, with Special Emphasis on the Belgian Scene* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press: 1954). Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies - Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

[2] Léon LeGrand, "Les béguines de Paris," in *Mémoires de la Société de Paris et de l'Île de France* 20 (1893): 295-357.

[3] Legrand, "Les béguines de Paris;" McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*; Simons, *Cities of Ladies*; Nicole Bériou, *L'avènement des maîtres de la Parole. La prédication à Paris au XIIIe siècle*. 2 volumes. (Collection des Etudes Augustiniennes, Série Moyen Age et Temps Modernes, 31) Paris: Institut des Etudes Augustiniennes, 1998.

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