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Review of Related Lives: Confessors and Their Female Penitents, 1450-1750, by J. Bilinkoff

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Jodi Bilinkoff. *Related Lives: Confessors and Their Female Penitents, 1450–1750*.

Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005. xii + 182 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$45. ISBN: 0–8014–4251–6.

With *Related Lives: Confessors and Their Female Penitents, 1450–1750*, Jodi Bilinkoff has made a substantial contribution to the study of early modern Catholicism. Though scholars have certainly explored the inherently complicated relationship between holy women and their spiritual advisors, the hallmark of Bilinkoff's work is to offer a broader overview than the case studies that have dominated the existing scholarship, and in turn to stimulate new questions and directions for future research. Bilinkoff's book is a well-written and engaging examination of cases of profound spiritual friendship and collaboration. Particularly notable is the scope of Bilinkoff's research: she draws on cases from Spain, Italy, France, Portugal, Spanish America, and French Canada. This allows her to draw some important conclusions about early modern Catholicism, a field which she rightly notes has been geographically compartmentalized.

The first chapters establish the contours of the confessor-penitent relationship. In chapter 1 Bilinkoff examines why women sought out spiritual directors: because it allowed them "sustained and serious conversation with a member of the opposite sex" (18). She also examines the motivations of male clergy to take responsibility for the spiritual lives of these women. Chapter 2 explores a specific manifestation of the confessor's enthusiasm: the decision to write a spiritual biography of the woman in his care.

Chapter 3 analyzes these life stories more closely. As Bilinkoff notes, these texts defy categorization since many of them were an amalgam of parts authored both by the penitent and the confessor. While the autobiographical statements of women in these texts have been used by many scholars to recapture a female voice in the early modern world, Bilinkoff also focuses closely on the male-authored portions. This adds a critical and often-overlooked dimension to our understanding of how these life stories functioned narratively and didactically. Confessors used these texts to glorify their cities and their religious orders. They used their hagiographies to highlight their spiritual intimacy with exceptional women. In this, Bilinkoff argues persuasively against those who have seen the male role in the creation of these texts simply as one that co-opts and controls the voices of women.

Chapter 4 examines the appeal of these texts, arguing that part of what makes them so compelling is the interpersonal dynamics they reflect. Here we encounter firsthand accounts of spiritually exceptional women who yearned for spiritual direction, expressing joy and relief when they were finally matched with responsive male confessors. For their part, these priests also hungered for intimacy with these exemplary women, seeking inspiration and even legitimization in their ties to them.

Chapter 5 explores the dissemination of these texts and their audiences. What is revealed here is a lively world of religious exchange where women separated by place and time still had access to the spiritual biographies of their spiritual foremothers. These works served as solace and inspiration to women embarking on similar paths.

Not all readers will be comfortable with Bilinkoff's primary reliance on Spanish examples, a feature of the work that she herself acknowledges at the outset. This possible objection should not detract, however, from the model that Bilinkoff has provided. Future studies of the relationships between priests and their female penitents and the collaborative texts that they produced will find inspiration and direction in her engaging analysis. This is particularly true in her sensitive handling of the complexity of her sources. She challenges the notions of these life stories as so formulaic and didactic as to render them useless to the historian. She argues persuasively that each has its own unique features. Further, she contends that we must take this literature seriously because so much of it was produced and widely disseminated in the early modern period. We simply cannot ignore what these texts can tell us about the "production and diffusion of cultural values" (9). And this is the lynchpin of Bilinkoff's most important conclusions about the enduring vigor of Catholicism in the early modern world. By demonstrating the appeal of these texts and the relationships that produced them, Bilinkoff has made a significant contribution. Her study illuminates the rich and compelling nature of the dynamic between male confessors and their female penitents, thereby adding tremendous dimension to our understanding of Catholic devotion in this period.

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