

Anne Winston-Allen. *Convent Chronicles: Women Writing About Women and Reform in the Late Middle Ages*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004. pp. xvii + 345 + illustrations.

Anne Winston-Allen's *Convent Chronicles: Women Writing About Women and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* is a significant work of scholarship that deserves a wide readership among scholars of convents, religion, and women writers. Her focus is the Observant reform of convents in the German-speaking territories of the fifteenth century. She illuminates a fascinating world in which women accepted, resisted, and modified attempts to bring their convents into line with Observant initiatives. What makes the work so compelling and important is Winston-Allen's access to the words of the women themselves. While the reform of convents has received considerable attention in recent studies of female monasticism, this work is sometimes limited by its reliance on the accounts of male reformers. Winston-Allen's prodigious research and analysis, however, allows us to hear the voices of nuns, sometimes vigorously challenging the

demands of reform and other times embracing their potential. These rich sources allow Winston-Allen to highlight a cross-section of issues ranging from convent reform to female literary production.

The first two chapters set up the context for the Observant reforms and the role of nuns and convents within it. Chapter One examines convent life in the late Middle Ages. Addressing a host of issues ranging from why women professed to the financial resources of convents to daily life within the cloister, Winston-Allen uses the nuns' writing and secondary sources to paint a vivid picture of medieval female monasticism. Yet her use of secondary sources here and throughout the work is a bit too broad. The works she draws upon range chronologically from the ninth to the sixteenth century and geographically from England to Venice. Particularly problematic is her reliance on Jutta Sperling's

work on Venetian convents. While Sperling's work is quite solid, the role of convents and enclosure in Venice is idiosyncratic, and that evidence should not be extrapolated to other contexts.

Chapter Two turns to an explanation of late medieval piety and the rise of the Observant movement. Winston-Allen begins with an analysis of what women themselves said about their participation in the beguine movement. These female narratives of the movement would prove to be a source of strength and solidarity for nuns during later reform campaigns. Winston-Allen then provides an excellent explanation of the Observant movement—which, as she notes involved various religious orders—and the participation and vested interests of all those involved (laity, city councils, and territorial rulers, for example).

Chapters Three and Four form the dramatic core of the book as they address how women both accepted and rejected reform. Particularly noteworthy in these chapters is Winston-Allen's keen analysis of the issue of

monastic reform. As she notes in her introduction, historians of female monasticism are presented with a vexing dilemma when confronted with women who accepted reforms, especially enclosure, forced upon them by a male clerical hierarchy. As she writes: "Clearly, it is difficult to decide who the heroines are here: the women who fought for the movement or those who fought against it" (7). By listening attentively and analyzing the words of the nuns themselves, Winston-Allen is able to take these women on their own terms, seeing what they gained or lost as they wrestled with the proposition of reform.

In Chapter Three, she analyzes how women accepted and participated in the Observant reforms. Here she draws on a deep base of sources that include letters, convent chronicles, and *vitae*. These offer lively accounts of how women made the reforms their own; they did not simply blindly accept what the male reformers offered them. They struggled to ensure, for example, that the financial burdens of reform would not be too onerous.

They traveled as part of reform missions, taking the message of Observant reform to their sister communities. Many women, swept up in the spirit of Observant monasticism, independently introduced reform into their convents. Chapter Four examines those women who rejected reform. Although there are fewer accounts of resistance in a female voice, Winston-Allen is still able to capture the spirit of these women as they sought to protect tradition and their property. Here, too, we have vivid recountings that often included dramatic episodes of physical resistance and defiant voices. In both Chapters Three and Four, a chief strength of Winston-Allen's analysis is her comparison of male and female accounts of reform. This juxtaposition allows her to isolate what was important to the nuns in these moments of change. They tended, for example, to value their active participation in reform when it succeeded (a role not often attributed to them by male accounts). Cases of resistance offered by female observers emphasized not the recalcitrance so often cited by male authors

but instead emphasized loyalty to the abbess and the convent's traditions.

Having established this vivid world of female-authored chronicles and other documents, Winston-Allen turns in Chapter Five to an analysis of access to the written word and writing within the convents. Ultimately, she argues, these nuns experienced a literary "renaissance." In fact, the very experience of Observant reform stimulated this outpouring of the written word.

In *Convent Chronicles*, Winston-Allen has written a masterfully engaging and important analysis. This book should be required reading for any scholars interested in female monasticism and women's literary production.

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