

Medieval Saints and Modern Screens: Divine Visions as Cinematic Experience, by Alicia Spencer-Hall. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018. Pp. 304. ISBN: 9789462982277; e-ISBN: 9789048532179.

First, to avoid any misunderstanding of the title, this book is not about the depiction of saints in film or about any specific cinematic treatment of saints (for example, Joan of Arc in the movies). Rather, it is a fascinating study of the experience of holy women's mystical visions through an analogy with the modern experience of media such as film, television, and virtual reality. Alicia Spencer-Hall takes the perspective of contemporary theories in film and cultural studies to bring a new and singular perspective on the medieval saints' lived experience of visions of God; she likens hagiography to a cinematic medium and draws analogies between the depiction, and even creation, of saints with the modern phenomenon of celebrity culture. Through a series of medieval and modern *exempla*, the book offers contemporary reference points that enable a modern reader to read, see, and engage with medieval depictions of holy women and their ecstatic visualizations of the divine on a level that bridges the medieval and the modern.

The author's textual corpus of study, for medieval saints, is a group of twelve prose *vitae* of non-canonized holy women from the Low Countries within an area focused on Liège: the "Holy Women of Liège" or the *Liégeoises* (21). They are: Alice of Scharbeek (the Leper), Beatrice of Nazareth, Christina *Mirabilis* (the Astonishing), Elizabeth of Spalbeek, Ida of Léau, Ida of Louvain, Ida of Nivelles, Juliana of Mont-Cornillon, Lutgard of Aywières, Margaret of Ypres, Marie of Oignies, and Yvette of Huy. All flourished within the late twelfth to early thirteenth centuries; eight had *vitae* composed by known male hagiographers in the thirteenth centuries. They were nuns, beguines, avowed virgins, anchoresses, and at least one chaste wife (Marie of Oignies) and one pious widow who became an anchoress (Yvette of Huy) (21; Table 1: 22–23). Perhaps most importantly, many of them knew each other or knew of one another. The Lives of these women "are replete with ecstatic visionary experiences" (21), crucial to Spencer-Hall's argument that hagiography is a cinematic medium. This argument develops through chapters 1 and 2, wherein the language of cinema and cinematic sight is brought to bear on the mystic's visionary experience of God.

In chapter 3, Spencer-Hall turns her attention to celebrity culture, the "celebrification" of the saint through hagiography, and how hagiographers (when known) acquire a celebrity status (although lesser) through association, much like people attached to modern celebrities. Her main example is Marie d'Oignies

and Marie's hagiographer, Jacques de Vitry, who became famous, himself, in his promotion of Marie the mystic. Spencer-Hall takes as her analogy the career of Jessica Simpson, a contemporary singer-actress and reality TV star, who has managed her own celebrity in the media, and her lesser-known hairdresser, responsible for her elegant coiffure, who acquired his own, albeit much lesser, fame. For anonymous medieval hagiographers, however, the example of Jacques de Vitry remains out of reach. Nevertheless, it is a thought-provoking argument that then turns to the case of Margery Kempe and her desire to associate herself with the "A-list" of holy women, such as Marie of Oignies and Birgitta of Sweden. Margery is a failed medieval celebrity; she is, instead, a modern medieval celebrity, thanks to the discovery of, and engagement with, her book by modern academic fans. Spencer-Hall draws an analogy with another reality TV celebrity, Kim Kardashian, a woman who has managed her rise to celebrity icon (a word that, as Spencer-Hall points out, resonates in medieval visual devotionals). Spencer-Hall's analysis of Kardashian stands on its own as an astute study of modern "auto-celebrification"; her status comes not from any authority, but from her fan base, in much the same way that Margery Kempe never gained any official recognition as a genuine female mystic, but spent her life on a nontraditional path toward sanctity. Even Kempe partakes in the celebrity of Marie of Oignies, by mentioning her in her own book.

Readers who are not familiar with Jessica Simpson or who do not keep up with the Kardashians will, nevertheless, be able to follow the argument. Spencer-Hall provides sufficient background and details to make her point. It is not entirely clear why she chose the examples of these two modern-day celebrities, and one well might question where and how the genuine spiritual devotion and faith of both Marie and Margery come into play. Spencer-Hall is a bit light on this aspect, but not on the affective responses and consequences of both the medieval and modern women's experiences, where she lays out an intriguing prospect for further interpretations. In chapter 4, she explores the world(s) of virtual reality, in particular a site called Second Life, where users can create other selves (avatars) and another life. The holy woman's mystical vision is likened to a virtual world, wherein she interacts with God, yet only she has the codes to access it. A reader not familiar with virtual reality might find the technical terms a hard slog, but, again, Spencer-Hall provides enough explanation to allow a novice (like this reviewer) to follow her argument (at least, I hope I did). The focus is decidedly on the visual; VR technology has not yet been able to offer complete, immersive sensory experiences, but that may not be far off.

In her conclusion, Spencer-Hall returns to the gendered lives of the

Liégeoises, who interact with God within a male-controlled social and ecclesiastical sphere. She names these women “Veronicas,” holy women who have had Christ imprinted upon them, as the image of Christ was imprinted upon Veronica’s veil. The veil signifies both a screen which projects an image and a barrier which conceals, but in this way, these holy women are able to pursue their spiritual careers without male clerical interference. No cleric may prevent their visions and few can participate in them. Although this book might not appeal to everyone, its engagement with cinema, celebrity, and cyberspace opens up a way for medievalists to connect, in all senses, to new technology and its potential impact on our field, in particular the lives and experiences of holy women whose close encounters with the divine may be all too strange to us.

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