

P. H. Cullum and Katherine J. Lewis, eds. *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*. University of Toronto Press, 2004. pp. 227.

PH. Cullum says in his introduction to *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, “although we knew other people who were interested in aspects of medieval masculinity, we felt that the issue of holiness and masculinity was an area that had not had much attention yet paid to it” (2). Cullum’s assertion may seem strange, given the recent, vigorous interest in gender in medieval texts. But such studies tend to focus on gender roles, especially women’s roles or the transcendence of gender norms. For example, medieval hagiographical texts’ portrayal of holy women with masculine aspects, a practice perhaps originating with Jerome’s famous idea that a celibate woman could become a man through her chastity, has been much studied. But, as Cullum notes, despite interest in the masculinity of holy women, few scholars have actually examined the connections between holiness and masculinity itself. Indeed, the obvious question

for scholars interested in gender and holiness is, “What makes holiness particularly *masculine*—especially in Christianity, where the traditional feminine traits of passivity and suffering are holy?”

Holiness and Masculinity does not directly answer this question, but its essays explore many other aspects of holiness and masculinity between the late Classical era and the Reformation. Most of the essays focus on English expressions of masculine holiness, though several others study expressions from other countries. Emma Pettit’s “Holiness and Masculinity in Aldhelm’s *Opus Geminatum*” discusses the differences in Aldhelm’s portrayal of male and female saints in an effort to pinpoint holy masculinity. Jacqueline Murray’s “Masculinizing Religious Life: Sexual Prowess, the Battle for Chastity, and Monastic Identity” posits that the representation of chastity as a battle emerges as a coping mechanism for religious men

to prove their masculinity in a secular world when sexual and martial prowess, the usual expressions of masculinity, are forbidden to them by the Church. Christopher C. Craun's "Matronly Monks: Theodoret of Cyrillus' Sexual Imagery in the *Historia Religiosa*" discusses the paradoxical construction of ascetics as both feminine in relation to God and masculine in their asceticism. Carolyn Diskant Muir's "Bride or Bridegroom: Masculine Identity in Mystic Marriages" investigates the little-studied phenomenon of males' mystic marriages and shows the gender differences manifested in such mystic unions. Meri Heinomen's "Henry Suso and the Divine Knighthood" shows how Suso's *Leben* and other works advocate different types of holiness for men and women based on secular gender expectations. Shaun Tougher's comically titled "Holy Eunuchs! Masculinity and Eunuch Saints in Byzantium" explores the representation of Byzantine eunuch saints as masculine in their *vitae*. Robert Mills' "The Signification of the Tonsure" studies the different and contradictory cultural implications of the tonsure,

and lack of hair generally. Dawn Marie Hayes's essay, "Christian Sanctuary and Repository of France's Political Culture: the Construction of Holiness and Masculinity at the Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis, 987-1328," shows the links between holiness, masculinity, and kingship in the architecture, symbolism, and political connections of France's Saint-Denis Abbey. Edward Christie, in "Self-Mastery and Submission: Holiness and Masculinity in the Lives of Anglo-Saxon Martyr-Kings," discusses the masculinization of the saint-kings' submission to Christ and of their martyrdoms. In "Edmund of East Anglia, Henry VI, and Ideals of Kingly Masculinity," Katherine J. Lewis explores Lydgate's connections of kingliness, masculinity, and holiness in his life of St. Edmund. W. M. Ormrod's "Monarchy, Martyrdom, and Masculinity: England in the Later Middle Ages" describes the use of the martyrdom trope and its associated holiness to rehabilitate ineffective kings such as Edward II of England. Fiona Dunlop's "Making Youth Holy: Holiness and Masculinity in *The Interlude of Youth*"

studies the conflicts between young manhood and holiness in the little-known playlet. Finally, Sarah L. Bastow's "The Catholic Gentlemen of the North: Unreformed in the Age of Reformation?" posits that the English Reformation played havoc with traditional gender roles in Catholic households.

Some of these essays are, by their own admission, preliminary explorations of understudied topics and therefore present facts and aspects of their topics without providing a particular argument. This is, perhaps, to be expected, and possibly even necessary, given the dearth of existing studies on holiness and masculinity. However, the exploratory essays feel incomplete; we are given the background and introduction to the topic, yet the background, while generally interesting and informative, is not used to make any sort of point. For example, Tougher's essay on eunuch-saints explores the relevant *vitae*, and only at the end implies that the hagiographers represented the saints as ultimately masculine despite their physical lack of maleness

because masculinity was a requirement for holiness (pp. 103-04). Such an interesting thesis could have been developed into a much more elaborate and powerful essay.

The minimized discussions of literary theory, especially gender theory, was unexpected, yet most of the essays assume a working knowledge of gender theory, and the lack of explanation may confuse readers without such knowledge. The few essays which deal with literary theory overtly tend toward the psychoanalytic schools. However, the general avoidance of literary theory eliminates long, jargon-filled, and sometimes irrelevant theoretical passages that mire other collections and also allows the authors more time and space to explore their topics.

All the essays contain a great deal of excellent and interesting research, often about little-known but relevant texts. Indeed, the collection is well worth reading if only for its cultural and literary information. The use of obscure texts does, however, limit the usefulness of the essays for

scholarly research; explorations of holiness and masculinity in more widely known texts, such as *The Golden Legend*, would certainly have enhanced the collection. No essay extensively explored the assumption of masculinity by holy females, a topic as relevant to holiness and masculinity as the assumption of masculinity by holy males.

Except for Murray's essay, *Holiness and Masculinity* does not attempt to answer my original question, "Why is holiness masculine?" But the individual essays generally do a good job of showing how holiness is constructed as a masculine trait—a necessary and logical topic for exploration, and perhaps one that eventually leads to the answer of why. *Holiness and Masculinity* is timely and relevant, and hopefully its publication signals more studies on the topic.

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