

Claire M. Waters. *Angels and Earthly Creatures: Preaching, Performance, and Gender in the Later Middle Ages*. (Middle Ages Series.) University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. pp. xi + 282.

Carefully researched and attentively prepared, this study brings together a number of subjects of interest to medievalists in general and feminist medievalists in particular, chief among them the relationship of gender to the discourses and institutions of "preaching." Situating her discussions of preachers and preaching in relation to texts of the 12th through 14th centuries written by and for preachers and about this vocation, Waters asserts that the juxtaposition of the earthly and spiritual embodied by, and requisite to, the preacher's function makes images of female preachers, both real and literary, crucial to our understanding of how preachers and preaching operated and were construed in the late medieval era. In response to the tendency of medievalists to separate men's and women's preaching as subjects of inquiry, Waters

notes, this book by contrast "aims to reintegrate these two traditions, which illuminate each other and clarify our understanding of what it meant to medieval preachers to be the mouth of God, to hold an angelic office in human form" (7).

Building on the basic premise that women's documented participation in evolving modes of late medieval extra-liturgical piety is both a reflection of the trends and an indication that women helped shape them, Waters suggests that "women could function as a sign of all that was both vital and threatening in these new expressions of piety" (6). As such, preaching, she finds, can offer us a way to observe the medieval Church's own process of coming to understand and shape itself, "through the bodies of the men who represented it and the women who tested its boundaries" (7). More a thematic overview

of preaching-related texts in relation to historical situations than an interrogation of the discourses that create and sustain the concept of "preacher" with regard to subjectivity and the body, the book's seven chapters provide close and careful explications of these materials, divided into two sections, one predominantly dealing with men and ecclesiastical contexts, the other considering the role and relevance of women. While not fully "integrated," the two histories offer an interesting array of materials and the author's explication of them in context.

The first four chapters describe what Waters refers to as the "building blocks of the preacher's role" (9): his authorization, his persona, and his language. First, "The Golden Chains of Citation" considers how the conception of a preacher's authority and the evolving changes in that conception during the broad medieval era are connected to the problem of citation. After a brief nod to contemporary performance theory, primarily

the issue of "ownership" raised by Judith Butler's and Jacques Derrida's responses to J.L. Austin, the discussion returns to its thematic focus, how the so-called "medieval theorists" (a phrase oft-repeated though not clearly or consistently defined) wrestled with dilemmas of speech and authority. The chapter concludes that because these theorists were unwilling to allow just any self-identified inspired person to join the preaching profession, they "explicitly displaced preaching from full participation in the realm of plenitudinous, divine communication" (30).

Next, "Holy Duplicity" considers the preacher's physical body and its centrality to the juxtaposition of earthly and spiritual. A discussion of Chaucer's Parson and Pardoner provides a literary case study for the dichotomy of *exemplum in bono* and *exemplum in malo*, and finds that "such dichotomies are unsustainable" because the ideal represented by the Parson "can only exist alongside and interdependent with the counterideal of his troubling, but not simply

unholy, colleague" (56). The practical matter of how to convey a message is the focus of the next chapter, "A Manner of Speaking," which considers the preacher's need to connect with diverse audiences while maintaining the distinctiveness of his role, hence the centrality of the vernacular and the concept of shared speech. A segue to the topic of women is then provided by "Mere Words," which examines the conventional association of rhetoric and the feminine—in particular the dangers of decoration and excess—and finds that later medieval preachers tended to use a worldly form of speaking of necessity even as they were charged with conveying spiritual messages.

The last three chapters then focus on female preachers, both real and literary, and argue that women play an important part in the history of preaching in the later medieval period. "Transparent Bodies and the Redemption of Rhetoric" looks at the legends of female saints and asserts that their influence could alleviate anyone's hypothetical

anxiety over the male preacher's physicality. Noting the possibility that women's speech could be construed as a rival to, or model for, clerical speech, Waters finds that "the imagined relationship between female and clerical speech suggests one reason why upheavals in church structure or practice brought with them anxiety about and argument against women preachers" (101). She offers close readings of the legends of early-Christian martyrs, Katherine of Alexandria and Mary Magdalene chief among them, to demonstrate how the saints are shown to embody "the various troubling elements of persuasive eloquence in a way that both flaunts and neutralizes the persistent anxieties about the place of rhetoric in preaching" (101).

Following these discussions about fictional and hypothetical women, "The *Alibi* of Female Authority" then considers the historical Hildegard of Bingen, Birgitta of Sweden, and Catherine of Siena, asking how actual women managed to address the church and

finding that their exclusion from authorization made it necessary for them to provide for themselves a place from which to speak. Last, "*Sermones ad Status*" examines Chaucer's Wife of Bath in conjunction with the "estates" model and what Waters aptly describes as "the chattering classes," and finds that "the old Wife" represents a combination of clerical and feminine modes of speech. Detailed notes, including the Latin texts translated by the author within her text, and a solid bibliography provide interested readers with the bibliographic tools needed for further exploration of this book's key topics.

Indeed, this book's greatest strength is the extensive foundation it offers scholars who might wish to develop its incipient lines of inquiry to more provocative ends. Clearly there is much more to be said about the conjunctions of gender and discourse here, augmented by a more sustained theoretical currency as well as a more extensive familiarity with those issues of feminist criticism and gender studies that readers might expect of a

study that promises to (as per the dust jacket blurb), "reinsert women into the history of preaching" and to show how images of female preachers are "key to understanding and exploiting the power, as well as the dangers, of the feminized flesh." Such a history warrants not only a survey of texts germane to issues of preaching and the representations of preachers in literature, both male and female—which the author aptly accomplishes—but also an analysis of how and why these texts can contribute to our understanding of gender identity and subjectivity in the later medieval period, questions and issues that this book urges us to explore.

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