

Received Medievalisms: A Cognitive Geography of Viennese Women's Convents, by Cynthia J. Cyrus. The New Middle Ages. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013. Pp. xxii + 243. ISBN: 9780230393578.

We are at least four decades into fruitful research on medieval women's religious communities and gendered analyses of medieval spirituality. But studies focusing on women's houses in many areas of the medieval map, especially those lying beyond the "cultural core" of Western Europe, have yet to be accomplished. Furthermore, with methods and questions inspired by recent interest in such areas as material culture, memory and identity studies, and historical geography and topography, scholars focusing on monasticism now have many avenues by which to move work on medieval religious women forward. With her new book *Received Medievalisms*, Cynthia J. Cyrus offers just such a forward-thinking and methodologically creative approach.

Politically and spiritually significant Vienna serves as more than a geographic framework for *Received Medievalisms*. Here, Vienna is a character in its own right, a locus of sacred and secular power, a thing to be mapped, remembered, and imagined over time. And within this urban landscape lie individual religious spaces—churches and monasteries, primarily—with medieval origins. Among these structures are the eight women's religious communities on which this study focuses, all of which were founded between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. Taken cumulatively, these spaces argue for Vienna's potent Christian and specifically Catholic identity. While the old city of Vienna confines Cyrus' study geographically, the temporal scope of her research spans centuries—sources range from fifteenth-century maps to nineteenth-century travel literature—and significant post-medieval cultural moments treated include the arrival of Ottoman forces at Vienna in 1529, the rise of the Jesuit presence in Central Europe and the Counter-Reformation, and the closing of contemplative religious houses in the 1780s.

Cyrus's study aims to do several things. Principally, it seeks to situate women's monasteries literarily within the "broader complex of . . . urban-historical portrayals in multiple popular genres dating from the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries, with a particular eye to the evolving attitudes toward Vienna's medieval past"(2). Cyrus also situates women's houses geographically, utilizing maps of medieval and early modern Vienna, as well as travel literature, to discuss a distinctly Christian, distinctly urban landscape of which female convents took up significant space. Cyrus's "cognitive geography," attempts to trace the history of women's convents by analyzing the connections between

urban space and received ideas surrounding the mythical “Alt-Wien.” These combined approaches constitute a novel and creative methodology, one that acknowledges that a historian’s view of the Middle Ages is and always has been mediated by time and subjective interpretation.

The book is arranged into six chapters. First is an introductory “Setting the Stage,” where the main aims and theoretical approaches of the book are laid out. Subsequent chapters consider four medievalisms—pictorial, topographical, mythicizing, and narrativizing—serially and in dialogue with one another. Interpretations offered in chapters two and three are heavily informed by scholarly literature in cultural geography and historical topography. Both focus on physical images of Vienna and the situation and function of women’s houses therein. Chapter two argues that sacred spaces, especially churches and convents established in the Middle Ages, are disproportionately represented (and oversized) on maps as significant civic landmarks, establishing Vienna as a distinctly Catholic city. Present here are also intriguing results from Cyrus’ careful analysis of map labels and indices: for example, she finds that women’s houses are typically identified on maps by saint’s name or place nickname rather than by order affiliation, the preferred way of referencing men’s houses on the same maps. Chapter three deals with the topography of religious institutions, looking to travel literature for references to Vienna’s monastic past. Intriguingly, Cyrus discovers that where women’s houses are mentioned in travelogues and related literature, their medieval origins are almost always highlighted, while the present context and recent past are ignored.

Chapters four and five further support these findings, but Cyrus’s sources shift from maps and travelogues to histories, miracle stories, and material objects pertaining to individual women’s houses. Here Cyrus provides a close analysis of foundation narratives and miracle tales from three female convents that serve as case studies. The stories tell of a medieval past imbued with the miraculous and revelatory, tales embellished (or fabricated whole-cloth) by modern authors to present the Middle Ages as wholly different from enlightenment culture. These stories highlight medieval alterity to be sure, but they also reinforce the importance of tradition and continuity to those who would claim Catholic identity. Collections of urban monastic stories generated “place-based knowledge,” highlighting convents to serve as physical landmarks of the sacred, material objects as symbolic placeholders for female monasteries long vanished, and nuns, often of fictional or dubious historicity, as spiritual exempla for contemporary readers.

So Cyrus’s analysis comes full circle: one can make a mental pilgrimage to

all of the sites of Vienna's medieval religious past with the help of maps, travel journals, legends, and devotional objects, even if the physical sites themselves have long since shut their doors. Indeed, emphasis on the physicality of medieval spaces, structures, and material objects associated with women's houses in these sources occlude from view the actual women living inside the communities. Even with what Cyrus has uncovered here, we still have only slivers of insights into the daily lives of Viennese nuns, medieval or modern, and little of their agency. Given the nature of this study and the relatively limited usage (and availability) of medieval sources, this book should primarily be understood as a history of the medievalisms associated with women's houses rather than a dedicated study of women religious themselves.

Cyrus's book is an accessible and relatively quick read—with only 162 pages of text it is not a cumbersome work. The presentation of her careful source analysis is often summarized, and in fact the presentation of her sources might have benefitted from more extended examples of original text to reinforce her conclusions for her readers. Notes are presented as endnotes, along with a comprehensive bibliography. Two helpful appendices offer greater detail about the various maps, topographies, travelogues, and histories discussed in her chapters. Although it would have been preferable to have more images directly accompanying the sometimes thick descriptions of Vienna panoramas, map indices, and material objects, it is worth noting that Appendix 1 provides web links to images of many of the maps discussed in detail in chapters two and three.

These are minor critiques. Cyrus' book offers up new approaches for analyzing the historical significance of women's communities, gender, topography, and collective memory. It is well worth consulting by anyone interested in these subjects or Vienna in particular.

Amy Nelson
University of Notre Dame