Review of: Angels And Earthly Creatures: Preaching, Performance, And Gender In The Later Middle Ages by Claire M. Waters

Katherine Allen Smith
University of Puget Sound, kasmith2@pugetsound.edu

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Citation
Angels and Earthly Creatures: Preaching, Performance, and Gender in the Later Middle Ages
by Claire M. Waters
Review by: Katherine Allen Smith
Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the American Society of Church History
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/27644727
Accessed: 08/10/2014 12:26

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Cohen is surely right that the Jewish authors of the text and their medieval readers found solace in the notion that they remained God’s chosen people and supplanted Christian ideals of holiness. Cohen gently suggests, however, that some of their responses may have been intended to do more than simply to enhance group solidarity. The authors and audience of the text, after all, were survivors or the children of survivors who had not embraced martyrdom. How to reconcile their admiration for the heroes of the accounts without undermining their own religious identity and the choice for survival that they had made? He suggests that there may have been a quiet critique of some of the martyrs’ actions. “Careful reading reveals characters less than perfect, characters depicted with ambivalence, characters who at one and the same time embody both the perfection of the deceased martyr-hero and the misgivings of the survivor who had submitted to baptism in order to go on living as a Jew” (80). Several of the episodes can be read not just as descriptions of righteous martyrs but as portraits of human beings uncertain of which path to choose. And in some cases the depictions of suicidal violence seem to challenge the rightness of the martyr’s choice. For the generation that survived through luck or conversion, such an ambivalent portrait of the past may have been a comforting vision.

Cohen’s interpretation is a very welcome chance to enlarge our vision of the mentality and self-perception of medieval Jews. It allows us to consider that Jews may have reacted to the traumas of the past as individuals. Jews of the twelfth century lived in a fast-changing world that offered many of them real hope for the future. Cohen alludes to the remarkable resilience of the Rhineland communities and the relatively stable relations with Christians that reasserted themselves in the twelfth century. Against this background, it becomes more difficult to be sure of how Jews understood the Crusade massacres. Were they trapped in a well of mourning and anger, or did the suffering of their ancestors become only one part of their religious identity and outlook? Could they indulge in these dramatic memories of the past because they had a reasonably stable present? Were the ambiguities and doubts about the martyrdoms that Cohen sees in the texts the expression of this struggle between the present and the past?

Now, the question is of course, did medieval Jews hear the multivalent messages that Cohen finds in the texts? I do not know. Some of his readings are ingenious, and they reflect a deep immersion in biblical and Talmudic language. It is possible that the audience for the narratives was equally versed in all of these traditions. It is possible too that perhaps the authors were engaged in a scholarly virtuosity that would have been meaningless to most readers. Whether each reading that Cohen offers is correct or not, he still has opened up a new way of thinking about these important texts. Cohen’s book will be part of the ongoing attempt to understand the diversity of Jewish experiences in medieval Europe.

Jonathan Elukin
Trinity College


This provocative study explores the contradictions that characterized preaching and preachers in medieval thought: admonished to bear them-
selves as God’s angelic representatives while remaining ever mindful of their human failings, eloquent preachers were at once celebrated for the purity and elegance of their speech and suspected of using their rhetorical skills to seduce and dazzle rather than instruct and reform. Through a reading of dozens of *artes praedicandi* (manuals written as preachers’ aids), supplemented by *exemplum* collections, works of hagiography, and poetry produced mainly between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, a period that saw a great revival of interest in preaching in the Latin West, Waters offers two interrelated theses concerning preaching and authority in the later Middle Ages. In the first place, she emphasizes the “fundamentally hybrid nature of the preacher’s calling” (2) and offers a reading of later medieval preaching based on discussions in the *artes praedicandi* of the preacher as both human performer and divine vessel, sympathetic to his audience and yet set apart from it, thoroughly versed in Scripture and rhetorical techniques but able to move his listeners with simple words. Second, Waters contends that the issue of women’s preaching, both real and imagined, directly influenced clerical understandings of male preachers’ authority, personae, and mode of speech. Waters’s study follows in the footsteps of recent work that applies interpretive models drawn from performance studies as well as semiotics to the study of medieval preaching, while entering into dialogue with literary analyses of prescriptive and hagiographical texts.

The book is divided into two parts, the first of which comprises four chapters on key aspects of the medieval preacher’s identity and enterprise, and the second of which devotes three chapters to women’s preaching in late medieval theory and practice. In a thought-provoking first chapter, Waters argues that preachers’ authority derived from “golden chains of citation” linking them—and their words—to a lineage of male preachers traceable back to Christ, the original word made flesh. As distinct from prophecy, which required only passive human vessels and could thus be performed by women as well as men, medieval writers held preaching to be an active, individualized expression of spiritual authority, an authority denied women through their subject place in the Church hierarchy and in society more generally. Although the background on medieval preaching provided in the introduction is quite brief, this discussion will provide less specialized readers with useful context. The second chapter examines the “holy duplicity” of the preacher’s persona through a reading of two well-known literary preachers, the saintly Parson and avaricious Pardoner of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. While the preacher’s body and gestures were considered reflections of his spiritual state, Waters reveals a strong undercurrent of suspicion regarding preachers’ ability to act out false personae that threatened their office’s authority. In the third chapter on “access and the vernacular,” Waters offers a nuanced explanation of how preachers negotiated their associations with both Latin and vernacular texts and speech, and finds that authors of the *artes praedicandi* encouraged preachers to draw upon personal experience to find common ground with their audiences. The fourth chapter reviews the uneasy relationship of medieval Christian writers with the classical art of rhetoric, a skill at once prized and condemned in medieval preachers.

The remaining chapters are devoted to the book’s second area of inquiry, medieval depictions of women’s preaching, and here Waters shifts her focus from the *artes praedicandi* to hagiography, historical women preachers, and *sermones ad status*, sermons intended for particular social or professional
groups. The fifth chapter treats representations of women preacher-saints in medieval legend, arguing that such stories allowed clerical authors to work through contradictions inherent in the office of preacher in a narrative space safely removed from the realm of actual practice. Focusing on *Lives of the early martyr* Katherine of Alexandria and Mary Magdalene (held by later authors to have died preaching in Marseilles), Waters holds that the effectiveness of women’s preaching depended on their willingness to renounce their feminine beauty, a renunciation that rendered their bodies “transparent” divine conduits. Moving from legend to history, the sixth chapter offers a study of three well-known women mystics—Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179), Birgitta of Sweden (d. 1373), and Catherine of Siena (d. 1380)—whose public critiques of clerical discipline drew, like preachers’ sermons, on a combination of experiential and textual authority. In the final chapter, Waters returns to the *Canterbury Tales*, this time to the *Wife of Bath*, whose preacherly speech pointedly satirizes the medieval tradition of sermon literature and subtly alludes to the frequent association of preachers with loose women in late medieval literary genres such as the fabliaux.

Although Waters’s primary audience is scholars of medieval preaching, and her interpretive bent is decidedly literary, her study has the virtue of bringing together a number of subfields usually pursued in relative isolation from one another, with the result that those interested in medieval constructions of gender, religion, literature, and rhetoric will alike find *Angels and Earthly Creatures* well worth reading. The book could have been leant a greater sense of unity and its important findings made more transparent through the addition of a conclusion, which would have provided Waters with an opportunity for addressing some of the larger observations and questions about late medieval culture that appear briefly throughout the book, such as her argument for a “horizontal, egalitarian mode of communication between clergy and laity rather than a hierarchical, vertical one” (70). Likewise, Waters’s suggestion that authors of preachers’ manuals adopted a “relatively untroubled attitude toward eloquence” (89) after 1200, when heretical groups like the Cathars and Waldensians were asserting their right to preach with increasing urgency, and being condemned for their very persuasiveness, seems to require additional explanation. On the whole, however, Waters’s ambitious study deserves praise as a sensitive treatment of a difficult subject and will undoubtedly inspire others to take up some of the knotty problems she illuminates.

Katherine Allen Smith
University of Puget Sound


Why does the medieval German mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg gradually disappear as author from her book? One might argue that medieval misogyny consigns female authors to oblivion. Poor argues that Mechthild disappears not because she was a woman (though strategies for justifying her authority as woman were employed throughout her text and later transmissions). She disappears, rather, because (1) she excelled at a new form of writing that privileged direct dialogue with God, but deemphasized the author, (2) medieval authority...