



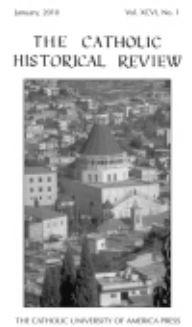
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Savonarola's Women: Visions and Reform in Renaissance Italy
(review)

Kate Lowe

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accompanied by any public ceremony or priestly blessing, nearly all of them seem to have followed much the same sort of informal ritual. They almost always involved an offer, or occasionally an exchange, of gifts of small value, most often a coin or two; sometimes a few apples or pears; or even a pair of shoes, a goblet, or a cask of wine. The couple usually exchanged words that might at least imply marital consent. The bishop's judges were properly skeptical of self-serving declarations. Most cases in these documents involved a claim by the plaintiff (*actor*) that he or she was married to the defendant (*reus*). Plaintiffs lost thirty-four of the thirty-nine cases where the judge's final decision survives.

Zuchuat's book is not free of flaws. His command of the substantial literature on medieval church courts, their procedures, and their records, for example, is uneven, as is his knowledge of recent treatments of the history of clandestine marriage. It seems odd, too, that he fails to cite canonical texts dealing with marriage formation directly from the sources, but relies instead on accounts of them in secondary works, many of them seriously dated. He frequently abbreviates the texts of the records that he edits, while the translation compresses them even further. These blemishes, however, should not outweigh the genuine contribution that he has made by rescuing this body of texts from oblivion.

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JAMES A. BRUNDAGE

Savonarola's Women: Visions and Reform in Renaissance Italy. By Tamar Herzig. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2008. Pp. xx, 333. \$35.00. ISBN 978-0-226-32915-4.)

Cleverly riding on the crest of a wave of academic interest in nuns and convents, this very accomplished book both charts and analyzes the fortunes of various mystical women committed to the memorialization of Savonarola's teachings and beliefs, and the depiction of Savonarola as a divine prophet, in the years up to the 1540s. While some of the material is known, much of it is newly discovered and unpublished, and the list of archival sources (often gleaned from less visited archives) is extremely impressive. Equally impressive is the handling of a large corpus of texts and documentation in conjunction with a substantial and ever-growing body of secondary literature on these religious women. The author writes of Savonarola's women—a phrase that plays on ambiguity—but also talks persuasively of Savonarolan activists, and these new understandings of Savonarola's followers illuminate the attractions as well as the disadvantages of alliance with and allegiance to a celebrity martyr.

The book has six chapters, and clearly and authoritatively charts the networks of connection and succession between Savonarola and Savonarolan "holy women." It moves from a general discussion of Savonarola's relationship with his female followers in Florence while still alive, to case studies of a string of Dominican tertiaries who kept faith with his memory (and by so

doing staked out new authority for themselves): Colomba Guadagnoli in Perugia; Lucia Brocadelli in Ferrara; Osanna Andreasi in Mantua; Stefana Quinzani in Soncino; and two exceptions to the rule, an Augustinian nun in Milan, Arcangela Panigarola, and a silk weaver in Racconigi, Caterina Mattei. The case studies allow the details of the behind-the-scenes maneuvering to be observed, but deeper patterns, such as the constant invocation to—and attempt to trace a line of descent from—St. Catherine of Siena, are also analyzed. The overriding message is that the split between supporters and opponents of Savonarola ensured that, even after his death, two ideological factions continued to feed off their opposition to each other, fighting for control over his posthumous reputation. The women under discussion here claimed to have had visions in which they met and held conversations with Savonarola, who often had gained the status of a saint in heaven. This type of endorsement of someone who had been excommunicated and burnt at the stake shows how these women's zeal was only increased by the difficulties and dangers of being on the losing side in this ferocious ideological clash.

The study highlights the importance of the contested political context in which convents operated in Renaissance Italy. The secular rulers often shared considerable control over convents with various ecclesiastical authorities, but life inside the convent was also so politicized that sometimes religion seems to have been eclipsed. In a fascinating section, the author discusses new material she has found on Lucrezia Borgia, who masterminded a move against Lucia Brocadelli because Brocadelli had openly criticized her father, Alexander VI. The fallout from this meant that nuns from another convent were allowed to gain a commanding position (indeed, one was elected prioress), an anti-Savonarolan confessor was appointed, and *clausura* was enforced, which all cut Brocadelli off from conduits to power within and without the convent, and thus silenced a key, vociferous champion of Savonarola's memory.

This is an important new book, setting the record straight in complex areas like the intertwining of politics, religion, geography, and reputation. It is thoroughly to be recommended.

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KATE LOWE

Nil Sorsky: The Authentic Writings. Translated, edited, and introduced by David M. Goldfrank. [Cistercian Studies Series, Vol. 221.] (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications. 2008. Pp. xxiv, 369. \$39.95 paperback. ISBN 978-0-879-07321-3.)

The work of Nil Sorskii (d. 1508) is the culmination of medieval Russian monastic spirituality. A major figure in his own lifetime, he left a small body of writings that contained his conception of the monastic life and continued the traditions of Orthodox asceticism. After his death his followers turned toward a struggle over the propriety of monastic landholding, eventually losing to the