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Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation (review)

Elizabeth Freeman

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not always followed outside of Paris, regardless of whether under Protestant or Catholic rule. It is the similarity of their paths toward hospital reform that makes these case studies so interesting. The elite of both cities ignored crown edicts they judged to be irrelevant to their individual religious and economic circumstances. In direct contravention of the Edict of Nantes (1598), the Montpellier hospital authorities denied Protestant inmates the ministrations of their own priests and actively sought to convert them, a practice the crown made no endeavours toward correcting. Nimois Protestants established their own hospital in 1653 for these very same reasons; the Catholic monopoly of the Hôtel-Dieu had led to conversion attempts on Protestant inmates. The elite of the Montpellier and Nîmes hôpitaux généraux ignored the crown dictates regarding hospital operations and opted for the less costly practice of assistance to the poor within their own homes, despite the crown's wish to hide away the morally-corrupt and unruly poor in institutions of confinement.

McHugh's book is a refreshing and informative contribution to the growing annals on hospital and poor relief reform in the Early Modern period.

Lisa Keane Elliott

School of Humanities (History)

The University of Western Australia

Mulder-Bakker, Anneke B., ed., Margot H. King and Hugh Feiss, trans., *Mary of Oignies: Mother of Salvation* (Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts 7), Turnhout, Brepols, 2007; hardback; pp. xii, 260; R.R.P. €60.00; ISBN 9782503517032.

Mary of Oignies (c.1177-1213), more usually known in her own day as Mary of Nivelles, is often known today as the first of the Low Countries beguines. Of course, she was by no means the first, but she was the one whom James of Vitry singled out from among the 'many women in the diocese of Liège' who exhibited 'shining sanctity' when he responded to Fulk of Toulouse's request to write about holy women in the Liège region. Writing his *vita* of Mary (this 'pearl of Christ') in around 1215, at a time when heresy was a clear problem and strict institutionalization of religious life was seen by some as a solution, James (as Anneke Mulder-Bakker argues) seemed to see Mary and her fellow *mulieres sanctae* as an alternative solution. That is, James presented these holy women as positive examples of everything that was

good in local and unregulated Christian life and he certainly did not think that clerics or university masters had to be the only role models.

Thus, one woman was presented as a model of James' greater vision of Christian life. This ideal life was a varied one – Mary worked in a leper hospital at Willambroux for more years than she spent as a recluse in her cell under the church at Oignies – and James' lack of interest in distinguishing between the various phases in her life suggests that he saw both as important parts of a greater journey. James did not even call the women 'beguines'; in his words they were true *religiosae* and presumably would have been diminished by any other name.

Inescapable from all this, of course, is the fact that when we seek Mary and her fellow holy women we tend sooner or later to find male hagiographers and their interests. But it is to the credit of this volume that the wider context of Mary and her world is illuminated. Mulder-Bakker calls the book a companion to Mary, and it is most certainly this. All scholars researching the worlds of the Low Countries holy women in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries will want to read this book. It contains an introduction by Mulder-Bakker and four texts translated into English: Margot King's translation of James of Vitry's *vita* (reprinted from King's 1998 translation, but with footnotes helpfully updated); Hugh Feiss' translation of Thomas of Cantimpré's c.1230 supplement to James' *vita*; Feiss' translation of the short foundation text of the Oignies church; and Feiss' translation of the liturgical office of Mary of Oignies (this office – based heavily on the office for Mary Magdalen – was composed at the Cistercian monks' abbey of Villers, and may have been composed by Goswin of Bossut).

There are two essays. Brenda Bolton adds an essay (based on her 1993 work 'Spiegels van Vroomheid: Relieken van Marie van Oignies') on the cult of saints and relics around Oignies. Along with the recent essay by Sharon Farmer on a similar topic, Bolton's work is undoubtedly going to open up a whole new avenue of scholarship on the amazing relic collection of Oignies. Finally, Suzan Folkerts examines the manuscript dissemination of Mary's *vitae* (both James' original and Thomas' supplement). James' *vita* was the most frequently copied of all the *vitae* of the southern Low Countries holy women and, interestingly, almost all surviving manuscripts come from monks' monasteries; Mary served as a role model to men and not to women. James' version was very popular in the fifteenth century. At this time it was not Mary's role as a prototype of Liège's holy women that was being stressed

but, rather, the status of Mary as ancestor of the duchy of Brabant. On the other hand, Thomas' supplement did not have much later popularity.

Although Mary is such a well-known individual, scholarship tends to have been fragmented into different specializations which have rarely influenced each other. Mulder-Bakker's introduction does an excellent job of identifying these threads and, in the process, provides an historiographical survey which is a boon to scholarship and more than the sum of its parts.

Bolton's essay shows how much James supported Oignies in ways other than by the writing of Mary's *vita*; he sent eastern silks to the community, he commissioned works of art for the church, and in particular he took advantage of his eastern connections to send relics to Oignies. James did all of this for many years after Mary died; his interest was not fleeting. Given such support, it is worth asking why Mary was never canonized, but Bolton points out that bad luck played a role. Key supporters died or were absent and a change of pope put a lid on the cult until the modern period. But the stunning relic collection remained – Mary herself would stay up at night to care for the collection – and the relics as well as the two *vitae*, the Villers' office, and the academic attentions of modern scholars all indicate the wide interest in Mary and her holy sisters.

Elizabeth Freeman

School of History and Classics
University of Tasmania

Newman, Barbara, *Frauenlob's Song of Songs. A Medieval German Poet and his Masterpiece*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007; paperback; pp. xxi, 241; 7 b/w illustrations, 1 CD; R.R.P. US\$25.00; ISBN 9780271029252.

Frauenlob was the popular name of Heinrich von Meissen (c.1260-1318), author of a remarkable corpus of Middle High German poetry, in particular of the *Marienleich* – an epic poem of over 500 lines in praise of the Virgin Mary. In this volume, Barbara Newman presents her translation of the *Marienleich*, luxuriously presented on facing pages alongside Karl Stackmann's critical text of the poem. This serves to introduce her study of Frauenlob and his milieu, as well as a more detailed study of the *Marienleich* and its influence, supplemented by a rich commentary on each of the twenty strophes of that poem.