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Generations in the Cloister: Youth and Age in Medieval Religious Life/Generationen im Kloster: Jugend und Alter in der mittelalterlichen vita religiosa (review)

Mary Marshall Campbell

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Hines ends with an important claim: that the readings in the volume are “not the result of an unsympathetic deconstruction that looks beyond [Bede’s] conscious religious beliefs to the pragmatic social and material interests involved in how he transmitted the story” (220). The central religious and spiritual dimensions of the text are, however, rather sidelined in much of the volume—a serious matter, but one that may be due in large part to the focus cited in the title. Hines claims that “we can appreciate Bede’s spirituality all the more when we understand how it was rooted in a substantial and realistic appraisal of the world” (220), and this is partially true. But the aims of material study and the aims of theological and spiritual inquiry—though not always or necessarily at cross-purposes—are not so easily reconciled. There is much value to interdisciplinary work and to the lively discussions it can generate; the material, though, needs to be readily accessible to the wide audience such discourse seeks. The issue with the volume is the age-old matter of audience and focus; in some cases, readers may often wonder whether a discussion seeks to further our understanding of Bede’s text by reaching out to other disciplines: the world outside the text illuminates the text. In other cases, the opposite may stand: the primary text (if that term is applicable) stands only as a tool to understand what lies outside it. The strongest essays in this volume are those that respect the boundaries set by one or the other approach and do not pretend (or attempt) to do more than they reasonably can do without losing purpose. The volume as a whole demonstrates the vitality of the Cædmon episode and its enduring power to spur interest and inquiry, though readers should be prepared for some challenging assumptions of generosity.



Sabine von Heusinger and Annette Kehnel, eds. *Generations in the Cloister: Youth and Age in Medieval Religious Life/Generationen im Kloster: Jugend und Alter in der mittelalterlichen vita religiosa*. Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2008. Pp. 200. ISBN: 9783825811730. €29.90 (cloth).

MARY MARSHALL CAMPBELL
Princeton University

Generations in the Cloister grew out of a panel of the same name at the 1995 International Medieval Congress in Leeds. In this essay collection, according

to the editors, two basic problems are considered: (1) the constitution of generations and the attribution of an identity to those generations and (2) the dynamics of relations between and among different generations. A bilingual volume, *Generations* comprises three essays in German and four in English, as well as a thought-provoking and thorough introduction (presented in both languages) in which the editors loosely stitch together the seven essays. Here, Heusinger and Kehnel divide the volume into two sections, the first focusing on “real” and “virtual” children and the second comprising case studies on various topics related to generational relations in the cloister. Additionally, the volume concludes with a useful index.

In the first section, the three essays—(1) “Die Mönche—Besondere Gotteskinder?” by Hubertus Lutterbach, (2) “*Parvulus*: The Idea of the Little Child Medieval Preaching and Commentary” by Tim Gorringer, and (3) “Im Spannungsfeld zwischen Spiel und Ernsthaftigkeit: Einige Bemerkungen zum Kinderbischofsfest in England” by Tanja Skambraks—grapple with the meaning of youth and childhood in a medieval religious context. Lutterbach’s essay traces the development of the changing concept of the second *Gotteskindschaft* (childhood in God) from the fourth-century inception of monasticism to the concept’s demise in the twentieth-century proclamations of Vatican II. Since the embryonic years of monasticism, newly professed monks have been given a hood to wear, which, because of its contemporaneous association with children, symbolized the new monk’s entrance into a special and spiritually higher second childhood in God, one subsequent to the first *Gotteskindschaft* in baptism. Lutterbach makes a cogent case for the importance of this second *Gotteskindschaft* as an ideal in monastic life and expatiates on ways in which this ideal manifested itself. Lutterbach’s essay has ramifications far beyond the insights it provides into medieval monastic culture; for instance, it raises questions concerning the relationship among metaphor, theology, and religious life. In his essay, Gorringer explores the meaning of *parvulus* in the Gospel of Matthew and—using commentaries by Jerome and Aquinas, among others—attempts to tease out the medieval Church’s understanding of the term. His conclusion—namely, that age was not at stake in the privileging veneration of *parvulus* but, rather, that the term incarnated an abstract ideal of childlike humility and innocence—enhances the claims made by the other two authors in this section. Gorringer’s essay concludes with the interesting observation that Augustine’s view of children as bearing the marks of original sin, which stands in sharp contrast to the biblical exegetes’

use of the child as a figure for innocence and humility, is completely absent in the commentators' works. In future research, it might prove interesting to explore in depth "this deep inconsistency . . . in Christian anthropology" regarding these competing conceptions of childhood (73). The final essay of this section by Skambraks analyzes a practice that Lutterbach adduces in making his case for the significance of the second *Gotteskindschaft*: the feast of the boy bishop. Skambraks's goal is to identify the function, meaning, and origin of this end-of-the-year clerical celebration in which a choirboy was selected to take on the role of bishop. Drawing from extant manuscripts, with a focus on England, Skambraks comes to the conclusion that the boy bishop's feast, in terms of its liturgical function as well as the boy's material outfitting, constituted a real transfer of authority to the boy and true reversal of status; furthermore, she pinpoints the origins of this feast in three cults—the Roman Saturnalia festival, the biblical story of the slaughter of the Innocent Children, and finally, the feast of Saint Nicholas.

The second section of the volume contains four essays that engage more directly with the investigation of relations (both familial and social) among generations in the cloister: (1) Annette Kehnel's "Fathers and Sons in the Cloister: Ecclesiastical Dynasties in the Early Irish Church"; (2) Gabriella Signori's "Generationenkonflikte im Kloster? Gedanken zum Mit- und Nebeneinander von Jung und Alt in spätmittelalterlichen Frauenkonventen"; (3) Mirko Breitenstein's "The Novice Master in the Cistercian Order"; and, finally, (4) Michael Robson's "Franciscans, Children, and the Cloister." Kehnel uses the example of the Irish Church, and, particularly, the case of Clonmacnoise, where fathers and sons held leading positions in the clergy well into the twelfth century, to investigate why the priestly obligation for celibacy eventually came to prevail. The Irish Church, in her view, presents an alternative possibility for the organization of ecclesiastical authority, one that successfully "combined procreation, asceticism and celibacy" (103); in fact, her conclusions call for a rereading of the standard history of the Irish Church to reevaluate the reform movements as having been borne out of monastic dynasties. Interestingly, Kehnel suggests that dynastic principles of leadership were usurped by principles of spiritual kinship and that what underlay this shift was an idea of the "powers of weakness" (122). Signori, drawing heavily upon the German Sister-Books, attempts to answer the question of how age differences affected life and culture in the cloister; she finds that age was of less importance to life in the medieval cloister

than was either a biological or artificial (e.g., friendly) relationship. Her conclusions about familial relations in women's cloisters, however, especially in juxtaposition to Kehnel's article, raise interesting questions about female dynastic relations in medieval cloisters—e.g., what sorts of practical or theological problems, if any, did they present before the Council of Trent? Additionally, I wonder whether Signori's finding that, in the cloister, "Gemeinschaft war nicht nur das Ideal, sondern auch die Praxis" [community was not only the ideal, but rather also the practice] (142) could be either a topos or a ramification of a topos of the genre of the Sister-Book. In "The Novice Master in the Cistercian Order," Breitenstein attempts to deduce from a series of case studies what the qualifications and conditions for selection as novice master might have been, thus filling in the silent gaps in normative texts (e.g., rules, customs, and statutes). Finally, Robson examines the Franciscan pastoral strategy toward children, reading in it a means to guarantee not only the religious formation and instruction of the community but also the continued vitality of the Franciscan order (i.e., as a program of recruitment).

Generations is an informative contribution to research into medieval monastic life. However, while the editors have made an attempt to sew the rather disparate articles together, it seems that the thematic thread they have chosen for their task—the theme of "generations"—snaps at certain articles, particularly those that the editors have earmarked as belonging to the first section of the volume. In the introduction, the editors define the concept of generations as "the social and time-related positioning of individuals or collectives within a society[, which] attributes to them a specific identity in the form of the generation identity" (3). That said, few, if any, of the essays explicitly take up this definition, working out what a *generational identity* could have meant for monastic culture and how that identity may have been constituted. After reading *Generations*, I wonder what exactly the introduction of the concept of generations—as opposed to, for instance, the categories of age, experience, or familial relations—adds to our understanding of the *vita religiosa*. But this volume represents, as the editors point out, "the first results in a historical approach to age" (18), and I look forward to future research that explores the contours of generations, adding definition to the concept's significance for life in the cloister.

