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Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Antwerp Dialogue by
Virginia Blanton, Veronica O'Mara, and Patricia Stoop
(review)

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Parergon, Volume 36, Number 2, 2019, pp. 197-198 (Review)

Published by Australian and New Zealand Association of Medieval and Early
Modern Studies (Inc.)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pgn.2019.0069>



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and study questions at the end. There are also five black and white plates—four with *Pearl* illuminations and one *incipit* folio. The weakest aspect of this book is the repetition of summary of the *Pearl*'s plot and some tonal differences between the articles, but there is an immense amount of content perfect for any instructor preparing to teach *Pearl*, these minor quibbles aside. While this book is designed for quick reference, there is a lot to be gained for anyone's understanding of *Pearl* and many different ways to continue making this text accessible to students who are new to it or to Middle English.

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Blanton, Virginia, **Veronica O'Mara**, and **Patricia Stoop**, eds, *Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Antwerp Dialogue* (Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts, 28), Turnhout, Brepols, 2017; cloth; pp. lxvi, 502; 21 b/w illustrations, 2 colour plates; R.R.P. €125; ISBN 9782503554112.

This collection of nineteen essays emerged from the Antwerp conference on Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe held in 2013. Preceded by collections of papers given at Hull in 2011 and Kansas in 2012, this final volume is the longest in a series of the same name constituting an ambitious attempt to showcase recent scholarly research on medieval nuns from right across Europe, including the British Isles, and extending from Catalonia up to Scandinavia and down to Hungary. The term 'nun' here includes religious under vows, tertiaries, and even secular canonesses, and the term 'medieval' is equally generous, extending from the eighth to the sixteenth and late seventeenth centuries.

The introduction follows the convention of providing summaries of the papers and also addresses retrospectively ten far-reaching questions about pan-European nuns and their literacies—their relationship to books, to Latin, and to the vernaculars. It eschews, however, any '*grand récit*' (p. lxiii), preferring the metaphor of a jigsaw puzzle, some of whose pieces are missing or currently hidden. This initial orientation is particularly useful, as not all readers will approach the individual papers (somewhat arbitrarily distributed among four sections entitled 'Rules and Learning', 'Literacy and Visualization', 'Translating and Rewriting', and 'Exchange and Networks') with equal curiosity or enthusiasm. But where else would the average Anglophone medievalist be able to read about Hungarian nuns and their role in developing vernacular literature (Viktória Hedvig Deák), or the reading of Catalan nuns (Blanca Gari), or the enviable life of the secular canonesses of Sainte-Waudru, who enjoyed all the advantages of convent life with none of the disadvantages (a private income, no vows, a residence requirement of only a few months of the year, and plenty of books) (Anne Jenny-Clark)?

Given the preponderance of medievalists who specialize in England, such potential readers should be aware that post-Conquest English nuns do not compare favourably with their continental sisters. They would make a poor showing indeed here were it not for the Syon Birgittines studied by Ann Hutchison, Mary Erler, and Veronica O'Mara. O'Mara writes on the Birgittine scribe she has now identified

as Mary Nevel (though can one really claim as ‘medieval’ a nun whose entire life took place in the sixteenth century?) but unfortunately ignores earlier work on London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 3600, and some of the other English Birgittine material is getting a little dog-eared through repetition. Mary Erler’s paper, however, on the transmission of images between Flemish and English Birgittine houses, stands out for its elegant coherence. Cate Gunn’s contribution on the Anglo-Norman translation of Edmund of Abingdon’s *Speculum* addressed to ‘sisters’, extracts from which are found in Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS McClean 123, which belonged to an English nunnery, somewhat salvages the reputations of English nuns. But they pale into insignificance beside the nuns of Florence, some of whom ran a printing press and worked as compositors (Melissa Moreton), and the religious women of Germany and the Low Countries, who feature in at least half the papers.

In a book concerned in part with nuns’ Latin literacy, however, it is disturbing to find some rather strange Latin. A religious order called ‘*pauperibus monialibus reclusis*’ (p. 28) seems improbable, while there seems to be words missing from Latin quotations on p. 27 and 28, and throughout that chapter we find unsettling variations in the use of *forma/formae/formam vivendi*. Sometimes it is not clear whether the problem is the medieval nuns’ or the modern scholar’s: the Latin quotations on p. 137, footnotes 33 and 34, could be interesting evidence of a Catalan nun’s idiosyncratic use of that language, though no comment is made, while in Plate 1, repeated on pp. 152 and 159, we can see that ‘*sancta trinitatis*’ can be blamed on the Birgittine scribe Sister Christina Hansdotter Brask (she apparently also miswrote ‘*salutationes*’ as ‘*sabutaciones*’ in Figure 4, p. 155). But the captions ‘*Septem psalmi paenitentialis*’ (Figure 2, p. 151) and ‘*Horae Sancta Anna*’ (Figure 3, p. 153) look like modern errors. One hopes the other European languages have survived in better shape.

Nonetheless, we should still welcome this book that contains a huge amount of information, much of it new, at least to Anglophones, about an area too long neglected. Only a generation ago, there was little for English-speaking students and scholars to read on nuns. Now we have an *embarras de richesse*, and our access has been thoughtfully facilitated by separate indices of manuscripts and religious houses, as well as of texts and people. These will prove invaluable to those working in an area that still has much to give.

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Blud, Victoria, *The Unspeakable, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval Literature, 1000–1400* (Gender in the Middle Ages, 12), Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2017; hardback; pp. 222; R.R.P. £60.00; ISBN 9781843844686.

The first thing I must specify in order to properly assess this book is that the punctuation of the title is crucial. This is not a book about gender and sexuality that has been titled ‘The Unspeakable’. Rather, it is a book that follows connections between distinct but interrelated conceptual domains: the study of that which