Katie Ann-Marie Bugyis, The Care of Nuns: The Ministries of Benedictine Women in England during the Central Middle Ages


Reviewed by: Jirki Thibaut, Vakgroep Geschiedenis, Universiteit Gent (Department of History, Ghent University) – Onderzoekseenheid Geschiedenis, Onderzoeksgroep Middeleeuwen, KU Leuven (Department of History, Research Unit Middle Ages, University of Leuven), September 2019

Katie Bugyis starts her excellent study on the cura monialium, or the care of nuns, with the intriguing question ‘Should the nuns be understood as the object or the subject of the care given?’ (p. 1). The lion’s share of scholarly attention has been given to the spiritual and liturgical care women religious received from male clerics (such as chaplains, priests, male confessors, bishops). Bugyis fundamentally alters this perspective, by exploring the spectrum of ministerial roles which women religious in England performed between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. In doing so, she makes a strong case for the importance of the pastoral care women religious offered to themselves, their fellow sisters, and to others who appealed to them for spiritual counsel, religious instruction, intercession and absolution.

The prominent place of ‘Benedictine’ in the title is a bit misleading. It suggests that the author looks exclusively at women strictly following the Rule of Benedict. However, Bugyis justly remarks that the disciplinary landscape in this period is flexible, rendering a too restrictive view of the Benedictine identity anachronistic. Therefore, she uses the term Benedictine ‘more heuristically than deterministically’ (p. 20), although she leaves the question open to which extent this Benedictine female care is distinct from women.
with a different disciplinary orientation. The author treats the
historiography rather cursorily, but Bugyis’ methodological approach
– combining ‘close paleographical, codicological and textual analyses’
(p. 17) of documents of practice originating from female communities
– is laudable. The author pieces together a wealth of previously
unexamined information from the few liturgical books from convents
that are still extant. By setting this material in dialogue with other
documents from the institutions under scrutiny, Bugyis successfully
reveals the ministerial authority and pastoral agency of women
religious in the period between 900 and 1225.

The study in general is divided in two parts and contains five
chapters. The first part (chapters 1 and 2) gives a systematic and
detailed overview of the liturgical and pastoral responsibilities of the
chief female monastic officers. The author convincingly argues that
ministerial duties were an integral part of the officers’ identity and of
female religious life in general. The second part of the book closely
examines three vital ministries carried out by women (mainly, but not
necessarily by the previously mentioned monastic officers), namely:
liturgically reading the gospel (chapter 3), hearing confessions
(chapter 4) and intercessory prayers (chapter 5). Although, as Bugyis
notes in the introduction, the care of nuns encompasses a much
broader array of spiritual and material tasks, she justifies her choice
of topics by arguing that these ministries were ‘consistently denied to
women in the prescriptive sources of their day, and in the
historiography of ours’ (p. 13).

It should be noted that Bugyis focuses on members of wealthy and
prestigious institutions of Anglo-Saxon origin, for which she has
sufficient source material. This raises the question as to the extent to
which the lived and perceived realities of the pastoral care of these
women from wealthy communities differed (or not) from that
accorded to women who belonged to less wealthy communities. The
surviving source material prohibits the author from conclusively
answering this question, but she does pay attention to it when
possible.

In chapter 1 Bugyis focuses on the liturgical responsibilities of cantors
and sacristans, an understudied group. Their offices are vaguely
deefined in prescriptive sources and they are rarely visible in
documents of practice. Via a close study of the sacristan- and cantor-
like duties which women religious performed, Bugyis reveals that
these women were, as custodians of shrines and liturgical directors,
very much able to orchestrate their divine office and to preserve the
memory of the community and its members. In the second chapter,
the author shifts her attention to the chief officers of a community, the
 prioresses and the abbesses. She not only examines the authority and
far-reaching responsibilities which prioresses and abbesses exercised
with regard to the spiritual care of their fellow-sisters, but also how
this authority was perceived as absolute within the community.
Bugyis also points out that similar ideas (albeit on a different scale)
were expressed by abbesses even of smaller communities.
In the third chapter Bugyis studies the liturgical reading of the gospel by nuns. While prescriptive sources prohibited women religious from performing this ministry, the author argues that women were very much devoted to reading, copying and proclaiming the gospel. Crucial to the author’s argument is the only surviving eleventh-century gospel book from a female community (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ms Bodley 155) – a rare witness as to how nuns adapted a gospel book for liturgical use. A critical reader might note that these adaptations could have been written by a cleric connected to the community – in spite of the fact women were certainly capable of it, as Bugyis justly argues – still, the manuscript is a strong piece of evidence of the liturgical creativity in female communities.

The following chapter examines women’s roles as confessors. Bugyis argues in favour of the existence of a profound penitential culture in female communities. Based on a close study of prayers of confessions in liturgical books from several communities, she points towards the various ways women religious could confess their sins, ranging from private confession to an abbess, to solitary confession, to a communal confession. Besides that, she also convincingly argues in favour of the continuous confessional roles of women religious in the Central Middle Ages. The last chapter focusses on the intercessorial role of women. Although previous research has argued that female communities became less relevant over the course of the Middle Ages, resulting in their impoverishment, Bugyis argues for the continuous value which contemporaries (both inside as outside the communities) accredited to female prayers. The book contains two appendices: a detailed textual analysis of the adaptations of the Gospel book, MS Bodley 155; and the edition of a prayer for an abbess (Cambridge, St. John’s college, Ms C. 18 (68) fols. 230r-234r).

Generally, ‘The Care of Nuns’ should prove useful to researchers interested in female liturgy and religiosity. It provides a thought-provoking and fact-based analysis of the ministerial roles women religious performed in central medieval England, that undoubtedly will stimulate further research on how nuns could exercise liturgical and pastoral authority and agency.

A WORDPRESS.COM WEBSITE.