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Leadership in Medieval English Nunneries

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Anyone who has been researching or simply been interested in female monasticism in medieval England must have noticed a frustrating scarcity of primary sources which has resulted result in relatively meagre secondary literature. Paradoxically, we know more about the spiritual life of medieval nuns than we know about more mundane areas of their life. This imbalance in terms of source survival has led to the development of a somewhat bleak view of the success and survival of female houses in England the later medieval period.

Religious communities of any kind, both male and female, were separated from the lay outside world and were organised around a hierarchical chain of command. However, a decision process within that structure was often subject not only to external pressures, for example by patrons, but also internal power games themselves frequently linked to the connections in the lay world, personal friendship and favouritism. The position of female houses in relation to the bishops, patrons and benefactors was often more vulnerable than those of their male counterparts, but the formal and informal power structures were just as complex and interesting.

This new book by Valerie G. Spear focuses on the leadership of abbesses and prioresses in medieval English nunneries bringing important information and analysis well beyond the scope of the title. Moreover, this book challenges further the widespread notion of the almost uniform decline of female houses in the later middle ages. The scarcity of sources and their fragmentary nature causes methodological issues when it comes to drawing broader conclusions about the state of female monasticism. This is particularly significant

as *Leadership in Medieval English Nunneries* manages to build a coherent picture of how varied the conditions of nunneries were in the given period. The author has shown very convincingly that the personality and connections of individual abbesses and prioresses had a great impact on their institutions in both a positive and negative sense.

The volume is divided into eight chapters which are to a large extent thematic except the last one 'Epilogue', which charts the dissolution of female houses and the role of their leaders in this process. Chapter 1 sets out the key problems of the work. It outlines the roles and responsibilities of abbesses and prioresses and presents models of hierarchies, power structures and possible interactions both within the community and with the wider world (very clearly mapped out on pp. 12?13). The second chapter 'Leadership and lineage' continues with the question of the actual extent of power of an abbess/prioress, her relationship with the members of the convent, and methods of election. A large part of this chapter analyses how far this was an attractive 'career path' for the daughters of nobility and gentry. This is discussed in relation to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in the light of what we know about changing patterns of admissions to the monasteries and the utility of these institutions to lay society.

The next chapter, 'Guardians of the brides', investigates the most important power relationship between a female house and its protectors ? the bishop. He was responsible for regular visitations to ensure that both the spiritual and material well-being of the community was maintained. The bishop was also supposed to help financially if a house was seriously affected by famine, war or plague. The fourth chapter 'The lady and the monarchs' examines relations of the leadership of nunneries with the English kings. In some cases they were patrons (if a nunnery was a royal foundation) and for all the institution, the kings were an authority to apply to for help. However, monarchs were also capable of placing significant demands on religious houses. The king could be a protector at a time of difficulties as the examples of St Helen's, Clementhorpe, Clerkenwell, Godstow, Marrick, St Mary's Winchester and Romsey show (p. 68). At the same time nuns could not easily refuse to take expensive corrodians and pensioners or provide large amounts of money at royal request; for example, the abbey of St Mary's Winchester provided the sum of £200 in 1520.

Chapter 5 looks at the internal workings of monastic leadership, especially in terms of the financial management of nunneries. It is a well-known fact that many female houses, particularly the smaller ones, were poor and often struggled with serious financial difficulties and the communities could experience prolonged periods of poverty. However, Spear challenges the widespread assumption that this was very much due to the ineptitude of the abbesses. She examines the backgrounds of the leaders of nunneries, which, in the later Middle Ages were often connected to the merchant classes and hence financial networks and knowledge. The surviving documents from Syon Abbey, discussed in chapter 5, shed light on the management structure of larger nunneries and the range of financial dealings they were engaged in ? borrowing, rent collecting, sales and other ventures into the marketplace. In the same chapter Spear examines types of financial pressures that contributed to the difficulties of the nunneries, namely the spiralling costs of hospitality.

Bishops' views on female houses are the subject of chapter 6, and their visitation records are among the most important of the small number of surviving sources related to female monasticism in England. They have been used extensively to examine the state of nunneries and mismanagements or other internal problems, but in this volume the author asks new questions. In particular she tries to extract the nuns' voices and opinions recorded in these inquests about what they thought about their communities and the way in which abbesses fulfilled, or did not fulfil, their role as leaders. In the seventh chapter, 'Shifting perspectives', the conditions, ideas and practice of female monasticism ? chastity, veiling, private ownership, the possibility of leaving the cloister to travel, for example to go on a pilgrimage ? at the end of the fifteenth century are discussed. Again here Spear presents a balanced picture and tries to break through the stereotype of decline. The final chapter entitled 'Epilogue' discusses the process of the dissolution of female houses in England from the 1530s onwards. The author traces the careers of former nuns and abbesses after the closure of their houses. She is sympathetic to her subject without being sentimental, which can be a danger in writing about the dissolution and destruction of monasteries and monastic communities.

The main and only criticism of this work that I would like to make is that the time span of the study is not made explicit in the title, although it is spelled out in the 'Introduction' (p. xvii) where it is stated that the work uses material from the period between 1280 and 1539. This choice is dictated primarily by the availability of primary sources, which in itself is a perfectly valid point, but the title as it stands is a bit misleading as it implies coverage of the entire medieval period.

The addition of a glossary is a very good idea and it makes the book more accessible to the non-specialist audience. Likewise, the charts on pp. 12 and 13 illustrating power networks of the superiors of the nunneries in relation to the outside world (both ecclesiastical and lay) and the power system seen from their own perspective are a very useful guide to the power structures at the centre of this work.

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