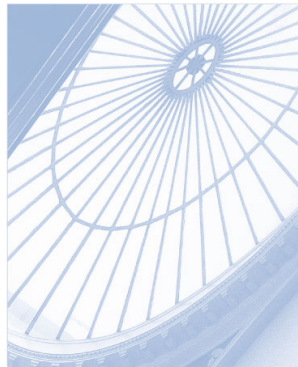


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JUNE L. MECHAM, *Sacred Communities, Shared Devotions: Gender, Material Culture, and Monasticism in Late Medieval Germany*, ed. Alison I. Beach, Constance H. Berman, and Lisa M. Bitel, *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts*, 29 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), xviii + 310 pp. ISBN 978 2 503 54134 1. €85.00

The work under review is an expanded and posthumously published version of June L. Mecham's Ph.D. thesis (University of Kansas, 2004). The author was able to work on the manuscript herself until the beginning of 2009, and the editors handled the final publication.

The subject of the resulting monograph—in contrast to the impression given by the very general title—is the piety of the nuns of the so-called Heath Convents of Lower Saxony (Lüne, Medingen, Ebstorf, Walsrode, Isenhagen, and Wienhausen), with a focus on the Cistercian monastery of Wienhausen alongside the Benedictine house at Ebstorf. For comparative purposes Mecham draws on individual objects and texts from the monasteries of the Holy Cross in Rostock and Brunswick, from the house of the Poor Clares in Villingen-Schwenningen (the 'Bickenkloster'), and from St Agnes in Maaseik, a convent of Augustinian canonesses.

In a similar manner to Jeffrey Hamburger, Mecham seeks to use topography alongside visual and textual sources to reconstruct the performance of piety (in particular, the case of the Easter liturgy in ch. 2). She engages with the multimedia outfitting of the convents, and recognizes wall paintings, sculptures, tapestries, manuscripts and liturgy, devotional images, 'paradise garden' reliquaries, Christ-child dolls in cribs, and embroideries as equally significant works of art and sources (ch. 3). She attributes the vast wealth of the Heath Convents, especially in the period of reform during the last decades of the late fifteenth century, to the social status of the noble nuns on the one hand, and to the nuns' wealth on the other (ch. 4).

A focal point of the study (ch. 5) are the building activities and the private piety of Katharina von Hoya, abbess of Wienhausen (1422–37 and 1440–69), who made many architectural alterations and contributed furnishings to the benefit of both the convent and her private devotional practice. In a separate essay, published under her own

* Trans. Ben Pope.

auspices in 2007, Mecham had already discussed the chapel of St Anna founded by Katharina as a witness to her private devotion.¹

Mecham devotes chapter 6 to religious visual media in the fifteenth-century reform era, which began at Wienhausen under Susanna Potstock (1470–1501), following the ousting of Katharina von Hoya. Mecham is chiefly concerned here with the reconstruction of reforming networks which crossed regions and orders, and which can be deduced from the spread and reception of certain texts, such as the ‘Dornenkron’ and the ‘Ars moriendi’, from the exchange of manuscripts and movement of individuals, whether abbesses, nuns, or reformers such as Johannes Busch, and from the *Devotio moderna* and the Windesheim Congregation. I would doubt whether there really was a direct exchange between north and south German convents, as the reference to an indulgence from the Bickenkloster in Villingen suggests. But the close connections which Mecham observes within the north German and Netherlandish space have been repeatedly confirmed by studies produced during recent years in connection with the Herzog August Library at Wolfenbüttel.² Obviously none of these works could be considered.

Mecham offers an original study of the ‘Crown of Thorns’ (*Dornenkron*) (pp. 218–28), a meditative prayer by Dietrich Kolde (a cleric associated with the Windesheim Congregation), which survives both at Ebstorf (KE MS. IV) and in multiple manuscripts at Wienhausen (Mss 31, 60, 69). Mecham interprets this work as an expression of Passion-centred piety in late medieval female monasteries, and also of other typically female forms of piety, such as spiritual pilgrimages in the form of prayers for indulgence (pp. 228–39).

The author finds a pronounced Eucharistic piety in the Heath Convents during the reform period, which she associates with medi-

¹ June L. Mecham, ‘Katharina von Hoya’s Saint Anne Chapel: Female Piety, Material Culture, and Monastic Space on the Eve of the Reformation’, in Jeffrey F. Hamburger, Carola Jäggi, Susan Marti, and Hedwig Röckelein in cooperation with the Ruhrlandmuseum Essen (eds.), *Frauen – Kloster – Kunst: Neue Forschungen zur Kulturgeschichte des Mittelalters. Beiträge zum Internationalen Kolloquium vom 13.–16. Mai 2005 anlässlich der Ausstellung ‘Krone und Schleier’* (Turnhout, 2007), 177–85.

² On this see my survey: Hedwig Röckelein, *Schriftlandschaften, Bildungslandschaften und religiöse Landschaften des Mittelalters in Norddeutschland* (Wiesbaden, 2015).

tation on the *Dornenkron*, with the performative rites of the Depositio and Elevatio crucis, with the re-enactment of the Via crucis, with the Visitatio sepulchri, and the ubiquitous motifs of the Resurrectio Christi. The nuns, according to Mecham, identified themselves in these 'dramas' with the Virgin Mary, with Mary Magdalene, and with Veronica, and thereby created a greater nearness to Christ (p. 261). Through the manipulation of religious works of art and material objects alongside the sacral space, the nuns of the Heath Convents—according to Mecham's central thesis—dramatized themselves as brides of Christ and inhabitants of the Heavenly Jerusalem, generating a particular spirituality which was seen in a negative light by their (male) confessors. In the convents of the Windesheim Congregation, on the other hand, Mecham observes a leaning towards Marian devotion (p. 258).

Mecham makes frequent use of detailed studies by others, for instance, Tanja Kohwagner-Nikolai's investigation of the Wienhausen embroideries. It is greatly to her credit that she has extensively absorbed German-language research, given the widespread ignorance of this material in the anglophone research today. She also understands the relevant historical vernaculars—Middle High German, Low German, and Dutch—which enables her to study the original sources beyond the universal language of Latin.

The editors have inserted references to literature which has appeared since 2009, for example, the Niedersächsische Klosterbuch (2012) and Charlotte Klack-Eitzen, Wiebke Haase, and Tanja Weißgraf's work on Wienhausen's robe for a statue of the Virgin Mary (2013). Unfortunately there is no consideration of Katharina U. Mersch's dissertation (2012), which tackles similar issues to Mecham's work. The index is very patchy and shows little understanding of the subject. In contrast to Mecham's very substantial monograph, the index is best not relied upon.

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