Virginia Blanton, Veronica O’Mara, and Patricia Stoop, eds., *Nuns’ Literacies in Medieval Europe: The Kansas City Dialogue*. (Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts 27.) Turhout: Brepols, 2015. Pp. xlv, 415; 8 color and many black-and-white and figures and 6 tables. €100. ISBN: 978-2-503-54922-4.

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This beautifully edited book comprises the proceedings of a conference held at the University of Kansas—Missouri in 2012. Spanning chronologically from the seventh to the sixteenth centuries, the contributions investigate case studies across northern and southern Europe. The aim of the Nuns’ Literacies project is to “create a dialogue about the Latin and vernacular texts nuns read, wrote, and exchanged in diverse geographical areas” (xxvii), and to focus on “the extent to which female religious . . . acted as patrons of, or intermediaries in, intellectual and literate practice” (xxix). In their introduction, Virginia Blanton, Veronica O’Mara, and Patricia Stoop define literacy very broadly to allow for a variety of perspectives (xxxiii). Their approach is meticulously justified and its limitations identified exhaustively; the achievements of this enterprise, however, certainly permit the editors to be less tentative than they are about its findings and significance and to focus more on what the project has achieved.

This edited collection is divided into five parts. Part 1, “Educating the Sisters,” situates nuns’ literary output within their day-to-day social function. Focusing on seventh- and eighth-century English convents, Blanton and Helene Scheck demonstrate the utility of looking beyond the slim evidence for nuns’ writing to build a more rounded picture of how women religious learned to read and write. The iconography of learning in Rudolf of Fulda’s *Life of Leoba*, for instance, was influenced by the nuns’ everyday practice and reveals a network of textual transmission between Anglo-Saxon and Frankish communities. Ulrike Wiethaus’s chapter on the education of the Cistercian nuns of late medieval Helfta challenges the notion of individual charismatic authority that we often associate with the “big-name” Helfta mystics (Mechthild of Magdeburg, Mechthild of Hackeborn, and Gertrud of Helfta). The texts written at Helfta were the products of communal practices. Learning was a collaborative pursuit central to the nuns’ contemplative practice, and the evidence points to a strong pedagogical tradition; Gertrud, for instance, simplified existing Latin texts to make it easier for younger nuns to learn them. Stoop’s analysis of the texts produced by the Augustinian canonesses of the Brussels convent of Jericho in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries brings to light multiple levels of literacy and a varied intellectual engagement. The sisters reauthorized sermons through the process of remembering and writing down those that they had heard; their commercial outputs are intriguingly revealing of their skills. In the final chapter in this section, Andrea Knox studies the libraries of Irish Dominican convents in late medieval Spain. These libraries, some of which were formed by refugee nuns during the Henrician Dissolution, attest to the continued use of Irish as a written language long after the sisters had moved, and also to their multilingual literacy; one convent, La Incarnación, had knowledge of Irish, Spanish, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Abbesses preserved influential humanistic texts that were banned by the Inquisition by forbidding men from entering the nuns’ scriptoria and libraries.

In part 2, “Nuns Making Their Letters,” contributors grapple with the challenges of isolating scribal hands. A poor and unusual hand in a fifteenth-century account ledger from the enclosed convent of St. Peter and Sebastian in Naples likely points to a nun who gained a functional level of literacy through learning and practice (Antonella Ambrosia). A fifteenth-century nun from Vadstena likely changed her handwriting over time while producing her manuscript and edited her own work intermittently (Nils Dverstop). Examining additions to codices from English convents allows to speculate on the influence that identifiable nuns may have had upon the inclusions of these additions (Veronica O’Mara).

Part 3, “Visualizing Meaning,” traces literacy in visual culture. Karen Blough focuses on the eleventh-century limestone reliefs from the male monastery of St. Liudger (Werden), which portray women religious exchanging ideas on books that they are holding and were likely influenced by the neighboring community of canonesses at Essen, indicating Werden’s recognition of the women’s intellectual endeavor. As shown by Loretta Vandi, the nuns of Santa Maria in Pontetetto (Lucca) used expressive style in their manuscript illuminations during the eleventh and twelfth centuries to convey feeling and movement. This style may well have been formed against the iconography employed by male monastic scriptoria and were likely in conflict with the canons of San Martino cathedral. Finally, Anne Winston Allen that while the production of books in German-speaking lands began to shift to secular hands in the later Middle Ages, women religious were still instrumental in the dissemination of literature throughout this region.

Part 4, “Engaging with Texts,” focuses on the convents’ literary cultures. Although she is clear that it is difficult to make a definitive decision on a text’s authorship, Maeve Callan queries the prevailing view that women’s authorial voices in early Irish texts were, in fact, written by men. She makes a tentative case for the female religious authorship of Líadain’s Lament, Darerca’s life, and Íte’s Ísucán, and a more forceful one against the androcentric assumption that these texts were male-authored. Moving on to Iceland, Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir considers what texts might have been available to Icelandic nuns. She examines a codex from the fourteenth-century convent of Reynistaður, which mostly contains Icelandic texts translated from Latin—saints’ lives, exempla, and miracle collections—or derived from Latin sources; the translations, however, do not appear to have been made by the nuns and had been copied from other exemplars. Eva Schlotheuber demonstrates that the nuns of northern Germany, and specifically in the Benedictine community of Lüne, were highly literate, adopted different registers to speak to different groups, and used a particularly sophisticated form of Latin. They were able to participate in an intellectual sphere normally dominated by churchmen and to bypass immediate male superiors to appeal to senior churchmen. Finally, Kees Scheepers examines the mystical revival that took place in the duchy of Guelders in the sixteenth century. The literary and spiritual culture at the Arnhem Sint-Agnes convent was crucial to the production of three influential vernacular mystical texts: Arnhemse mystieke preken, Die evangelische peerle, and Den tempel onser sielen.

The final part focuses on “Literary Agency.” By examining a property dispute from eighth-century Gloucestershire, Andrew Rabin demonstrates that nuns were able to self-advocate in a legal setting and to assert control over their property because of their high levels of pragmatic literacy in dealing with legal texts. Rabin thus makes a case for broadening a traditional understanding of “literacy” to include this kind of operational literacy. Examining texts produced by the nuns of Godstow Abbey from 1400–1550, Emilie Amt reveals a fascinating diversity in the levels of literacy within this community (for example, some nuns could not write but were able to read certain texts). Finally, Darcy Donahue presents the work of the sixteenth-century Discalced Carmelite nun, Ana of Bartolomé, whose commentary offers very personal take on the Teresian reform: Ana does not attempt to perform impartiality as other chroniclers might, but expresses distress at communities who did not meet the high standards of austerity imposed by Teresa de Ávila.

This volume troubles the accepted hierarchies of medieval literacies predicated on the efforts of prolific male clerics. Many contributors (notably Callan, Schlotheuber, and Rabin) address usefully the misogynistic and androcentric biases in the medieval discussion of nuns’ intellectual production and in modern takes on this topic. Though the book will obviously appeal most to specialists interested in women religious, the emphasis on community encourages the reader to think beyond literacy as a quality that an individual might develop or perform, and to view literacy as a necessarily collaborative practice.

Kirsty Day, University of Edinburgh