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Nicky Hallett, *The Senses in Religious Communities, 1600–1800. Early Modern ‘Convents of Pleasure’*, Women and Gender in the Early Modern World series, Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, pp. xii + 249, £ 65, ISBN: 978-1-4094-4946-1 (hardcover).

This is an original, unusual, at times challenging and always thought-provoking book, a new landmark in the current developments made by scholars in the study of early modern English nuns. The fates of Catholic women who wished to enter the religious life have been all but ignored even in such seminal works as John Bossy’s *English Catholic Community* or Peter Guilday’s *Catholic Refugees on the Continent*. Over the last decade however, thanks mainly to Claire Walker’s research and to Caroline Bowden’s personal and collective projects, much has been done to correct this imbalance. Manuscript sources have been located across Europe and England, most have been catalogued and many digitised as part of the AHRC-funded project entitled *Who were the nuns? A prosopographical study of the English convents in exile, 1600–1800*. The resulting six volumes of primary sources published as *English Convents in Exile, 1600–1800* by Pickering & Chatto (2012–2014) offer readers a broad overview of the incredible richness of material to document the life writing, history writing, reading habits, spiritual life, everyday life, or even the political involvement of nuns in their local and national contexts. Nicky Hallett participated in this endeavour by editing volume 3 on *Life Writing*, and she had previously contributed two of her own volumes of edited sources, both published in 2007 by Ashgate: *Lives of Spirit: English Carmelite Self-Writing of the Early Modern Period* and *Witchcraft, Exorcism and the Politics of Possession in a Seventeenth Century Convent: ‘How Sister Ursula was once bewitched and Sister Margaret twice’*.

In the work under review, Hallett continues her exploration of the Carmelite communities founded at Antwerp (1619) and Lierre (1648), but this time she offers new insights into the nuns’ experiences of contemplative life through the conceptual lens of the senses. The book opens most clearly with those questions: ‘What did it mean to be sensate in an early modern convent? How did it *feel* to be alive – or dead – in a contemplative community?’ (p. 1). To answer these questions, the study is developed around a general introduction followed by eight chapters, the last one being ‘A Conclusion of Sorts’. Chapters 1 and 2 contextualise

and introduce chapters 3 to 7, which are dedicated each to one of the five senses in turn: touch, taste, hearing, smell and sight respectively.

After a scholarly and informative general introduction, readers may find the first two chapters puzzling. Chapter 1, enticingly entitled 'In Which Mrs Eyre Protects the Impressionable Souls of her Tender Daughters', does not offer a clear sense of direction so much as suggestions to map out the sensory contexts in which young Catholic Englishwomen grew up. Through the example of Mary Eyre, née Bedingfield, who took her three daughters to the Carmelite convent of Lierre, Nicky Hallett shows that taking the veil was, for many young women, a safe and wise option in a generally 'sensory-censorious' culture (p. 27). She evokes the crucial importance of conduct books and makes the distinction between interior and exterior senses in the spiritual writings of nuns and of the authors they read. Bodily senses were to be disciplined and transcended, in order to allow the contemplative soul to feel interiorly. Chapter 2, 'Becoming Behaviour: Two Cases of Sensational Reading' is shorter and continues the author's background-building by exploring the activity of reading with regards to the senses. It highlights the importance of the nuns' medieval heritage (particularly of authors such as Julian of Norwich, John of the Cross, or Teresa of Jesus), the influence of contemporaneous writers such as Alfonso Rodriguez, and even of secular philosophers such as Hobbes and Bacon. The reader may find it difficult to pinpoint the focus of this chapter which does not solely dwell upon the convents' reading habits *per se* but chooses to evoke some fascinating cases of demonic possession and exorcism, in which the bodies of the afflicted nuns became like living books to their sisters.

After these somewhat unusual first two chapters, the next five appear more traditional. In chapter 3, 'Titillation and Texture: The Sixth Sense of "Handsome Handid Nuns"', the reader explores the sensory experiences of nuns through their manual work and the sense of touch, which was regarded as meanest of the senses. Yet Carmelites were particularly preoccupied with this sense, which allowed them at times to verify other senses, validating or invalidating the impressions given by sight, smell or sound. Here, Hallett explores textures, for instance the softness and sensuousness of the clothes worn during clothing ceremonies, followed by the roughness of the conventual habit. She evokes the importance of pain in convents where the imitation of Christ was a model. She also, imaginatively – and unexpectedly for a chapter on touch – develops an analysis of smell, which she interprets as a remote form of touch through vignettes concerning the odours emanating from saintly corpses.

Taste is studied next, as another form of touch; in chapter 4, 'Of Taste and Tongue: "a very slippery member"', readers will learn about the humoural theories related to different types of food and about the penitential practices related to food and drink in English Carmelite convents. The author, however, chooses to go further and to integrate the

role of the tongue as the organ of speech; she develops an analysis of self-control, silence and the regulation of speech which, *stricto sensu*, may be seen as a little outside the remit of this chapter on the sense of taste, but which brings fascinating insights into early modern conventual life.

In chapter 5, 'Still Small Voices: Sounds, Sibilance and Silence in Early Modern Convents', the study moves on to the sense of hearing: in enclosed communities, separated from the world by walls and grilles, the nuns were never to be seen but they were heard, as 'disembodied voices', during Mass (p. 147). And on the inside, what did the nuns hear? This chapter explores the importance of the convents' bells, the role of silence and the place of music, and it conjures up the special atmosphere of enclosed religious communities through the ages. It concludes with a very brief evocation of inner hearing, those sounds heard spiritually by ecstatic nuns during raptures, and of miraculous sounds, unexplained yet heard physically 'with their corporeal eares', often by several witnesses (p. 155). Sadly, the chapter closes on the mere evocation of these intriguing elements, full of such promise of fascinating insights; this is one of the instances when the reader might wish to know more of the author's personal interpretation of the phenomena she conjures up.

Chapter 6, 'Of Smell and Space: "Evaporating Subjects"', is perhaps the most sensuous or sensory of all the chapters. Smell, Nick Hallett tells us, 'is an especially intimate sense' (p. 162), and this particular chapter reflects this intimacy beautifully. It shows how the experience of smell was both individually formative and communally essential, since convents at times built their spiritual identity around their shared common experience of smells, often the sweet odours of saintly, uncorrupted bodies. In chapter 7, 'Eagle-eyed Nuns: Envisioning Vision in Contemplative Communities', the book reaches what was usually known as the highest, the most noble of the five senses. Vision was to be the particular object of the nuns' vigilance, as it was linked to the vice of curiosity: the eyes were therefore disciplined, downcast and chaste. But they could also be paths to spiritual inspiration, and nuns used pictures to help their souls to soar in contemplation. Here, Nicky Hallett draws a distinction between various forms of pictures, namely the printed or painted images used to represent sanctity in the convent, the imaginary images or evocations used during spiritual exercises and the sights seen inwardly during mystical visions or revelations. In this captivating chapter, the author draws extensively upon Teresa of Avila's writings on sight and vision, thereby giving readers a contextualised sense of what English Carmelites would have believed about 'seeing'.

Finally in chapter 8, 'Sensate Certainty: A Conclusion of Sorts', Nicky Hallett considers the trustworthiness of the senses. Citing numerous spiritual and philosophical writings on the subject, she situates the perception of early modern English Carmelites in the historiography of their time to show at once both their indebtedness to previous authors

and their originality, at the periphery of the canon. This conclusion opens up important questions about historicising and periodization, and about the rapport of communities at the margins with more central, canonical sources.

This book is highly original, atypical, and it is at once a delight and a challenge. Much of the delight comes from the chosen topic, which offers rare and intimate insights into the lives of individuals and communities, lives which have remained very private and mostly unknown for centuries. But it also derives from Nicky Hallett's own distinctive writing style; a quick glance at the table of contents will reveal the author's inimitable *cachet*, allying quotations from the nuns' papers with her own imaginative and graceful captions, always so richly alliterated. This technique in fact echoes the body of the work, in which Hallett cites the convents' papers at length and comments only lightly at times, as if to allow the nuns' voices to speak for themselves, in the first person, about their own sensory experiences and their lived contemplative lives. The length of the footnotes shows that the author has preferred to relegate some of her interpretative work to the periphery of the text, as one would do in an edition of primary sources. And therein lies the challenge. Indeed, this authorial decision leads, at times, to some repetition in the cited material across various chapters and may leave the reader somewhat hungry for more analysis, more explanatory material; yet it is in keeping with the overall feel of the book, in which the author seems to strive towards the evocative rather than the definitive. In this sense, this study may be described as historical in content yet highly poetic in form. In a fittingly reflexive manner, it echoes the nuns' own literary productions: it is a precious, well-informed, beautifully researched addition to the existing canonical historiography, yet it quite deliberately remains at the margins, both through its subject and its form. It is audacious, scholarly and lyrical at once, it defies the rigid pigeon-holes of genres, and engages readers fully by not always giving them what they expected when and where they would have expected it. It is also a landmark in the developing scholarship on early modern convents in exile, since – to my knowledge – this is the first monograph to take the study of these nuns beyond its traditional remit and make it into an academic subject for the broader history of ideas, where it can be analysed more conceptually.