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Laurence Lux-Sterritt

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Early Modern Women

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL



Volume 13 + Number 2

Spring 2019

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Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies

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manuscript and print audiences. Bell's resultant reinterpretation of Wroth's writings, meanwhile, convincingly situates Wroth's lexical patterns of allusion, concealment, ambiguity, and contradiction as key elements of a "poetics of secrecy" that veil the poignant intimacy and eroticism pervading her lyrics (60). Above all, Bell's work showcases the dynamic interconnections among Wroth's writings and the strategic versatility of her authorial and editorial practice. It will be a defining resource for future generations of Wroth scholars.

KATHERINE R. LARSON
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The Chronicles of Nazareth (The English Convent), Bruges, 1629–1793. Ed. Caroline Bowden. Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2017. xxxi + 493 pp. \$90. ISBN 978-0-902832-31-2.

Between the years 2008 and 2011, the "Who Were the Nuns?" project unearthed an unprecedented wealth of material documenting the lives of English nuns exiled on the European continent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The project's findings, its database, and its associated publications opened up a rich field of research; scholars of religion, history, literature, music, or visual arts are now able to bring some balance to a historiography which, for too long, had ignored the importance of early modern English convents.

In 2007, Nicky Hallett published two volumes documenting the lives of the English Carmelites; in 2012 and 2013, Caroline Bowden acted as general editor to six volumes throwing light upon all aspects of conventual life in exile, from history writing to life writing, spirituality, convent management and various aspects of the interaction between convents and the outside world. With *The Chronicles of Nazareth*, Bowden provides scholars with the latest of recent editions of conventual primary sources. Nearly concurrently, K. S. B. Keats-Rolan (ed.) has published her *English Catholic Nuns in Exile, 1600–1800: A Biographical Register*, testifying to the current liveliness of the field.

This volume presents the chronicles of the Augustinian Canonesses and their convent of Nazareth, in Bruges. Caroline Bowden has transcribed and annotated two out of the three original manuscript volumes. The first volume covers the first century, from the foundation of the house in 1629 to 1729; the second

volume runs from 1729 until the troubles that forced the nuns to leave in 1793. A third volume, which is not edited here, covers the years 1794 to 1818.

As noted in the introduction, authorship is difficult to establish. Volume One was copied ca. 1738 from earlier original documents that have not survived; the volume is in the hand of Sub-Prioress Anne Weston, but there is no way of knowing who had written the original documents she used as her sources. Weston indicates they were compiled by each prioress in turn, although Victoria Van Hyning has argued that this may not have been the case for the first decade of the house's history and that the practice started in 1639, when Augustina Bedingfield arrived from Louvain. The first ten years of the *Chronicle* do indeed read more like a retrospective summary than a continuous account updated by contemporaneous authors. From 1647, however, the style changes suggest that the *Chronicles* were written regularly to serve as a document of memory of the house. Things are more straightforward for the second volume, which exists in its original form in three different hands believed to be those of Prioresses Herbert, Darrell, and More.

The *Chronicles* give details of recruitment, membership, accounts, alms, building works, management, as well as spiritual practice, links with the outside world and, of course, obituary notices. They were intended to be read by the members of the house, to maintain a feeling of belonging and a sense of continuity with the endeavours of their predecessors. Communal readings were to be done at the refectory at mealtime, alongside the *Vitae* of saints and other texts of a spiritual nature. The text is comparable to most chronicles in that it follows a formula, often starting with an account of new recruits and professions, followed by the obituaries of deceased sisters (these can vary greatly in length), details of the house's financial situation, and other pragmatic aspects of convent management. It also ends with a summary of the alms received that year, with a mention of the names of the benefactors to be thanked.

The text, however, is quite unusual in one respect: where most chronicles gloss over internal disputes and events that indicate disunity or disorder, the *Chronicles of Nazareth* record a more nuanced picture of communal living and vocations. For instance, romantic love features much more prominently than in most texts of the same nature, and readers learn that several of the nuns entered the convent after the failure of their initial plans for an intended marriage. Mary Watson, for instance, took the scholar's habit in 1665 "upon the discontent of being cross'd in her affections in England" (57); elsewhere, the text shows

Watson was not the only postulant to enter the convent to nurse a broken heart. Moreover, the chronicle goes into unexpected detail about certain scandals, such as the elopement of Sister Perpetua Errington in 1696, when she used a skeleton key to escape the cloister after fifteen years of profession to pursue a passionate love affair. Yet those stories do serve a purpose, since all the nuns mentioned, in the end, became perfect religious and embodied examples of God's superior grace. Sister Perpetua even returned to the convent after eleven years of erring in the world. She was welcomed back with kindness and devoted the rest of her life to God and her community, in humility and obedience, intent on making amends for her egregious error; her long obituary notice serves as a moral tale for others. Alongside the temptations of worldly love, the personal papers of cloistered nuns testify to their frequent struggle with either what they call spiritual "aridity," or personal melancholy, which sometimes plunged them in darkest depression. Here again, the *Bruges Chronicle* differs from most when it chooses candidly to evoke the painful consequences of such mental turmoil, with Sister Mary Bernard Ford's "rash attempt. . .to Drown herself" in June 1764, which the author describes as a "terrible accident," happily averted by God's mercy (370).

The *Chronicles*, therefore, reveal much about individual lives and trajectories of these nuns, which were sometimes less straightforward than they are made out to be; moreover, they give a vivid picture of communal life in the cloister, and particularly of its struggles to obtain proper buildings, to secure reliable and long-lasting patronage, and to attract new postulants each year. The practice of taking on lay boarders, for instance, was believed to enhance the house's outreach and therefore to augment its appeal for new entrants. In the end, these boarders proved to be more of a distraction to regular life than they were an advantage, and the practice was discontinued. The text is particularly rich in indications that help to contextualise conventual life in exile, particularly in the second volume, where readers appreciate the tremendous impact of local politics upon the lives of religious communities.

Caroline Bowden has produced a rich edition, following clear, simple principles which limit editorial interference with the original text to a minimum. The bibliography and index are fulsome, yet not overwhelming. The maps will help the reader to situate the Bruges community. At the end of the volume, a glossary will help readers to become more familiar with some of the terms relating to enclosed religious life. I particularly appreciated the notes on currency and on the calendar of feasts and saints' day, both of which allow modern readers to get their

bearings in otherwise unfamiliar standards of reference. The list of nuns cited will enable scholars to search each individual in the *Who Were the Nuns?* database and find out more about them. Lastly, it is worth mentioning the quality of the book as an object in itself; printed on high-quality paper, beautifully bound, the volume answers to the highest standards of the Catholic Record Society series with Boydell & Brewer.

LAURENCE LUX-STERRITT, AIX MARSEILLE UNIV, LERMA, AIX-EN-PROVENCE, FRANCE

The Book of the Mutability of Fortune. Christine de Pizan. Ed. and trans. Geri L. Smith. Toronto: Iter Academic Press; Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2017. xvi + 294 pp. \$44.95. ISBN 978-0-86698-570-3.

Christine de Pizan has come to be appreciated as the first professional woman of letters. She is also often seen as the first truly systematic feminist intellectual in literature, appropriating Italian and French Renaissance humanistic learning toward this end. In simply making Christine de Pizan's *Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune* (*Book of the Mutability of Fortune*, 1403) available to an English-speaking audience, Geri Smith would already be rendering a great service to students of women's history, literature, and related fields. This is not only because Smith ushers in and spotlights yet another Christine text, but also because this particular work, perhaps more than any other in the author's forty-three title oeuvre, is both the longest (at some 24,000 verses) and most representative, exhibiting her stylistic and thematic versatility at a decisive phase of her overall career, extending from about 1390 through 1429. Smith superbly delineates and analyzes this career in her preface, along with the work's historical context, sources, structure, themes, scholarly editing, and critical reception from the early modern period until today. For it is in the *Mutability* that we find Christine shuffling off her initial stage as prince-pleasing courtly (and also religious-devotional) poet and self-consoling widow while retaining the courtly-lyrical mode's refined emotions, spirituality, and personal voice as she moves on to more ambitious works, mostly in prose. After the *Mutability*, she progressed beyond the didactic exegetical mythological stories structuring the earlier *Epistre Othea* (*Epistle of Othea to Hector*, 1400) to tell the *Mutability's* one sustained historical-voyage story, laced with subplots, on



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