

Henning Laugerud, Salvador Ryan and Laura Katrine Skinnebach (eds), *The Materiality of Devotion in Late Medieval Northern Europe: Images, Objects and Practices*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, January 2016, p v+202, €29.95, ISBN 978-1-84682-503-3

The Materiality of Devotion in Late Medieval Northern Europe is the third volume in the European Network on the Instruments of Devotion's (ENID) series on Christian piety and practices. It focuses 'on the materiality of medieval religion and the manner in which Christians were encouraged to engage the physical senses — gazing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting — in their devotional practices in order to intensify the experience (1). There are certainly many themes within this scope of research that explore important concepts of how devotion was physically experienced and expressed, ranging from Rob Faesen and Henning Laugerud's assessments of visions to Laura Katrine Skinnebach's research on divine transfiguration. The contributors to this volume each cover a unique aspect of material devotion, but their work collectively conveys the importance of physically experiencing the divine in medieval life. It is not just that devotion was physically experienced, but that it was an almost essential part of everyday expression of faith, from rituals like the Eucharist to prayer books and devotional art.

Berndt Hamm provides the first chapter, which is appropriately broad in scope for an introduction to the theme. He explores concepts of 'grace' and how it was mediated through various developing forms, particularly once the vernacular became more commonly used. He emphasises the value of 'proximate grace' for understanding the significance of material devotion, which allowed lay men and women to be guided to divine experiences through symbolic depictions of God and the divine (10). This could take on many forms such as the visual depiction of Christ as a child, meant to evoke feelings of unconditional, lifelong love; or the depiction of Christ on the cross, wounded by Longinus's spear, where the 'inner love' of Christ becomes outwardly expressed through his blood

(16). He concludes by assessing how the Reformation changed perceptions of material devotion for some, considering it irrelevant when faith alone could redeem; but the ensuing chapters all demonstrate how diverse and deeply entrenched the concepts of material devotion were in Christian expressions of faith.

Rob Faesen focuses more specifically on the life of a particular ‘poet and mystic, namely Hadewijch, and her book of visions which became one of the first ‘mystical texts written in the vernacular (36). Little is known about her personal life, but Faesen assesses the importance of her work in exploring the capacity for humans to connect with and even become one with Christ and the divine. There are many symbolically significant components to the visions (visions 7 and 8 specifically) which Faesen analyses: they both take place during Communion, the first on Trinity Sunday and the second ‘on an Easter day; and in both ‘Christ shows her the love unity between the Father and the Son, a key connection through the Holy Spirit which Hadewijch believed human beings could share with God (37). The connection between humanity and The Holy Trinity is crucial to Hadewijch’s visions, which becomes apparent in both visions, when Christ materialises as a child in vision 7, and when she climbs up a mountain — which ‘refers to [Christ’s] humanity and its various aspects (i.e. the various ‘paths)’ — to meet with Christ in vision 8. In both, a human experience is shared that unified Hadewijch with Christ: either physical embrace or experience of suffering; and these are used to support the concept of *hoghe minne* (‘high love’) where the love is wholly for the other and not for oneself (42).

Faesen and Laugerud are the only contributors that focus on mystics and visions, and both emphasise the idea of not only sensing God and the divine, but also being able to form a union with God. This raises questions over how common that belief was at the time, or whether it is more specifically linked to mysticism and visions. Laugerud’s approach is quite different to Faesen’s, since his chapter covers visions more generally

and the experiences of multiple mystics. Instead of only assessing Hadewijch's visions, he assesses her visions alongside contemporaries such as Gertrude of Helfta. Gertrude also had a vision of Christ's physical incarnation, alongside the Virgin Mary, emphasising that 'When we look at Gertrude's descriptions we find much of the same content as in Hadewijch', especially for physical manifestations and imagery (52). If the same imagery and symbolism appears in the accounts of other mystics, that raises the question over whether 'visionaries actually see (or saw) images and things that they had seen before and that reappeared in their memory', though this question is addressed through the concept of *aevum* (56). Using the case study of Julian of Norwich's experiences of *aevum*, Laugerud explains it as 'the bridge between time and eternity', going beyond merely personal experiences, between God's realm outside of time's influence and humanity's realm, where concepts of past and memory are almost irrelevant (58). This chapter is such an interesting contrast to Faesen's because it places that previous chapter in a wider context that explains how Hadewijch was both typical and atypical amongst her contemporaries. It also emphasises how theologically complex the visions and the women who experienced them could be, and guides the discussion of material devotion away from simply physical objects and communal ritual.

Salvador Ryan offers a new direction for the next chapter, by assessing not only the mystical traditions that are evident in bardic poetry in Gaelic Ireland but also the theme of 'affective piety' and Christ 'as lover or spouse' in devotional literature (75). As the Franciscan and Observant orders expanded their influence within Gaelic Ireland, depictions of the Virgin Mary weeping blood and Christ on the cross became more prevalent in Irish bardic poetry, being integrated and disseminated through a respected literary canon within Ireland (72). The act of weeping blood was a common aspect to affective piety, eliciting a similar weeping from the sinner as an expression of sorrow and regret. He also assesses how this

depiction coincided (and was even integrated into) portrayals of Christ as a lover, sometimes with clearly sexual imagery and language. Other recurrent depictions and imagery are also explored, from Christ as the chivalric knight being wounded and suffering for his lover to the spear wound from Longinus, which '[drew] forth a torrent of love from Christ's heart' (79). These are not the only literary motifs assessed by Ryan, but they demonstrate how many literary and devotional images and symbols were transferred across Europe and integrated into more specific mediums like Irish bardic poetry. It demonstrates not only the survival of these themes in different mediums, but also the preservation of the mediums that adopted them, since Ryan makes the point early on that the survival of Irish medieval devotional material has 'fared particularly poorly' (70). It then may be worth researching how important the Franciscans were in preserving such examples of Irish Gaelic culture.

Laura Katrine Skinnebach's chapter focuses more on the fundamental relationship between the physical and the divine, through the study of the Transfiguration and its influence on Christian rituals. The Transfiguration involved Christ transforming before his disciples, changing into a shining being while God's voice emerge from the clouds, as a demonstration of God's physical and perceivable presence on Earth. This and the Incarnation were believed to have 'legitimized sensory experience as a way of knowing God', along with the Eucharist where bread and wine are transformed into the body and blood of Christ; and Skinnebach emphasises how examples of transfiguration are found in many Christian practices, texts, and imagery henceforth (91).

Such examples include the *Vera Icon*, based on a story of Christ's face being wiped with a cloth that then had his face imprinted on it, to burning wax images of St Catherine as a candle whereupon any wishes will be granted (98). The significance of such transformation was that it was believed to be so closely linked with God and understanding of the divine, due to Christ's own transfiguration. There was not only an 'outer

transformation' but an inner one too, where the change itself 'served to transform and conform the senses into a devout sensorium, ready to sense the divine' (103).

This chapter is perhaps one of the most concise and clear assessments of the fundamental link between sensory experience and devotional practice, also making a strong argument for why perceivable transformation was a crucial element to many devotional tales and rituals. It could easily have served as the introductory chapter over Hamm's which, while certainly intriguing and detailed, lacks the clarity that Skinnebach provides in her own writing.

The next chapter looks more specifically at the *Johannesschüssel*, a sculpture depicting St John the Baptist which typically (though not always) contained a relic inside of it. Soetkin Vanhauwaert and Georg Geml assess how the *Johannesschüssel* emerged as a part of relic culture from the thirteenth century onwards, the significance of hiding relics within, and how it came to have a devotional value of its own. The portrayal was specifically of St John's head, having been decapitated by King Herod in the biblical stories; and the skull of St John was believed to have healing properties, making it a popular relic for pilgrimage. The *Johannesschüsseln* were believed to have similar healing properties to the skull of St. John, correlating with Skinnebach's chapter where Christ's face imprinted on a cloth was believed to also have curative powers (94). Many *Johannesschüsseln* were ornately made and adorned with gold, silver, and gems to visually convey 'the significance, the authenticity and the meaning of the relic it carries', effectively mediating the perception of the relic and the *Johannesschüssel* (110).

Even more intriguing is that the relic itself did not have to be ornate and visually impressive in order to be revered, but this expectation existed for the *Johannesschüssel* which contained them, with less ornate examples potentially being overlooked as insignificant. This expectation, together with the fact that they did not always carry relics within, leads

Geml and Vanhauwaert to conclude that eventually the *Johannesschüssel* became a relic with its own cult following, regardless of any relic being contained within. The exploration of how a reliquary like the *Johannesschüssel* can acquire a devotional significance of its own over time is quite interesting, but the relatively brief conclusions lead to the sense that there are more questions raised than answers provided. The question over the nature of the relationship between relic and reliquary is raised, but the chapter focuses more on the latter than the former.

Barbara Baert's chapter looks at the Annunciation and how its depiction in medieval devotional material has a specific sensory symbolism that few other contributors have touched upon in this book. The Annunciation is the event when Gabriel came down to Earth to declare to Mary that she would give birth to the son of God, despite being a virgin. Like the Transfiguration, it is a moment that shows the divine taking physical form, and this concept carries over into the devotional imagery of that moment. Baert focuses on the concepts of *Bildakt* and the 'interspace' between text and image or, in this case, the biblical tale to the painting (122). This term is used exclusively for biblical translations from text to image, and refers to the moment upon translation where 'another dimension begins to operate that transforms the word into a sensual world where other laws concerning truth, reality and imagination hold sway. Baert argues that this also changed how the senses perceive the scene depicted, allowing for a more diverse experience of the Annunciation than simply reading would allow. She discusses many symbolic aspects to the medieval depictions of the Annunciation, from biblical characters being placed in contemporary settings like a medieval house to more subtle symbolism like a fire representing God's presence and a lily representing Mary's virginity.

While these are intriguing, the most important part of this chapter comes from the discussion of something rarely discussed by other contributors: the importance of odour and touch. Odour is specifically

isolated as a key sense because it is ‘intrinsically inarticulate’ and ‘possesses the capacity to take us back to the past, to the repressed, to the source and that it thus evokes the desire for restoration’ (139). This is brought up in the context of garden metaphors, the ‘Enclosed Gardens’, and the connection between odours, flowers, and femininity (137). It relates to the Annunciation through Gabriel’s act of breathing into Mary’s ear, which Baert interprets as the impregnating force containing the ‘shadow’ of the Holy Spirit, and the motif of pollen to fit Mary’s connection to lilies (142). Baert highlights that the study of odours in material devotion has received little attention, but her arguments express how assessing the significance of odour and smell could open new avenues for understanding medieval devotion.

The book concludes with Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen’s chapter on the importance of, and controversy about, the use of instruments in material devotion. He describes the arguments over whether instruments of devotion ‘substitute for immediate, direct and unaided access to things’ or an enhancement of such ability to comprehend things (146). He briefly summarises arguments made by various proponents and critics, with Friedrich Kittler suggesting that ‘our entire cognitive and epistemological infrastructure is mediatized’, an argument which Jørgensen seems to relate to in his chapter. Concerning material devotion, Jørgensen argues that instruments of devotion were an important and even formative component to religious expression, stating not only that ‘instrumentality both expresses and forms spirituality’ but also that by assigning symbolic importance to instruments, ‘they themselves produce and engender what they may seem to be merely reproducing or representing’ (149). It is an interesting argument that perhaps underpins the significance of every form of material devotion expressed in this book thus far. If materials for devotion are given this significant socio-cultural status, it makes sense that their persistent use reinforces their significance over time.

Jørgensen also reinforces the importance of smell and touch as senses for devotion through the example of scented rosary beads, reinforcing Baert's argument about the importance of these senses. In his concluding remarks Jørgensen argues, 'Without images no vision, without media no senses, without props no perception' (164). This goes further than almost any of the other chapters in emphasising the importance of material devotion: instruments and media not only aid devotional expression, they *define* it. Such an argument is a bold, if questionable, conclusion but one that expresses the centrality of images, objects, and other material practices to medieval devotion. Whether you agree with Jørgensen's conclusion or not, the book and its contributors make a convincing argument for how significant and multifaceted material devotion was in the medieval period.

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