

# *Introduction: transforming male devotional practices from the medieval to the early modern*

Article

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# INTRODUCTION

## Transforming Male Devotional Practices from the Medieval to the Early Modern

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In September 2015 three scholars: Sarah Bastow (an Early Modern historian from the University of Huddersfield), Sarah Macmillan (a late medieval scholar from Liverpool Hope University / University of Birmingham) and myself, Rebecca Rist (a medieval historian from the University of Reading) came together to host a two-day conference at the University of Huddersfield on the theme of ‘Transforming Male Devotional Practices from the Medieval to the Early Modern’. The conference included three key note papers: two by medievalists of the high and late middle ages: Anthony Bale (Birkbeck, University of London) who spoke on the topic of ‘Men and Pilgrimage at the End of the Middle Ages’ and Katherine Lewis (University of Huddersfield) who gave a paper on ‘Tracing Male Lay Piety in William Caxton’s Saints’ Lives’, and one by an early modernist: Lucy Wooding (King’s College London) who spoke on ‘Of the Expresse Worde of God: Tudor Catholicism and Vernacular Religious Culture’.

The theme of the conference: male devotional practices from the medieval to the early modern explored the nature and character of lay male devotion in the medieval and early periods and its development between the eleventh and seventeenth centuries. Questions the conference asked included: To what extent did policies and directives from the clergy influence male lay devotion? Did male clerical notions of masculinity affect lay male devotional practice? Were men more focused upon text-led devotional practices than artefact-orientated devotional practices? Can male lay devotional practice be distinguished from female practice? How important were regional variations in Europe in creating an overall picture of lay male piety?

The conference engendered a rich selection of papers on a wide range of topics. Rebecca Rist spoke on ‘Catholic Piety and the Crusades in the Novels of Walter Scott’, Sarah Macmillan on ‘The Uses of Tribulation: Piety, Identity and Masculine Self-Formation’, and Sarah Bastow on ‘The Pious Life of Thomas Meynell: Practical Concerns and Recusant Anxieties in Sixteenth Century Yorkshire’. Other participants included Rachel May Golden (University of Tennessee), who spoke on ‘Gendered Grief, Crusade and Devotion in Lamenting Richard the Lionheart’, Katie Phillips (University of Reading) on ‘Devotion by Donation: The Alms-Giving and Religious Foundations of Henry III’, Jonathan Gallagher (University of Edinburgh) on “‘Oh to vex me, contraries meet in one’”: John Donne’s “A Litanie” and the Oath of Allegiance Controversy (1606-10)’, Delia Sarsons (University of Reading) on ‘Englishmen and their Books of Hours’, Gabriela Badea (Columbia University) on ‘Landscapes of the Heart in *Le livre des seynctz medicines* by Henry of Lancaster’, Laura Jacobus (Birkbeck, University of London) on “‘In remission of sins’: Putting a Price on a Money-Lender’s Piety’, Alexandru Ştefan (Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania) on ‘Death as a Social and Devotional Event. The Case of Several Guilds from Late Medieval Transylvania’ and Carol Sibson (Queen Mary, University of London) on “‘Soun Peer en Merite e en Louher’”: the Medieval Layman and the Saint’. Unfortunately, Patrick James (CUNY, New York) withdrew and was unable to give his paper ‘The Queer Art of Grace in John Donne’s Holy Sonnets’.

Although there has been ground-breaking scholarship on the study of Catholic devotional culture in medieval and early modern Europe, studies of both medieval and early modern religious practice have largely focussed on women’s history and the perceived feminisation of religious space. By contrast the conference explored how devotional practices informed the identities of lay men in both the public and private spheres. By looking at the concept of lay piety over a long chronological period, speakers examined the many changes in religious practice from the high medieval with its emphasis on pilgrimage, crusade, penance, indulgences and the formulation of the doctrine of purgatory, through the late medieval which saw an increased emphasis on personalised and private devotion, and into the Early Modern when the change to the official religion of England outlawed

much traditional practice and altered lay belief and piety in England forever.

This special edition of *Reading Medieval Studies 2017* brings together some of the papers from the conference, which were subsequently peer reviewed and expanded into articles. Unfortunately only a small selection of the papers from the conference are included in the volume since the key note speakers had already promised their papers elsewhere and some of the other participants did not put forward their papers for publication. Nevertheless, the seven papers published here are very representative of the themes and issues which the conference explored and provide a snapshot of its range and scope.

Rebecca Rist's article 'The Crusades, Catholic Piety and Chivalry in the Novels of Walter Scott', examines how medieval lay piety was portrayed by the nineteenth-century novelist Walter Scott. Rist analyses Scott's crusading novels, *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman* as a comparison of medieval Catholic society with the state and prospects of nineteenth-century Britain. In both novels Scott plays with a number of themes: Saxons versus Normans, Catholics versus Protestants, Saracens versus crusaders in order to explore the nature of piety, chivalry and crusading. Rist argues that Scott's overall conclusions are ambiguous since, while suggesting that chivalry is the leaven in the Catholic lump, he also notes its ambiguities. Furthermore, while recognizing the importance of religious motivation for the crusades, Scott remains unsure as to whether such religious fervour is acceptable.

Sarah Macmillan's article "'Well saved in suffering': Tribulation Texts and Masculine Self-Formation in Late Medieval England' examines *The Book of Tribulation* and compares it with other contemporary fifteenth-century texts such as *The Twelve Profits of Tribulation* and *The Six Masters of Tribulation* which also describe the experience of suffering. Macmillan examines what suffering meant from a lay male perspective. She argues that the ideal of masculinity presented in *The Book of Tribulation* is the ability to submit to God's will with patience and stoicism in order to gain self-mastery. In the context of late-medieval English piety, the *Book of Tribulation* emphasises that it is the exertion of control over one's own thoughts, emotions and actions which brings self-control, from which in turn springs inward, spiritual self-empowerment.

Sarah Bastow's article 'The Piety of Thomas Meynell: "no thing was spared how holy soever it was"' examines the commonplace book of Thomas Meynell, a Catholic writing in the early seventeenth century who recalls the revolutionary religious changes that had altered the religious and political landscape of England. Bastow argues that through Meynell's commonplace book we can see how Thomas's piety and religious convictions were part and parcel of his everyday life. His writing presents us with his belief in the sacramental nature of Catholicism and his certainty that through it he and his fellow Catholics will secure salvation. It is a moving testimony to the perils Catholics faced in their everyday lives in remaining true to the faith of their medieval ancestors.

Katie Phillips's article 'Devotion by Donation: The Alms-Giving and Religious Foundation of Henry III' examines the ways in which Henry III of England displayed his piety. Phillips shows how Henry was strongly influenced by the thirteenth-century mendicant orders and that this influenced his religious patronage. She argues that the political problems Henry faced during his reign have long overshadowed the importance to him of his faith and his belief that through his adherence to the teachings of Saint Francis and emulation of the life of Jesus Christ he would secure the salvation of his soul and the souls of his family. Henry's support for the mendicant orders, in particular the Franciscans, reveals his piety, while his decision to patronise hospital foundations displays his desire to aid the poor, sick and needy.

Gabriella Badea's article 'Landscapes of the Heart in Henry of Lancaster's *Livre des Seyntz Medicines*' reveals how a prominent nobleman of the fourteenth century, Henry of Grosmont, duke of Lancaster, explored in his confessional work, *Le Livre des Seyntz Medicines* three particular images of the heart: as a vortex on the bottom of the sea, as a fox's burrow, and as a busy town marketplace. Badea argues that the idea of penance in late medieval Europe emphasised the heart as the fount of all evil, and that contemporary texts concerned with the sacrament of Confession expressed the need to examine the depths of the self. In response Henry turned pragmatically to allegory to describe inwardness and to articulate a confession of the heart. The *Le Livre des Seyntz Medicines* therefore puts forward a very 'modern' view of the difficulties of self-knowledge.

Carol Sibson's article 'Lay Spirituality in the High Middle Ages: How the Layman Became a Match for the Saint' examines the vision of the exemplary layman depicted in the early-fourteenth century hagiographical poem *De seynt Panuce* in which the protagonist Panuce meets a minstrel and a wealthy lord who both serve as a corrective and an inspiration to his piety. Sibson argues that the poem adheres to monastic virtues, yet endorses lay status, emphasising that both pious laymen and professed religious may be considered spiritual equals, and asserting the need for the layman to act ethically in his civic responsibilities. Hence we are presented with another innovative text which reflects concerns over the moral state of late medieval society and gives us insight into contemporary beliefs as to how the good lay Christian should navigate his way.

Finally, Alexandru Ştefan's article 'Death as a Social and Devotional Event. The Case of Several Guilds from Late Medieval Transylvania' explores how the devotional solidarity that medieval Transylvanian guildsmen expressed through their funereal rituals gave guilds the opportunity to transform the death of one of their members into a representation and endorsement of their power and prestige in urban society. Through a fascinating examination of the evidence for the funeral activities of important Transylvanian guilds, Ştefan argues that the rituals instituted by a craft guild at the death of one of its members, in particular the obligation of young guildsmen to carry the coffins and to bury their fellow dead members, promoted not only very specific pious behaviour, but also a series of complex rituals that allowed them to express their social status in the urban community and to ensure the renewal of established hierarchies.

Hence we see how the articles presented in this special edition examine important thematic strands which were explored at the conference 'Transforming Male Devotional Practices from the Medieval to the Early Modern' held at the University of Huddersfield in 2015: continuity and change (how did lay male lay religious practice develop?); male and female diversities (how did lay men express piety and devotion compared to lay women?) and place and space (how did lay male piety manifest itself in different regions?). They reflect the overall aims of the conference: to explore lay male piety in the medieval and early modern periods in contrast to male clerical practice; to understand how male lay practice differed from female lay practice; and

to analyse the way in which lay men understood and constructed their identities in relation to devotional culture. It is hoped that the volume will be a valuable contribution to the study of lay male piety in the medieval and early modern periods.

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