

Adelisa Malena. *L'eresia dei perfetti. Inquisizione Romana ed esperienze mistiche nel Seicento italiano.*

Temi e Testi 47. Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2003. xviii + 318 pp. index. €39. ISBN: 88-8498-118-2.

The study of women in the Renaissance has been a fertile field for many years as various aspects of women and their ambience have been investigated. None has been more informative than the considerations concerning the spiritual life of women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as the work of Adriano Prosperi, Gabriella Zarri, and Anne Jacobson Schutte, to name only a few, have amply demonstrated. The present monograph builds upon and supplements previous studies and provides penetrating insights into the spiritual life of women in the seventeenth century who had experienced mystical revelations from the divine. In this fascinating study the author pinpoints problems inherent in the study of mystical women or the so-called *perfetti*. She notes that "excessive" sanctity had been a cause for admiration in the medieval Church, but in the seventeenth century the same experience of sanctity became a cause of concern to the Roman Inquisition. In addition, the terms sanctity real or "feigned" and quietism are often defined as diverse camps, but Malena puts both under the heading of mysticism. She notes that this particular type of spirituality and mystical experience became, under narrowing doctrinal constructs of the Holy Office of the Roman Inquisition, a heresy defined as "pretended sanctity," pelagianism, and quietism. Another aspect of this study indicates that not only did mystical women fall under suspicion, but also their confessors and spiritual directors.

As one realizes, the experiences of mystical women and their influence on learned men and confessors has a long history: the Blessed Bridget of Sweden and her *Revelations*, Margaret Ebner and her *Revelations*, Angela of Foligno, Paola Antonia Negri, the Blessed Chiara Bugni, and the Virgin of Venice known only as Giovanna, to name only a few. The cases of Chiara Bugni and the Virgin of Venice are especially significant, since their influence on very learned men, Francesco Zorzi in regard to Bugni and Guillaume Postel in relation to the Venetian Virgin, was profound.

The study of the mystical women that Malena presents is not dull, dry material, but rather a balanced view of various types of cases brought against many women who claimed sanctity. The inquisition of the Neopolitan "holy mother and teacher of the spirit," Giulia de Marco is one of the most interesting processes, and also one of the most difficult to comprehend. Giulia, who had friends among the Neopolitan nobility and especially with the court of the viceroy, the Count of Lemos, was the accused in a notorious process in 1615 in which the alleged sexual aberrations of Giulia were the central focus of the Inquisition. The great interest in her so-called obscene acts and lascivious practices have relegated to a second level the charges of feigned sanctity that had been under scrutiny by the Roman Inquisition since 1609. The Inquisition of Naples had been fearful of the reputation of holiness that had accompanied Giulia and sought to control it by 1607. When the results of the investigation were heard by the Cardinal Inquisitors in

Rome, a decree of the Inquisition in August 1609 against the "santità affettata" and "quietismo" of Giulia, directed to the bishop of Caserta, indicated that "sor" Giulia should be admonished and warned to lay aside her pretensions and affectations of sanctity. Giulia di Marco had claimed that her soul had always been united with God and that "this union was such that the essence of the powers of the soul were immersed in God in an inexplicable way" (16). As others who had proceeded her, she claimed that she knew the secrets of the heart and who was good or evil. She also said that obedience must be blind and that her spiritual sons must practice complete obedience and total resignation "in the sacred side of Christ." Her influence on her followers was so great that they came to her for confession and communion. The inquisitorial process lasted for eight years and in 1615 reached a conclusion with a public abjuration by Giulia and with her condemnation to prison. Two of her "spiritual sons," Giuseppe De Vicariis and Aniello Arciero, were also condemned to prison. What is most significant about this process and other similar ones is the question of magisterium. The Holy Office of the Inquisition defined the claims of mystical women as heresies in order to preserve the magisterium of Church that was fearful of any encroachment upon its teaching and dispensation of the sacraments, as well as the perceived danger of these mystical women.

The second section of the book is devoted to Francesca Frabroni, a nun of Pisa, whose claims of holiness and sinlessness greatly disturbed the Roman Inquisition; the investigation of Francesca began in 1677. The tribunal sent "learned and prudent" confessors to illuminate her so that she would realize her own errors and finally "to lead her back into the state of health" (47). She was accused of breaking her vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience; more damaging for the Inquisition, however, was her pretense of sanctity. Malena states that there could be no doubt that the nun had feigned her sanctity in order to deceive those around her. She scorned the mysteries of the faith by refusing to make the sign of the cross, to go to confession, and to recite the liturgy. In her haughtiness she claimed that she did not have any will or free will, for she had given it to God who had accepted it, and consequently she had neither temptation nor remorse. She claimed equality with the Virgin Mary and like her was free from original sin. She owed obedience only to God. When all attempts by confessors failed to return her to health, in their words, she was transferred to the Monastery of Saint Catherine at San Gimignano where she was deprived of her habit and placed in a cell ("loco carceris," 57). Shortly after her incarceration in the monastery and after additional interrogations by the Inquisitor General of Florence, she died. Her death, however, did not stop the controversy about Francesca Frabroni. This aspiring saint was to be further condemned. In 1689 in the Church of Santa Croce in Florence her portrait, showing her on her knees with hands bound behind, and a chest containing her mortal remains were placed on the altar while a summary of the long process and of the final judgment was read to the congregation. Then those remains were handed over to the secular arm and carried to the place of executions, where they were thrown unto the fire, and the ashes were scattered in the wind. This bizarre

conclusion eight years after her death makes very clear the fear that the life of Francesca Fabbriani and her followers engendered in the hierarchy of the Church and in the Roman Inquisition.

The study of Francesca Fabbriani alone would make this book a fine contribution to scholarship. It contains many more distinctions, however. It is written in lively and clear prose and is a joy to read. The subjects presented in this study are significant, each in its own way, since they demonstrate the strictures that the Church increasingly placed upon mystical women in the Seicento. The author has demonstrated impeccable scholarship in her archival research, and it is a pleasure to read her detailed footnotes. She takes a broad view of her subject, incorporating all aspects of issues religious, political and social, all the while maintaining a precise control of the sources.

This book is an important contribution to the study of women in the religious life of the Seicento and the influence that their mysticism inspired. Those accused of feigning sanctity still hold great interest for the modern reader because of the boldness of their assertions as well as the boldness of their lives. This book is a must not only for those interested in the religious life of post-Tridentine Italy, but also for anyone who has interest in women and their lives in early modern Europe.

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Helen Hills. *Invisible City: The Architecture of Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Neapolitan Convents.*

Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. xii + 268 pp. + 10 color + 44 b/w pls. index. illus. gloss. bibl. \$60. ISBN: 0-19-511774-3.

After Paris, seventeenth-century Naples was the most populous city in Europe, a city of convents concealed by towering façades and fortress-like portals, behind which rose small municipalities. Although Naples did not have the highest conventual population in Italy — in 1623, nuns composed only about 1 percent of the populace, as compared to 5.5 percent in Florence — the culture of female enclosure was quite distinctive and distinctly aristocratic, offering women freedoms from the strictures of secular society at the same time as it promised unique control over the urban fabric in what the author encapsulates, after Michel Foucault, as “an optics of power” (18).

Hills’s governing thesis is that the architecture of the convents of Naples modeled the body of the virgin nun, with all the complexities and dissonances that such a metaphor might imply. Rather than simply espousing feminine identity and aspiration, the convent was a repository and a conduit of civic action, a porous site of class tension, political maneuvering, and ecclesiastical gamesmanship. Female communities expanded in size and wealth, especially before the anti-Spanish revolt and the plague of 1656. They benefited from a kind of competitive piety initiated by the viceroys and from a strategy of survival on the part of the city’s aristocracy