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### Warren, Nancy Bradley. *The Embodied Word: Female Spiritualities, Contested Orthodoxies, and English Religious Cultures, 1350–1700*

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Warren, Nancy Bradley.

*The Embodied Word: Female Spiritualities, Contested Orthodoxies, and English Religious Cultures, 1350–1700.*

ReFormations: Medieval and Early Modern. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010. Pp. xi, 339. ISBN 978-0-268-04420-6 (paperback) \$36.

With her third book on female spiritualities Nancy Bradley Warren, professor of English at Florida State University, has produced an ambitious and worthy study, the fifth in Notre Dame's *ReFormations: Medieval and Early Modern* series. The series aims to bridge the gap in writing on religion between the medieval and early modern periods. In this volume Warren has produced a comparison of at least ten (depending on what you count) female religious writers from St. Birgitta of Sweden to Elizabeth Cary. Her specific interest is, as the title suggests, embodiment and particularly "incarnational theology," the focus on God made human flesh, as well as "the corporeal aspects of textual encounters and of knowledge acquisition" (47). Studies that cross the artificial divide between medieval and early modern are not so rare now, but they are still in great need. The current trend of looking for continuities between pre- and post-Reformation religiosity is greatly welcome. Denominations were perhaps less set for early modern people than they were later. Even in the sixteenth and to a lesser extent seventeenth century, people could treat the religious environment more as a buffet than an entirely prix-fixe menu.

This is particularly true for spirituality of the sort Warren looks at. Her book shows that for a certain broad class of female religious writers the continuity across denominations and eras, particularly in the use of spiritual imagery, is striking. Warren demonstrates that the authors' theology was never far divorced from their bodies and that physical, bodily imagery, specifically gendered (such as that of motherhood), was vital. Central to this was their experience, often mystical, of Christ's bodily incarnation and the physical suffering of the passion. Throughout this book Warren is admirably scholarly—showing a good grasp of the very broad range of writings necessary. The best part of this is her demonstration that writers drew from similar sources. She has skilfully grouped the authors, not entirely by period and place but also by topic. Chapter 4, for example, joins Margery Kempe to Anna Trapnel and Elizabeth Cary. The women she focuses on are an interesting bunch and produce

many a lively quote. There are many and detailed notes, although there is no bibliography of cited works.

This book does have its weaknesses. One is the use of a common methodology that constructs an argument by producing an anecdote or quote, following it with extended exegesis, followed by another anecdote, more exegesis, and so on. Obviously there is nothing wrong *per se* with either anecdotes or exegeses, and by piling them on one can demonstrate a thesis. However, I would like to see individual quotes or pieces of evidence placed within a more structured and sophisticated argument that better elucidates the context. In this case, I was left not knowing whether quotations were typical or unusual for the author, the specific title, or the genre. Having a longish bit of explanation after each bit of information also produces a fair bit of repetition. I do not want to exaggerate the problem here, however, as Warren is far from the worst example of this. Frustration comes from the fact that she is best when she is doing the more difficult thing, which is the hard-nosed research and in-depth analysis, so this is clearly a stylistic choice rather than stemming from a lack of ability.

Another choice was the use of postmodern language. This is a particular pet peeve of mine. Many readers will enjoy it much more than I do and everyone will have read far worse examples. It is more common in the field of English, which is her normal home, and less in History, which is mine. In more cases than not, however, the language hinders and obscures her argument. She works hard in spots to fit her findings into categories exemplified by buzzwords. The most common in this book is “embodied,” not surprisingly given the title. The language also accentuates the problem of repetition and can make certain passages a chore. They can sound specific while actually being very general, as in: “The textual corpus bears witness to embodied human experience in history and simultaneously seeks reincarnation in the lives of readers through human history.” (75) Another criticism might be that Warren sometimes stretches her argument and sees embodiment in everything (see especially p. 148). Fortunately she produces enough valid examples that her argument rarely falters as a result. Sometimes the texts are interpreted very literally. One striking example of this (p. 65, but elsewhere also) is where love is described as a bodily feeling, even when specifically labelled as divine love. Mentions of hearts are also literally interpreted as the organ. (85) In all the discussion of the body it sometimes seems like the women have no souls. One thing I would have liked to have seen addressed was the obvious counter argument

that these spiritual experiences are prime examples of the seeming opposite of what she argues, which is disembodiment. She herself mentions that an interest in incarnation in the late Middle Ages is nothing surprising, so she could have spent less time on that topic. At the same time she rather surprisingly omits any mention of the cult of Corpus Christi, and sacramental theology gets a very late mention in the book as well.

I do not like to make such distinctions, coming from an interdisciplinary background myself, but I think the above issues will make the book more attractive to scholars of English than to historians of religion. Still, I do not think they ruin what is a very useful study.

BEN NILSON, *University of British Columbia at Okanagan*

**Weber, Alison (ed.).**

***Approaches to Teaching Teresa of Ávila and the Spanish Mystics.***

Approaches to Teaching World Literature. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2009. Pp. vii, 297. ISBN 978-1-60329-023-4 (paperback) \$19.75.

The essays in this edition of the *Approaches to Teaching* tackle a challenging pedagogical question: How to engage twenty-first century North-American students—in either largely secular, Catholic, or other institutions of higher learning—in the esoteric topic of early modern Spanish mysticism? The contributors tell their stories of successfully motivating students to reflect on the religious, socio-political, and philosophical issues triggered by the lives and writings of Spanish mystics.

Part One of the collection (“Materials”) addresses the basic issues of accessing the writings of the Spanish mystics for instructors and students. Alison Weber describes Spanish and bilingual anthologies and editions of primary texts. She discusses reference works on the relevant historical events, works on individual mystics and spiritual orders, and historical and literary, religious and theological studies of mysticism. Amanda Powell explains how English translations of Teresa’s writings convey different nuances of meaning, suitable