
REVIEWS

Geneviève James, ed. *De l'Écriture mystique au féminin*. Saint-Nicolas, Québec: L'Harmattan, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2005. 180p.

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De l'Écriture mystique au féminin (*On Women's Mystical Writing*) contains a detailed introduction by Geneviève James (1-21) and eight essays, arranged chronologically from the medieval period to the 20th century. Western Christian mysticism is the unifying theme of the first five essays. The mysticism of Catherine d'Amboise, a laic poet from the Middle Ages, manifests itself as compassion (*miséricorde*) and joy, and a strong need to express these feelings in writing (23-26). Marguerite de Navarre, sister to King François I and a queen in her own right, represents the French Renaissance. Although she was a devout woman, she was hardly a mystic. The young Marguerite yearned, nonetheless, to become free from earthly prisons associated with love, the enclosure of a room, bookish knowledge, or perhaps the dominance of men, all prisons of the visible world that hindered the soul from achieving complete union with God (37-49).

Saint Theresa of Ávila is, on the contrary, a mystic extraordinaire of the Spanish Golden Age (51-62). In an unusually militant text, feminist in tone, the reader who anticipated accounts of truly mystic experiences finds instead a declaration of war against "the judges of this world." In her *Chemin de Perfection* (*The Road to Perfection*), the stereotypical metaphor of the convent as a prison becomes a place of liberation for women, a place where they can express themselves unhindered by men. Ahead of her time, the great mystic from Spain saw life in a religious community as the least painful choice that was open to women.

"Marie de l'Incarnation" represents the century of Louis XIV. She transmitted her spiritual teachings in letters written to her son living in France even though her arena of religious activity as a nun was in Quebec where her memory remains deeply imbedded in the culture, history, and literature preserved in the Musée des Ursulines de Québec. It houses the artefacts from the convent founded by her and remains today a privileged tourist stop (63-75).

The life of "Saint Lydwine de Schiedam" spans the 14th and 15th centuries. She was canonized, however, only in 1890. We see her through the oblique prism of her biographer Joris Karl Huysmans, a convert to Catholicism (77-95). Saint Lydwine finds joy in suffering. It brings her closer to the suffering of and union

with Christ which is a joyous occasion in spite of her decomposing body. We recommend that readers complement Imane A. Hakam's study with Robert Ziegler's essential chapter on Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam in his work on Huysmans, *The Mirror of Divinity* (2004).

In the sixth essay James herself provides a thorough and well-documented study of Alexandra David-Néel's life and oeuvre relating her daring travels and exploits in the Orient. Tibet was a region very little explored and hardly known in David-Néel's time. Less open to Westerners, it was off limits to women. David-Néel's quest for a higher spiritual knowledge led her to mysticism by means of the Orient and Buddhism as practiced in Tibet, in writings that became bestsellers in her time.

The inclusion of the last two essays in a volume on mysticism may surprise. One may ask if the "sorcières noires" (the black witches) were mystic women? Did they seek a union with a higher divine being or were they women who possessed a special knowledge based on intuition, inner guts, and mastering the art of healing properties of herbs and plants. These abilities made them feared as well as sought out for their power to heal.

Is "the idea of *mysticism*... a social construction" (127) or is it, on the contrary, an individual experience that society values as an extraordinary gift without always understanding it? Is it an exceptional longing for union with the divine and a means to transcend the limitations that society and its prisons inflict upon us? Women endowed with supernatural powers have been called by ambiguous names: mystics, heretics, and mediums. Tituba and Télumée are fictional black heroines, the first in Maryse Condé's novel *Moi, Tituba, sorcière noire de Salem* (1986), and the second in a novel by Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle*. Although her grandmother has initiated Télumée into the wisdom that she had acquired during long years of practice, can we say that Télumée and Tituba are learned and wise women, initiated into a higher knowledge, or are they witches, magicians, and enchantresses? Does the fact that they are "initiées, instruites, savantes" qualify them as "mystics"?

The last essay is a medical case study, reminding us of *Germinie Lacerteux* by the Brothers Goncourt except that the heroine is not a faithful servant who leads a secret life who, unbeknownst to her masters secretly indulges in sexual excesses and alcohol. "Madeleine," on the contrary, was a religious woman from a respectable and wealthy sector of society, married and mother of four, a widow and beloved grandmother who suffered from a harmless yet socially troublesome "megalomania," calling herself "Le Roi du Monde" ("The King of the World"). She remained institutionalized for some twenty years. Following her release to a retirement home she enjoyed another ten years before dying in her nineties.

Do “Madeleine’s” visions and her initiation into catholic esoteric practices qualify her as a mystic? Her twenty-year internment in a mental institution and Dr. Allitaire’s doctoral dissertation based on “Madeleine’s” case throw shadows of doubts on the “mysticism” of her writings. Jean-Pierre Laurent and Jacques Maître have consulted innumerable documents including interviews with witnesses, and have justly concluded that to speak of a “mystic experience” in the case of “Madeleine” would be to greatly exaggerate. Their critical approach includes politics, religion, medicine, and social influences. *De l’Écriture mystique au féminin* also features the influence of Lacan, a close reading of a mother’s letter to her son, and Allendesalazar’s more traditional approach which sheds new light on Saint Theresa of Ávila. ✱