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Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *The Strange Case of Ermine de Reims*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2015. xii + 236 pp. Appendix, notes, bibliography, and index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8122-4715-2; \$55.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-0-8122-9133-9.

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Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski's careful examination of the supernatural experiences attributed to the fourteenth-century devout widow, Ermine of Reims (d. 1396), provides an evocatively contextualized picture of late medieval devotional practices. At the same time, the book calls for a reconsideration of the contours and significance of late medieval debates regarding the prophetic abilities and supernatural experiences of women. Blumenfeld-Kosinski emphasizes the complexity of Ermine's experiences by examining the surviving record through the various frameworks available to Ermine's late medieval contemporaries (pp. x-xi). For this reason, she organizes the book's five chapters around the following themes: urban widowhood, spiritual collaboration, lay piety, demons, and methods for distinguishing between demonic and holy spirits. The resulting argument highlights the potent connections among socio-economic status, networks of neighbors, clerical ambitions, gender discourses, high politics, and religious practice. It also reveals how economically insignificant individuals like Ermine, who are largely invisible in the surviving historical sources, could affect the major historical developments of their time.[1] Ermine, who once gathered and resold marsh reeds to support herself, responded personally to the religious turmoil caused by the papal schism of 1378 in a manner that may have profoundly influenced theological debates surrounding spirit possession and divine revelation.

Blumenfeld-Kosinski's first chapter introduces Ermine as poor but pious widow from the war-torn, plague-ridden, and politically significant city of Reims. When she was thirty-seven, Ermine and her sixty-three-year-old husband Regnault migrated to the city from the neighboring countryside because Regnault could no longer work. He died in 1393, leaving Ermine in a precarious position. The working poor could not retire and aging individuals had difficulty finding reliable caretakers. Financially excluded from all but the poorest religious institutions, Ermine may have accepted Jean le Graveur's offer of patronage and spiritual direction as a means of ensuring her material as well as spiritual wellbeing (p.18). The resulting collaboration produced Jean le Graveur's book, *The Visions of Ermine de Reims*, which Blumenfeld-Kosinski characterizes as a stylistically unique chronological diary of Ermine's encounters with demonic and saintly visitors (p. 22-23).[2]

Chapter two compares the collaboration between Ermine and Jean le Graveur to that undertaken by other male clergy members and their female advisees.[3] According to Blumenfeld-Kosinski, the available evidence supports two seemingly contradictory interpretations of Ermine's relationship with Jean le Graveur. Ermine's confessor could have sacrificed "Ermine's mental and material well-being to his own goals of producing a saint for the glory of his order" or he could have come "to Ermine's rescue at the very moment when she most needs it" (p. 29). It is difficult to determine which interpretation is most accurate because Jean le Graveur likely obscured Ermine's voice. As Blumenfeld-Kosinski observes, Jean le Graveur's conscious insertion of his own persona into his reports of Ermine's experiences demonstrates

clearly that he edited her experiences for the purpose of protecting and promoting his own authority. In particular, he countered any possible suspicion of sexual attraction between himself and his spiritual advisee, separated Ermine's reputation from that of the royally persecuted hermit Jean de Varennes (d. 1396²), and emphasized the absolute and divinely sanctioned authority of the clergy. Jean le Graveur received immense help in these efforts from the demons that plagued Ermine day and night. By placing the arguments he wished to refute in the mouths of demons, Blumenfeld-Kosinski argues, Jean le Graveur was able to infer divine support for his own positions.[4]

In addition to reinforcing his own authority, Jean le Graveur hoped his report of Ermine's trials would "instruct us on how to guard against the deceptions of the Antichrist and his minions" (p. 59). Ermine's terrifyingly arduous task of spiritual self-defense, however, consumed the vast majority of her sleeping and waking hours and comprised the only aspect of her religious life over which she exercised any recognizable competence. Ermine, who confidently exposed most demonic ruses, had so little religious education that she could not say her Latin prayers correctly and it is very likely that she did not clearly understand the meaning of the Latin words she struggled to utter (pp. 59-62). Completely dependent upon her confessor, Ermine behaved as a perfectly devout and obedient parishioner. As chapter three recounts, she suspected all of her supernatural experiences to be demonically inspired; she remained fiercely loyal to her confessor even when demonic apparitions of saints counseled her otherwise; she dutifully modified her extreme ascetic practices at her confessor's request; and finally, she only experienced divinely inspired Eucharistic visions in a manner that confirmed important points of doctrine. She neither enjoyed the authority nor the spiritual consolations attributed to other medieval women visionaries.[5]

Clinging to her *arma Christi* (a painted tablet showing the instruments of Christ's passion), Ermine repelled demonic attacks with unshakable faith and obedience. Blumenfeld-Kosinski's fourth chapter explores these attacks thematically, focusing on the categories of sex, animals, and aerial journeys. This organizational strategy allows Blumenfeld-Kosinski to compare Ermine's experiences to the evolution of European ideas about saints and witchcraft. With respect to all three types of attack, Blumenfeld-Kosinski illustrates how Ermine's steadfast refusal to acquiesce to sexual temptation or fear of bodily harm is the only aspect of her experiences that distinguishes her from witches. For these reasons, Blumenfeld-Kosinski suggests that the demonic torments suffered by Ermine "can be seen on the one hand as an imitation of the ancient desert fathers but on the other as a conscious rejection of what was quickly becoming a determining feature of the 'witch'" (p. 105). Jean le Graveur revealed the extent of the potential overlap between discourses of sanctity and witchcraft when he asserted that Ermine accidentally attended a sermon by the controversial hermit Jean de Varennes while trying to escape from a demonic gathering in the nearby woods to which she had been transported against her will (p. 124).

As Blumenfeld-Kosinski argues, Jean le Graveur reported Ermine's involuntary attendance at a gathering that closely resembled later reports of witches' Sabbaths for the sake of defending her orthodoxy. Following André Vauchez, Blumenfeld-Kosinski suggests that Jean le Graveur attempted to separate Ermine's reputation from that of this condemned hermit (p. 54).[6] In making this assertion, however, Blumenfeld-Kosinski implies, as she does at other points in her narrative, that she can distinguish between Jean le Graveur's machinations and Ermine's true intentions (pp. 26, 47, 53, 86-87, 92). In light of the interpretive difficulties presented by texts like Jean le Graveur's and explicitly discussed by Blumenfeld-Kosinski (pp. 45-53), it would have strengthened the book's argument if these attempts to distinguish between Jean and Ermine's voices had been more fully explained. Otherwise, the reader wonders how much of Ermine's reported experiences were fabricated by Jean le Graveur.

This small weakness, however, does not diminish the book's most profound contribution, namely, its ability to render the familiar radically unfamiliar. Only after introducing her reader to the day-to-day experience of this poor and devout widow, does Blumenfeld-Kosinski return in her final chapter to the subject of theological methodologies for distinguishing divine inspiration from demonic inspiration. In

doing so, she reveals the potent institutional and personal ties that connected poor women like Ermine to influential individuals such as the outspoken chancellor of the University of Paris, Jean Gerson (d. 1429).^[7]

According to Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Gerson cautiously approved of *The Visions of Ermine de Reims* in 1401. In 1423, however, Gerson explicitly rejected Ermine's authenticity by identifying her as someone who almost seduced him into false belief (144).^[8] Nancy Caciola and Dyan Elliot have explained this change of opinion regarding Ermine with reference to Gerson's growing concerns regarding excessive expressions of piety among the laity, the role played by female visionaries in church politics, and the interpretive difficulties posed by women's experiences of divine revelation.^[9] Blumenfeld-Kosinski complicates these arguments by noting that "Gerson had many personal connections to the city of Reims" in 1400. For this reason, his initial cautious and limited approval of *The Visions* likely reflected his unwillingness to challenge "the oaths and affirmations" of Ermine's clerical supporters. In 1423, however, when "all the men in Reims for whom Gerson had felt such loyalty were dead", he finally felt free to disapprove of Ermine's fantastic visions, which he likely attributed to a disturbed mind (pp. 145-150).^[10]

Despite Gerson's discomfort with the type of spirituality Ermine represented, Gerson praised Ermine for "humility, a firm faith, and a 'prudent and ignorant simplicity'." He also encouraged recipients of supernatural experiences to cultivate these particular virtues in his 1401-1402 treatise on discernment (p. 145). For this reason, Blumenfeld-Kosinski posits rather provocatively that Gerson's knowledge of Ermine's case may have inspired him to write his treatise, *On Distinguishing True from False Revelations*, which Blumenfeld-Kosinski identifies as Gerson's first treatment of the topic of spiritual discernment (p. 144).^[11] Although others have argued that Gerson wrote this particular treatise in response to his relationship with his sisters or as part of his attempt to reform the practice of theology, Blumenfeld-Kosinski's carefully contextualized exploration of his response to Ermine suggests several topics for further inquiry.^[12] Some of these include: how social obligations shaped theological pronouncements, the percentage of the historically invisible women like Ermine, and the effects of Jean de Varennes arrest on Gerson's ideas about discernment.^[13] Moreover, Blumenfeld-Kosinski calls attention to Gerson's handbook for parish priests, *Teachings for Simple People*, which circulated in Reims just prior to Ermine's arrival in that city (pp. 63-66). In doing so, Blumenfeld-Kosinski implicitly asks scholars to re-evaluate the role of pastoral reform in generating the fantastic experiences that theologians like Gerson found so disturbing. Blumenfeld-Kosinski's presentation of Ermine of Reims also confirms a collaborative model of late medieval knowledge production that emphasizes the material connections between university theologians and the laity.^[14] It only fitting then that she closes her book with an exploration of the ways in which Jean le Graveur's text and Gerson's writings remained linked in the manuscript tradition (pp. 151-155).

The book's appendix contains translations from *The Visions* and Gerson's letter of approval. The bibliography is comprehensive and Blumenfeld-Kosinski carefully contextualizes her comparative exploration of Ermine's experiences. For these reasons, in addition to posing many exciting questions to medievalists, *The Strange Case of Ermine de Reims* may also serve as an excellent introduction to the topics of medieval devotion, spiritual possession, and urban widows for non-specialists, graduate students, and advanced undergraduates. Blumenfeld-Kosinski has certainly provided a wide audience within the scholarly community a moving story and a valuable resource.

NOTES

[1] For similar discussions arguments see Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 79-125. Also David Gary Shaw, "Social Selves in Medieval England: the Worshipful Ferrour and Kempe," in *Writing Medieval History*, ed. Nancy Partner (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), pp. 3-21. For the limited access historical

sources provide for individuals like Ermine, see Sharon Farmer, "Down and Out and Female in Thirteenth-Century Paris," *The American Historical Review*, 103, no. 2 (1998): 346-351.

[2] Jean le Graveur, *Entre Dieu et Satan: Les Visions d'Ermine de Reims (+1396) recueillies et transcrites par Jean le Graveur*, ed. Claude Arnaud-Gillet (Florence: Galluzzo, 1997).

[3] For detailed discussions of such collaborations and the interpretive challenges they present, see John W. Coakley, *Women, Men and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and their Male Collaborators* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), and Catherine Mooney, ed. *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

[4] Compare to Barbara Newman, "Possessed by the Spirit: Devout Women, Demoniacs, and the Apostolic Life in the Thirteenth Century," *Speculum* 73 (1998): 733-770. Also Jo Ann McNamara, "The Rhetoric of Orthodoxy," in *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1993), pp. 9-27.

[5] Caroline Walker Bynum, "Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century," *Women's Studies*, 11 (1984): 179-214.

[6] André Vauchez, "Un réformateur religieux dans la France de Charles VI: Jean de Varennes (+1396?)," *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres 142^e année*, 4 (1998): 1112.

[7] For the most recent biography of Gerson, see Brian Patrick McGuire, *Jean Gerson and the Last Medieval Reformation* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).

[8] For alternative interpretations, see Wendy Love Anderson, "Gerson's Stance on Women," in Brian Patrick McGuire, ed., *A Companion to Jean Gerson* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), p. 297, and Yelena Mazour-Matusevich, "La position de Jean Gerson (1363-1429) envers les femmes," *Le Moyen Âge*, 112 (2006): 342-344, and 345.

[9] For concern about devotional excess and political female visionaries, see Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, pp. 303-304. For fear of deception, see Dyan Elliott, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 281. For a detailed discussion of Gerson's fear of women's devotional excess, see Daniel Hobbins, "Gerson on Lay Devotion," McGuire, ed. *A Companion to Jean Gerson*, pp. 41-78.

[10] For Gerson's consistent medicalization of women's visionary experiences, see Elliot, *Proving Woman*, pp. 277-278.

[11] Wendy Love Anderson identifies this treatise as Gerson's second extended treatment of this topic. See Anderson, *The Discernment of Spirits: Assessing Visions and Visionaries in the Late Middle Ages* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), pp. 180-189.

[12] For the suggestion that Gerson's relationship with his sisters inspired his interest in spiritual discernment, see Brian Patrick McGuire, "Late Medieval Care and Control of Women: Jean Gerson and his Sisters," *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique*, 92.1 (1997): 5-37, and Yelena Mazour-Matusevich, "Late Medieval Control of Masculinity: Jean Gerson," *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique*, 98.3-4 (2003): 418-426. For the argument that Gerson's desire to reform the theology faculty of the University of Paris shaped his discernment concerns, see Steven Ozment, "The University and the Church: Patterns of Reform in Jean Gerson," *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 1 (1970): 111-126; Dyan Elliott, "Seeing Double: John Gerson, the Discernment of Spirits and Joan of Arc," *American Historical Review*, 107.1 (2002): 33-34, and Nancy

McLoughlin, *Jean Gerson and Gender: Rhetoric and Politics in Fifteenth-Century France* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), 130-135

[13] For Gerson's pastoral handbook, *Doctrinal aux simples gens*, see Jean Gerson, *Oeuvres complètes*, 10 vols. in 11, ed. Palémon Glorieux (Paris, Tournai, Rome, New York: Desclée, 1960-1963), vol 10: 295-302.

[14] For a detailed study of such interactions see Tanya Stabler Miller, *The Beguines of Medieval Paris: Gender, Patronage, and Spiritual Authority* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

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