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Woman under Monasticism

Feminist scholar and activist Lina Eckenstein (1857–1931) was educated in modern and medieval European languages, as well as classical and medieval history. She published on art history, and participated in archaeological excavations in Egypt alongside Flinders Petrie. During the 1880s, while working as a research assistant, translator and proofreader, Eckenstein embarked on her pioneering study of medieval convents. Based on close engagement with medieval textual evidence, but written from a secular, sceptical viewpoint, it was published by Cambridge University Press in 1896. Eckenstein argued, persuasively and with great originality, that religious life allowed medieval women educational and social opportunities similar to those that she and her contemporaries were campaigning for. In her view, the Reformation had seriously restricted women's freedom for several centuries, but she noted that the modern movement for women's education had now arisen in the societies most radically affected by the Protestant reforms.

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Woman under Monasticism

*Chapters on Saint-Lore and Convent Life
between A.D. 500 and A.D. 1500*

LINA ECKENSTEIN



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WOMAN UNDER MONASTICISM

CHAPTERS ON
SAINT-LORE AND CONVENT LIFE
BETWEEN A.D. 500 AND A.D. 1500

BY

LINA ECKENSTEIN.

‘Quia vita omnium spiritualium hominum sine litteris mors est.’

ACTA MURENSIS MONASTERII.

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TO
MY FRIENDS
KARL AND MARIA SHARPE PEARSON.

PREFACE.

THE restlessness, peculiar to periods of transition, is a characteristic of the present age. Long-accepted standards are being questioned and hitherto unchallenged rules of conduct submitted to searching criticism. History shows us that our present social system is only a phase in human development, and we turn to a study of the past, confident that a clearer insight into the social standards and habits of life prevalent in past ages will aid us in a better estimation of the relative importance of those factors of change we find around us to-day.

Monasticism during the ten centuries between A.D. 500 and A.D. 1500 exhibits phases of vital significance for the mental and moral growth of Western Europe. However much both the aims and the tone of life of the members of the different religious orders varied, monasticism generally favoured tendencies which were among the most peaceful and progressive of the Middle Ages. For women especially the convent fostered some of the best sides of intellectual, moral and emotional life. Besides this it was for several centuries a determining factor in regard to women's economic status.

The woman-saint and the nun are however figures the importance of which has hitherto been little regarded. The woman-saint has met with scant treatment beyond that of the eulogistic but too often uncritical writer of devotional works; the lady abbess and the literary nun have engrossed the attention of few biographers. The partisan recriminations of the Reformation period are still widely prevalent. The saint is thrust aside as a representative of

gross superstition, and the nun is looked upon as a slothful and hysterical, if not as a dissolute character. She is still thought of as those who broke with the Catholic Church chose to depict her.

The fact that these women appeared in a totally different light to their contemporaries is generally overlooked; that the monk and the nun enjoyed the esteem and regard of the general public throughout a term bordering on a thousand years is frequently forgotten. Even at the time of the Reformation, when religious contentions were at their height, the nun who was expelled from her home appeared deserving of pity rather than of reproach to her more enlightened contemporaries. As part of an institution that had outlived its purpose she was perhaps bound to pass away. But the work she had done and the aims for which she had striven contributed their share in formulating the new standards of life. The attitude of mind which had been harboured and cultivated in the cloister, must be reckoned among the most civilizing influences which have helped to develop mental and moral strength in Western Europe.

The social value of cloistered life in itself may be disputed. To the Protestant of the 16th century a profession which involved estrangement from family ties appeared altogether harmful. Moreover monasteries and religious houses were bound up in the reformer's mind with the supremacy of Rome from which he was striving hard to shake himself free. Wherever the breach with Rome was effected the old settlements were dissolved and their inmates were thrust back into civic life. To men this meant much, but it meant less to them than to women. In losing the possibility of religious profession at the beginning of the 16th century, women lost the last chance that remained to them of an activity outside the home circle. The subjection of women to a round of domestic duties became more complete when nunneries were dissolved, and marriage for generations afterwards was women's only recognised vocation.

But even in some of these same Protestant countries where nunneries were summarily dissolved, the resulting complete subjection of women has in modern times been felt to have outlived its purpose. How far this subjection was a needful stage of growth which has helped to develop a higher standard of willing purity and faithfulness need not now be discussed. In certain countries, however, where the monastic system with all the privileges it conferred on women was swept away, we now find a strong public

Preface.

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opinion against the restriction of women's activity to the domestic circle, and these countries were among the first to break down the artificial barriers imposed on woman's influence and grant her some share in the intellectual and political life of the community.

The right to self-development and social responsibility which the woman of to-day so persistently asks for, is in many ways analogous to the right which the convent secured to womankind a thousand years ago. The woman of to-day, who realises that the home circle as at present constituted affords insufficient scope for her energies, had a precursor in the nun who sought a field of activity in the convent. For the nun also hesitated, it may be from motives which fail to appeal to us, to undertake the customary duties and accept the ordinary joys of life. This hesitation may be attributed to perversion of instinct, it can hardly in the case of the nun be attributed to weakness of character, for she chose a path in life which was neither smooth nor easy, and in this path she accomplished great things, many of which have still living value.

It is with a view to the better appreciation of the influence and activity of women connected with the Christian religion that the following chapters have been written. They contain an enquiry into the cult of women-saints, and some account of the general position of woman under monasticism. These subjects however are so wide and the material at the disposal of the student is so abundant that the analysis is confined to English and German women.

At the outset an enquiry into the position of women among the Germans of pre-Christian times appeared necessary, for early hagiology and the lives of women who embraced the religious profession after Christianity was first introduced, recall in various particulars the influence of woman and her association with the supernatural during heathen times. The legends of many saints contain a large element of heathen folk-tradition, together in some cases with a small, scarcely perceptible element of historical fact. In order therefore to establish the true importance of the Christian women, whose labour benefited their contemporaries, and who in recognition of their services were raised to saintship, the nature of early women-saints in general had to be carefully considered.

In the chapters that follow, the spread of monasticism is dealt with in so far as it was due to the influence of women, and some of the more representative phases of convent life are described. Our enquiry dealing with monasticism only as affecting women, the

larger side of a great subject has necessarily been ignored. There is a growing consciousness now-a-days of the debt of gratitude which mankind as a whole owes to the monastic and religious orders, but the history of these orders remains for the most part unwritten. At some periods of monasticism the life of men and that of women flow evenly side by side and can be dealt with separately, at others their work so unites and intermingles that it seems impossible to discuss the one apart from the other. Regarding some developments the share taken by women, important enough in itself, seemed to me hardly capable of being rated at its just value unless taken in conjunction with that of men. These developments are therefore touched upon briefly or passed over altogether, especially those in which the devotional needs of the women are interesting chiefly in the effect which they had in stimulating the literary productiveness of men. Other phases are passed over because they were the outcome of a course of development, the analysis of which lies beyond the scope of this work. This applies generally to various continental movements which are throughout treated briefly, and especially to convent life in the Netherlands, and to the later history of mysticism. The history of the beguines in the North of France and the Netherlands is full of interesting particulars, marked by the inclusion in the *Acta Sanctorum* of women like Marie of Oignies († c. 1213), Lutgardis of Tongern († 1246) and Christine of Truyen († 1224), whose fame rests on states of spiritual ecstasy, favoured and encouraged by the Dominican friars. So again the women in Southern Germany, who cultivated like religious moods and expressed their feelings in writing, were largely influenced by the Dominicans, apart from whom it seemed impossible to treat them. In England the analysis of writings such as the 'Revelations' of Juliana of Norwich and of Margery Kempe necessitates a full enquiry into the influence and popularity of Richard Rolle († 1349) and Walter Hilton († 1395).

During the later Middle Ages the study of the influences at work in the convent is further complicated by the development of religious associations outside it. Pre-eminent among these stands the school of Deventer which gave the impulse to the production of a devotional literature, the purity and refinement of which has given it world-wide reputation. These associations were founded by men not by women, and though the desire to influence nuns largely moulded the men who wrote for and preached to them,

Preface.

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still the share taken by women in such movements is entirely subordinate.

It is needless to multiply instances of the chapters on convent life which are here omitted; in those which I place before the reader it has been my aim not so much to give a consecutive history of monasticism as it affected women, as to show how numerous are the directions in which this history can be pursued. Having regard to the nature of the subject I have addressed myself in the first place to the student, who in the references given will, I trust, find corroboration of my views. In quoting from early writings I have referred to the accounts printed in the *Acta Sanctorum Bollandorum* and to the edition of Latin writings published under the auspices of Migne in the 'Patrologiae Cursus Completus,' except in those few cases where a more recent edition of the work referred to offered special advantages, and regarding the date of these writings I have been chiefly guided by A. Potthast, *Wegweiser durch die Geschichtswerke des europäischen Mittelalters*, 1862. In accordance with a division which has been adopted by some histories of art and seems to me to have much in its favour, I have taken Early Christian times to extend to the close of the 10th century; I have spoken of the period between 1000 and 1250 as the Earlier, and of that between 1250 and 1500 as the Later Middle Ages. The spelling of proper names in a work which extends over many centuries has difficulties of its own. While observing a certain uniformity during each period, I have as far as possible adhered to the contemporary local form of each name.

While addressing myself largely to the student, I have kept along lines which I trust may make the subject attractive to the general reader, in whose interest I have translated all the passages quoted. There is a growing consciousness now-a-days that for stability in social progress we need among other things a wider scope for women's activity. This scope as I hope to show was to some extent formerly secured to women by the monastic system. Perhaps some of those who are interested in the educational movements of to-day may care to recall the history and arrangements of institutions, which favoured the intellectual development of women in the past.

I cannot conclude these prefatory remarks without a word of thanks to those who have aided me by criticism and revision. Besides the two friends to whom I have dedicated this book, I have to cordially thank Mrs R. W. Cracroft for the labour she has

spent on the literary revision of my work in manuscript. To Dr H. F. Heath of Bedford College I am indebted for many suggestions on points of philology, and to Robert J. Parker, Esq. of Lincoln's Inn for advice on some points of law and of general arrangement. Conscious as I am of the many defects in my work, I cannot but be grateful to the Syndics of the University Press, for the assistance they have rendered me in its publication, and I trust that these defects may not deter readers from following me into somewhat unfrequented paths, wherein at any rate I have not stinted such powers of labour as are mine.

LINA ECKENSTEIN.

December, 1895.

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ERRATA.

- Page 23, note 1, date of St Ida in A. SS. Boll. should be *Sept. 4* instead of *June 20*.
,, 26, line 7, read *tillh* instead of *silk*.
,, 162, ,, 21, read *Martianus* instead of *Marianus*.
,, 190, ,, 32, read 1240 as the date of Jacobus di Vitriaco's death.
,, 241, ,, 8, read *Bergen* instead of *Berg*.