
Many scholars of early modern women are familiar with the excellent series, The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe, which has uncovered the remarkable lives and writings of numerous European women from 1350 to 1750. The series now numbers fifty-nine volumes, with more in production. Commemorating its tenth anniversary, the series offers a superb companion piece: a teaching volume that spans disciplines as disparate as comparative literature, art history, and medicine, and that addresses the needs of diverse teaching contexts, whether undergraduate or graduate, secular or religious. Teaching Other Voices: Women and Religion in Early Modern Europe is impressive not only for its breadth of applicability, but also for the precision of detail and concrete pedagogical advice that it offers to its readers. Contributors share “best classroom practices” and alert fellow teachers to typical challenges that students face as they cross cultural divides, all the while inspiring interest in the texts and figures themselves. Primarily a guide for teachers, this volume can also be enjoyed by students who desire a deeper understanding of early modern European women and their religious writings.

Teaching Other Voices begins with a helpful historical introduction that briefly sketches the religious landscape of early modern Europe; this overview then shifts ingeniously to relaying women’s “alternate history” (4), and thus sets the stage for the chapters that follow, while also bringing home the need for both telling and hearing these hidden stories. A chronology of “key events and male figures” alongside “female figures” follows, again raising the question, “Who creates histories?” The editors then suggest possible courses and modules in which the volume’s featured authors can be taught, including classes such as Renaissance literature or history, women’s studies, biography/autobiography, theater/drama, and religious history. As the volume unfolds, it becomes evident that while “the other voice” of early modern Europe is often couched in religious contexts, that voice carries wide resonance and holds significance for fields such as philosophy, music history, and human rights studies, all outside the discipline of religious studies.
Comprised of five sections organized according to chronology and theme, this text includes two chapters on “Italian Holy Women of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries” (covering figures such as Bridget of Sweden, Catherine of Siena, and Sister Bartolomea), four chapters on “Elite Women of the High Renaissance” (featuring Lucrezia Tornabuoni, Antonia Pulci, Vittoria Colonna, Marguerite de Navarre), six on “Women and the Reformation” (Marie Dentière, Jeanne de Jussie, Katharina Schütz Zell, Francisca de los Apóstoles, María de San José, Cecilia Ferrazzi), and two on “Post-Reformation Currents” (Jacqueline Pascal, Johanna Eleonora Petersen).

Though this brief review cannot do justice to the thoughtful contributions made in each chapter, notable themes emerge across the volume’s various sections. As indicated in the introduction, there are four significant features that especially mark women’s religious expression in the early modern period. First, women are often located in communities, such as convents, that shape their lives and religious experiences (as witnessed in chapters on Sister Bartolomea, Marie Dentière, Jeanne de Jussie, María de San José, and Jacqueline Pascal, for example). Second, women’s experiences are often deeply interior, with a “special pull toward inner vision and the mystical.” Third, women often express their religious devotion through the body, whether in their spiritual practices or acts of charity; for example, Horodowich offers further explanation on why women often renounced food, and Bornstein addresses the religious significance of food, Eucharistic devotion, corporeal penitential practices, and so on. Finally, women often had to evade “limits on imagination and movement” through “resistance to authority” (6). While it may be questionable what makes these four features distinctively feminine (though the last might be the simplest to argue, because women faced social constraints), the volume’s chapters seek to flesh out these various facets of women’s religious experience.

In fact, Lazar outlines in the first chapter his own rubrics for teaching female spirituality—rubrics that parallel those found in the introduction—including the manner in which women found an authoritative voice, their attitudes toward ascetic practices, and the quest for autonomy or self-determination (37). Bornstein adds to this list the frequent identification of women with the suffering Jesus (45), and McKee explains historically, in part, the “particularly feminine window on the issue of suffering for the
gospel” (151). While each chapter of the volume addresses some of these common themes, it introduces themes unique to the individual and text at hand, thus illustrating that women’s religious expression is richly variegated even if held together (loosely) by helpful “teaching rubrics.”

Another striking feature that runs throughout the volume is the manner in which contributors invite their students to read early modern women’s texts both empathically and critically (perhaps with a slant toward the empathic). This approach opens students to be “illumined” by what they read (22) as they seek to understand the foreign and at times “off-putting” aspects of early modern women’s religious lives. Lance Lazar (38), Daniel Bornstein (52), Alison Weber (168), and Elizabeth Horodowich (176), for example, offer their students specific questions to accompany their reading, with sympathetic reading as an explicit aim in mind.

While the volume is invaluable, it might have benefitted from a bit more editorial intervention, since it does strive to serve as a guide across volumes, disciplines, geographical regions, and time periods. For instance, cross-referencing related themes between chapters might have been a helpful addition (such as Lazar’s rubrics for teaching female spirituality in the first chapter, which parallels those in the introduction and other chapters; or simply indicating rich overlaps in texts and authors between the volume’s independent chapters, as in the case of Marie Dentière and her Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre). It may have also helped to define some terms, often contested, like “feminist,” “heretical,” “evangelical,” “reformed,” and “secular,” especially since authors within the volume seem to use some of the terms differently. Finally, providing the context of each contributor’s institutional location a bit more clearly would likely assist readers as they think through translatability of teaching methods to their own contexts, be it undergraduate or graduate, religious or secular, or a seminar or lecture style classroom. Bornstein, for example, hints helpfully at implicit campus ethos (52), which cannot be discerned from his institution’s name or explicit descriptions alone. Likewise, Ahlgren’s explanation of her own disciplinary training and her current institutional context was very useful (161), as she then illustrates how the text might be applicable in other contexts for a wide range of courses. The volume juggles a lot, making demands on the reader without such mediation.
Teaching Other Voices is an invaluable tool for both young and experienced teachers. A creative and innovative addition to The Other Voice, it offers a refreshing variety of pedagogical approaches, including specifically guided readings, letter-writing and autobiographical narrative as written assignments, and role-playing in the classroom, all for a wide range of disciplines and teaching contexts. One of its highlights is an appendix that summarizes the multiple teaching strategies presented in its rich chapters, along with typical student responses and challenges. For those who have not had broad exposure to the series, this volume introduces fascinating subjects to its readers and helps to make early modern women and their religious writings come alive for both teacher and student alike.

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Zayde (1670–71) represents one of the last early modern French romances, a genre characterized by sentimental plot twists framed within a succession of travels, misfortunes, separations, and reunions. Set in medieval Spain, within the background of both the so-called “reconquista” and the Mediterranean religious conflict, it recounts the deeds and misadventures of the sentimental relationship between the Spanish noble Consalve and the mysterious Zayde, whose ship wrecks on the Catalonian shores. The reader knows only her name and the tortuous conjectures that Consalve makes about her, since the two characters do not speak the same language. The first part of the romance is of special interest within the history of discourse on women. Because of the lack of verbal communication, the narrative is told from the perspective of Consalve, who strives to interpret Zayde’s actions, reading her as a mysterious sign to be deciphered. Although at the denouement the reader finds out that Consalve’s inter-