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### Book Review: Kathryn M. Rudy. *Virtual Pilgrimages in the Convent: Imagining Jerusalem in the Late Middle Ages*

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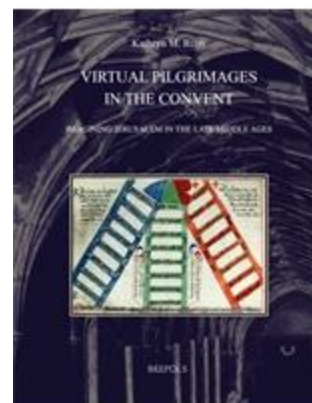


**PEREGRINATIONS**  
INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF PILGRIMAGE ART



Kathryn M. Rudy. *Virtual Pilgrimages in the Convent: Imagining Jerusalem in the Late Middle Ages*. Series: *Disciplina Monastica* 8. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2011. Pp. 475. 110 Euros. ISBN 978-2-503-54103-7

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Kathryn Rudy's *Virtual Pilgrimages in the Convent: Imagining Jerusalem in the Late Middle Ages* is an important book that covers an essential, but neglected aspect of medieval pilgrimage, pilgrimages as performed by people who could not travel. Readers of *Peregrinations* may find that it also opens the door to many new studies, including reconsiderations of familiar material, in the realm of pilgrimage art. The book is centered on seventeen texts that were copied by religious women in the Low Countries and used for inducing virtual pilgrimage experiences within the confines of the convent. The book analyzes and explains several different modes of virtual pilgrimage and the role it played in the devotions of late medieval nuns and other religious women. The discussion is centered in the Low Countries, but in a section near the end, Rudy presents evidence that related devotions were practiced throughout Europe and also by lay people. The book's appendices include editions and facing-page translations of eleven of the previously unpublished texts, along with codicological notes. The book is appropriate for specialists

in devotional art of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, but also will interest those in adjacent fields such as cultural history, history of religion, and art.

Following an introduction, the discussion portion of the book is divided into four chapters covering souvenirs (texts and relics), interior or stationary pilgrimage devotions, exterior or somatic pilgrimage devotions, and a discussion of the wider context in which the virtual pilgrimage practices of religious women are compared to similar devotions by lay people. The second and third sections, on interior and exterior virtual pilgrimage devotions seem to contain the strongest analysis, though the first chapter answers fundamental questions and links the images and texts discussed in the subsequent sections to the traditions of real, geographic pilgrimage travel. In fact, this section answered a number of questions that have long vexed this reviewer. For instance, why were medieval pilgrims to Jerusalem so insistent upon measuring and recording sizes and distances? Why were personal pilgrimage accounts valued and copied by people other than their authors? And how was the tension between the pilgrimage tradition and clausura negotiated?

Section two, "Interiority: Stationary Pilgrimage Devotions," discusses ways of conducting virtual pilgrimage through prayer and meditation, guided by images and texts. Some of these are prescribed prayers and repetitions and conducted over time, and often rewarded by indulgences. The images used this way are complex, with many different episodes creating multiple foci in the pictures, or single scenes presented in series, typically as woodcuts in books, many of which bear evidence of user interaction, such as blood painted onto the images.

The third section, "Exteriority: Somatic Pilgrimage Devotions" describes texts and their use for physical devotional practices in which the nuns reenacted Christ's movements through the Passion, and in turn, the movements of pilgrims through Jerusalem. It is in this context that the "metric relics," the measurements of monuments and distances between significant places taken by pilgrims in Jerusalem were applied to the space of the convent. For instance, handwritten marginal notes in *Heer Bethlem's guide to spiritual pilgrimage* (The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek 231 G22) indicate that the cloistered woman walked three times around the cloister to replicate the distance Christ walked when being taken to Pilate, then to the fountain in the cloister to signify Christ before Herod, and then three more times around the cloister to reenact the distance of Christ's return to Pilate after meeting Caiaphas and Annas (216). The space of Jerusalem is here superimposed upon the space of the convent, and practitioners can experience co-passion with Christ by replicating his movements through the holy city.

Though the book is built upon seventeen texts, visual images are prominent. Many of the texts are accompanied by images, which, as the author points out, would have taken priority for many late medieval users. As an art historian, Rudy also analyzes



the books as objects, and derives important information from their formats and conditions. She also includes discussions of woodcuts and engravings, painted manuscripts, panel paintings, carved and painted Easter sepulchers, built spaces, and *besloten hofjes*

("enclosed gardens"), in which souvenirs from physical pilgrimages were worked into altarpiece-like diorama collections with silk flowers, bits of colored glass, and sculpted figures.



Rudy's visual analysis of key images is particularly enlightening, for example that of a painting in Museum M in Leuven (162-170). Here, she demonstrates how the painting's episodic composition allows the viewer to move from site to site in the manner of a physical traveler in the Holy Land, stopping at the locations of each event in the Passion for focused contemplation, and again in the manner of a traveler or traveler's tale, to move through areas of anecdotal detail between the major locations, that correspond to the passage of time and space, as one might experience on foot. The painting also includes figures in fifteenth-century dress that reinforce the link between past and present



that both physical and virtual pilgrimage create. This and other major images are reproduced in color plates at the back, while black and white details are placed within the text.

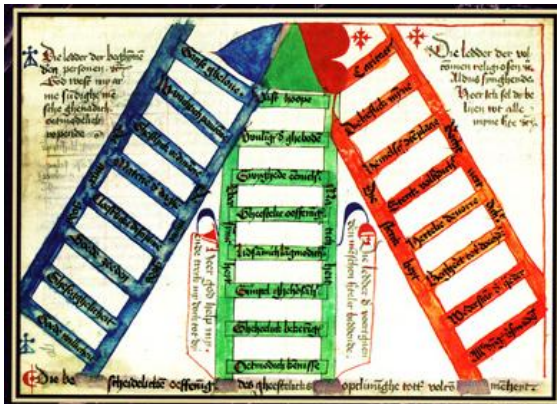
A few points left me with questions, but these were minor and none detracted from the book's overall success. I wonder whether the image on the right of the top register of the painted lid of a reliquary box might be interpreted as the Ascension of Christ, based on comparison with the *Rabbula Gospels*, rather than the Resurrection. Also, the formatting of the volume has some problems for which the author cannot be blamed. For instance, the table of contents claims that chapter IV begins on p. 231, when in fact it begins on p. 233, however, the page header carries the title of chapter III throughout chapter IV.

Affective piety can be grisly stuff; several times I had to take breaks from reading in order to clear my head of the very sentiments that the religious users of Rudy's texts

sought to amplify. Unlike the readers of Rudy's manuscripts, I find no pleasure in contemplating the sufferings of Christ and his mother, yet the book is sufficiently thorough and vivid that after reading it, I have a sense of why it appealed to late medieval religious women and a glimpse of what they may have felt while performing these devotions. This was especially the case while reading the translations of the primary texts provided in the appendices. I am unable to comment on the accuracy of the translations, but I am confident that I join many in feeling gratitude that these texts are now made available to readers of English.

The implications of this book for pilgrimage art research are enormous. Rudy provides evidence for pilgrimage as a mental habit that likely informed viewers' responses to all devotional art, not just those pieces ornamented with scallop shells and thereby immediately associated with pilgrimage, and that may have structured their experiences of a whole range of spaces, not just those within the walls of relic-housing churches. Throughout reading this book, one wonders how many other objects were experienced in this way, and which works could be revisited in this new light.

This book is also significant for pilgrimage studies at large, for it successfully moves beyond any lingering remnants of structuralism. For decades, pilgrimage scholars



have understood that the Turners' model of pilgrimage as a liminal rite was inadequate to explain medieval experience, yet no subsequent theory has offered anything quite so malleable or universal. Rudy's study confronts pilgrimage in an entirely

contextualized way, demonstrating an entirely medieval way of thinking about and performing pilgrimage, free of structuralist reduction, and one which does not even suggest the tropes of separation or liminality. The result is an integrated understanding of medieval pilgrimage that explains it as both the motivation for and reception of an important category of texts and images.