

# BOOK REVIEW ON *A FEMALE APOSTLE IN MEDIEVAL ITALY: THE LIFE OF CLARE OF RIMINI*

*Ella Wieggers*  
*Smith College*

---

Jacques Dalarun, Sean L. Field, and Valerio Cappozzo, *A Female Apostle in Medieval Italy: The Life of Clare of Rimini*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023. 175 pages.

Clare of Rimini (c. 1260–c.1324–29) was one of many women of the mid-to-late medieval period who lived and embodied the *vita apostolica* outside of the cloister, without a direct allegiance to an established religious order. Existing at an intersection of holiness, heresy, literary transformation, and changing saintly definitions, Clare is both a fascinating figure and one who is too little known. Her *vita*, written almost concurrently with the time of her death, was not translated into English before the publication of *A Female Apostle in Medieval Italy: The Life of Clare of Rimini*. As Clare appears as an example in a great deal of the secondary scholarship on lay penitents and quasi-religious, quasi-Franciscan women in medieval Italian communes, and as her *vita* is one of the first Italian saints' lives written in the vernacular as opposed to Latin, this translation is a welcome addition to the literature.

The team behind *A Female Apostle in Medieval Italy* is an impressive one. Jacques Dalarun authored one of the only monographs dedicated solely to Clare; Sean L. Field has written extensively on the lives of quasi-religious women living at the same period as Clare; and Valerio Cappozzo has a number of publications on the translation and interpretation of medieval Italian vernacular literature. Together, they present an English version of Clare's anonymous *vita* that is a pleasure to read, with pertinent contextual notes. The authors/translators chose to focus the notes and contextualisation for each chapter around specific themes, using the hagiography as a window into a general picture of medieval life. The format here is somewhat unconventional, as the contextual information takes the form of an essay appended to each chapter of the *vita*, and endnotes are limited to basic citations and glosses of terms.

This unique formatting is the work's greatest weakness and its greatest strength. As one would expect from the editorial/authorial team, the essays contextualise each chapter to help the reader better appreciate the hagiography's unique elements and the complex

socio-religious world of medieval Northern Italy. However, the essays are largely distinguished from the medieval hagiography via margin size, as opposed to font changes or clearly delineated headings. This can make it difficult to discern when the *vita* text ends and the chapter's essay begins. I found myself wishing for an essay title following each *vita* chapter in order to delineate this divide more clearly as I read.

Similarly to the muddled formatting, the intended audience for this book is somewhat unclear. The authors assume a baseline knowledge of medieval religion, and the contemporary writing is academic in nature, as opposed to devotional or popular. However, I have difficulty imagining this being of particular use to an expert audience already versed in the lives of female lay penitents and Franciscan mystic traditions. It is a slim volume largely focused on presenting the *vita* clearly and informatively to its readers, and exploring medieval Italy through an unusual lens. For this reason, it would likely be of use in an undergraduate classroom.

I could see this text being particularly helpful as a way to teach medieval women's religious cultures and mysticism to an undergraduate class at an intermediate or introductory level. The same sort of historical survey course on medieval Christianity that might assign *The Book of Margery Kempe* or another "canonical" mystic could easily use this as assigned reading, as Dalarun, Cappozzo, and Field solidly ground the work in its historical period. As the translation seeks a scholarly audience that lacks some familiarity with the basics of mysticism studies and Italian history of the medieval period, an undergraduate audience would benefit from studying a primary source translation presented in this format. Ultimately, *A Female Apostle in Medieval Italy* will, due to its timely publication and accessible presentation of its material, certainly find its audience and inspire a new generation of undergraduates to investigate lay mystic women and their complex worlds and spiritualities.