

raises further demonstrate the wider problems within medicine and its need to better treat its women patients.

All in all, *Self-Trust and Reproductive Autonomy* is a solid introduction to the complex issues involved with women managing their many reproductive options and dealing with medical practitioners and technology within feminist philosophy. While the impact of an unsympathetic and unaware medical system remains problematic, this work is an important component for the process of developing self-awareness and trust.

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The Empress Theodora: Partner of Justinian by James Allan Evans. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002, 172 pp., \$29.95.

Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium by Judith Herrin. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002, 320 pp., \$29.95.

MARY A. VALANTE

Very little has been written about Byzantine empresses recently. For example, despite the appeal of Theodora, due to the scandalous way she is presented in the primary sources, no monograph has been written about her in English for more than 20 years. That said, Evans's work is by far the more satisfying of the two. Despite what is implied by the title, Herrin's monograph is not an investigation of the roles of Byzantine empresses; instead, it is about three empresses in the eighth and ninth centuries, two of whom reigned and one who did not, and especially their contributions to the debate on iconoclasm which was raging in the East at the time.

Herrin identifies the military and church as the most important concerns of Byzantine emperors during this period. She focuses on iconoclasm and the Church because, she says, female rulers, like their male counterparts could order generals to lead armies, but they had little ability to influence the Church unless they insisted on taking such powers for themselves. Since there is in fact a long tradition of women influencing the Church—founding churches and monasteries, becoming powerful

abbesses, influencing important secular or ecclesiastical men—this supposition cannot be maintained. However, the impact of at least two of the empresses in question on iconoclasm in the East is clearly demonstrated, even if it was well known before this work.

Like Herrin, Evans argues that Theodora's most important contribution was ecclesiastical. His grasp of the sources is impeccable, as demonstrated by his refusal to fall into the traps of other scholars—reviling Theodora as did the contemporary historian Procopius or elevating her to the emperor's co-ruler. Instead, here is a balanced portrait of a lowborn woman with questionable background who rose to power and influence during a crucial period of history. He is always careful to analyze the agendas of the primary source authors. For example, the famous Nika revolt—for which Theodora is often credited with saving Justinian's throne—is downplayed, as is Theodora's supposed influence on foreign policy.

The empresses Herrin discusses are Irene, Euphrosyne, and a ninth-century Theodora, not the same one discussed by Evans. Irene was married to the iconoclast emperor Leo IV, who died in 780. Irene then took over rule of the empire on behalf of her nine-year-old son, Constantine. At first she was his regent and co-ruler, and when Constantine came of age Irene refused to allow him to rule. He was able to displace her, though after two years he was forced to bring her back to court. A few years later she overthrew her own son, had him blinded, and once again began to reign, this time alone. Interestingly, it is not these power struggles that Herrin sees as Irene's most valuable contribution to the definition of empress. Instead, it is her involvement in the Seventh Ecumenical Council that Herrin views as Irene's most lasting contribution. Because the Council declared iconoclasm a heresy and restored the worship of icons to the Eastern Church, Irene effectively overthrew the policies of her three male predecessors.

The next empress, Euphrosyne, is the least well known of the three, and for good reason. Herrin herself admits that there is very little mention of her in any of the sources for the period. Euphrosyne is Irene's granddaughter who marries into a later dynasty to help legitimize it. But she never rules in her own right, is never regent, and her role in the anti-iconoclast movement is very unclear. Her stepson, the next emperor, is another iconoclast who marries a woman named Theodora. Theodora's mother is usually credited with teaching a love of icons to the next generation, but Herrin argues that Euphrosyne did so first. However, there is no strong evidence for this, just rumors which are reported in the chronicles as such.

Theodora is Herrin's third empress. When her husband died in 842, she was left as regent for her two-year-old son. Only a year later, she restored the worship of icons. Although she ruled for another 14 years, stepping aside with little grace when her son instigated a rebellion, it is once again

her approval of icons that Herrin views as this empress's most important contribution.

Evans, like Herrin, examines closely the more famous Theodora's theological ties. This is particularly interesting since in so many other ways (though not exclusively) Theodora and Justinian were careful to cultivate a public image of complete agreement. But Theodora already had Monophysite leanings when she met Justinian. But even where she disagreed with Justinian, Theodora continued to assist him. By setting up monasteries where Monophysites could claim refuge, she removed many from positions of contention. Justinian preferred to believe common ground could be found on the issue, while Theodora acted on her own to protect those she could.

The conclusions reached by the two authors reveal why Evans's work is the more valuable of the two. Herrin concludes, "Once they have the chance to exercise power in their own names, as I hope I have shown, women are just as purposeful and effective as men" at best a specious remark (240). She points out that there is a long tradition in Byzantium, dating back to Constantine the Great's mother, Helena, of empresses holding influence. Even so, Herrin argues that the power wielded by these three women, especially in the ecclesiastical matter of iconoclasm, is unusual.

Evans discusses his empress in the context of other Greek, Byzantine, and Roman women of power only in his *Afterword*. Here, Evans makes it clear that Theodora's accomplishments were both more and less than those of other women. She is not credited with more learning, power, or influence than the sources indicate. Instead, Evans focuses on how she is portrayed by the primary sources, and the reasons for the varied nature of her portrayal. Procopius's famous *Secret History* is a vindictive work, and Theodora bears the brunt of the author's class-based distaste. But she was Justinian's true partner, neither the strength behind the throne nor the object of scandal and titillation Procopius would have us believe. Justinian was a brilliant ruler, and would have been without Theodora. But he could count on her loyalty and common sense when everyone else failed him, and it is clear that even though she never bore him children, the main task of a queen, Justinian returned her faithfulness.

In Herrin, however, there is also almost no source criticism, and the sources themselves are rarely named in the text, though there are extensive notes and a bibliography. Mixed in with too-vague references such as "sources say . . ." there is far too much speculation (for example, there are several references to the possibility that Euphrosyne *may* have been born in the royal birthing chamber).

Overall, Herrin's lack of startling conclusions and ineffective use of sources will be disappointing to scholars. However, its readable style may make it interesting to a general audience or for undergraduates. On the

other hand, Evans's impartial picture of the Empress Theodora will be of great value to many. Byzantine scholars will find a historiographic void filled. Feminist scholars should appreciate this realistic depiction of such an important woman who is too often portrayed as more powerful than she was, or dismissed as the object of the Emperor's lust. Here is a real woman, born in poverty and regarded by many of her contemporaries as a disgrace, who rose to power through marriage to become a terror to her enemies and a very good friend to many others, including those living the life she had escaped. The book is very appropriate for upper-level undergraduates and graduate students.

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Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England by Joy Dixon. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, 293 pp., \$46.00 hardcover.

Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America by Ann Braude. 2nd ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001, 300 pp., \$49.95 hardcover, \$19.95 paper.

JUNE HADDEN HOBBS

Verena Tarrant, the young trance speaker of Henry James's *The Bostonians* (1886), gives riveting public lectures on the topic of women's rights—but only under the influence of spiritual powers over which she has no control. As she tells her mother, "It's not *me*" who speaks." Tellingly, members of one audience who hope "that Miss Tarrant is in good trim" are reprimanded "by others, who reminded them that it wasn't *her*—she had nothing to do with it—so her trim didn't matter" (1984, 80). Both James's narrator and his other characters hold Verena's spiritualism in contempt in this satire of the women's movement. It is a weapon to suppress her voice and a tool for manipulating a public hungry for sensational entertainment.

Over a century later, feminists still frequently construe mainstream religion as oppressive to women and esoteric spiritualities as embarrassing. Even those who recognize religion's potential for empowering women

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