

Review of *Meditations on the Life of Christ: The Short Italian Version*

(William and Katherine Devers Series in Dante and Medieval Italian Literature 14). By McNamer Sarah. Notre Dame, IND: University of Notre Dame, 2018. Pp. clxxx + 264. Price \$65 (hbk). ISBN: 9780268102852.

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Irish Theological Quarterly 84, no. 1 (2019): 92–95,
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0021140019830020>

This book has long been anticipated and much expected. Since the publication of her ground-breaking article in 2009, Sarah McNamer kept referring to this publication as the one that would clarify and answer almost all remaining questions about the textual history of one of the most important texts of the Later Middle Ages, the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*. It is no little task, as there is a lot to explain.

As Sarah McNamer rightly points out, the collection of meditative retellings of Christ's life, known as *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, is 'the single most influential text in Western Europe.' It is a work that had wide-reaching impact on not only Latin and vernacular literatures but also on religious and devotional practices and the emergence of theatre in the Later Middle Ages. Despite this overarching significance, however, neither the author nor the original language and the date of the work have ever been satisfactorily identified. Sarah McNamer's present book sets out to find solutions to all these problems. In her 2009 article ("The Origins of the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*" *Speculum* 84 (2009), pp. 905–955) she has already laid the foundations of a compelling new theory that the original version of the *Meditationes* is a short Italian recension that survives in only one single manuscript today in the Bodleian Library Oxford which was most probably penned by a woman and later rewritten by Franciscan friar(s). The present publication is the critical edition of this original version of the *Meditationes* (pp. 1–197), accompanied by a full English translation and a commentary, introduced by a long study on the origin and authorship of the work (pp. xiii–clvi), followed by a detailed linguistic examination of the text by Par Larsson (pp. clvii–clxxvi) and closed by a bibliography and index (pp. 198–264).

Promised to be provided with ultimate answers to all these puzzling questions on the textual history of the *Meditationes*, one certainly approaches the book with very high expectations. These, however, are quickly toned down by some strange remarks in the footnotes of the introductory study. Whenever the author mentions recent challenges to her hypothesis about the primacy of the text she publishes in the book, instead of detailed explanations and answers, she refers her readers to an article she will publish later and

separately from this monograph (p. xxii n 5; xlv n 25; lvi n 36; lvii n 40; lix n 47 etc.). Leaving so many important questions unanswered in a publication expected to offer the author's latest and final views on the matter, feels to be slightly undermining the weight of her study. This impression becomes even stronger after re-reading the author's 2009 *Speculum* article, which shows significant overlaps with the introductory study, not only in structure but also in the very wording of her arguments. This repetitive nature of the study, together with a lack of engagement with many of the recent and rather compelling challenges of her work, seems to suggest the author was not able or willing to provide fresh arguments in support of her views. Discussions of some freshly raised points, such as the fascinating problem of references to sources in the *Meditationes* (p. lxxxix) and citations from it in other texts (pp. cxxxiii–cxxxix), are relegated to either some rather hastily written footnotes (cf. the giant n.44 on pp. cxxxiv–cxxxvi) or to that separate article she now envisages to settle all newly raised textual problems. The hastiness of the examination of these points in the introduction is revealed by statements such as her remark that the historical compilation of the Franciscan scholar Paulinus of Venice, known as the *Historia Satyrica*, which is said to quote from the *Meditationes*, is available only in manuscript and, as she could unfortunately not obtain any copies of it, the whole problem is dismissed as 'irrelevant' (p. cxxxiv n 44). This approach is rather questionable in the light of the fact that almost all of the five known manuscripts of the *Historia Satyrica*, inventoried by Heullant-Donat ('Entrer dans l'histoire. Paolino da Venezia et les prologues de ses chroniques universelles', *Melanges de l'Ecole Francaise de Rome*, 105 (1993), 381–442) are available online, together with some recent studies on the work and its history. Equally tantalizing is what she writes, in the very same footnote, about the early-14th-century passion narrative attributed to Franciscus de Mayronis (d. 1320) who was also said to be quoting from the *Meditationes* in his text. Although of this work she did manage to acquire copies, her study of the text was not relying on their transcriptions by someone else (p. cxxxv). Without consulting the new critical edition of this work by Riccardo Burgazzi (*Franciscus de Mayronis, Tractatus de Passione Domini: Critical Edition and Studies*. Prospero Editore, 2017) she has quickly come to a rather sharp conclusion that the text, as we know it today, is not an original work of Mayronis, whose name is clearly associated with it in the manuscript, but a 14th/15th-century compilation (p. cxxxv).

Many of these questions, although not all, are indeed treated in the author's article ('The Debate on the Origins of the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*', *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 111 (2018), pp. 65–112). This separate 'appendix', however, cannot be regarded as part of the reviewed monograph, which, therefore, offers an incomplete and slightly outdated presentation of the author's theory. If the book, then, is considered in itself, without its annex in the article, the innovative value of the introductory study will inevitably shrink. We are, therefore, left only with the meticulous linguistic analysis by Par Larsson and the author's new addition to her hypothesis that all later versions of the *Meditationes*, that is a shorter, rather wide-spread, Italian recension (*testo minore*) and a longer Italian text (*testo maggiore*) as well as the long Latin version, were created one after the other by one and the same person (at the same place?) in the course of some 15 years, between 1325–1340.

Having such a relative value of the introductory study, it is probably best, as Sarah McNamer suggests herself in her later article, to view the book only as a critical edition, translation and commentary of the earliest version of the *Meditationes*. Being based on one single manuscript, Canonici Italian 174 of the Bodleian Library Oxford, McNamer's edition is not a comparative critical edition, based on a collation of manuscripts, but rather a critical presentation of the text of one manuscript. Her emendations and corrections are clear and convincing, but her presentation of the text does not really facilitate its use.

The critical text has no line numbers on the pages so even the author herself refers to it by using folio numbers of the manuscript. These, however, are not highlighted anywhere on the pages, but inserted in the Italian text in brackets. Referencing the critical edition by these folio numbers, therefore, is rather complicated even inside the book itself, not to speak about future comparative studies.

One can only agree with the author's decision to maintain the chapter-system of the manuscript she is editing but readers would surely have welcomed some help in identifying these chapters in other Italian versions or the Latin critical text. Adding chapter numbers of these versions on the margin or even to provide a separate concordance table for them would certainly have helped the reader.

Another difficulty is that the critical text has no apparatus. Emendations were placed in footnotes under the main text, but the rather frequent biblical quotations/allusions (usually set in a separate apparatus) and references to other sources (generally placed in yet another register below the first) are unidentified and unregistered. Consequently, there is no separate index of biblical and other quotations either, nor a list of personal and place names or other notable words in the text. These indices would again have been very useful, as earlier editions of Italian versions from 1847 and 1933 are all un-indexed.

Failing to comply with what is now considered as a requirement of critical editions, so neatly applied in the edition of the Latin text by Stallings-Taney, leads on to further problems. Although unmarked in the text, many references are examined in the commentary, but these analyses, lacking the need to specify their extent and exact nature (as quotations and allusions), are often very vague. In the description of the Last Supper, (chapter 16 in the edition and 73 of the Latin critical text), for example, a citation from Augustine is explained with a simple reference to a page number in the English translation of the *Legenda Aurea*. (n. 95 on p. 222) without mentioning that it actually derives from a Pseudo-Augustinian homily (PL 40, 1285) not to speak about comparing how it is quoted here and in other Italian versions. The important reference to a legend of St Francis of Assisi in the same chapter has also received a rather abrupt treatment. The author, probably borrowing the mistaken reference from the Latin critical edition, simply refers to a page number in the edition of the *Legenda maior* of St Francis (p. 222 n. 96). She fails to identify that the quotation comes not from that text (which on the quoted page has '*illa non vulgaret exterius, nisi quantum Christi urgebat caritas et proximorum utilitas exigebat*') but from the slightly later *Legenda minor* (which has '*vulgaret exterius, nisi quantum fraternae salutis urgebat zelus, et supernae revelationis dictabat instinclus*' p. 666 of the

same edition) quoted literally in the Latin and other Italian versions and paraphrased in the *testo breve*. Had she identified this source correctly, she could have detected a mistake in the Latin critical text (which has *supernae* instead of the correct *fraternae*), against all Italian versions and previous editions of the Latin, which all preserve the correct form. Having the right reference, she could also have found a hitherto unrecorded *terminus post quem* for the text. As the *Legenda minor* was compiled from the *Legenda maior* around 1266–1268, an explicit and literal quotation from it in the *Meditationes* would clearly mean that the latter – including McNamer’s early Italian version, which also contains it – should not be earlier than 1268–1270.

These inconveniences and shortcomings of McNamer’s monograph as a critical edition and the sporadic mistakes in her translation (such as rendering ‘*riguarda ... miser Iesu stare*’ as ‘watch your Lord Jesus **sitting**’ on p. 93), however, are not the main problem about her book. What one really misses here is proper comparative context. The only way to highlight the critical significance of ‘the short Italian text’, whether as the earliest form or a late derivative of the *Meditationes*, would have been a comparative study and edition in the light of the other Italian and Latin versions, which she has not provided in the present monograph. Occasional comparisons to other Italian recensions, such as notes 92 and 94 on p. 221, do not provide convincing proof for the priority of the *testo breve* (both cases look like results of a common scribal mistake when the copyist misses lines due to *homoioteluta* /similar line-endings/ in the source text).

More detailed and systematic comparison with the secondary Latin short versions, for example, would have brought to light that a ‘systematic elimination of distances and place names’, together with repressing references to literary sources, is not as striking and inconceivable as McNamer finds it (p. lix). It seems to be one of the main drivers behind the creation of the secondary Latin short versions, where these details seem to have been removed in a systematic way. Upon checking only one manuscript of the Latin short versions of the *Meditationes* in 41 chapters (Vatican Ross. 3, ff. 90r–92v) only for chapter 16, I was surprised to detect a very similar and seemingly systematic repression of details, such as the mention of the relic of the table of the Last Supper, the quotation from Augustine, the reference to the legend of St Francis, together with all meditative instructions, which are also missing in McNamer’s *testo breve*. In order to use this argument as a convincing proof for the stylistic primacy of the *testo breve*, therefore, this similar and clearly a systematic method of rewriting the long Latin version into a shorter text should definitely have been taken into account. This, however, can only be achieved through a thorough comparative edition, which as she acknowledges herself, was not the aim of McNamer’s monograph. Lacking this comparative context, however, the present book will remain a simple transcription of only one, although a rather fascinating type, of the many Italian versions of the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*.