

Julie Hirst. *Jane Leade: Biography of a Seventeenth-Century Mystic*. Aldershot, Hants and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005. xii + 160 pp. \$99.95 / £50.00. Review by P. G. STANWOOD, UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA.

This welcome study of the remarkable Jane Lead or Leade (1623–1704) thoughtfully depicts her life and her numerous works (<http://www.passtheword.org/Jane-Lead/index.html>). The “Philadelphians”—the circle that surrounded Leade and her “spiritual mate” Dr. Portage—have often been poorly remembered. Evelyn Underhill (in *Mysticism*, 1910), for example, styled this “extraordinary sect” as exhibiting mysticism “in its least balanced aspect mingled with mediumistic phenomena, wild symbolic visions, and apocalyptic prophecies.” But Julie Hirst, while uncritically accepting Leade’s claims to mystical experience, approaches Leade out of an interest “strongly shaped by concerns within feminist theology.” Hirst is not interested in describing Leade as an example within a certain tradition, but “as a figure in her own right,” uniquely gifted as a charismatic prophetess and prolific religious writer. This book thus aims to reflect on Jane Leade’s prophecies and “the gender dynamism of her mysticism and spirituality” (9).

Hirst divides her short book into eight somewhat overlapping chapters. She begins with a brief outline of Leade’s life, tentatively titled “Norfolk’s Child to ‘Bride of Christ.’” This chapter recalls Leade’s early life as one of nine children born to Hamond Ward and his wife Mary, affluent members of the landed gentry, in north Norfolk. At the age of about fifteen, during Christmas festivities, a voice told her to reject such vanity, after which she withdrew into a religious melancholia that lasted three years. Her unwilling marriage at about the age of twenty to William Leade, a worthy and “godly” merchant of King’s Lynn, with whom she had four children, was unsatisfactory, for she was “largely subsumed under her husband’s jurisdiction” (21). He died intestate in 1670, leaving her penniless but free to follow her heavenly calling. She longed for spiritual intimacy; and soon after her husband’s death, she began to have visions of the holy virgin Wisdom, with whom she would in due course be married. She would write in her diary that her first husband had “long hindered my marriage with the Lamb” (26). Now she might call herself divinely owned: “She had the power of personal, spiritual and political choice through a determined will to break free of patriarchal restrictions . . . her solution to widowhood was thus remarriage to God” (27).

But already one is moving into chapter 2, on Dr. John Pordage, who had been leading a circle of “spiritual thinkers” in Bradfield, Berkshire; but he was forced out of his ministry there, and would resign it altogether when the Act of Uniformity was introduced in 1662. Moving to London, Pordage and Jane Leade met, and she joined his group. Pordage encouraged Leade’s visions and her writing, and he evidently introduced her to Jakob Boehme whose works were to occupy an immensely important place in her thought and composition. The central and most important chapters of the book describe Jane Leade’s peculiar transformation of Boehme by means of her own unique alchemical discourse and her vision of mystical marriage to the universally redemptive figure of Sophia, or Holy Wisdom. She was to search for “gold” in terms that might signify the way into a realization of the divine; moreover, she would confer on Wisdom a relationship within the Trinity. These are the concerns of the chapters on “Searching for GO(L)D,” “Visions of Sophia,” and “Mystical Marriage.”

Sophia appeared in many of Leade’s visions and became for her a representative of the female Christ crucified. Hirst describes Leade’s use of Sophia “as a theological tool which enabled her to express certain concepts such as redemption and spiritual rebirth in which Sophia became the mediator between the human and the divine” (62). Leade’s decidedly feminized Deity generates a principal theme of this book. Hirst asks, “How might we read Jane’s visions of Sophia in the light of current feminist scholarship and feminist theology?” (63) Hirst pursues answers to this question throughout most of the remaining chapters of her book, urging the point that Jane Leade became “a fully formed mystic” principally by becoming a “Bride of Christ” through the power of the Virgin Wisdom. Leade’s role as “prophetess” to the Philadelphians allowed her to teach these views, supported by numerous and increasingly intense visions, and also to advance her millenarian ideas about universal salvation available at the Second Coming.

Hirst provides a sympathetic though mostly uncritical summary of Leade’s beliefs, and she quotes a number of passages from Leade’s extraordinarily active pen. Many of these brief excerpts reveal a writer of highly turgid and inflated prose. The one poem, “likely to be Jane’s own work,” is extracted from *The Revelation of Revelations* (1683), but apparently it was first published in *A Heavenly Cloud now Breaking* (1681). Hirst quotes this poem in order to demonstrate Leade’s fascination with Sophia, which it clearly succeeds in do-

ing. Yet this poem of forty lines (in five eight-line stanzas) is an egregious mangle of unscannable lines and empty images. Stanza 3 (lines 17–24) is characteristic:

Oh! Hear Virgin-Wisdom's call and cry,
 Who skill'd would be in her Mystery:
 A new Way of Manifactory stands open, I see
 Such Treasures as the World's Wonder be:
 A Ship laden within, that God himself again
 Will enter in to seize upon these heav'nly Gems;
 Ah, blessed sale for such rich Goods imbark'd here,
 For what less than she acting Stone will appear? (76)

This book seems to have begun as a thesis or dissertation, which the author has left unrevised. Hirst's prose is cluttered with references to various contemporary critics, especially those who help her to advance her feminist reflections—one wishes for a more secure, independent, and skeptical interpretation of Jane Leade's significance. Furthermore, there is in Hirst's book frequent repetition of ideas and statements in a dense and fettered style. The typographical and syntactical errors are numerous, for which the publisher may be to blame. Was there no competent in-house editor? Examples abound: from dangling participles, "Remaining in control, her accounts of these episodes . . ." (28) to other irritating lapses: "much less studied in than in the revolutionary decade" (111); "to emphasis a spiritual transformation" (124); "Jane made use of on standard biblical imagery" (126). Hirst aims to describe Jane Leade's unusual personality, strange visions, and heterodox theology with little reference to a larger context in her own time, though she is at pains to demonstrate Leade's importance to current women's studies, and to "theology." Yet for all these caveats, this modest study is a useful and honest biography of a remarkable and genuinely fascinating woman of the later seventeenth century.