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**Elizabeth Rapley**, *A Social History of the Cloister: Daily Life in the Teaching Monasteries of the Old Regime*. McGill-Queens Studies in the History of Religion, series two. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2001. xi + 379 pp. Illustrations, appendix, glossary, notes, bibliography, and index. \$49.95 (cl). ISBN 0-7735-2222-0.

Review by Ann W. Ramsey, Independent Scholar, Esopus, New York.

Years of archival research and a clear and balanced exposition make this the best account available in English of three highly influential teaching orders of ancien regime France. Rapley provides a synthetic history of the Company of Ursulines, the Company of Marie Notre-Dame, and the Congregation of Notre-Dame, who, at the height of their influence and expansion just before 1670, operated free schools for girls in virtually every town of France.

Rapley begins by asking why institutions of such vitality and influence in seventeenth- and much of eighteenth-century France should have fallen prey to a negative historical evaluation that has both marginalized and obscured the role of the cloister in French life. Rapley's answer is basically twofold. She reminds us of some particular characteristics of the sources: nuns deliberately shunned public advocacy of their role but at the same time contributed to a largely hagiographic literature "designed strictly for home consumption" (p. 4). Chiefly secularist, external histories and the fragmentation in religious institutional history, oriented chiefly to individual orders, created further obstacles to effective social histories of the cloister.

Against this background, Rapley sets the history of women's teaching orders firmly in the broader context of ancien regime political, cultural, and, perhaps most interestingly, economic history. Her account opens with a chronological survey of female teaching orders in France. In the years 1592, 1597, and 1607, respectively, three tiny, disparate communities of women took vows of chastity and devoted themselves to the Christian education of young girls. From 1610-1670, a hyper-rapid expansion ensued, whose pace followed the model of a veritable "contagion" (p. 14). Rapley locates the novel social commitment to female education in the broader context of the French recovery from the Wars of Religion and the drive of Counter-Reformation Catholicism to win over hearts and minds. By 1670 there were some 500 communities of professional nun-teachers that made up about a quarter of the total number of all types of female monasteries in France (p. 14).

This very rapid expansion, funded largely by the dowries elites gave to place their daughters in the orders, also sowed the seeds of future difficulties when the economic base of French cities declined in the later seventeenth century. Rapley does an excellent job explaining the subsequent vulnerability of religious orders. Their wealth, held in mortmain, became simultaneously the target of resentful, economically pressed elites, a tax-hungry state, and a new discourse on the virtues of productivity, launched by Colbert and propagated by eighteenth-century social and economic reformers. Mortmain had been among the most ancient of ecclesiastical privileges whereby all lands acquired by the church were exempt from any form of secular taxation.

The events that severely compromised the economic viability of women's teaching orders, and of monastic communities more generally after 1670, deserve to be better known. They constitute an important chapter both in the collapse of the ancien regime and in the conflicts between the monarchy and the French church. Rapley's discussion of "the monastic system and the economy" emphasizes that "it was for financial reasons more than any other that the country's elites began to cool towards the monasteries" (p. 35). The reader will find valuable information on the size of dowries provided to entrants, the scale of the convents' building programs, and their purchase of urban properties—all features increasingly resented as a drain on local economies and at odds with the religious mission of the houses.

Amidst these tensions, 1689 marked a "watershed between sufficiency and decline" (p. 39). The monarchy initiated an *amortissement* crisis by demanding that all religious bodies pay dues of *amortissement* and *nouvel acquêt* on all lands acquired since 1641. *Amortissement* dues and arrears accounted for far more than actual convent revenues and thus forced these institutions into either borrowing or collapse. In 1704 the monarchy decreed that investment in the money market would be subject to the same dues of *amortissement* as real estate. In 1749, just as the agricultural economy was coming out of depression, a new law prohibited the monasteries from any further purchase of land. This fatefully tied the economic future of the monasteries to the state itself by ensuring that all monastic monies would have to be invested in public *rentes*.

The most devastating blow to convents and monasteries came, however, from the effects of the Law Crash. In 1720, the government ordered religious houses to limit cash transactions and to contract no new *rentes*. Their specie, gold, and silver were taken to the Treasury, and their *rentes* were converted into the new *billets de banque*, which were virtually worthless by the end of the year. The government's reduction of its own debt in 1724 with the Visa further destroyed the value of convent-held *rentes*.

Rapley highlights the work of the *Commission des secours* that was set up in 1727 to eliminate financially unviable houses and to provide support to those that could become financially sound. Her interpretation underscores that this commission, often neglected even by historians of the church, was a major instrument of "social engineering" that forcibly mandated a reduction in the number of convents and banned new vows (p. 24). Overall, it is a great virtue of Rapley's work to anchor the history of the cloister firmly to these financial developments and to show that the critique of mediocrity levelled against the orders in the eighteenth-century ignores the root problems of the "poverty" that severely affected all houses (p. 95).

In underscoring that the eighteenth-century decline in the numbers of nuns was mandated and not spontaneous (p. 84), Rapley's account requires readers to consider anew the vigor and significance of nuns' resistance to the ecclesiastical reforms of the Revolution. When the National Assembly ordered the complete evacuation of all convents in 1792, a population of aged nuns, no longer socially elite, was exposed to much social hostility. Rapley, and much recent historiography, emphasize not this humiliating demise of the early modern convent, but the legacy of the nun's teaching mission. Through the value system conveyed to generations of women, convent education appears to be the foundation of a "gender divide [that] was of the utmost importance to the future of France and the church of France" (p. 107).

Part Two of this book, "The Anatomy of the Cloister," elucidates the everyday experience of life in the cloister. All clearly explained are vows of obedience, asceticism, administrative structures, the impact of Jansenist controversies, relations with the surrounding community, internal conflicts, the novitiate, the role of lay sisters (*converses*), and the evolution of the *pensionnat* (or use of the convent not only for boarding schoolgirls but also as retirement homes and even prisons).

Arguably most fundamental to the convent experience was the rule of *clausura*. Required of religious women by papal bull and the Decrees of Trent, *clausura* called for the complete physical separation of nuns from the world by impenetrable physical barriers and through a spirituality of "beloved solitude," renunciation, and sacrifice (p. 117). In her efforts to provide "a faithful portrait" (p. 3), true but not flattering, Rapley notes both the severe rigor with which *clausura* was enforced as well as pragmatic "creeping modifications" (p. 116). *Clausura* was appealing to the families of nuns because they equated it with respectability. It offered nuns a sense of security and even a prideful sense of "belonging to an elite company" (p. 118). Rapley refers both to Sarah Hanley's critique of cloistering--the "family-state compact" designed to serve the gender politics and social interests of the most powerful[1]--and to an early modern "culture of obedience" and submission that "in one light . . . was a regressive force, turning women into children" (p. 140). Using the words of the nuns themselves, drawn from their Constitutions and from death notices, Rapley also argues that the cloister was in many cases--how many we cannot say--experienced in contentment, and that for some self-mortification held a complex appeal.

The book concludes with a useful appendix that categorizes and quantifies the array of archives Rapley consulted; the appendix also summarizes the quantitative information available in previously printed accounts. Tables examine the demographics of the convent population (some 90,000 women in the three teaching orders) and indicate clearly the geographic areas and years for which there are adequate archival series to answer questions about nuns' ages, patterns of recruitment, and mortality rates.

This work is not framed as a critique of the gender politics of the cloister, but Rapley does demonstrate throughout how much the social structures of the ancien regime were perpetuated within the convent. Rapley consciously strives for an interpretive balance that is the hallmark of her work. In doing so, she succeeds in revealing the compelling human face of the cloister and in underscoring its enduring cultural influences.

## NOTES

[1] Sarah Hanley, "Engendering the State: Family Formation and State Building in Early Modern France," *French Historical Studies* 16 (1989): 4-27.

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