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Helene Scheck, *Reform and Resistance: Formations of Female Subjectivity in Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Culture*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008. xii + 238 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$70.00 U.S. (hb). 978-0-7914-7483-9; \$24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-7914-7484-6.

Review by Bruce L. Venarde, University of Pittsburgh.

Helene Scheck has given us an erudite and original study that is not for the faint of heart. The first hint—after the subtitle—is the Library of Congress cataloguing data, with no fewer than nine subject headings. A discussion of Augustine’s characterization of the soul in its gendered dimension begins on p. 3 of an introductory chapter entitled “Women in/and Early Ecclesiastical History: An Overview,” which also explains how the author will use critical theory, in particular the approaches of Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler. “The aim of this book,” Scheck states, “is not to trace historical moments...but to understand how women were perceived, and how they perceived themselves, within their particular social and historical circumstances—the ‘Real’ conditions of their existence. In other words, to consider whether women are able to emerge as autonomous subjects...and if so, how” (p. 12). The matter at hand, then, is female personhood, identity, and in the case of the tenth-century Saxon canoness and author Hrotswitha of Gandersheim, interiority. Scheck devotes two chapters each to “three of the least stable and most productive moments of reform and resistance in the Germanic early Middle Ages” (p. 1): the Carolingian ecclesiastical reforms in the decades around 800AD, reform movements in England from the times of King Alfred to the eleventh century, and the tenth-century Ottonian cultural program and monastic reform atmosphere in which Hrotswitha wrote. The author stresses from the beginning that the cases are not the same, and that although each movement worked to restrict women’s roles, there was often resistance to that aspect of reform. Following the lead of Jacqueline Murray, Scheck challenges us to be alert to alternatives to hegemonic ideology so as not, by understanding that ideology to be universal, unwittingly to reproduce and endorse it. The book describes both hegemonic discourses on women and femaleness and texts that show fissures in facades of unity and narrow orthodoxy.

The matter of orthodoxy is front and center in the first chapter pair, “The Limits of Orthodoxy: Being Female and Female Being Under Charlemagne” and “Soul Searching: Alcuin of York and His Circle of Female Scholars.” The presentation here is generally that of the subsequent pairs: an orientation to the aspects of a given reform movement as regards women and gender, followed by careful readings of medieval texts, often drawing explicitly on (to name only the most cited) Althusser’s interpellation, Foucault’s technologies of the self, or Butler’s performativity, all of this supported by thorough knowledge of secondary literature, both historical and literary-critical. As throughout the book, the argumentation is dense and often departs from prevailing scholarly views. The new orthodoxy of the Carolingian reform, one designed to limit women’s participation in the Church, is here epitomized by the writings of Theodulf of Orléans; at the same time, continuing restatement of, for example, the need for strict claustration of nuns shows that enforcement of reform principles was uneven. Certainly Charlemagne’s abbess sister Gisla was a frequent presence at his court. Having introduced Alcuin of York as a voice dissenting from the norm in chapter two, Scheck devotes chapter three to his writings, including educational tracts, letters, and verse. These materials reveal Alcuin as a nurturer and admirer of women’s intellectual accomplishments, addressing Abbess Gisla as “mathematician” and “woman word-powerful,” that is, to use modern terminology, a verbally and mathematically skilled scholar (p. 65). A key member of Charlemagne’s court of scholars had regard for women’s intellect that “allowed

him to transcend traditional views of gender and to promote instead an egalitarian basis for understanding what it is to be human" (p. 71).

Chapters four and five—"Redressing the Female Subject: Women, Transvestite Saints, and the Anglo-Saxon Benedictine Reform" and "Resounding Silences: Mary and Eve in Anglo-Saxon Reform Literature"—present a much bleaker situation, without an avid dissenter like Alcuin. There continued to be powerful women and strong female voices right to the end of the Anglo-Saxon era, but they were exceptional. Their privilege as members of the elite made them anomalous in a world that restricted women's visibility and denied them a place in intellectual circles. Here the author identifies herself as "cynical" (pp. 82; 194, fn. 10) and reinterprets Old English texts that have been seen to promote women and the female. Of the Old English accounts of women saints who passed as men, potentially nonconformist stories, the author argues that although they may be less harsh about the female body than their Latin sources, "they neither liberate nor empower women" (p. 96). She argues against a reading of Eve in *Genesis B* as a strong, autonomous figure, or one absolved of guilt. Juxtaposing the text—very effectively, in my view—with illustrations of it from Oxford, MS Junius 11, Schenk reveals a text in which "the abjection of Eve is devastating because it disables and immobilizes female autonomy on so many levels" (p. 118). Aelfric of Eynsham, writing in the late tenth century, represents the rising cult of the Virgin Mary of his time, but the Mary of his homilies is an utterly passive figure, indeed an inhuman one.

The second hero of the book after Alcuin is Hrotswitha, the subject of chapters six ("Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: Claiming Her Voice") and seven ("Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: Recasting Female Subjectivities"). While recognizing that Hrotswitha's writings support reform, Scheck mines prefaces, epics, legends, and the famous dramas to argue that they make room for women in ways that the mainline Carolingian and Anglo-Saxon movements did not. Hrotswitha, Scheck finds, explores the themes of gender and power in ways that have women and men working together. Hrotswitha's *Maria* presents a model for religious women and a fully human figure, the polar opposite of Mary as Aelfric portrays her. Scenes of rape or attempted rape in the dramas use multiple strategies to resist the objectification of the female body and reveal rape as an act of violence and delusion rather than lust. In general, Scheck concludes, "Hrotswitha reiterates patriarchal texts but finds in them and exploits...the ruptures that are perpetually reproduced by the very discourses that seek to eliminate them" (p. 165). These are texts with which I am familiar and I find the readings of them careful and provocative.

The choice to summarize and quote at some length is meant to give a sense of the flavor of *Reform and Resistance*, as well as its contents. There is much to praise here. Scheck hits on the happy solution of referring to "a presumption of universality and objectivity based solely on the experiences, interests, and perspectives of men and ignoring those of women" as "masculinist," since "male" or "masculine" would implicate all men (p. 176, fn. 34). The book, if in the main a literary study, is well-grounded in history and in one chapter uses images to advance an argument; it is genuinely interdisciplinary. It is also genuinely comparative, looking at three different "moments" in three different parts of Europe and drawing on both Latin and Old English texts. That does mean that there is no one central argument since "it has been my intent only to demonstrate the complexities of female subject production," but the demonstration is powerful (p. 170). There are wonderful readings, as when Schenk points out that Hrotswitha shows herself, contrary to her own assertion, to be well aware of the horrors of war, including rape, or how performance of the dramas would have underlined some of their themes, a real addition to the debate on whether the dramas were meant to be performed. Excellent observations about modern scholarship, as when Scheck chides those who, in effect, fault Hrotswitha for not being a modern feminist, are most welcome. And why assume an anonymous text, or one whose authorship is disputed, was written by a man? Scheck makes a good case that the author of the poem "Karolus Magnus et Leo Papa" was a woman, a member of Charlemagne's family, or perhaps a woman writing in a monastery headed by one of his daughters.

I have some reservations. First, to refer to the entire geographical area under consideration as “Germania” is odd (and reductionist in a way that the book as a whole takes pains not to be). Second, an important theme is that conversionary periods are most favorable for the creation of Christian female subjects, whereas reform tends to render women supplementary or even abject (p. 22). This is a version of a venerable feminist thesis that women, at least in Western societies, have tended toward greater visibility and opportunity in times of political and social decentralization. But it seems forced here: Hrotswitha’s “literary vision...supports reform movements” (p. 121) yet she is “a product of cultural flux in the conversionary climate of Ottonian Saxony” (p. 165). Which? The joining together of medieval texts, modern interpretations, and critical theory can at times turn into a hall of mirrors. To say that “Alcuin seems to recognize what Janet Nelson observes of early medieval gender dynamics in courtly circles” (p. 58) is to put the modern interpretive cart before the medieval text horse. Finally, there are some errors in Latin transcription, which in one case leads to a mangled text and translation of a few lines of “Karolus Magnus et Leo Papa.” There is an incorrect form: *purpureia* (for *purpureis*). Scheck speculates that the Gisla here is Charlemagne’s daughter, not his sister. It turns out that what is reproduced as *purpura* should actually be *proles*, which settles the question (pp. 41; 180, fn. 31).

It is presumably SUNY Press style to present all foreign language quotations—including French!—in italics *and* with quotations marks, but it looks strange. And while the press is to be commended for printing on fifty-percent recycled paper, it should seek better glue. Some pages at the beginning of my paperback review copy are falling out after one reading.

Reform and Resistance offers new ways to think about the lives and portrayals of women in the early Middle Ages and is an important contribution to ongoing, increasingly complex and nuanced conversations about medieval women and gender.

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