
H-France Review Vol. 11 (July 2011), No. 142

Barbara R. Woshinsky, *Imagining Women's Conventual Spaces in France, 1600-1800: The Cloister Disclosed*. Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010. vii + 344 pp. Figures, bibliography, and index.

Review by Elizabeth Rapley, University of Ottawa.

As the title suggests, this work by Barbara Woshinsky is a study not of ancien régime convents per se, but of their place in the mental world of their contemporaries. From the period of the Counter Reformation to that of the Revolution, convents figured significantly in the social and psychological makeup of France. Few indeed would have been the men and women who did not have experience of them, for better or for worse. By reason of their number, visibility, and economic heft, the institutions and the populations that inhabited them occupied considerable space in the public consciousness, engendering what Woshinsky calls “a convent culture.” As she points out, this convent culture has received little scholarly attention. While we have a fairly good grip on the historical facts about the institutions, when and where they were established, how they functioned, who lived in them and so on, the way in which, collectively, they colored and permeated contemporary thought is harder for us (living as we do in a conventless culture) to imagine. The author sets out to examine and explain a state of mind which no longer exists.

Woshinsky begins with an exploration of gender as it was perceived in the early modern period, taking her evidence from a variety of sources. The most important source is, of course, the written word. The early seventeenth century, overshadowed by the religious upheavals of the sixteenth, was a time of deep and agonizing introspection. Authors both lay and clerical pondered the problem of existence as it pertained to salvation. How did the soul relate to the body? How did the one escape the snares of the other and come blameless to Judgement Day? It was not a simple question to begin with, and it was made more complicated by the religious culture of the times. Baroque Catholicism, for all its strong insistence on sexual morality, was extremely corporeal in its forms. It aroused the senses even as it preached distrust of the body. Anybody who has seen Bernini's sculpture of *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* can understand the dilemma. And where corporeality existed, there was bound also to be gender. Even in matters of the spirit there was maleness and femaleness. In her first two chapters, “Hermitages of the Soul” and “Living Temples or Vases of Ignominy,” Woshinsky describes the ways in which various authors approached the subject, tentatively perhaps, and with the lavish use of allegory to cover up any confusion. At the risk of simplifying a highly nuanced examination, we can conclude that for these authors, maleness was essentially spiritual and femaleness essentially physical.

A society's attitudes and values are also discernible through its architecture and art, its clothing, and its body images. Clothing and buildings reveal something of the men—and, more pertinently, the women—who inhabit them. Clothing covers or it reveals; it can signal either a shrinking from, or an invitation to, a relationship with outsiders. In early modern thought, the voluminous clothing of women (at least, of “good” women) reflected the inward orientation of their natures. Women's bodies were, above all, vessels; it was what they contained, and the priority of protecting it, that really mattered. Equally, the configuration of a building, its accessibility (or lack thereof), the positioning and shape of its living quarters, all tell us something about its inhabitants. Thus, while “male” architecture is open and cruciform,

“female” architecture is private and inward-turning, designed rather to conceal than to display; it is the “closed garden” of the Song of Solomon. This closed garden is most perfectly represented in the cloister.

This brings us to Woshinsky’s central topic. The word “cloister” has several meanings. A cloister is a closed-in courtyard. “*The cloister*” is the life of monastic seclusion, once practiced by monks and nuns alike, but given a strongly feminine slant in the sixteenth century when the Council of Trent made it mandatory for nuns. Thereafter, “to cloister” meant, simplistically, “to lock [women] up.” But Woshinsky shows throughout the book that for its contemporaries, the word had multiple meanings. After all, the same walls and doors that locked women in also locked men out. A convent could represent not a prison but a refuge. It could be a place of retreat, and this brings her into the sort of digression that gives depth to her principal thesis.

As seen in chapter three, the notion of “retreat from the world” had come to hold great appeal for people in all walks of life. The early modern period was characterized by a new interest in privacy, in escape whether temporary or permanent from the pressures of society. For those who could afford it, a space apart, whether in a country estate or in a closed-off apartment within the larger house, became highly attractive. But however it was achieved, retreat did not need to have a religious character. For women in particular, it might simply be an alternative form of existence (which Woshinsky calls a “feminotopia”). To live apart, enjoying the company of female friends but eschewing male companionship of any kind, was an idea that had its merits. As long as it did not entail hardship or the sacrifice of pleasure, life without marriage could offer real charms and could even be a “feminotopia.” The convent was hardly that, but it could legitimately claim to be a feminotopia of a sort, a space which had the advantage of separation from men. For this separation, however, it would always remain suspect. In the male-dominated universe, its exclusive femininity made it marginal and mysterious.

This mysteriousness fed the imaginings of outsiders. In reality, the cloister in its most absolute sense was more or less a myth. Most convents of the early modern period had multiple openings onto the world. The coming and going of visitors and of the nuns themselves allowed intriguing glimpses into what was, in theory, invisible. Convents served as schools, as retirement homes, as boarding houses, as asylums, and sometimes, at the behest of the authorities, as jails. Nuns were implicated in worldly goings-on. Thus, there was a tension between what the cloister was imagined to be and what it actually was. People knew a little about it, and imagined more. And this fed into a popular form of literature: revelations about convent life.

The first novels that Woshinsky examines described the convent in a positive light. During the early seventeenth century—the age of piety—they saw it as sanctuary, as a sure protection for innocent young women against the evils of world and flesh. Then, beginning in the later seventeenth century, the literature began to present convents in a different guise, as participants in clandestine and sometimes disreputable dealings. The main characters in these novels were individual women, women with problems. For them, convents were sometimes “good,” sometimes “bad,” sometimes refuges and sometimes prisons. They might be the gates to freedom from abusive relationships or the launching pads from which love affairs could take off; but they might also provide the walls and bars that kept the heroine from her lover. The frustrated nun was a popular topic in convent culture. Female sexuality sold books.

Woshinsky makes two interesting points about this mid-century literature. It was predominantly the work of women, and though it was not all that kind to convent life, it accepted it as part of “the way things are.” However, she shows how, as the seventeenth century turned into the eighteenth, the culture changed, and the criticism became more virulent. In this later convent fiction, which (not surprisingly) was written by men, the *galant* gave way to the *libertin*. Lesbianism made its appearance. Nuns were no longer just the victims of their own frailty and the lasciviousness of others; they were active perpetrators.

The cloister was no longer refuge, but camouflage. All this fitted perfectly into a long-held belief, recently clothed in scientific terminology, that women were creatures of rampant sexuality, that given the unnatural conditions of enclosure, they could truly run amok. There was something more. Behind the titillating eroticism of the novels of Diderot and l'abbé de Pure lay a militant anticlericalism, which in criticizing convent life sought to destroy it. Unfortunately for the nuns of France, *La Religieuse* and *Les Lettres portugaises* fitted well into the mood of their country in the late eighteenth century, as subsequent events would show.

For the purposes of her book Woshinsky does not use in-convent sources: letters, records, annals and so on. She is concerned not with how convents actually functioned, but with how they were seen, and fantasized about, by outsiders looking in. She draws a well nuanced picture, using contemporary literature to display a broad array of preconceptions and prejudices and outright sensationalism. She shows how that literature mutated over time, reflecting the changing moods and conventions of society. The “convent culture” that she describes would follow the general culture of the country from pious endorsement by the Catholic Reformation to universal destruction by the Revolution.

Thus, behind the immediate subject of the book, the cloister as seen by its early modern contemporaries, we catch sight of a *mentalité* in evolution. Woshinsky shows how, during the age of piety, traditional misogyny was forced to concede (in a backhanded way) that women were, after all, capable of holy lives, and the convents were holy places. But misogyny's setback was partial and temporary. Once the spiritual lost its hold on people's minds, revisionism began with a vengeance. The old canard, that women without men were naturally weak and even perverse, hit hard at the convents, and led to their total undoing. It is an interesting light thrown upon an important historical era, and one well worth reading.

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