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Valerie L. Garver, *Women and Aristocratic Culture in the Carolingian World*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009. xix + 310 pages. Figures, bibliography, and index. \$49.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8014-4771-6.

Review by Jennifer R. Davis, The Catholic University of America.

If it was the task of the first generation of scholarship on medieval women simply to find the women, subsequent generations of historians studying medieval women have, like their peers examining other periods, sought to use gender as a tool of analysis, and to recapture the ways in which female experience played into and shaped wider historical trends. The last few decades have seen a number of important studies of gender in the Middle Ages, although the difficulties of the sources make such study of the early Middle Ages especially challenging. Nonetheless, even in the early medieval context, important work has been done on women as transmitters of family memory, on female saints (or the lack thereof), and on female monasticism, to name just a few topics.

Garver's welcome new book accomplishes two primary tasks. First, she offers the only complete survey of aristocratic female experience to focus on the Carolingian period in particular. Second, by choosing to approach Carolingian women in terms of their participation in aristocratic life, she is able to restore Carolingian women to a vital and central role in their society. Toward the end of the Introduction, Garver summarizes her aim: "This book argues for the many prominent ways in which women produced, maintained, and shaped elite culture in the Carolingian world" (p. 19). She succeeds beautifully in realizing this goal, producing a thoughtful and well-constructed evaluation of the roles played by women in the Carolingian world.

The organization of the book itself reveals Garver's methodology. The very first words of the book are a quotation from the bishop Jonas of Orléans, taken from a guidebook he wrote to instruct Carolingian men on the conduct proper for a Christian layman: "For there are four reasons why men desire women: family, prudence, wealth, and beauty" (p. 1). As Garver argues throughout the book, this kind of idealized vision of female experience is not simply a male construct, but a portrait shaped by the actual life experience of Carolingian women. This is illustrated by the subsequent four chapters, each of which takes up in turn the four ideal traits Jonas presented, that is (in Garver's slightly re-ordered version), beauty, family, prudence, and wealth. Garver thus uses the very structure of the book to help her make one of her main arguments, namely that while we may usually encounter women through the lens of male writing, these male sources can be carefully read to reveal the impact of actual women on male representations. In a neat shifting of perspective, the frame she adopts, developed by a male cleric, serves as the scaffolding for an appraisal of women's agency in shaping their own society.

This elegant construction culminates in a final chapter on textile work. While at first glance a chapter on textiles might seem out of place after chapters devoted to Jonas's elaboration of female traits, Garver in fact uses textile work, one of the most common forms of labor associated with women, to illustrate all of her previous themes of beauty, prudence, wealth and family. For example, textiles can demonstrate and enhance wealth and beauty, require prudence in their production and distribution, and function as signs of family consciousness (for instance, p. 19). Garver concludes, "Women bore and transmitted aristocratic identity through their knowledge of textiles and textile manufacture and decoration, making

women and textiles essential to the wider social, political, and religious networks that marked the Carolingian elite" (p. 268). To pursue the textile metaphor, Garver weaves together the experiences of lay and religious women, the ideals expected of women and the realities which shaped their lives, to end up with an analysis of how women helped structure the Carolingian world.

The Introduction to the book lays out the achievements of previous scholarship on women, in particular work on family memory and on other groups of early medieval women, such as Anglo-Saxon nuns. It is in the Introduction that Garver deals most directly with the theoretical concerns which have shaped the historical study of women and have led to an increasing focus on gender and the construction of both male and female identities. She wears her theory lightly, which makes the book, despite the complexity of some of the concepts discussed, easily accessible to students. Scholars might have benefitted from more consideration of theoretical frameworks as the book proceeded, but the choices Garver has made about how to read her sources are clear.

Garver seeks in this book to offer an overview of Carolingian women, and thus she wanders widely in the Carolingian world through both space and time. The geographical range is helpful and allows Garver to make arguments about what was typical for most Carolingian aristocratic women (e.g., p. 72). The chronological range is necessary given the limited source base, although her chosen frame of c. 700 to c. 925 is somewhat unusual. Reaching back to when the Carolingian family was an aristocratic clan like any other fits in with much recent work questioning a distinct break with the Merovingian past. Her reasons for stopping a third of the way into the tenth century, after the end of the Carolingian dynasty in the East, but when Carolingian culture would persist for much of the tenth century, are less obvious (p. 9). Nonetheless, the book does address Carolingian society from an appropriately wide angle.

Garver also discusses her sources in the Introduction. The variety of sources exploited for this book is one of its great strengths. Garver has analyzed a very wide range of written sources, carefully mining each for all the information she can retrieve. Her readings of the primary sources are sensitive and nuanced, and bring to light new insights into some well-known evidence. Her use of material culture is even more impressive. Garver employs sources generally overlooked in the historiography, and thereby opens up new fields of investigation for Carolingianists studying many different topics. For example, Garver's examination of silks as gifts in Carolingian society integrates women's experiences as givers and receivers of such expensive and exotic gifts into a broader aristocratic culture of gift-giving and liturgical celebration (pp. 242-59). The sources for Carolingian women, whether material or written, are admittedly limited, but Garver considers each source from multiple angles and combines all possible evidence to make the most of the sources available to her.

All of these sources are approached via the angle of aristocratic experience. In particular, Garver is concerned to focus on 'typical' aristocratic women, rather than more unusual, although often better documented women, such as the Carolingian queens (for instance, p. 5). Perhaps the most famous Carolingian woman is the laywoman Dhuoda, who wrote a manual of advice for her son. Dhuoda may not be entirely atypical in her literary efforts, but her status as one of the few women whose own words are preserved for us makes her unusual. She appears in this book, but only occasionally. This choice by Garver to focus on more average aristocratic experience is a salutary one, allowing her to go beyond the exceptional cases to make an argument about standard experiences. The book's emphasis on average aristocrats is also justifiable given the source base. One would certainly like to know more about lower-status women, but access to such women's lives is harder to come by. However, Garver perhaps dismisses the potential too quickly (p. 4). The possibility of exploiting material evidence is particularly important in this context. Significant studies have already been done on skeletal remains, making arguments about the kinds of physical work medieval men and women engaged in. Strontium can also be extracted from teeth to reveal migration from where a person was born to where that person died. We should not be too hasty to give up on the task of studying women other than elites. Garver still has

reason to define her project as she did, but we may be able to say more about lower-status women in the future.

Chapter one focuses on beauty. Carolingian authors expected aristocratic women to be beautiful, and to demonstrate through their dress and appearance the moral probity of themselves and their families. Such values were hardly particular to the Carolingian period. However, by looking for the specific ways in which Carolingian authors used beauty as a means of measuring aristocratic women and of warning of the flaws beauty could conceal, Garver is able to tease out some specifically Carolingian values. For instance, Garver discusses a particular interest in jewelry and hair accoutrements which can tell us something about what kinds of items the Carolingians treasured (pp. 59-61). Chapter two moves on to family, drawing on a rich literature on liturgical commemoration and changing family structure in the Carolingian world. Garver demonstrates how women, as nuns at family houses, or educators of the young in the history of the family, among other roles, played an essential part in shaping the family and its Carolingian representations. In chapter three, Garver turns to prudence, which she examines via an investigation of how women provided both direct education and served as moral exemplars by their own behavior. Both lay and religious women were responsible for educating children and both might educate those destined for either lay or religious status as adults (especially pp. 139-44).

In chapter four, Garver explores wealth, arguing that a specifically female responsibility for food and entertainment necessarily involved women in the management of resources. Moreover, in the absence of men, either permanently in the case of a convent or temporarily on war or business in a lay setting, women needed to oversee the wealth of families and institutions: "Carolingian women, both lay and religious, had substantial opportunities to exert managerial control over household, estate, and convent. Their gendered duties almost certainly gave them power; they demonstrate how instrumental they were in the development of social and political bonds as well as in contributing to the economy" (p. 222). The final chapter, as noted above, uses textile work to bring together the four thematic strands analyzed in the first chapters. The book concludes with a discussion of the stages of life of a Carolingian woman, allowing Garver to end with reflections on her main interest in the normative experiences of Carolingian women and how they contributed to their society.

The main argument of the book is that Carolingian women were deeply implicated in their society as active agents, and not just passive reflections of male ideals. As I have tried to suggest throughout this review, Garver succeeds in this important project. A second primary argument is that historians should not draw a hard and fast line between the experiences of lay women and religious women. As Garver writes, "Carolingian women were participants not just in religious matters but also in the wider political, social, and cultural spheres of their day. In this regard women in both the religious and secular worlds had a great deal in common" (p. 2). All of the chapters in the book integrate consideration of lay and religious women. For example, women's roles as the preservers of family memory were shared between nuns who prayed for their relatives and their lay counter-parts who patronized the institutions responsible for prayer (pp. 77-102). Clearly, the distinction of religious status mattered, especially in the Carolingian world which was deeply anxious about protecting the holy from the taint of worldly affairs. The overall claim that there was more to unite than to divide aristocratic women is, however, fully documented and convincingly argued. This is a significant point not only for the history of gender, but for our understanding of the Carolingian period as a whole.

A third framing argument is a little more problematic. Garver contends that the long-term impact of the experiences of Carolingian women continues to shape female roles today: "This book has outlined changes in women's lives and in the ways others perceived women that underline the centrality of the early Middle Ages and particularly the Carolingian era to the reshaping of antique ideas and the development of lasting social norms" (p. 281). The claim that the Carolingian period made a pivotal contribution to the development of female experience is not fully justified by the foregoing text. The

idea is alluded to in the Introduction (pp. 5, 17, 19), but does not figure prominently in the chapters to follow.

Garver's interest in the long-term trajectory of women's lives also has another consequence. In her concern to stress continuities in female experience, Garver's discussion at times flattens out a sense of chronological development within the Carolingian period itself. She is clearly aware of such changes (for instance, p. 9 or p. 280), but does not address them in a sustained way. While the evidence would not allow this book to be arranged chronologically, the lack of emphasis on change over time limits Garver's ability to appreciate the diversity of Carolingian experience. Despite these reservations about balancing continuity and change, the book gives specialists in the Carolingian period much to think about, while still remaining relevant and accessible to non-medievalists interested in the history of gender.

The West Frankish king Charles the Bald was quite fond of pictures of himself. One of these ruler portraits is the image chosen for the cover of this volume (see discussion of the image on pp. 32-34). It would be easy to look at this illumination and think of the traditional stories about Carolingian rulership and the successes of the Carolingian Renaissance. But if one looks closely, there are women in the picture. It is the achievement of Garver's book that she has drawn our attention to these women, and argued forcefully that they were not just depicted by artists and scholars of the Carolingian Renaissance but that they themselves helped shape the society which created this Renaissance.

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