
H-France Review Vol. 13 (July 2013), No. 96

Anne E. Lester, *Creating Cistercian Nuns. The Women's Religious Movement and Its Reform in Thirteenth-Century Champagne*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011. xxiv-261 pp. Map, appendix, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00. ISBN 978-0-8014-4989-5.

Review by Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak, New York University.

Anne Lester's case study of thirteenth-century Cistercian female houses in the French region of Champagne began as a 2003 dissertation at Princeton. It has matured into an important contribution to understanding the ways women negotiated their integration within both the monastic and the larger social environment, while also enabling the society of Champagne to fulfill its pious aspirations. Indeed, Lester's regional study, based on an analysis of unpublished and unexploited charters, may well affect the more general historiography of religious movements.

Lester's heuristic strategy is in itself indicative of a significant aspect of the female religious communities she has studied, namely that none of them produced outstanding individuals who became the subjects of hagiography. Modern awareness of women religious from Champagne stems mostly from charters—some of which are reproduced as facsimiles throughout the book—whose diplomatic discourse substantially differs from the rhetoric of Cistercian customals, and from the spiritual and homiletic writings by the women themselves or, more commonly, by male confessors, confidants, and admirers. In charters, nobles, country folk, and urbanites alike entrusted Cistercian nuns with the mediation of their own personal commitment to a life of salvific piety. Such deeds involved women religious as both recipients and enablers of generosity, though the women themselves were rarely, if ever, responsible for the material and scribal existence of the charters given in their favor. Since they did not create cartularies, copies of such records, it appears that their only responsibility, scrupulously fulfilled, was to preserve individual deeds in archives. These lost their organic identity when, along with their host convents, they were later incorporated into male abbeys. With remarkable diligence, Lester has succeeded in restoring a distinctive existence to communities of women whose dedication and piety stimulated the tempo of religious and charitable life in Champagne for more than a century.

With the explicit goal of tracking reform and its implications, Lester follows spiritually minded women from their spontaneous efforts at creating a penitential life for themselves in service to the sick and the poor, through their institutionalization as Cistercian nuns. This development occurred against the background of the order's statutes (1225, 1228), which banned creation of and association with new female houses. Lester's account of the emergence of the women's religious movement in twelfth-century Champagne involves two narratives. In one, she develops a sociological analysis of the women brought together by a common spiritual quest. She shows that these women were organized as mixed and somewhat marginal communities, with origins ranging from aristocratic lineages, to urban families, poor milieus, and even incorporating repentant prostitutes. Lester demonstrates how women, rendered controversial by their former lifestyles and lack of sanctioned affiliation, successfully adopted and adapted such powerful ideals as crusading and such established cultural constructs as monastic rules and urbanism to secure an acceptable identity as nuns.

Lester's second line of narrative is contextual, associating the women's religious movement in Champagne with a Flemish antecedent, linking it to the successful commercial economy of Champagne, and locating its patrons among such upward striving social groups as knights, women, secular canons, artisans, and tradesmen. Networks of patronage and interaction with contemporary society inspired by the ideals of the *via apostolica*, in particular their staffing of leper houses and *domus-Dei*, brought the quasi-religious women of Champagne within the Cistercian socio-cultural orbit. While women, as unaffiliated religious, adopted the framework of Cistercian customs, monks negotiated different strategies for providing these women with spiritual care. Both groups grew convinced that they shared a similar spiritual identity compatible with the order's mission. Nevertheless, Lester's careful analysis of the formal incorporation of women into the Cistercian order in the early decades of the thirteenth century shows that the impulse for incorporation originated less with the women themselves than with reform-minded popes and bishops who, eager to regulate apostolic movements, saw in care-giving and in the open flexibility of Cistercian customs an institutional model for the reform of women religious. Stressing this use of the Cistercian order to rein in women's apostolic movements, Lester challenges the primacy traditionally ascribed to friars in regulating female religious.

As their communities morphed into Cistercian convents, women continued their selfless dedication to the poor and the sick, presenting models of Christian piety that remained, at least initially, synergistically attuned to the religious ideals of Cistercian monks, local preachers, ecclesiastical officials, and crusader families. The textual footprint of female religious activity in Champagne testifies, in Lester's adroit reading, to a story of administrative and economic success. Lester argues, however, that the persistent commitment of these nuns to the ideal and practice of real poverty and the systematic distribution of their income to the needy brought them both to a virtual state of disobedience and to actual mendicancy, threatening their institutional survival.

Indeed, by the end of the thirteenth century, the female Cistercian enterprise in Champagne progressively failed. Lester assigns this breakdown to those various destabilizing events that affected Champagne from the late thirteenth century onward, such as its incorporation into the royal domain, inflation, taxes, shrinking resources, and warfare. Compounding poverty and destruction were papal and Cistercian policies, which demanded total claustration for all professed nuns (papal bull of 1298) and decreed that female communities of less than twelve persons be converted into cells, or dissolved to be replaced by male priories of the order (Cistercian General Chapter, 1399).

Politics, economics, ecclesiastical policies, and institutional restructuring undoubtedly played significant roles in ending the thirteenth-century momentum of female monastic reform. However, with only a fleeting allusion to changing devotional patterns, and with relatively little attention to the women's radical and ongoing commitment to charity in the conclusion of the present monograph, the ideological component of the fate of the female movement in Champagne tends to be de-emphasized. In fact, Lester's most powerful argument, skillfully woven throughout her fine study, is that Cistercian nuns bent every aspect of their endeavors to the apostolic ideals of poverty and assistance to the needy. This inspired most of them deliberately to eschew the practice of grange agriculture, production, and marketing, as characteristically pursued by their Cistercian brethren, for nuns saw in such practices a mechanism for the accumulation of wealth rather than for its distribution. Inevitably, with hard times, nunneries no longer had the resources to sustain or rebuild their monastic life.

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ISSN 1553-9172