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Mita Choudhury, *Convents and Nuns in Eighteenth-Century French Politics and Culture*. Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2004. ix+234 pp. Notes and index. \$42.50 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-8014-4110-2.

Review by Carolyn Lougee Chappell, Stanford University.

Over the past few years, the convents of ancien regime France have been reexamined, reevaluated, and repositioned in the mainstream of historical development. Books by Barbara Diefendorf, Elizabeth Rapley, and Susan Dinan have shown the multiple ways in which Catholic Reform convents served the needs of women--founders, nuns, boarders, pupils--in the post-Tridentine period, how women in convents were able not merely to pursue their own spiritual values but also to "change the face of early modern female religiosity,"[1] and how the cloister provided education for generations of girls as well as vocations for many thousands of women (perhaps 90,000 teaching nuns by the time of the Revolution). Together, these works have countered and corrected the tendency of historians to portray nuns as little more than "hapless victims of repressive clerics, church dogmas, and family strategies,"[2] and demonstrated the inadequacy of histories that overlook the convent's centrality to French experience.[3]

In Mita Choudhury's important new book, *Convents and Nuns in Eighteenth-Century French Politics and Culture*, the convent is something quite different: not an institution but an element of discourse "within the volatile political culture of eighteenth-century France" (p. 2). Choudhury's objective is to show the convent in the French imagination, rather than in daily operation, and to reveal how the image of the convent figured in the multiple discourses--gender, liberty and despotism, citizenship, patriarchal and paternal authority, domesticity, public opinion--in which other historians, over the past decade or two, have located the origins of the Revolution. [4]

Choudhury introduces her topic, in chapter one, with a nine-page survey of the history of convents up to the eighteenth century and an analysis of Denis Diderot's *La Religieuse*. She characterizes the convent as an ongoing interplay between nuns intent upon expressing their religious convictions and ecclesiastical authorities concerned to control that expression, and suggests how the convent came to ally, in a mutually useful but episodically competitive axis of power, with church, secular society, family, and aristocracy. Then, as if to preemptively book-end the eighteenth-century heart of her discussion, she jumps to analyzing *La Religieuse*, which was published only in 1796, "not as an anticlerical polemic but as a political document" (p. 14)--by which she means that Diderot, like writers to be studied later in the book, went beyond a critique of the convent per se to indict the state for countenancing a secret "place of servitude and despotism" (p. 27) that violated women's freedom, prohibited them from living according to nature as mothers of families, and stifled the inherent sociability of human nature.

Chapters two and three, entitled "Martyrs into Citizens: Nuns and the Resistance to *Unigenitus*, 1730-1753" and "Despotic Habits: The Critique of Feminine Power in the Cloister, 1740-1770," are designed to supplement Dale Van Kley's story of Jansenist oppositional politics[5] with a missing gender dimension: with a demonstration of the "gendered nature of eighteenth-century Jansenist polemics and politics" (p. 35) and an explanation of "how Jansenists forged female religious dissent into religious and political weapons" (p. 36). Van Kley himself has called for such an extension of his own study: "In place of a Jansenist feminism, should one rather speak of a feminine Jansenism?"[6] Choudhury shows how Jansenist nuns used stereotypes of feminine virtue (passivity, humility, submission) to represent their

opposition to Unigenitus as obedience to conscience and prior vows rather than as insubordination, constructing “a form of resistance within a discourse of obedience” (p. 39). Male Jansenist theologians then appropriated this “holy example” of the martyr nuns to legitimate the resistance of Jansenists in general. Lawyers and magistrates took up the persona of the martyr in the refusal of sacraments controversy (1752) and in the ensuing decades in several cases of *appel comme d’abus* brought by nuns against their superiors. Lawyers assembled a discourse that would fester as the century moved on and eventually ensnare not only “the masculine hierarchy of the post-Tridentine church” (p. 52), but also the monarchy, the royal mistress, and all female aristocratic authority. Magistrates, arguing that nuns continued, after their vows, to have the rights of citizens, “placed the nun within the nation.... The right to private conscience without any interference from the clergy increasingly sounded like secularized civic autonomy” (pp. 82, 67). Thus did religious rhetoric lay a foundation for modern notions of citizenship.

Chapters four and five, on “The Vocation Forcée in French Political and Literary Culture, 1740-1789” and “School of Virtue, School of Vice: The Debate on Convent Education, 1740-1789” identify the point where opinion turned against the convent—turned from defenses of nuns and efforts to reform the convent’s shortcomings to implicit or explicit denials of the convent’s legitimacy as an institution. The woman coerced by her despotic and abusive family to take vows became the dominant image of the nun, even though cases of forced vocation were in practice nearly non-existent. Choudhury believes this counter-factual story of the *vocation forcée* was compelling precisely because a profusion of legal and fictive discourses retailed it: “the intertextual nature of the forced vow story in part explains its power....In the end, both for lawyers and for most men of letters, the reality of convent life was less important than authorial ideologies and commitments” (p. 102). The convent, then, became a focal point in the reshaping of patriarchy into an indictment, rather than a buttress, of corporate society and traditional distributions of power. Chapter five does not concern itself with the debate among pedagogues and educational theorists but rather traces the pornographic literary works that depicted convents as sites of an eroticism that would inevitably break through, given that womanhood is anchored in the body and women’s social utility centers on meeting men’s needs. “In erotic literature the female body and its capacity for experiencing pleasure was the starting point for female education” (p. 143). Others have noted that a large number of eighteenth-century “libertine novels” took place in convents. Choudhury explains why this was so: the convent served as a locus for Enlightenment debates about sensationalism, materialism, education and gendered spheres because the institution itself was based upon conceptions of repressible desire, spiritual hegemony over the corporeal, and denial of pleasure that Enlightenment ideology contested.

Finally, in chapter six, “From Victims to Fanatics: Nuns in the French Revolution, 1789-1794,” and the conclusion, Choudhury shows how, once the Revolution severed the symbiotic link between monarchy and church that defined the Old Regime, the nun became on one side an outlaw and on the other a mainstream figure. Seen by the early Revolution as a victim of forced vocation, the nun became an enemy of the Revolution after many nuns refused to take the oath to the Civil Constitution. But by the end of the century she had also become, ironically, a mainstream figure; the nun who had challenged the church as well as the state by refusing Unigenitus now became the darling of the church in its battles against the state. So she would remain through the nineteenth century. Indeed, one over-arching purpose of Choudhury’s book is to identify that very reversal—how the contesting nun of the Jansenists became the conservative nun of the nineteenth century—and to locate the shift within pre-Revolutionary political culture rather than after 1789.

This is a complex book: a pleasure to read and thought-provoking at every turn. The intricate argumentation is masterful, the close readings of texts stunningly insightful. The nuns’ personal writings, lawyers’ briefs, novels, plays, pamphlets, and police reports that Choudhury has resurrected will enrich future studies of the period. Her presentation of the plasticity of gender imagery—how

multivalent gender stereotypes could justify, as well as delegitimate, women's speaking out—has particularly far-reaching implications for interpretation of the eighteenth century: “gender was not always automatic grounds for exclusion from the political arena, particularly in a patriarchal system that was becoming increasingly unsteady and unsure” (p. 68). Those involved in the turn to pre-Revolutionary political culture will know where to shelve this book: not with Diefendorf, Rapley, and Dinan, but according to Choudhury's sense of its neighbors: “These cases and others like them served as a bridge between the politico-religious controversies examined by Dale Van Kley and David Bell and the ‘domestic dramas’ documented in Sarah Maza's study of prerevolutionary causes célèbres and in Jeffrey Merrick's work on the desacralization of the French monarchy” (p. 96).^[7]

Those who doubt, however, that discourse creates the social will be uneasy with aspects of Choudhury's approach. She shows that the convent was a focal point of critique by tracing eighteenth-century representations that bore the seeds of the century to come, rather than presenting an encounter between discourses, between two ways of looking at the world in the period. Where are the intelligent proponents of hierarchy and of female quests for salvation, the defenders of women who found wholeness and satisfaction and freedom *from* marriage in the cloister? Similarly, the very first chapter inadvertently creates an impression that the convent was not an object of contestation before 1740. Where are the Protestants? Or the Erasmians? If their earlier challenges to monastic institutions were made part of the story, how new and how particular to pre-Revolutionary political culture would the eighteenth-century critiques look? Would such comparison usefully illuminate the later discourse? Finally, in the end do we really know what made the critique so compelling in the pre-Revolutionary period? Surely inter-textuality is a slim reed on which to hang deep changes of attitude in a society where everyone—even Protestants—knew nuns personally and were familiar with a local cloister, and where religious belief was oscillating more deeply than, perhaps, at any time in the preceding millennium. Choudhury holds that the imaginary of the convent as metaphor for tyranny and disorder was more compelling than that of the seraglio or the Bastille because of “the relationship between the institution's own changing structure and purpose and the seismic political and cultural shifts taking place in eighteenth-century France” (p. 7). Yet the convents' “changing structure and purpose” do not find their way into the analysis. It will be up to readers to perform their own intertextuality by integrating this immensely valuable book with the other strand of convent studies that has placed the institution in its social matrix.

NOTES

[1] Barbara B. Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 9.

[2] Susan E. Dinan, *Women and Poor Relief in Seventeenth-Century France: The Early History of the Daughters of Charity* (Ashgate Press, forthcoming).

[3] Elizabeth Rapley, *A Social History of the Cloister: Daily Life in the Teaching Monasteries of the Old Regime* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001); Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990); Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*; Dinan, *Women and Poor Relief*; Susan Dinan, “Spheres of Female Religious Expression in Early Modern France,” in Susan E. Dinan and Debra Meyers eds., *Women and Religion in Old and New Worlds* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 71-92.

[4] Sarah C. Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: the Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[5] Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560-1791* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

[6] Dale Van Kley, "Préface," in F. Ellen Weaver, *Mademoiselle de Joncoux: polémique janséniste à la veille de la bulle Unigenitus* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 2002), p. 11, quoted by Choudhury, p. 35.

[7] Van Kley, *Religious Origins*; David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France; Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); Maza, *Private Lives*; Jeffrey Merrick, *The Desacralization of the French Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990).

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