

---

H-France Review Vol. 2 (June 2002), No. 44

Julie Ann Smith, *Ordering Women's Lives. Penitentials and Nunnery Rules in the Early Medieval West*. Burlington, Vt. and Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001. 246 pp. Bibliography and index. ISBN 1-8592-8238-5.

Review by Constance H. Berman, University of Iowa.

Smith has brought together the major published sources and studies on early medieval nunnery rules and references to women in penitentials for the early middle ages. In an introduction, conclusion and six chapters, she treats women in the penitentials (Ch.1, "History", Ch. 2, "Sexuality", Ch.3, "Work") and women in the rules for nuns (Ch.4, "History", Ch. 5, "Enclosure", Ch. 6, "Work and Abstinence"). The most impressive segment is Ch. 6, on work and abstinence as described in the nunnery rules, which provides a summary of what each rule says on work-related topics: prayer, textile production, duties of abbess or prioress. Smith's analysis suggests that nunnery rules, much more than those for monks, emphasized means of support.

Smith asserts that hers is a book about norms, not practice. Explicitly excluding any speculation on the actual lives of women and instead limiting herself to what churchmen wrote in penitentials, rules for nuns and, to a certain extent, in the legislation of church councils or secular law, she provides a compendium of facts about how male compilers of penitentials and male authors of rules for nuns thought nuns and other women should behave. The reason to tie them together, as Smith says in her concluding paragraph, is that "the texts were not simply designed to condition and constrain the behaviour of audiences but were also part of a more comprehensive project of Christianisation and imposition of clerical views of how the world should be" (p. 226).

But whereas monastic rules would have been widely read by and to communities of women (and their composition would have been affected by the conditions of life in monastic communities, as Smith implies with regard to the rule of Donatus of Besançon), there is little evidence that penitentials were ever read or listened to by women at all, except perhaps as excerpts quoted to penitents concerning their particular sins. Moreover, can we assert the importance of the penitential texts on the basis of existing editions without discussing who preserved such texts in manuscripts, the manuscript context in which they survive, and the numbers which did in fact survive? Certainly, the assertion that penitentials were widely used in the parish confessional needs discussion of when confession began to be common in the early middle ages.

In limiting her gaze to what is available in the prescriptive documents of the early middle ages about women and their religious lives, Smith takes little account of a considerable development in the literature on women's monasticism and the church more generally, albeit much of it concerns a slightly later period. Many of us working on medieval religious women would now reject the single-gendered approach which we applauded in the publication of Suzanne Wemple's, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500-900* (Philadelphia, 1981). For how can we evaluate what we are told about women, if we do not know how men were treated, as is done by Penelope Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession: Religious Women in Medieval France* (Chicago, 1991), a work not cited in Smith's bibliography? While Smith does not hesitate to slide backwards in time from the early middle ages to invoke the most misogynist statements of Jerome or the Apocrypha and to treat Augustine's rule as an early medieval

one, most evidence and studies considered concern the earliest rules for nuns up to the eleventh-century penitentials of Burchard of Worms and go no further forward in time than that. While Smith cites Bruce Venarde, *Women's Monasticism and Medieval Society: Nunneries in France and England, 890-1215* (Cornell University Press, 1997), presumably because it treats the tenth-century Regularis Concordia, she does not seem to have looked at Venarde's conclusions about how many more houses of nuns there were in the central middle ages than we thought when Wemple published the study cited above. Indeed, there is much recent literature on medieval nuns (some of it appearing since Smith completed her work) that would have aided in her understanding. I would add to the bibliography several important books and articles by American, British and other European scholars published between 1989 and 2001. [1] Reading those works would have allowed Smith to progress beyond assumptions about the value of women's prayers that have disappeared in the new feminist analysis of religious women in the middle ages.

Sometimes there are statements that just don't make sense. Smith cites Elizabeth Makowski, *Canon Law and Cloistered Women: Periculoso and its Commentators, 1298-1545* (Washington, D.C., 1997) to document the following statement: "Indeed, the strict claustration which was insisted upon in the rules for the new orders which emerged from the Cluniac reforms of the tenth-century onwards could not completely stifle the desire for non-monastic life among women religious, and even Benedict VIII's publication of the bull Periculoso (1298) could not hinder the formation of non-monastic communities such as those of the Beguines or inhibit women's embracing of alternative religious movements such as the Cathars or the Humiliati" (p. 176). As even non-specialist readers may know, the rules for new orders did not emerge from Cluniac reforms, but in reaction to them, while we have clear documentation for the Beguines from the early thirteenth century, for the Cathars from at least the mid twelfth century, and the Humiliati from about the same time. Moreover, as I argue in *The Cistercian Evolution. The Invention of a Religious Order in Twelfth-Century Europe* (Philadelphia, 2000), those new orders turn out not to have emerged until late in the twelfth century.

A few minor misstatements need correction. What might be considered by some a double-house at Molesme is not a daughter of Cluny, as is stated on p. 145; indeed, most literature describes Marcigny as the sole daughter-house for women of the abbey Cluny under the control of a prioress answering to Cluny's abbot-and perhaps this is a place where the author simply misspeaks. Similarly, it is not clear that Benedict's rule is "[t]he first known Western rule to specify the requirements for the daily practice of the members of a religious community," for Benedict drew on other known sources. If Smith is arguing that those earlier sources did not specify any of the daily routine, that point should have been clarified. There is conflation in Smith's treatment of the Benedictine Rule's call for monastic stability as equivalent to the "encloistering" of nuns for the protection of their chastity; I think it important to keep these two concepts separated, for having a single monastic compound or enclosure in which everything could be done without having to be dependent on the outside world should not be equated with "encloistering."

Despite the limited scope, there are interesting materials to be gleaned from this study. If one wants to know about the regulation of work in women's religious communities in the early middle ages, it is here in great detail. If one is interested in knowing what Augustine, Caesarius, or Burchard of Worms had to say about women, it is found here. The study is especially interesting when Smith does occasionally slip beyond her self-imposed boundaries, for instance in her discussion of the recent literature on excavations at early medieval nunnery and double-monastery sites. Although it could have been informed by a wider reading of recent publications on medieval women's monasticism, this is a contribution of great value for what it has made available for teaching purposes, for students writing essays and for scholars.

## NOTES

---

[1] Brian Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham and the Gilbertine Order, c. 1130-c.1300* (Oxford, 1995); Berenice Kerr, *Religious Life for Women, c. 1100- c. 1350: Fontevraud in England* (Oxford, 1999); Paulette L'Hermite-LeClercq, *Le monachisme féminin dans la société de son temps: Le monastère de La Celle (XIe-début du XVIIe siècle)* (Paris, 1989); Maureen Miller, *The Formation of a Medieval Church: Ecclesiastical Change in Verona, 950-1150* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993); Marilyn Oliva, *The Convent and the Community in Late Medieval England Female Monasteries in the Diocese of Norwich 1350-1450* (Woodbridge, 1998); Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies, Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (Philadelphia, 2001); Sally Thompson, *Women Religious: the Founding of English Nunneries after the Norman Conquest* (Oxford, 1991); and articles by Constance H. Berman, "Cistercian Women and Tithes," *Cîteaux* 49 (1998): 95-128; "Were There Twelfth-Century Cistercian Nuns?" *Church History* 68 (1999): 438-68; or "The Labors of Hercules, the Cartulary, Church and Abbey for Nuns of La Cour-Notre-Dame-de-Michery," *The Journal of Medieval History* 26 (2000): 33-70; and "Cistercian Nuns and the Development of the Order: The Abbey of Saint-Antoine-des-Champs outside Paris," in *The Joy of Learning and the Love of God. Essays in Honor of Jean Leclercq, OSB*, ed. E. Rozanne Elder, pp. 121-56 (Kalamazoo, 1995).

Constance H. Berman  
University of Iowa  
[constance-berman@uiowa.edu](mailto:constance-berman@uiowa.edu)

Copyright © 2002 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172