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Valerie L. Garver, *Women and Aristocratic Culture in the Carolingian World*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009. xix + 310 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$52.95 US (cl); \$28.95 (pb). ISBN 978-0801477881.

Review by Courtney L. Luckhardt, University of Memphis.

When the Carolingian bishops Gerard of Cambrai and Adalbero of Laon enumerated the three orders of society, “those who fight, those who pray, and those who work,” they spoke of a society ordered by and for men. And while women could certainly be incorporated into the second two orders of those who pray and those who work, it is aristocratic women who were specifically left out of this ordering of medieval society, as it was their fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons who fought, not themselves. While much scholarly work has been done in the last thirty years to include women into our current understandings of early medieval culture, very little of it has used their own terms, rather than our modern ones.[1]

In the same way that Georges Duby used the words of his Carolingian bishops to explain the organization of medieval society, Valerie Garver’s *Women and Aristocratic Culture in the Carolingian World*, uses the words of cleric Jonas of Orléans to explain and organize the roles that aristocratic women were expected to play in the Carolingian world.[2] “There are four reasons why men desire women: family, prudence, wealth, and beauty,” Jonas wrote in the 820s. Garver has organized her excellent and readable monograph along those lines as well, with a chapter on each of these qualities, in addition to a final chapter that brings all these themes together by exploring the role of aristocratic women in textile production. While modern theories of feminism and gender studies can be helpful in illuminating the dark corners of the early medieval world, it is important to let the sources speak for themselves, and Garver has done an admirable job balancing those twin impulses by letting the sources guide not just her analysis, but her book’s organization as well.

Beyond organization, Garver’s research uses a variety of Carolingian sources (ca. 700– 725 CE), allowing her to examine the lives of aristocratic women as a unified group, without separating women by lay or religious profession, nor the sources by their prescriptive or descriptive aims. Her interdisciplinary approach to these sources shows the similarities that linked the elite female experience and the particular ways that women acted in their own interests within the contours of their specific social boundaries, without trying to define precisely where those limits lay given the sparse evidence (p. 15). Within this context, noble women emerge as producers and transmitters of Carolingian aristocratic culture, and Garver makes a compelling case for the reevaluation of the traditional picture of a male-dominated elite society.

In the first chapter, Garver explores the role that beauty, in the form of both female appearance and adornment, played in defining elite roles for women. While beauty is an externally defined characteristic, it ideally reflected a woman’s inner virtue, though this was the case only in exegesis, hagiography, and panegyric. In reality, beauty mattered as a marker of social prestige, and could be enhanced by decoration and rich display (p. 66). A pretty face, then as now, might be appreciated as a

marker of good genetics and birth, but even a plain woman with the right clothing, jewelry, and other personal adornment might be an asset to her aristocratic family.

Family and kin ties too, played a central part in creating and maintaining the networks that marked elite political life in the period, as Garver discusses in chapter two. Carolingian aristocrats valued the kind of bonds that women created, from traditional marriage alliances to the memorial activity that female religious engaged in, which created ties between the living, the dead, and their descendants. In the case of the latter, Garver's extended discussion of the memorial books of the foundations of Remiremont and San Salvatore is particularly astute, using these sources to explore the way that the royal foundation of female monasteries, including the recruitment of nuns from the aristocracy, bound elites to both the royal family and the wider Frankish church through land and fictive kin ties (p. 100).

In contrast to the "external" female virtues of beauty and family ties, which were determined largely by the accident of birth, the other two feminine virtues of prudence and wealth could be controlled by female social practice. While Jonas of Orléans' *prudentia* is a difficult term to define precisely, Garver argues that this is the only one of the four desirable female characteristics that places the actions of women themselves at the forefront. In Garver's formulation, the female role in providing a moral framework for the household and the instruction of inferiors (particularly children and servants) created in their contemporaries a desire for women to possess the prudence to carry out these duties, so as to perpetuate elite culture and promote their natal and spiritual families (p. 123). The advantages of Garver's approach in linking the aristocratic lives of both lay and religious women are most evident in this chapter. She ranges across a variety of sources. Some are hagiographical, for instance examining the women of Boniface's circle, the most famous being his relative Leoba, for whom we have evidence of her learning as a young novice in the convent of Winborne, as well as her instruction of others as an abbess in Bischofsheim on the Tauber River. Likewise, Garver's exploration of laywoman Dhuoda's *prudentia* in her handbook for her son William, while not particularly new, sheds light on the similarities in the expectations of learning and teaching for aristocratic women, no matter their profession. Beyond instruction, Garver zeroes in on the importance of women's "moral exemplarity," as both women themselves and their aristocratic families benefited from the good reputation and virtue of their female members, and both genders were invested in encouraging this behavior in young girls in both lay households and religious houses (p. 169).

While female prudence entailed right action through moral virtue, in Garver's formulation, aristocratic women contributed to the wealth of their kin groups through the twin actions of hospitality and good domestic management. Much scholarly attention has been paid to the role of women in hospitality in forging elite connections, but much less to the importance of women in controlling significant aspects of estate management and agrarian production, the engine of the Carolingian economy. [3] As Garver herself notes, neither scholars of the early medieval economy nor those investigating medieval women's work have paid particular attention to early medieval aristocratic women's work (p. 175 n. 10). Garver's wide source base helps to illuminate the role that female domestic management of both lay and religious households played. Utilizing capitularies, charters, hagiographical *vitae*, and material culture, she builds an important, but checkered, picture of female agency in maintaining aristocratic wealth and property. The topic alone could use its own monograph, and Garver has identified a significant gap in the current scholarship.

These seemingly disparate thematic threads are woven together in the book's final chapter on textiles. This is the book's best and most original chapter, as Garver brings her full thematic and documentary arsenal to bear on the question of aristocratic female involvement in the manufacture and decoration of textiles. As in previous chapters, Garver utilizes a huge range of textual sources, from letters to capitularies, to examine the various ways that women were responsible for these objects that displayed elite rank to outsiders, glorified God and the church, reinforced kin group ties, and transmitted aristocratic identity through this specifically female work. Even more importantly, Garver examines the

surviving material evidence of textile production, though she admits that a catalogue of extant Carolingian textiles would be a slender volume (p. 244). Nevertheless, her analysis of the Maaseik Embroideries from the first half of the eighth century, the Witgar belt (fabricated between 860-876), as well as the surviving imported textiles from Byzantium and Sassanid Persia, is confident and fascinating. In Garver's reading, textiles comprised an essential component of Carolingian aristocratic culture, and women's singular role in their production demonstrated their own prudence and wealth, as well as celebrating the objects' beauty and the connections that the gift of such fine materials forged.

This is a useful and well-research book, and Garver's mastery of a variety of early medieval sources allows her to draw novel conclusions about the roles of aristocratic women as active participants in and shapers of Carolingian elite culture. The book's thematic organization, based around Jonas of Orléans catalogue of female virtues, pushes Carolingian ideas about women's roles into the forefront of her analysis, rather than modern theory, to the great benefit of the monograph. Those interested in medieval cultural or gender history will certainly be interested in this book. While the limited footnotes and lack of Latin original text may sometimes be frustrating to the expert reader, it does make this book accessible to an advanced undergraduate audience, for instance in a seminar on medieval women. My only quibbles with this fine text are that, in my view, her final chapter on textiles is the strongest in the book, and it seems somewhat buried under the weight of the previous chapters. Additionally, the book seems to express an overly optimistic view of women's contribution to the Carolingian Renaissance, as nearly all of her examples are of positive contributions of women to elite culture.

All and all, *Women and Aristocratic Culture* reveals a great deal about the elite female Carolingian experience and suggests an appealing level of agency for these noble women within the bounds of their own social milieu.

## NOTES

[1] Suzanne Fonay Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500 to 900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981); Julia M.H. Smith, "The Problem of Female Sanctity in Carolingian Europe c. 780-920," *Past and Present* 146 (1995): 3-37; idem, "Did Women Have a Transformation of the Roman world," *Gender and History* 12.3 (2000): 552-71; Janet L. Nelson, *The Frankish World: 750-900* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996); Régine Le Jan, *Femmes, pouvoir, et société dans le haut moyen âge* (Paris: Picard, 2001); and the essays in *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900*, eds. Leslie Brubaker and Julia M.H. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[2] Georges Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer, (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

[3] Michael J. Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup: Ritual, Prophecy, and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tène to the Viking Age* (Blackrock, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 1996) and Bonnie Effros, *Creating Community With Food and Drink in Merovingian Gaul* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

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