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Constance Hoffman Berman, *The White Nuns: Cistercian Abbeys for Women in Medieval France*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. xvi + 345 pp. Maps, tables, figures, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. \$89.95 US (hb). ISBN 978-0-8122-5010-7.

Review by Tanya Stabler Miller, Loyola University Chicago.

For over 30 years, Constance Berman has labored to restore medieval women to Cistercian history. In numerous articles on individual women's houses, as well as her significant revision of the history of the order itself, Berman has demonstrated that Cistercian nuns were central to the order's development.[1] Frequently depicted as the great reforming order of the twelfth century, the traditional Cistercian narrative centered on monks living lives of austerity and manual labor in remote, uncultivated lands. Inspired by the reforming impulses and spiritual practices of the new Cistercian Order, as the traditional narrative went, women sought incorporation, thereby posing a threat to the order's ideals and burdening its monks with the task of providing pastoral care. Indeed, histories of the Cistercian Order, until relatively recently, ignored or denied the presence of Cistercian nuns; others claimed that communities of nuns were not "real" Cistercians at all, asserting that the nuns merely imitated Cistercian practices. Constance Berman's decades of research has done much to overturn these narratives and her latest book brings the fruits of this labor together into one monograph.

Densely packed with arguments and proofs, *The White Nuns: Cistercian Abbeys for Women in Medieval France* is not an easy book to summarize. Quite simply stated, *The White Nuns* is a detailed study of Cistercian nuns in the ecclesiastical province of Sens from roughly the late twelfth through the fifteenth centuries. As Berman herself asserts, the book is about "resisting... familiar misogynies" (p. 234). These misogynies, which she traces to male-authored monastic histories, are familiar to historians of religious women: the sexual dangers monks faced in their associations with women, the burdens of providing women with pastoral care, the chronic economic difficulties of women's houses, and the administrative failings of its abbesses. Such misogynistic discourses have shaped modern historiography, leading to an inaccurate, but persistent perception of women's monastic foundations as "dumping grounds" for unmarried or unmarriageable daughters and even dens of scandal. In these narratives, economic woes loom large. In addition to the trope of female mismanagement, scholars had long assumed that women's houses experienced difficulties attracting patronage, since wealthy donors (according to modern scholars) preferred to give gifts and privileges to monks, who, in addition to being able to perform sacerdotal functions, were presumably more sincere in their adoption of the monastic life. These assumptions and misinterpretations, as Berman has long argued, have hinged on scholarly ignorance of the plethora of archival sources on women's

houses, documents of practice that, while difficult to use, clearly disprove claims about female mismanagement of property and donor disinterest in medieval nuns.

The book's main insights concern these entrenched inaccuracies and misogynistic assumptions. Consequently, Berman does not delve into Cistercian spirituality or discuss the religious ideals animating the order's nuns. Nevertheless, she urges scholars to regard women's entry into religious orders as a positive choice, pointing to the demographic boom of the central Middle Ages, which alleviated the pressure on women to marry and bear children. Likewise, Berman objects to the portrayal of Cistercian nuns as interlopers that the order's monks were forced to accept, suggesting that perhaps it was the monks themselves pushing for the nuns' incorporation. Most prominent in the book is Berman's detailed and frequent discussions of women's economic activities and donor interest in women's communities. Nuns and abbesses, Berman argues, were effective stewards of monastic properties and resources. Medieval men and particularly women, moreover, valued and requested the nuns' prayers, as evinced by their generous donations and privileges. In the course of elaborating on these donations and privileges, Berman's book recovers the activities of powerful female patronesses, who founded, supported, and sometimes even joined communities of nuns.

The book is organized into two main parts, with a brief third section—composed of a single short chapter—of conclusions. Part I, which Berman describes as a “European-wide gaze on Cistercian nuns,” ranges through many of Berman's main criticisms of traditional Cistercian historiography (p. xiii). Chapter one, “Reform monasticism and Cistercian Nuns in Western Europe,” is a sweeping overview of the order's history of denying the existence of Cistercian nuns, noting that even as historians have been duly skeptical of some the rhetorical claims of the order's leading spokesmen, they had (until relatively recently) taken the absence of references to nuns to mean that there were no Cistercian nuns. Indeed, a frequent refrain in this chapter is the need to treat with skepticism, or to wholly reject, the discourses of the monks, whom Berman characterizes as “self-serving” in their efforts to obscure the nuns' presence and contributions (pp. xvi and 233). While this is certainly an important point, one that many historians of women's communities have emphasized in recent years, often monks are characterized rather one-dimensionally as greedy or misogynistic with no consideration of other circumstances or motives.

Chapter two, “Visitation of Nuns and their Regularization,” presents instances of the order's attempts to regulate women's communities on matters such as visitation, the size of individual houses as compared to endowment, and enclosure. Noting the contradictory and repetitive nature of references to nuns in the General Chapter's *statuta*, Berman asserts that these statutes cannot be taken as evidence of “rigid, enforceable laws and norms” (p.18). These regulatory efforts demonstrate, however, that, contrary to the interpretations of an earlier generation of scholars, the Cistercian Order did not ban the admission of new women's communities in the early thirteenth century. As Berman has long urged, historians must examine charters and other documents of practice in order to evaluate the effectiveness of statutes.

Chapter three, “Cistercian Nuns and the Order's Economic Practices,” starts with a critique of the traditional narratives about Cistercian economic success, which depict the monks as pioneers settling on uncultivated “desert” lands. Dismantling the myth of Cistercian grange agriculture establishes the main point of the chapter, specifically that Cistercian economic practices were far more diverse than the traditional Cistercian histories suggest. Consequently,

historians cannot disqualify women's houses as Cistercian on the basis of their economic practices. A hallmark of the order was efficient property management, a quality shared by male and female communities alike. Indeed, austerity, efficiencies, and rationalized economic practices, such as consolidating land holdings and diversification, as well as exemptions from tithes, tolls, and taxes accounted for the economic success of the order.

Part II turns to the Cistercian nuns in the ecclesiastical province of Sens. This section of the book is composed of chapters focused on female foundresses and patrons of women's communities. As Berman explains, this organizational scheme aims to highlight female patronage and administrative know-how, since for far too long medieval scholarship has minimized women's abilities to manage property and see their spiritual wishes to fruition. By emphasizing women's powers of patronage, Berman contributes to a growing literature that recognizes medieval noblewomen's agency and authority as expected and routine rather than exceptional.

Chapter four, "Women Regents, Cistercian Nuns, and Feudal Crisis: Clairets, Villiers, Voisins, and Port-Royal," presents a series of interesting details on each abbey, starting with the female foundresses and followed by descriptions of its endowments. The chapter's overriding goal seems to be to establish three points: first, that elite women preferred to found and support houses of nuns rather than monks; second, that demographic change and crusading culture (which led to the absence and often death of male heirs) allowed for more women to join and endow houses of Cistercian nuns; and, finally, that prudent management of property and resources were the key to the houses' long-term success. We do not learn much about the foundresses beyond their gifts and oftentimes the discussion drifts from the foundresses to the nuns' property management (an important point, to be sure). In several cases, as Berman notes, the foundresses' roles are obscured by their successors, often sons. Still, Berman shows here (and in later chapters) that elite men and women sought the prayers of Cistercian nuns and that many families founded and fostered relationships with female houses in the context of preparing to depart on Crusade. Here, Berman's conclusions accord well with other recent studies on Cistercian nuns by Erin Jordan (on Flanders and Hainault) and Anne Lester (on Champagne).^[2] Charters, moreover, reveal that elite families placed several daughters in Cistercian houses and elite women retired to these communities as widows after their children were grown. Without denying the element of choice, Berman mentions a number of other factors that may explain the rising popularity of Cistercian nuns, including the financial crises hitting the knightly class in the high Middle Ages, which may have made entry into Cistercian convents attractive to elite families.

Chapter five, "Cistercian Nuns and the Great Heiresses of Chartres, Blois, and Auxerre," focuses on female patronesses, specifically the female rulers of Chartres and Blois. These families lost many of their menfolk on Crusade, leaving a remarkable number of female heiresses who, unlike the women in chapter four, were heiresses in their own right, and therefore had greater control of their property. The social, economic, and political realities of the age meant that elite women ran their family estates while their husbands were away (or dead). Trained as competent managers of estates, elite women gave lavishly to Cistercian houses and, if circumstances permitted, led these houses as abbesses.

Chapter six, "Blanche of Castille (1188-1252) and Cistercian Abbeys of Nuns," examines Queen Blanche and her mid-thirteenth century foundations, Maubuisson and Lys. In a brief

comparison with Royaumont, a house for Cistercian monks founded in 1228, Berman stresses the limits on Blanche's access to funds, which compelled her to lay the groundwork for her foundations in a slow and piecemeal way. Like the widows discussed in chapter four, Blanche had to manage her limited resources carefully and find creative ways to ensure that Maubuisson and Lys were on firm financial footing. As in the previous chapters, the focus shifts from the female patroness to the abbesses' savvy management of property and consolidation of the abbeys' rights.

Chapter seven, "Saint-Antoine-des-Champs Outside Paris," breaks from the original organizational focus on female foundresses to discuss Saint-Antoine, a house for Cistercian nuns that had its origins (around 1198) as a house of male and female penitents. As a suburban foundation, Saint-Antoine benefitted from the patronage of noble elites as well as members of the rising merchant class in Paris. Located just outside Paris's walls, Saint-Antoine possessed both urban and suburban holdings. While Berman does not say so explicitly (it is perhaps to be inferred), the example of Saint-Antoine highlights the diverse development, economies, and recruitment of Cistercian foundations, upending older arguments about which houses "counted" as Cistercian. Saint-Antoine also serves as another example of competent property management. Saint-Antoine's nuns were educated and literate and they managed the house's diverse (urban and rural) assets wisely, calling upon the expertise of nuns who hailed from the landed elite as well as women from the city's merchant classes.

Chapter eight, "Nuns and Viticulture in Champagne," continues the discussion of property management, examining suburban abbeys of nuns in the county of Champagne. The chapter is mostly concerned with the gifts of various noble founders and supporters of Cistercian nuns in the region, many of whom were contenders for the countship. As in the case of Saint-Antoine, merchant families and religious leaders also expressed their support for these foundations, demonstrating broad support for Cistercian nuns and a widely held regard for their prayers. The chapter also discusses the nuns' economic management and blames the economic difficulties of specific houses on the negligence and evil intentions of monks out to absorb the nuns' properties.

Part III is composed of a single, short chapter, "Cistercian Nuns and Their Predecessors," which seeks to explore the effect of rival reform groups that included women (such as Fontevraud and the Paraclete) on the development of Cistercian houses for women in the province of Sens. Here, the author aims to address why there were no Cistercian nuns in this region until the thirteenth century, suggesting that Fontevraud and the Paraclete already fulfilled these spiritual needs. Rather than explore this point further, Berman proceeds to explain the differences in how these foundations were organized (prieories versus abbeys), pointing to the relative advantages the Cistercian nuns (organized as abbeys) had over the prieories of Fontevraud and the Paraclete. In the end, Berman asserts that her brief comparison of twelfth-century reform communities with the Cistercian houses reinforces her point that abbesses across the various female foundations were able administrators.

Clearly the product of many years of painstaking archival research, *The White Nuns* is a trove of useful information. With four appendices and 36 tables of data, this book will find an important place on the bookshelves of medievalists interested in the Cistercians, medieval women, and religious orders more broadly. Readers unfamiliar with Cistercian history or the broader historiographical issues with which Berman is engaged, however, may have difficulty

appreciating the significance of some of Berman's arguments. Moreover, Berman's heavy emphasis on founders, wealthy patrons, and administratively gifted abbesses sometimes overshadows the nuns themselves. While motivations for entry into the religious life are obviously difficult to uncover, some discussion of the nuns' devotional activities would have fleshed out Berman's assertion that women had positive reasons for becoming Cistercian nuns. As much recent scholarship has shown, medieval ideas about female spirituality and its redemptive potential help explain why donors so valued the women's prayers. The nuns' valuable services to their communities, moreover, have received a great deal of attention in recent years. Yet, Berman deemphasizes the association of Cistercian nuns with care of the sick, asserting, without clear explanation, that evidence for the nuns' association with the care of lepers is "unreliable" (p. 217). These issues aside, Berman's book is an important reminder of how far the field has come since she began writing about Cistercian nuns and how much work remains to restore medieval monastic women to history.

NOTES

[1] Constance Hoffman Berman, *The Cistercian Evolution: The Invention of a Religious Order in Twelfth-Century Europe* (Philadelphia and Oxford: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

[2] Erin L. Jordan, "Gender Concerns: Monks, Nuns, and Patronage of the Cistercian Order in Thirteenth-Century Flanders and Hainaut," *Speculum* 87 (2012): 62-94; Anne E. Lester, *Creating Cistercian Nuns: The Women's Religious Movement and Its Reform in Thirteenth-Century Champagne* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011).

Tanya Stabler Miller
Loyola University Chicago
tstabler@luc.edu

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