

*Creating Cistercian Nuns: The Women's Religious Movement and its Reform in Thirteenth-Century Champagne*, by Anne E. Lester. Cornell University Press, 2011. Pp. xvii+261; b/w ill. ISBN: 9780801449895.

In *Creating Cistercian Nuns*, Anne Lester tells the story of forty-four Cistercian convents that came into being in and near Champagne mostly in the first four decades of the thirteenth century. She argues that these communities were part of a larger women's religious movement that included the béguines of Liège, the canonesses of Germany, and the penitent women and Poor Clares of Italy. According to Lester, these women took as models for their beliefs and practices famous holy women like Marie d'Oignies and Margaret of Cortona, devoting themselves to "poverty, charity, and penitential piety" (3). The book is impressive because in it Lester manages to make a convincing argument about the spiritual aims of the nuns even though their convents left no records speaking directly to the nature of their piety. Lester builds her argument on hundreds of charters that she unearthed from the archives of the monasteries that took over northern French female Cistercian houses in the fifteenth century. She puts these administrative and economic documents to work on the task of unveiling forms of piety in the houses by examining what they say about the origins of the convents, their social and economic networks, and the process and effects of their incorporation into the Cistercian Order.

The book's first chapter focuses on the earliest beginnings of the communities and presents evidence that they were like the communities in which some of the famous holy women lived or that arose in the regions where these women were active. In their origins, before they became Cistercian nunneries, Lester contends, the women's communities of Champagne were, like the béguines of Liège or the *humiliatae* of Italy, independent groups whose beliefs and practices emphasized charity, penance, and poverty. She presents some compelling examples that suggest that such a formation may indeed have been present in Champagne. Records from a dispute characterize Notre-Dame-des-Prés as an unaffiliated group of women who shared a grange, sang psalms, wore habits, and wandered about uncloistered; Willencourt had "foundation" documents that referred to a preexisting community of women "serving the poor of Christ" and "leading a religious life" (42); the women of La Cour Notre-Dame-de-Michery, before they became Cistercian, provided care in a nearby leprosarium; and Pont-aux-Dames was also a community of women living in a leprosarium before its members formally professed. Val-des-Vignes received gifts as a community of *filles-Dieu*, a term that may have indicated penitential piety because it was applied at least sometimes to communities of reformed prostitutes.

The fourth and fifth chapters expand upon this initial presentation of the evidence. The fourth maintains that the nuns demonstrated *caritas* by acting as administrators and caregivers in hospices, known as *domus-Dei*, for the poor and sick and in leprosaria. The fifth traces the relationships Cistercian nuns in Champagne established with “crusader families,” that is, families whose members included multiple crusaders. Lester uses saints’ lives and sermons to argue for a widespread thirteenth-century understanding, one that the nuns would have shared, of crusading as penitence. What is especially helpful about these chapters is not simply that Lester finds more documentary evidence that the nuns engaged in practices that could have been inspired by figures like Marie d’Oignies or Yvette of Huy; it is that she contextualizes these phenomena in terms of larger institutional imperatives. The nuns, Lester notes, often took up their roles in the leprosaria and *domus-Dei* just as the papacy and bishops sought to bring hospices and leprosaria under ecclesiastic regulation, and, indeed, in all but two of the cases detailed in the book, the nuns received previously independently operating *domus-Dei* and leprosaria from counts, bishops, and other authorities. Similarly, the nuns prayed for crusaders at a time when the Cistercian Order had positioned itself as a specialist in this kind of spiritual support.

While Church authorities might have thus accommodated some of the nuns’ spiritual aims, poverty, Lester contends, remained a source of tension. The second and sixth chapters use the charters to demonstrate that some convents—unlike the male Cistercian houses that amassed enormous estates and marketed their produce—lived modestly off of fixed rents on such properties as urban houses, market stalls, and small parcels of land that the nuns received from less exalted, generally non-noble donors. The final chapter shows the result: inflation, taxation, the 1314–22 famine, and the Hundred Years’ War left the convents so weakened that the Order could command their wholesale dispersal in 1399. Lester maintains that the nunneries were economically vulnerable to circumstance because all along they had conscientiously sought “to live close to the bone” (116). Indeed, the book’s third chapter offers evidence that the Cistercian insistence on claustration, with its concomitant demand that the nunneries have viable structures in which to live and pray and sufficiently healthy endowments to prevent them from public begging, created conflict between the nuns and the Order. Some independent convents only minimally passed their abbatial inspections to achieve incorporation: the charters and Cistercian records reveal possibly humble convent structures (granges, hospitals, and leprosaria) and continued mendicancy.

A great strength in *Creating Cistercian Nuns* is that Lester, while making a general argument about almost four dozen houses, reveals significant differences among them. “Independent groups of women” include those that assembled because of elite foundations and those that were more self-originating. Convents established relationships with *domus-Dei* and leprosaria by various paths. The women of La Cour Notre-Dame-de-Michery cared for the *leprosi* of Viluis for thirty-four years before they became Cistercian while those of Marcilly had been Cistercian for seventeen when they asked their bishop to give them the leprosarium of Cerce so they could reside in Cerce’s superior facilities. Some nuns begged; others were wealthy. This diversity is important but confusing because Lester gives only slight attention to how it shows that evidence from some of the houses fits her argument better than that of others, and she gives only slight attention to why this might be so. It becomes clear early on that it is up to the reader to track which convents were most likely to have been influenced by ideas of the *vita apostolica*, which only possibly so, and which probably very little if at all. Lester’s findings would be more sharply delineated if the book included a comparative analysis of the houses, including a detailed description of what we can know about their revenues, and an explicit breakdown of the evidence base. As it stands, these findings are already significant to any historian interested in the development of the Cistercian Order and in thirteenth-century women’s communities.

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