



# Medieval Feminist Forum

A Journal of Gender and Sexuality

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of the monograph, her analysis in the final two chapters suggests that these interests merged after the mendicants became the spiritual guardians of lay penitents.

Readers interested in the lay penitential movement will find that Doyno's innovative examination of charity provides nuanced observations about the underpinnings of lay sanctity and its malleability in the hands of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the laity. Doyno's work expands what we know about how the papacy contended with the influences of penitential ideals in lay piety. Far from being a simple undertaking, *The Lay Saint* sheds light on a complicated topic in the history of medieval Christianity.

Mary Anne Gonzales

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<https://doi.org/10.32773/VASU1809>

*Superior Women: Medieval Female Authority in Poitiers' Abbey of Sainte-Croix*, by Jennifer C. Edwards. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. 336. ISBN: 9780198837923.

The question of how women cultivated authority in a world that sought to limit them has long been central to feminist medieval studies. Jennifer C. Edwards's *Superior Women: Medieval Female Authority in Poitiers' Abbey of Sainte-Croix* insightfully intervenes in this conversation by arguing that the medieval abbesses at Sainte-Croix in Poitiers relied on two strategies to exercise authority. First, they drew on a network of allies made up primarily of male officials, and, second, they mobilized cultural artifacts related to the abbey's foundress Saint Radegund to attract new supporters. In demonstrating the continued authority of the abbesses at Sainte-Croix, Edwards valuably nuances the notion of authority itself: authority, she argues, rests not so much in the power to compel obedience by force but in the ability to command respect. *Superior Women* skillfully illustrates how the abbesses of Sainte-Croix demanded such respect and so obtained support from secular and religious figures over the course of a millennium.

This book offers a wealth of information about Sainte-Croix in particular, while also providing insight into broader themes within feminist historical inquiry. One of the book's central interventions is its contestation of the commonplace assumption that religious women's power declined in the later Middle Ages. With this analysis of Sainte-Croix, Edwards instead shows the vitality of female monasticism across time. The book also counters the assumption that men consistently sought to thwart female authority as it explores how abbesses deployed textual and visual rhetoric to garner the support of male officials. In making these claims, Edwards avoids casting the nuns as perfectly harmonious and instead highlights competition and difficulty alongside comradery, hence offering a three-dimensional portrait of women who persisted within and despite human fallibility.

The book consists of an introduction followed by seven chapters and a conclusion. The first six chapters move chronologically from Radegund's sixth-century life through the sixteenth century, and the last compares election conflicts from different periods. Chapter 1 charts the sixth-century foundation of female monastic authority at Poitiers, focusing on three versions of Radegund's life by the poet Venantius Fortunatus, the Sainte-Croix nun Baudonivia, and Gregory of Tours. In examining these *vitae*, Edwards charts the emergence of the two strategies for establishing authority that Sainte-Croix's abbesses would continue to use centuries later. This chapter thus lays the foundation for the rest of the book and, more broadly, demonstrates how hagiography could be adapted for different spiritual and political purposes.

Subsequent chapters reveal how Sainte-Croix's two strategies for garnering authority were put into practice by subsequent abbesses. Chapter 2 looks at four early examples: Radegund's (ca. 520–587) installation of a relic of the True Cross at Sainte-Croix through the support of male officials, a hostile bishop's absence from Radegund's funeral, Sainte-Croix's Abbess Agnes appeal to Gregory of Tours for assistance, and, finally, the struggles of Abbess Leuovera against nuns who opposed her within Sainte-Croix. Chapter 3 further explores abbesses' accrual of authority by examining their use of visual art. By renewing and restoring stories of their foundress with the construction of the church of Sainte-Radegonde, the creation of an illuminated manuscript of Radegund's *vita* (the "libellus"), and the "discovery" of

Radegund's tomb, abbesses during the eleventh century presented the saint and her community as powerful, relevant, and well connected. With incisive visual analysis, this chapter shows how abbesses mobilized cultural artifacts to attract new supporters.

Subsequent chapters cover more direct challenges to Sainte-Croix's authority and track the abbesses' responses. Chapter 4 does so by examining a shift in support from secular rulers to the papacy. This chapter demonstrates that Sainte-Croix's abbesses were able to protect their abbey, maintain their claims to superiority over the canons of Sainte-Radegonde, and manage their finances amid disputes between the nuns, the canons of Sainte-Radegonde, and the bishop of Poitiers. They did this by petitioning for papal assistance and demonstrating that their claims had historical support. In addition to documenting a period of contention at Sainte-Croix, this chapter excitingly complicates the assumption that ecclesiastical reform was always bad for women. Chapter 5 follows a further attack on the Sainte-Croix abbesses' authority from the canons of Sainte-Radegonde, who used stained-glass church windows and new miracle tales to shift the power from monastery to the church and to appeal to Count Alphonse of Poitiers and his brother King Louis IX by using symbols that evoked their mother, Blanche of Castile. This chapter supports the book's thesis less than the others as it is primarily about the canons' authority rather than the abbesses', but it does set the stage for subsequent power struggles between the canons and abbesses.

The final two chapters delve further into conflict at the abbey. Chapter 6 documents how the nuns responded to the canons' attempts to undermine them by using Radegund's relics, the fragment of the True Cross, and banners during town processions to display their authority publicly. In doing so, the community garnered the support of the papacy and monarchy to confirm their privileges. Edwards thus shows that women were not barred from authority during the late Middle Ages to the degree that scholars often assume. The final chapter further explores conflict at the abbey by comparing tensions during the elections of abbesses in three time periods: Isabelle de Marmande's thirteenth-century election, Jeanne de Couhé's 1491 election, and her niece Marie Berland's election in 1512. Read together, these conflicts reveal the violent potential of the disputes between Saint Radegund's

communities. This chapter reveals continuities across time in the ways in which Sainte-Croix's nuns critiqued their abbesses and the methods they used to attempt to expel an abbess from office.

In her conclusion, Edwards connects her study of Sainte-Croix to broader themes within feminist historical inquiry. She argues that Sainte-Croix was not as exceptional as some assume and that other abbeys may well have followed its example. This book serves as a valuable example of the benefits of studying a single abbey across a *longue durée* to identify broader patterns. It also reminds us not to take misogynists at their word and to continue to seek examples of women's authority in the later Middle Ages. Working across scholarly discourses and media, Edwards offers a more capacious history of a convent and its abbesses than has generally been achieved and contextualizes this narrative within medieval French history as well as within ongoing conversations in feminist medieval studies. Readers interested in women religious and gender in the Middle Ages from multiple disciplines will find a great deal of value in this well-researched and compelling account of abbesses' authority.

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*Nuns' Priests' Tales: Men and Salvation in Medieval Women's Monastic Life*, by Fiona J. Griffiths. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. Pp. 349. ISBN: 9780812249750.

Fiona J. Griffiths has published a well-researched analysis of relationships between nuns and clerics in which she both challenges and builds upon widely accepted scholarship on gender relations in the early and high medieval periods. By examining an understudied group, nuns' priests, she articulates several important new arguments. Griffiths goes beyond the work of scholars like C. Stephen Jaeger, Gerald Bond, Constant Mews, and Jo Ann McNamara, among others, to show that strong bonds between religious men and women were not