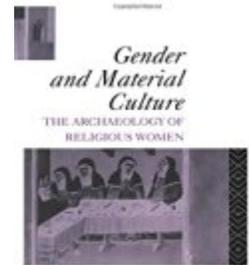


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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Roberta Gilchrist. *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women*. London/New York: Routledge, 1994. xiv + 222 pp. \$135.00 (library), ISBN 978-0-415-08903-6.

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Once in a blue moon a book comes along which changes the whole way in which we look at a field of study—that is what Roberta Gilchrist's *Gender and Material Culture* has done for the study of medieval nuns. This consideration of all the medieval houses of nuns in Britain by a York-trained archeologist, now at the Center for East Anglian Studies in Norwich where she is also archeologist for the cathedral, overturns many outworn notions about nuns in late medieval England being poor, scandalous, or ineffective. Gilchrist has assembled in this study all the information for religious women in Britain found in antiquarian studies, in such local and specialized histories as the *Victoria County Histories*, in monographs by Burton, Elkins, Thompson and others, and from Knowles' various collaborations on religious houses. She has not only added such evidence as aerial photographs and manuscript plans, combining her material in new ways which utilize well the visual possibilities of tables, charts, and photographs, but she brings to these materials the archaeologist's eye for material detail and interest in spatial relationships.

It is particularly in her feminist devotion to considerations of gender that Gilchrist creates a new picture of the lives of medieval religious women in Britain showing that women's monastic communities were an important aspect of late medieval culture because they often provided valuable services to their communities. By looking at gender as a legitimate category of analysis and at the history and archaeology of women's religious communities as topics which can be effectively studied on their own, Gilchrist uncovers some startling facts and clears the ground for additional productive work. In her reassessment, particularly of the material remains of medieval religious women's lives, Gilchrist has exposed many of the misogynous assumptions of earlier authorities which

still tend to contaminate our work, or which discouraged study of medieval women before it got started. For example on page 23, "For some time male historians of male monasticism claimed that sources for religious women were simply not available or adequate—a claim admirably discounted by the recent proliferation of work on religious women by female historians." Hers is thus an antidote to the now-outdated evaluation of nuns in Powers' 1922 study.

Not least of her startling findings is her carefully-documented one of a propensity for women's houses to have north-facing cloisters. This is handled in a canny way which belies all quibbles about either necessities of sites, or women's communities' lesser flexibility in choice of site. For Gilchrist shows that even in places where the drainage possibilities would seem to have made a south-facing cloister preferable, nuns in certain parts of Britain chose to build or to adapt existing buildings so as to face cloisters away from the sun. She explores a variety of iconographic and other possibilities to explain this finding—among other things, such north-facing cloisters are associated with areas which had double communities at one time or another. That nuns should make what appears a positive choice for the bleaker, northern prospect may seem counter-intuitive, but then isn't the whole message of the humility and poverty of Christian monastic community, one in opposition to monastic wealth? (Gilchrist's findings, moreover, perhaps tie in with some from France by Bernadette Barriere who has done excavations at Coyroux. There Cistercian nuns similarly appear to have preferred buildings for their abbey which were considerably less substantial than those for neighboring Cistercian men at Obazine. At Coyroux the situation is certainly not one in which economic reasons had any bearing on their choices—for the nuns shared en-

dowment with the monks of Obazine, yet chose a more ascetic site and buildings.) That medieval nuns should choose for themselves different standards by which to live than did the houses of monks which we usually cite—those with rich endowments and glorious buildings—suggests that we too might fruitfully employ different, or at least additional, standards for judging both nuns and monks in the Middle Ages, than those traditionally applied to male monasteries.

When the traditional standards are employed, women's religious houses too often come off badly—they are described as poorer, less-well-endowed, less well-managed, smaller, and over-crowded versions of men's religious houses. Often this is not even literally true; there are many more large and wealthy houses of nuns than most studies of monasticism have implied. There were also many more small houses of monks—poor, ill-managed, and short-lived—than there were Clunys or Clairvauxs. Gilchrist's study thus suggests the need for a more balanced view than simply that women's houses were poor and men's rich. For Gilchrist is correct in asserting, as on page 24: "The archeology of nunneries has remained unwritten because monasteries for women have been judged against standards which are male." Similarly, on page 25: "According to the framework of male monasticism, historians and archaeologists have dismissed nunneries as unsuccessful, and hence the story of medieval monasticism has remained incomplete."

But it is at this point that some of us may wish to slightly nuance Gilchrist's interpretation. For she asserts that women's communities should be judged by their own standard because "nunneries were founded for a different purpose than monasteries for men,"... "indeed, for a different social purpose," (page 25). But were women's communities founded for different purposes? I find it dangerous, for historians of women to treat communities of medieval nuns as a separate category which cannot bear comparison to that of medieval monks. Moreover, there is great difficulty in extrapolating intentions of founders and donors from the material remains themselves. My own reading of monastic records for houses of both men and women, for both England and France, has made me increasingly convinced that women's religious houses were founded for the same purposes of prayer and service as were men's houses. Certainly a comparison of the many of the charters of bequests for Cistercian houses for monks and nuns in France suggests that there was little difference in the intentions of those who founded or endowed religious houses for women, from those who founded men's houses. Both women's

and men's communities were given funds for anniversaries, for pittances, for perpetual masses, for burial—that such gifts requiring the services of a priest were more costly to a community of nuns is, of course, a different problem. But the frequent bequests I have seen, particularly in the later middle ages, made to "the poor nuns who will pray for their souls" by wealthy men and women, are gifts which confirm that if there were any gendered differences in the perceived efficacy of prayers in the late middle ages, it may well have been in favor of those by women. Indeed, the increasing foundation of women's religious houses in the later middle ages might in itself suggest that donors and patrons were finding that women's houses fulfilled their intentions better than did houses of religious men. Thus, while Gilchrist may be correct that medieval nuns often fulfilled different purposes for their communities than did medieval monks, I am convinced nonetheless that medieval people founded women's religious houses for the same reasons that they founded men's. The difference lies in how well those donor's expectations were fulfilled. But Gilchrist's standards by which nuns may be judged positively—ones of humility, prayer, and service—are ones which should not only be applied to houses of nuns, but should be applied to all religious communities. We too often forget that the foundation of religious communities was not for the purpose of building solid physical plants, establishing adequate endowments, or for innovative administration of property, but for prayer!

Finally, Gilchrist's study brings up the much-vexed problem of Cistercian women—particularly in Britain, which she treats with great caution. But it seems to me that Gilchrist has fallen prey to what I'd like to call "the double standard of proof" as applied to Cistercian women. In general terms, this is our tendency to uphold (or to be held to) much higher standards of proof about women's history than were ever used by earlier historians writing the earlier "master narrative" of a "history" which was in fact "men's history." With regard to women in the Cistercian Order this has meant that much more documentary evidence of Cistercian status has been demanded for women's houses than ever has been provided for men's communities. I bring up this quibble because to get it right makes Gender and Archaeology all the more useful, but also because it is a good example of a pitfall into which many other medieval feminists' re-assessments may fall.

With regard to Cistercian women in England, one piece of evidence denying that certain houses of nuns in Lincolnshire were part of the Cistercian Order—evidence

discussed in an article by Coburn Graves (“English Cistercian Nuns in Lincolnshire,” *Speculum* 54 (1979): 492-99)—has been considered more definitive than all the evidence to the contrary.

This mid-thirteenth century disagreement about the status of certain nuns has been blown out of all proportion in the literature and used to deny the affiliation with the Order of not just five or six houses of nuns, but nearly all women’s houses founded in Britain within the Cistercian Reform. The specific issue which Graves raised is how seriously we should take the statement by the abbot of Cîteaux in the 1260s that a half dozen houses of nuns might be wearing the habit of the Order but not be part of it or entitled to its privileges. In this instance, particularly since Henry III treated them as Cistercian, it is hard to decide whether the abbot of Cîteaux should be relied on in this case, for all we have is the notice of his letter endorsed on the close rolls of Henry III. All the evidence suggests that the abbot of Cîteaux made this statement not on the basis of any careful investigation of existing documents, but as a response to information provided by an interested and officious party, namely an archdeacon of Lincoln, wanting to deny that these women’s houses were Cistercian so that he could collect a Crusader tenth from them. But while this specific instance of fence-sitting by a Cistercian abbot on an issue having to do with women in the Order is part and parcel of what was happening elsewhere in the Order’s treatment of women at the time, it may or may not represent an outright willingness to jettison the women’s houses of the Order in Lincolnshire in an effort to protect the increasingly fragile tithe privilege for the Order’s men’s houses.

But a more serious issue lies just below the surface here: the upholding of excessively restrictive standards of proof for whether women’s communities were indeed part of the Order by twentieth-century historians of monasticism—possibly following the lead of those thirteenth-century monks and abbots who were going into such a panic about the increasing numbers of women in the Order. But the standards by which women are deemed not part of the Order are standards which have never been held up for examining whether individual men’s houses’ were part in the Order, either then or now. It seems to me that women’s historians, out of fear of having all their efforts denounced because of legalistic arguments about the legitimacy of the odd case, have fallen in too readily with such “upping of the ante” regarding who is part of the Cistercian Order by traditional male monastic historians. Particularly when women consider only women’s houses, moreover, we may not even realize how

disparate and gender-biased are such standards of proof—as in this case when applied only to women’s houses in the Order of Cîteaux and not to men’s. Even Gilchrist is susceptible to being swindled in this way, as on page 41 where she says, “Cistercian monasteries for men were most successfully founded c. 1130-50; similarly the “unofficial” Cistercian nunneries were founded mainly in the decades c. 1130 and c. 1160. Those nunneries recognized by the Order, however, were founded considerably later. Tarrant Keynes...[and]... Marham [only?],... were formally incorporated into the order only by 1250.” What’s wrong with this statement is the assumption that formal incorporation was always there, when in fact it is a fairly late twelfth-century phenomenon in all cases.

A simple search through the General Chapter records published by Canivez from which such formal recognition of affiliation by the Order is usually documented when it came to women’s houses, shows that such formal recognitions of Cistercian status or affiliation were never recorded at least as far as surviving evidence shows before 1190, whether for women or for men. Thus, to call women’s houses which were founded between 1130 and 1160 “unofficial”, while those Cistercian houses for men founded between 1139 and 1150 are “official”, is to apply gender-biased standards of proof which under-represent the women’s houses in the early Cistercian reform. That feminist historians have been made so hesitant in our study of Cistercian women that we should agree to apply such differential standards, is indeed a cautionary tale.

Fortunately, Gilchrist ignores such distinctions in her tables. This is fortunate for they contain interesting information. I was amazed to discover from Gilchrist’s tables (on this point derived from Knowles’ *Religious Houses* handbooks), that nearly half of the Cistercian women’s houses in Britain were founded before the 1180s. This is certainly not what is implied by Knowles’, *Monastic Orders in Medieval England* second edition, page 362, where he says, “Along with the canons, the nuns continued to multiply, and here again the increase was chiefly among those who followed the rule of one of the new orders. Of the thirty-odd Cistercian nunneries which were in the course of time established in England almost one-half date from the period 1175-1215....” The implication is that the other women’s houses came later; in fact, as Gilchrist’s tables show, most actually came earlier.

Finally, a comment on the overall high quality of this book’s production. While it is true that bringing a fresh eye to the organization of a table or chart can often show

how it could be made better (for instance Gilchrist's figure 9 would be easier read with the axes reversed), that is a mere quibble. The tables in this book are packed with important information. The photographs show what they are intended to show—even the aerial ones. The plans are well-labeled and comprehensible—again this is frequently not the case in books on monastic archaeology. I cannot reiterate often enough that this is an excellent book which will help many of us in our own work on religious women, and bring new interest to it as a sub-field of medieval gender studies. Gilchrist does more than simply re-evaluate the effectiveness in building structures and the efficacy of the prayers of British medieval nuns, or provide models for other studies of the relation-

ship between material culture, space, and women's roles. She also persuades all medievalists of the extremely exciting things happening in the study of medieval religious women today. This is a marvelous book, with new ways of looking at religious women in the middle ages which will fascinate even those who have for too long believed that "medieval nunneries were dumping grounds for unwanted women" rather than the vital institutions of medieval society which Gilchrist shows them to be.

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