CHAPTER SEVEN

NOBLE WOMEN’S POWER AS REFLECTED IN THE FOUNDATIONS OF CISTERCIAN HOUSES FOR NUNS IN THIRTEENTH-CENTURY NORTHERN FRANCE: PORT-ROYAL, LES CLAIRETS, MONCEY, LIEU, AND EAU-LEZ-CHARTRES

Constance Hoffman Berman

Noble women were often founders of new houses of Cistercian nuns in thirteenth-century northern France. Their power within the region of Blois, Chartres, Tours, and Nogent in the thirteenth century, however, has often been neglected by historians of women. It was once posited that there was a decline in women’s power and authority in western Europe from the twelfth century through the end of the middle ages, particularly with the introduction of the practice of male primogeniture. But it has turned out that allowing only one son to marry and produce heirs in each generation could lead to situations in which the only remaining heir was a woman. In this region the Crusades had a particularly strong impact on noble families; the deaths of male heirs as a result of such adventures as well as growing royal encroachments, may explain some of the strong exercise of authority by women, who

1 Parts of this paper were presented at a Berkshire Conference on the History of Women at Smith College in 1984; some of the documents have been translated and published in Berman, Women and Monasticism in Medieval Europe: Sisters and Patrons of the Cistercian Order (Kalamazoo, 2002); it is part of a much larger project on thirteenth-century religious women and their patrons for which I have received support from the University of Iowa and the NEH. I am particularly grateful to the UI Obermann Center for Advanced Studies.

2 Georges Duby, who in such work as The Knight, the Lady, and the Priest: The Making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France, trans. Barbara Bray (New York, 1983), assumed that by the twelfth century, the practice of primogeniture had replaced the partible inheritance of an earlier period, to the great detriment of all women; challenges to Duby’s thinking are found in “Georges Duby et l’histoire des femmes,” Clio: Histoire, Femmes, et Sociétés 8 (1998), passim, but esp. Amy Livingstone, “Pour une révision du ‘mâle’ Moyen Âge de Georges Duby,” 139–54.
became more frequently than might be expected, the sole remaining heirs to countships in the region.³

In the cases cited here, the authority and rule of early thirteenth-century women who were patrons of Cistercian women has been ignored in part because the history of those nuns has been denied as a result of a long-standing dispute among Cistercian historians about whether or not houses of nuns were part of the Order, and if so, what constituted proof that they were Cistercian nuns. Several generations of noble women in northern France have been missed in our assessment of women’s power and authority because younger historians have been warned off the study of religious women “who were not really Cistercian,” and the documents for those nuns which constitute strong evidence that noble women did have power and authority.⁴ Studying communities of Cistercian women provides not only evidence of the existence of those religious women, but about their secular mothers, sisters, aunts, and daughters, who were founders and benefactors of such religious communities. The activities of great noble ladies charged with managing family estates and providing for the souls of family members in the early thirteenth century in this and other regions, have now come to the fore as we rehabilitate the history of houses of Cistercian women which those great noblewomen founded. In the region west of Paris on which I concentrate here, those religious and secular women were together contributors to thirteenth-century economic development, as they encouraged the amelioration of property by the construction of mills, the consolidation of land into more efficient holdings, and the opening up under their direction of forest and marshlands to additional settlement. The examples cited here reflect a considerably larger phenomenon.
