

RELIGIOUS WOMEN AND THE CHURCH

IN TWELFTH CENTURY EUROPE

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In twelfth century Western Europe, as the Roman Church expanded in power and influence, women found that their opportunities within the church remained limited or even diminished. While women had been significant in the early Christian Church, misogyny and “reform” had gradually eroded any power that women could hope to wield. Papal decrees stripped abbesses of mixed monasteries of their positions; enforcement of celibacy denied women influence in parishes; nuns were increasingly cloistered and marginalized. Male clerics continued to deny women the education that might have improved their position and male and female attitudes towards women continued to accept their inferiority to men. The voices of the women of the time were mostly silent; the male writers, so verbose on other subjects, ignored them. Only a few women were able to emerge and achieve even limited success, and then usually on male terms.

The attitude of men of the church towards women in the twelfth century was one of undisguised misogyny. Much of received wisdom came from the Church fathers, of whom St Paul was the most prominent and vocal against women. Paul made it clear that he believed that in the natural order of things, woman should be submissive to man “The head of the woman is the man...”¹ The clerics of the twelfth century were ill-disposed to ignore the views of the Church Fathers. The Church controlled all education and taught all potential clerics that the Bible and the writings of the Church Fathers were the final authority on all matters. For men of the church, centuries of dogma were not easy to cast off, especially when that dogma confirmed their own positions in the hierarchy. In addition, many clerics, especially monks would have had little

interaction with women. They would have little practical experience to counter the established beliefs.²

The first woman in the Bible is Eve, and she played a large part in the thoughts of medieval churchmen. Eve was the cause of man’s downfall, the woman who had stained humankind with sin through her weakness. To the medieval churchmen, Eve epitomized women, the daughters of Eve. They found no reason to dispute the early Church Father Tertullian who wrote to a woman, “Dost thou not know that thou, too, art Eve?”³ In fact, Geoffroy of Vendôme, a twelfth century Benedictine abbot, blamed Eve (and by extension all women) for the death of Jesus Christ, for “had [woman’s] sin not required it, Our Savior would not have had to die.”⁴ Women were thus, by their nature, wicked and sensual, tempters of men and a danger to the soul. Their very beauty, so tempting to men, was merely a shell to hide their inner ugliness. John Chrysostom (347–407 CE) wrote, “You will see that bodily beauty is a white-wash tombstone, for inside it is full of filth.”⁵ Odo of Cluny elaborated upon this sentiment in the tenth century, to describe women as “sack[s] of dung.”⁶ If women were wicked, however, they were also weak. Hildebert of Lavarin described women as a “fragile thing, steadfast in nothing but crime.”⁷ Male clerics frequently portrayed women as reckless, restless, their weak bodies reflecting weak minds. Giles of Rome

² Jacques Dalarun, “The Clerical Gaze” in Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, ed., *A History of Women in the West: II Silences of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 1992), 16.

³ Tertullian, in *Patrologia Latina* I, ed. Jacque Paul Migne (Paris, 1844), col. 1305.

⁴ Geoffrey of Vendome in *Patrologia Latina* 157, col. 168.

⁵ John Chrysostom, Epistle Theodora, chapter 14, quoted in Arthur Frederick Ide, *Special Sisters: Women in the European Middle Ages*, 4th Ed. (Mesquite: Ide, 1983), 4.

⁶ Odo of Cluny, in *Patrologia Latina* 133, col. 556.

⁷ Hildebert of Lavarin, quoted in Jacques Dalarun, “The Clerical Gaze” in Klapisch-Zuber, *A History of Women in the West*, 22.

¹ 1 Cor. 11.3

describes women's bodies as "limp and unstable" so that "women are unstable and unsteady in desire and will."⁸

However, during this same period, there was also a rise in the cult of the Virgin Mary. While Jesus' mother had played some part in the worship of the early church, it was during the medieval period that she began to play a central rôle.⁹ As Eve was the wicked woman, the blueprint for all women, Mary was the ideal. The Church built and dedicated great cathedrals to the Blessed Virgin, monks wrote hymns to her and crowds appealed to her as the 'Mother of Mercy' to heal the sick and perform other miracles.¹⁰ However, as Clifford Lawrence notes, the veneration of the Virgin Mary did little to improve the image or the position of women within the period, for Mary was set aside from other women: the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception meant she was born without original sin.¹¹ She remained a virgin and thus never sullied herself. This led to a stratification of women into three classes by, among others, St Jerome: virgins, widows and wives.¹² Only a virgin could hope for the full rewards of heaven; widows and wives might hope for redemption with penance and time.

Given the prevailing attitude towards women, it is little wonder then that the Church refused to consider women within the priesthood. St Paul had made it clear that he believed women had no place in the celebration of church services, commanding, "Women must keep quiet at gatherings of the church. They are not allowed to speak; they must take a subordinate place, as the Law enjoins them."¹³ The Epistle to Timothy – possibly written by a disciple of Paul – reinforces this attitude and extends it to declare, "I permit no woman to teach or have authority

over men."¹⁴ However, Gary Macy argues that the Church did "ordain" women in the early Church. He acknowledges that the definition of ordination is unclear from the texts, but some women may indeed have acted in liturgical roles. Certainly, abbesses would hear daily confessions from nuns, give penance, perform a form of excommunication, and preach within the nunnery.¹⁵ By the twelfth century, however, the leaders of the Church criticized these women. Pope Innocent III condemned such abbesses in a letter to the Bishop of Burgos in 1210, acknowledgement that the practice occurred and an indication that the Church was intent on re-exerting its control over such women.¹⁶

As the Church excluded women from the priesthood, it also excluded women from the growing field of academia. In the early twelfth century, Paris was in the midst of the educational and intellectual revolution spurred in great part by Peter Abelard and other thinkers, which led to the birth of the scholastic tradition¹⁷. Christopher Brooke notes that "nowhere was education more advanced and more effective than in Paris."¹⁸ However, tradition excluded women from this movement. Philippe de Novare wrote, "Women should not be taught to read and write."¹⁹ He was not alone in these sentiments. Women were too weak, too intemperate, too apt to allow loquacity to overwhelm the need to be chaste. Using Biblical passages as a guide, the Church shut out women from the public sphere of education.²⁰ For women, it would be centuries before they could gain an education in a university.²¹

There was a belief among many that women were not predisposed to scholarship. Peter Abelard notes, "A

⁸ Giles of Rome, *De Regimine Principum Libri III*, 272, quoted in Carla Casagrande, "The Protected Woman" in Klapisch-Zuber, *A History of Women in the West*, 87.

⁹ F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2002), 147.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 147 and Richard Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, The Penguin History of the Church 2, ed. Owen Chadwick (London: Penguin, 1990), 305.

¹¹ Clifford H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 3rd ed., (Harlow: Pearson, 2001), 219.

¹² Jacques Dalarun, "The Clerical Gaze", 29.

¹³ I Cor. 14:34–35.

¹⁴ 1 Timothy 2:12.

¹⁵ Gary Macy, "The Ordination of Women in the Early Middle Ages," *Theological Studies* 61.3 (Sept 2000)

¹⁶ Innocent III as quoted in Gary Macy, "The Ordination of Women in the Early Middle Ages,"

¹⁷ For more information on medieval scholarship, see Richard Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).

¹⁸ Christopher N.L. Brooke, *The Medieval Idea of Marriage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 91.

¹⁹ Philippe de Novare, *Les Quatres Ages d'Homme*, ed. Marcel de Fréville (Paris: SATF, 1888), 16.

²⁰ Carla Casagrande, "The Protected Woman", 99.

²¹ Paulette L'Hermite-Leclercq, "The Feudal Order" in Klapisch-Zuber, *A History of Women in the West*, 213.

gift for letters is [...] rare in women.”²² Andrea Nye observes that Abelard chided his student Heloise for her “woman’s tongue” that hindered her ability to conduct philosophy and to reason.²³ Men were not alone in their assessment of female scholarship. Long indoctrination had so attuned women themselves to the belief in female weakness in this sphere that they were frequently dismissive of their own efforts and those of others of their gender. Noted philosopher Hildegard of Bingen downplayed her own scholarship as a woman, “poor as I am in womanly form” describing herself as a vessel of the Holy Spirit and thus the fruits of her labor as barely her own.²⁴

Excluded from the priesthood and education, there were few remaining options for religious women in the twelfth century: to enter a nunnery or to become a deaconess. The tradition of the Catholic Church had St Scholastica, sister of St Benedict of Nursia, founding the first nunneries in the sixth century along Benedictine lines.²⁵ Nunneries soon sprang up around Europe, especially in the realms of the Merovingian and Anglo-Saxon Kings. According to Richard Southern, these nunneries fulfilled a need for a place of refuge for widows who wished to protect their freedom and property and for daughters who did not wish to marry. Both these widows and daughters were from powerful families, and many became notable abbesses and prioresses, including Hilda of Whitby and Radegunde at Poitiers.²⁶ Many of these women lived in “double-monasteries”, where monks and nuns in adjacent foundations, with a shared church and shared services. In many cases, the monks were an adjunct to the main nunnery – there to provide sacraments and to do heavy work – and an abbess ruled both men and women.²⁷

However, the church abolished most double monasteries in the reforms of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, attacking the wisdom of men and women being close together as well as the concept of a woman being in charge.²⁸

The twelfth century was an important period for the Church. The Gregorian reforms begun by Pope Gregory VII (1073–1085) in the eleventh century had reached a momentum that created significant change. These reforms ostensibly aimed to remove the laxity and corruption that had developed within the church, and to strengthen the church against the growing power of the secular nobility. Life in the monasteries was supposed to be one of quiet contemplation of God, a fellowship of men or women dedicated to an ideal more important than worldly matters. Yet, as the chronicles attest, the monastic life was one of internal disputes, power games, corruption, and luxury. It is little wonder that respect for the regular clergy waned in the period and led to disputes.²⁹

St Benedict wrote his Rule ca. 530 CE in Italy, and over the course of three centuries, the Benedictine monastery became the model for all European monasteries including those for women.³⁰ The Rule focused upon obedience: to God, to the abbot or abbess and to the Rule. The rule forbade personal property, determining this to be a “special vice to be cut off root and branch,” and idleness or excessive drinking or eating.³¹ Richard Southern notes that the Rule expected monks to “put up with everything – poverty, illness, harshness – because these things lead back to God.”³² Yet, by the latter part of the twelfth century, this was clearly not the case in the Benedictine monasteries. As John Appleby writes in his Introduction to the *Chronicle of*

²² *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, trans. Betty Radice (London: Penguin, 1974), 66.

²³ Andrea Nye, “A Women’s Thought or a Man’s Discipline? The Letters of Abelard and Heloise,” *Hypatia* 7 (1992) 3

²⁴ Hildegard of Bingen, *Selected Writings*, trans Mark Atherton, (New York: Penguin, 2001).

²⁵ Gregory I Dialogos. *The Book of Dialogues*. Trans. “P.W.” and ed. Edmund G. Gardner. In *The Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, Halsall, Paul, ed. Fordham University. February 2001 <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook.html>>.

²⁶ Richard Southern, *Western Society and the Church*, 309.

²⁷ Lawrence, C.H., *Medieval Monasticism*, 49.

²⁸ Richard Southern, *Western Society and the Church*, 310.

²⁹ For more information on life in a male monastery, see Jocelin of Brakelond, *The Chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond Monk of St. Edmundsbury: A Picture of Monastic and Social Life on the XIIth Century*, translated and edited by L.C. Jane, introduction by Abbot Gasquet (London: Chatto and Windus, 1907).

³⁰ Sally Thompson, *Women Religious: The Founding of the English Nunneries after the Normal Conquest* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 3.

³¹ “Rule of St Benedict,” *Patrologia Latina* Vol. 66, col. 215ff, translated by Ernest F. Henderson, *Select Historical Documents of the Middle Ages* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1910).

³² Richard Southern, *Western Society and the Church*, 220.

Richard of Devizes, they had become “rich and complacent.”³³

The growing dissatisfaction with the traditional Benedictine Rule within the monasteries led to the forming of new monastic orders. Their version of the Rule reflected growing concerns about the excesses and the limited spiritualism of the Benedictines.³⁴ One of the earliest of the new Orders was the Cluniac, founded at Cluny in France in the tenth century, which emphasized the mass, the *Opus Dei*, above all else. The Cistercians led the second wave of reform. Founded in Cîteaux in 1098, the Cistercian Order became popular under St Bernard of Clairvaux and spread rapidly throughout France and England.³⁵ The Cistercian version of the Rule emphasized asceticism and withdrawal from the world.³⁶ Despite their differences, neither the Cluniacs nor the Cistercians wanted anything to do with women.³⁷ Lawrence notes that as these more zealous monks were concerned that women would have a pejorative influence upon their souls, interaction with them was “to be avoided at all costs.”³⁸ Sally Thompson argues that the Cistercians in particular were “remarkable for their hostility to women”. She notes that decrees banned Cistercian abbots from ministering to women, even to blessing them, and it was not until 1213 that a decree of the General Chapter of the Cistercians even acknowledged the existence of nuns following the Cistercian rule.³⁹ Although some historians dispute this extreme view, most agree that the Gregorian reforms “diminish[ed] the possibilities of active female participation in formal religious organizations.”⁴⁰ However, Bruce Venarde notes

that we might interpret the figures differently. He points out that the number of nunneries quadrupled between the years 1070 and 1170 CE and that many of these foundations were independent of male monasteries.⁴¹ It would seem that nunneries flourished, yet the numbers do not seem to tell the whole story. This four-fold increase only indicates an addition of three hundred nunneries, while at the same time the number of male monasteries was growing at a far greater rate. From the foundation of Cîteaux in 1098 CE to 1200 CE, Cistercian monks founded 525 new abbeys; Augustinian houses sprang up in their hundreds throughout the continent while other smaller orders flourished.⁴² By comparison, the nunneries came along in fewer numbers, later and smaller. After the Cluniac order had already established hundreds of male houses, it finally sponsored a nunnery at Marcigny in 1056 CE. This was not through some newfound generosity on the part of the abbot of Cluny, St Hugh, but rather it was to provide a place for female relatives of monks at Cluny so that the monks might not be distracted.⁴³

Some of these male foundations were extremely large and well endowed. Within thirty years of its foundation, the Cistercian Rievaulx Abbey in Yorkshire, England numbered 140 monks and 500 lay brothers.⁴⁴ No nunnery could hope to compare. Firstly, the nuns did not usually have the institutional support of a large order such as the Cistercians or Cluniacs. However, the changing nature of the monasteries and of lay interest in the church lay at the heart of the relative lack of endowment. Richard Southern argues that secular society no longer saw the monasteries as an end in themselves, but saw them as an integral part of society with a distinctive rôle to play. Secular lords would pay vast sums to sponsor monasteries whose monks would in turn say masses and prayers for the lords after their deaths and thus smooth their way to heaven. As the church banned women from celebrating

³³ Richard of Devizes, *Cronicon Richardi Divisensis de Tempore Regis Richardi Primi* (The Chronicle of Richard of Devizes of the Time of King Richard the First), edited by John T. Appleby, Medieval Texts, eds V.H. Galbraith, Sir Roger Mynors and C.N.L. Brooke (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1963), xv.

³⁴ Richard Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 163.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 163.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 250–265.

³⁷ Bruce Venarde, *Women's Monasticism and Medieval Society: Nunneries in France and England, 890–1215* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 13.

³⁸ Lawrence, C.H., *Medieval Monasticism*, 3rd ed., 220.

³⁹ Sally Thompson, *Women Religious*, 95.

⁴⁰ Janet L. Nelson, “Society, Theodicy and the Origins of Medieval Heresy,” *Studies in Church History* 9 (1972), 74.

⁴¹ Bruce L. Venarde, *Women's Monasticism*, 54.

⁴² F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, 137–139.

⁴³ Lawrence, C.H., *Medieval Monasticism*, 220.

⁴⁴ F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, 139.

mass, they could play no part in this function.⁴⁵ Lay sponsors were thus discouraged from donating to nunneries when they could put their money to better use in a monastery. Of course, some noble families continued to endow and support nunneries. King Henry II of England and his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine supported the Order of Fontevrault⁴⁶ while St Gilbert, the son of a knight founded the Order of Sempringham.⁴⁷ However, most nunneries remained smaller and poorer than were their male counterparts.

This lack of endowments encouraged alternative methods of raising funds. In particular, many nunneries expected the family of a prospective nun to provide a substantial “dowry” of cash, land or items. This reinforced the already aristocratic nature of the nunneries and excluded all but the socially acceptable.⁴⁸ The church establishment and popes frequently decried the practice. Pope Alexander banned the taking of money for accepting someone into the religious habit in his decrees of 1179⁴⁹. The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 went further stating, “The stain of simony has so infected many nuns that scarcely any are received as sisters without a price.”⁵⁰ However, it continued, and nuns as eminent as Hildegard of Bingen defended it and the social hierarchy it maintained by arguing, “There should be discrimination; otherwise, if different people are congregated together, the flock may be rent asunder through the pride of those who are socially superior and the shame of those who are of a different class.”⁵¹

In some cases, monasteries even usurped established nunneries. In 1122, Abbot Adam Suger of the Abbey of St Denis in Paris established a claim to the

nunnery of Argenteuil and expelled the nuns there. This reduced the nuns to wandering the countryside in search of a home until Peter Abelard gifted them his retreat of the Paraclete in 1128. His wife Heloise, a former prioress of Argenteuil became its first abbess.⁵² Abelard remained a spiritual guide to the nunnery until his death in 1142.

Abelard and Heloise exchanged several letters that are important guides to the day-to-day problems of running a nunnery. In particular, Heloise wanted Abelard’s advice on the possible adaptation of the Benedictine rule for the nuns. She argued that as the Rule of Benedict “was clearly written for men alone, it can only be fully obeyed by men” and that, according to St Jerome, breaking even part of the Rule condemned them. As women are weak, compared with men, the Rule should not hold them to the same standards, just as it did not hold children to the same rules as adults, or the sick to the standards as the healthy.⁵³ Abelard responded by agreeing in some part with Heloise’s requests, lessening the strictures of the Benedictine rule relating to food, fasting and sleep.⁵⁴ However, he was still a man of his time and showed his prejudices in these letters. He exhorted Heloise to ensure that the nuns kept abstained from wine, kept long hours of silence and remained solitary from male influence.⁵⁵ Clifford Lawrence notes that Abelard also assumed that the nuns would need some male guidance and, importantly, supervision.⁵⁶

Male supervision of nunneries became an important aspect of twelfth century monasticism. Whereas in previous eras, abbesses had been powerful figures in their own rights, they were frequently subject to a male superior. In the Premonstratensian Order, for example, the nuns lived alongside the canons in double monasteries until the 1130s. However, the male canons treated the nuns as little more than servants, would not allow them to do more than observe chapel services and in underfunded them, to the point that 1138, Pope Innocent II castigated

⁴⁵ Richard Southern, *Western Society and the Church*, 310 and Lawrence, C.H., *Medieval Monasticism*, 220.

⁴⁶ Sally Thompson, *Women Religious*, 113.

⁴⁷ Lawrence, C.H., *Medieval Monasticism*, 224.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 217–218

⁴⁹ Roger de Hoveden, *The Annals of Roger de Hoveden: Comprising the History of England and of Other Countries of Europe from A.D. 732 to A.D. 1201*, trans. Henry T. Riley (New York: AMS Press, 1968), volume 1, 505.

⁵⁰ J.D. Mansi, ed., *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio XXII* (Florence 1759) 1051

⁵¹ Hildegard of Bingen, *Selected Writings*, trans. Mark Atherton (New York: Penguin, 2001)

⁵² *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 22.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 160–161.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 185–6.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 187, 196.

⁵⁶ Lawrence, C.H., *Medieval Monasticism*, 222.

the Order.⁵⁷ The situation at Marcigny was similar. Despite the presence of some illustrious noble women as nuns, including Adela of Blois, daughter of William the Conqueror, a male prior appointed by the Abbot of Cluny ran the nunnery.⁵⁸ Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny even described Marcigny as “the delightful prison.”⁵⁹ However, occasionally, women could still rule without too much interference. After Abelard’s death, Heloise ran the Paraclete and its six sister houses independently and Peter the Venerable praised her effusively by for doing so in his letters to her.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, Hildegard of Bingen began as mistress to a group of nuns connected to the male Benedictine monastery of St Disibod’s, but when the population of nuns expanded due to her fame, she succeeded in persuading the abbot to allow her to move the nunnery to Bingen where she took effective control.⁶¹

For those religious women who did not want to be cloistered away in the “delightful prison” of a nunnery, there were very few alternatives. Churchmen distrusted women, and if their ideal woman was a virgin, hidden away from their gaze, then the only other respectable position for a woman was a wife and mother. Such women had little impact upon the Church, their husbands subsuming them socially and in religion.

However, before the Gregorian reforms, some women could hope to be both wives and have some influence on the Church, albeit unofficial and indirect. Clergy, while discouraged from marrying, still frequently took wives or concubines and the Church grudgingly accepted these women as part of parish life.⁶² However, by the beginning of the twelfth century, the Church began to ban such marriages. In England in 1108, Anselm Archbishop of Canterbury decreed, “priests, deacons and subdeacons shall live in chastity, and shall have no woman in their houses save only those who are connected with

them by close relationship.” Any married priest wishing to celebrate mass or avoid heavy penalties had to live apart from and not see his wife. The decree banned these clerical wives from living upon any lands belonging to the church.⁶³ Pope Alexander, in his decrees of 1179, reinforced this ban, stating, “Clerks in holy orders shall not keep concubines”, and making it clear that punishment awaited those that disobeyed.⁶⁴

The wives of non-clerical husbands had few options as long as their husbands remained alive, but if they became widows, these women had the chance to follow a vocation. Many widows became nuns, especially those who wished to avoid a second forced marriage. Between one quarter and one half of all nuns may have been widows or wives of men taking up the habit of monks.⁶⁵ However, widows over forty who preferred to remain in the world had the option of becoming deaconesses. While accepted as a part of the Church by St Paul, they occupied a marginal position.⁶⁶ In parishes, they assisted the priests prepare to administer the sacraments and helped with female baptisms, while some did enter monastic orders. However, they did not actively take part in the liturgy nor in the blessing of the sacraments and the church deemed these positions suited only for mature women. The Quinsext Council of 692 noted the minimum for a deaconess should be forty (as compared to a male deacon who could be ordained at twenty-five).⁶⁷

Centuries of Biblical and Church dogma taught clerical men of the twelfth century that women were the founts of wickedness and that they needed to be isolated, constrained and silenced. Thus, even as the Church in the West expanded at a great rate, flowering into an institution of learning and vast wealth and power, women remained marginalized. Bias and doctrine forbade a woman from becoming a priest, banned her from education. For a

⁵⁷ Ibid., 223.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 220.

⁵⁹ The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, 281.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 43, 277–284.

⁶¹ F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, 175.

⁶² Gary Macy, “The Ordination of Women in the Early Middle Ages.”

⁶³ Roger de Hoveden, *The Annals*, 201.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 510.

⁶⁵ Bruce L. Venarde, *Women’s Monasticism and Medieval Society*, 97.

⁶⁶ *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 180.

⁶⁷ “The Canons of the Council in Trullo, Often Called the Quinsext Council”, reproduced in *The Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, Halsall, Paul, ed. Fordham University. February 2001 <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook.html>>.

woman of vocation there was only the nunnery, often a meager place compared with the establishments for men, and often closed to all but the rich. Within the nunnery, silence and obedience to men were increasingly becoming the norm and only a few singular women like Heloïse or

Hildegard of Bingen could overcome this subjugation to shine. That they did remains a testament to their character amid the difficulties of this age for women.

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