

The Seclusion of Eustochium: Paschasius Radbertus and the Nuns of Soissons

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This article examines three works by the ninth-century theologian, Paschasius Radbertus, all addressed to the Carolingian community of religious women at Notre Dame de Soissons. In addition to being valuable sources for the Mariologist, these sources provide insights into the complex social world of Carolingian religious women. Written at the time of the implementation of the monastic reforms of Benedict of Aniane, Radbert's texts can be read as responses to the imposition of a stricter form of claustration on women's communities. Drawing on the patristic model of Jerome and Eustochium in particular, the spirituality of these texts stresses the contributions of religious women through intercessory prayer, liturgy, and correct doctrine. Radbert alternately emphasizes the important role played by widows in Carolingian religious houses and encourages younger members not to leave the shelter of the religious life. In particular, Radbert's commentary on Psalm 44 (45) meditates on a text that would have been significant at the nuns' consecrations, deliberately employing language that would have paralleled the conventions of secular marriage. In conclusion, Radbert's three texts for Carolingian nuns bear interesting resemblances to twelfth-century Cistercian spirituality.

SOMETIME after 785, the community of nuns at Notre Dame de Soissons would take in a foundling child who would become perhaps the greatest theologian of the Carolingian world: Paschasius Radbertus. According to the Bollandist life of Radbert, as I will call him here, his mother had died when the boy was very young, and the nuns arranged for him to receive his early education at the nearby monastery of St. Peter. Radbert was tonsured, however, before the altar of Notre Dame and “in the presence of the nuns,” and he later told the abbess of Soissons, Theodrada, that he considered himself as *a puero uester alumnus*. He would not remain at Soissons, but instead entered briefly into secular life. This was a decision he would later deeply regret, however, and Radbert eventually retired to the

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monastery at Corbie, whose abbots, Adalhard and Wala, were Theodrada's brothers.¹

Radbert continued to hold Theodrada and her daughter Imma (or Irma), who succeeded her mother as abbess at Soissons, in deep gratitude, affection, and respect throughout his life. In a sense, Radbert never strayed far from the social, religious, and political orbit of Theodrada and her two powerful brothers, all cousins to Charlemagne. Radbert remained a passionate partisan of Adalhard (r. 780–815) and Wala (r. 826–835), despite upheaval and political disfavor under Charlemagne's son, Louis the Pious. Precisely insofar as they represented an older political world, Adalhard and Wala found themselves isolated in Louis's court, and Radbert would craft two highly erudite *vitae* to memorialize at Corbie the brothers' somewhat ambivalent legacy. Although he remained only a deacon, Radbert eventually followed the brothers as abbot of Corbie himself (r. 843–851). At the same time, Radbert also maintained an ongoing relationship with the community of Soissons, writing over the course of his life three significant treatises specifically for them: a lengthy sermon on the Assumption, known as *Cogitis me*, purporting to be from Jerome to the widow Paula and her daughter Eustochium; a treatise, *De partu Uirginis*, on the perpetual virginity of Mary and the birth of Christ; and, the longest of these works, a three-book commentary on Psalm 44 (45 by contemporary numbering).

While *Cogitis me* and *De partu Uirginis* have obvious significance from the perspective of a Mariologist, all three treatises have seldom been considered together, and even more rarely read as sources contributing to our understanding of Carolingian religious women or in light of the often checkered progress of the Carolingian reform.² These texts have valuable

¹Paul Guérin, ed., "Saint Paschase Radbert, Abbé de Corbie," in *Les Petits Bollandistes vies des saints*, 7th ed. (Paris: Typographie des Célestins, 1873), 5:36–39. See also "De Radberto Paschasio Abbate Corbeiensi," in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptorum* 15, ed. O. Holder-Egger (Hanover: Hahn, 1887), 452–454 (hereafter cited as MGH); L. H. Cottineau, *Répertoire topographique des abbayes et prières* (Mâcon: Protat frères, 1939; repr. Turnhout: Brepols, 1995), col. 3051–3053.

²For an analysis of the controversy between Paschasius Radbertus and Ratramnus of Corbie over the perpetual virginity of Mary, the authority remains Leo Scheffczyk, *Das Mariengeheimnis in Frömmigkeit und Lehre der Karolingerzeit* (Leipzig: St. Benno, 1959), 207–237. Scheffczyk's work, however, precedes Ripberger's edition of *Cogitis me* and his attribution of the work to Radbert, concentrating instead on the controversy between Radbert and Ratramnus. For the importance of *Cogitis me* with regard to the development of the office of the Assumption, see Rachel Fulton, "Quae est ista quae ascendit sicut aurora consurgens? The Song of Songs as the *Historia* for the Office of the Assumption," *Medieval Studies* 60 (1998): 91–98. The commentary on Psalm 44 (45) has been sadly neglected by scholars. See Alf Härdelin, "An Epithalamium for Nuns: Imagery and Spirituality in Paschasius Radbertus' *Expositio on Psalm 44 (45)*," in *Quest of the Kingdom: Ten Papers on Medieval Monastic Spirituality* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1991), 79–107. More recently, Alan G. Zola has examined *Cogitis me* and the *Expositio* in light of traditions of spiritual marriage, "bridal spirituality," and

insights to offer if read in this way, however. Radbert's treatises are works written out of a deep familiarity with the Soissons community, marked by warm affection and notable respect for both the nuns' spirituality and their level of learning. In all three works, Radbert addresses the nuns habitually with such endearments as *carissime* and *dilectissime*, cajoling, flattering, and admonishing them in turn. These works are strikingly intimate examples of a Carolingian abbot offering nurturing pastoral care to women who had been his own former foster-mothers, who continued to direct and offer counsel to their own community. Moreover, as with his Eucharistic work dedicated to Warin of Corvey, Radbert wrote these treatises for the Soissons community at their behest and in response, at least in part, to their questions and concerns about their liturgical practices and about existing theological controversy. The commentary on Psalm 44 (45) in particular represents a complex and creative response to the reforms of Benedict of Aniane, which called, among other things, for increased claustration of monastic houses and particularly of women. Taken together, Radbert's works for the nuns of Soissons both assumed and celebrated a model of female monastic spirituality which emphasized the nuns' aristocratic status, their learning, and their seclusion, thereby heightening the value of their spiritual contributions through prayer and the liturgy toward the welfare of the Empire. This model was based on patristic sources, particularly the writings of Jerome, and was superficially, at least, in keeping with the aims of the Benedictine reform. Radbert's model, however, posited a different, and arguably more rigorously ascetic, form of spirituality than was usually predominant in the Carolingian world, either for men or for women, which may well have been intended to subvert, or to outdo, the prevailing monastic culture propounded by Benedict of Aniane.

Throughout Radbert's career, the nuns of Soissons can be said to have played a vital role in encouraging their former protégé to develop as a writer, biblical scholar, and theologian. Like the small circles of monks who populate Radbert's *Epitaphium Arsenii*, the nuns of Soissons were intimate acquaintances, both political and spiritual, drawn even closer to Radbert in the adverse climate of the 830s and 840s. They represented, therefore, a comparatively safe and limited audience for Radbert, continuing and encouraging a conversation in which he pursued and developed certain themes within his body of writing.³ *Cogitis me*, Radbert's treatise on the

existing monastic practices at Corbie, in "Radbertus's Monastic Voice: Ideas about Monasticism at Ninth-Century Corbie" (Ph.D. diss., Loyola University Chicago, 2008), 1:83–97.

³*Cogitis me* would achieve a wide circulation in the early medieval period, in part because Radbert's pose as Jerome was taken to be genuine and promoted by Hincmar of Rheims, and consequently made a lesson at Matins on the feast of the Assumption. See Rachel Fulton, "Mimetic Devotion, Marian Exegesis, and the Historical Sense of the Song of Songs," *Viator* 27

Assumption, is not securely dated, but he dedicated it to both “Paula” and her daughter “Eustochium,” no doubt Theodrada and her daughter Imma.⁴ E. Ann Matter, the editor of *De partu Uirginis*, has dated this second text to between 844 and 846, the year of Theodrada’s death; Radbert himself says that the request for the work had come not long before he was able to complete it.⁵ The commentary on Psalm 44 (45) is the latest, longest, and most complex of the three works. Radbert opens the work by eulogizing Theodrada to Imma, apologizing for his tardiness in completing the work Theodrada had once requested. This would, therefore, place the text after 846, and probably in his years of voluntary exile to Saint-Riquier after 851.⁶ At the same time, the reforms of Benedict of Aniane had been implemented at Corbie, at least in part, from 819, and presumably at Soissons as well from around the time of Amalarius of Metz’s *Institutio sanctimonialium* of 817. If Theodrada herself had requested the commentary on Psalm 44 (45), as Radbert mentions, then all three works would have been commissioned to address concerns that arose within the first generation of reform at Corbie and Soissons, and in some respects they reflect that wider experience.

I. WOMEN’S MONASTICISM, CLAUSTRATION, AND THE CAROLINGIAN REFORM

A richer understanding of women’s monasticism in the ninth century calls for a reassessment of the impact of the Carolingian reform on women’s houses and the potential impact of strict claustration on their ties with local communities. The groundbreaking work of Suzanne Wemple argued for an inverse correlation between women’s influence in the church and the existence of

(1996), 97n45; Dominique Iogna-Prat, “Le culte de la Vierge sous la règne de Charles le Chauve,” in *Marie: Le culte de la Vierge dans la société médiévale*, ed. Dominique Iogna-Prat, Eric Palazzo, and Daniel Russo (Paris: Beauchesne, 1996), 70, 89–91. The commentary on Psalm 44 (45) survives in only one eleventh-century Corbie manuscript, and therefore must have been copied, though to what extent we cannot know. The manuscript of *De partu Uirginis*, perhaps so worn with use by the nuns that it fell apart, has come down to us with the text “in as confused a state as any treatise of the Carolingian period.” E. Ann Matter, “Introduction,” *De partu Uirginis*, Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Medieualis 56C, ed. E. Ann Matter (Turnhout: Brepols, 1985), 16–36 (hereafter cited as CCCM).

⁴Paschasius Radbert, *De assumptione sanctae Mariae uirginis (uel Epistula beati Hieronymi et ad Paulam et Eustochium de assumptione)*, CCCM 56C, ed. A. Ripberger (Turnhout: Brepols, 1985) (hereafter cited as *Cogitis me*).

⁵Paschasius Radbert, *De partu Uirginis*, lines 3–4: “Quaestionem carissimae, de partu beatae Mariae uirginis mihi nuper allatam uobis persoluere decreui.”

⁶Paschasius Radbert, *Expositio in Psalmum XLIV*, CCCM 94, ed. Beda Paulus (Turnhout: Brepols, 1991).

centralized reform in the early medieval period. In this model, the Merovingian period and the tenth century, respectively, would see a pattern of women's involvement in the church and dramatic individual cases of female sanctity, whereas the ninth century would bring about the "waning influence of women in the Frankish church."⁷ At the same time, Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg has suggested that the procedural structures of the Carolingian reform, specifically the formalizing of the canonization process replacing local, public consensus with "increased episcopal and synodic control," were actively responsible for "a detrimental effect on the promotion and ultimate selection of female saints." Elsewhere she has argued that Carolingian reform legislation, such as the *Institutio sanctimonialium*, made the strict active enclosure of women a priority, with the consequence that female monastic houses became increasingly dependent on male authorities for sponsorship.⁸

Recently scholars have questioned the extent to which the reforms of Benedict of Aniane targeted women's communities in particular, and have suggested that the reasons for the decline in the number and prominence of women's houses at this time may be both more complex and more indirect. As Wemple herself noted, a decline in women's ascetic monasticism may well reflect overall improvement in the legal position of women, in part due to the reformers' advocacy of marriage.⁹ Strict claustration could accompany special attention to and support of women's houses, as in the sixth-century communities founded by Caesarius of Arles, and alone it need not necessarily have stifled women's houses—or at least not immediately. Sarah Foot has noted the extent to which Louis the Pious and his successors encouraged and patronized certain all-female houses, precisely as part of an effort to supplant the fast-disappearing double houses.¹⁰ With such royal and elite support, an aristocratic community like Soissons might continue and even flourish. Moreover, reacting against top-down models of reform by Semmler and Oexle, Katrinette Bodarwé's recent study reveals a process of reform in which the Benedictine Rule was adapted for women's houses in a

⁷Suzanne Fonay Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500–900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 127.

⁸Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, 500–1100* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 4–5; Schulenburg, "Strict Active Enclosure and Its Effects on the Female Monastic Experience (ca. 500–1100)," in *Medieval Religious Women*, ed. John A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank, vol. 1, *Distant Echoes* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1984), 56–59; Schulenburg, "Women's Monastic Communities, 500–1100: Patterns of Expansion and Decline," *Signs* 14, no. 2 (1989): 278, 286. See also Valerie L. Garver, *Women and Aristocratic Culture in the Carolingian World* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009), 3–4.

⁹Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 171.

¹⁰Sarah Foot, *Veiled Women*, vol. 1, *The Disappearance of Nuns from Anglo-Saxon England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 66–69.

bewildering variety of ways. Moreover, she demonstrates that, in this process, women's monastic communities had tremendous powers of passive resistance, with reformers often having to wait decades to re-found communities with entirely new members.¹¹ Thomas Schilp has questioned the extent to which women's houses were considered "Benedictine" at all in the early medieval period, arguing that the terminology used to describe them is indistinguishable from canonesses.¹² Franz Felten, likewise, has noted the highly regional nature of women's monasticism in Frankish lands throughout the early medieval period, the vague terminology applied to it, and its often ephemeral nature, not necessarily connected directly to the implementation of reform.¹³ The recent work by Alan Zola on Corbie itself notes the slow and piecemeal implementation of reform there from 819, with the community continuing to retain practices not at all in accordance with the Rule even when it was, in theory, compliant; this stage of reform would peak, in fact, during the abbacy of Radbert's hero, Adalhard, between 821 and 826.¹⁴

Sources such as Radbert's three treatises for the nuns of Soissons can provide insights into the culture of Carolingian monasticism, particularly with regard to the complex crosscurrents swirling about the implementation of Benedictine reform. In her survey of Carolingian hagiography for women, Julia Smith has argued for a qualitative shift between Merovingian and Carolingian models of sanctity that stressed, in place of the flamboyant wonder-working of Merovingian saints, both male and female, a more confined, interior spirituality for women that would ultimately lead, perhaps unintentionally, to an emphasis on the individual soul.¹⁵ Radbert's treatises take up similar

¹¹Katrinette Bodarwé, "Eine Männerregel für Frauen: Die Adaption der Benediktsregel im 9. und 10. Jahrhundert," in *Female vita religiosa between Late Antiquity and the High Middle Ages*, ed. Gert Melville and Anne Müller (Vienna: Lit Verlag, 2011), 235–272. See also Steven Vanderputten, *Monastic Reform as Process: Realities and Representations in Medieval Flanders, 900–1100* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2013).

¹²Thomas Schilp, *Norm und Wirklichkeit religiöser Frauengemeinschaften im Frühmittelalter: die Institutio sanctimonialium Aquisgranensis des Jahres 816 und die Problematik der Verfassung von Frauenkommunitäten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1998).

¹³Franz Felten, "Frauenklöster im Frankenreich," in *Vita religiosa sanctimonialium: Norm und Praxis des weiblichen religiösen Lebens vom 6. bis zum 13. Jahrhundert*, ed. Chirstine Kleinjung (Korb: Didymos Verlag, 2011), 11–70.

¹⁴Zola, "Radbertus's Monastic Voice," 125–162.

¹⁵Julia M. H. Smith, "The Problem of Female Sanctity in Carolingian Europe," *Past and Present* 146 (1995): 33: "The essence of women's sanctity lay not simply within the cloister walls, but within the individual soul. . . . An interior spirituality expressed in visions is the most distinctive aspect of Carolingian hagiographical writing about women." Smith's suggestions parallel similar debates about the damaging effect of the Cistercian order on women's monasticism in the twelfth century, including the emphasis on women's visionary spirituality. It may be that some of the qualifications suggested to models of reform for the high medieval period may also apply to the Carolingian world: for example, see Fiona Griffiths, *A Garden of Delights: Reform and*

themes, although without the hagiographers' emphasis on visionary spirituality, in particular glorifying the seclusion of the community of Soissons. For Radbert, however, seclusion hardly meant simple submission: instead, his form of aristocratic seclusion placed the nuns paradoxically beyond the reach and above the criticisms of the reformers. In their almost epicurean withdrawal from the world, the nuns were strategically placed to offer intercession for the welfare of the Empire. In keeping with the Carolingian impulse to clarify and distinguish monastic and clerical modes of life, and to enrich the understanding of these modes of life through allegorical exegesis and commentary, Radbert sought to create a complementary ideal, inspired primarily by the writings of Jerome, for communities of women.

II. CAROLINGIAN SOISSONS

Soissons was an important late Merovingian and Carolingian center, situated in the heart of ancestral Carolingian lands. The site of the anointing of Pippin the Short by Boniface in 751, it was also where Louis the Pious had done public penance in 833.¹⁶ In many ways the community of nuns at Notre Dame had as proud a history as the more famous monastery of St. Medard, and possessed equally aristocratic connections. The house had originally been founded by the notorious Merovingian mayor of the palace, Ebroin, in 658/659, and followed a mixed rule of Columbanian and Benedictine elements, including the *laus perennis*.¹⁷ Charlemagne's redoubtable sister Gisela seems to have been abbess of both Chelles and Soissons until her death in 810. Gisela lived primarily at Chelles, but she installed her niece Rotrud, the eldest daughter of Charlemagne, at least temporarily in Soissons, although Rotrud appears not to have been formally made abbess of the

Renaissance for Women in the Twelfth Century (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 8–14.

¹⁶For the dating of the coronation of Pippin, see Marios Costambeys, Matthew Innes, and Simon MacLean, *The Carolingian World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3; Jennifer R. Davis, *Charlemagne's Practice of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 24. For the dating of Louis's public penance, see Mayke de Jong, *The Penitential State: Authority and Atonement in the Age of Louis the Pious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1–2.

¹⁷Janet Nelson has suggested that Notre Dame de Soissons is at least as likely a candidate as St. Medard to have produced the anonymous manuscript of the *Liber Historiae Francorum* in "Gender and genre in women historians of the early Middle Ages," in *L'historiographie médiévale en Europe*, ed. Jean-Philippe Genet (Paris: Éditions du centre nationale de la recherche scientifique, 1991), 159–160. Ian Wood notes that the LHF's lack of promotion of the cult of St. Medard may support Nelson's suggestion, in "Administration, Law, and Culture in Merovingian Gaul," in *The Uses of Literacy in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 78.

community.¹⁸ Gisela was a highly educated woman, a noted correspondent of Alcuin, and possibly the guiding intelligence behind the Prior Metz Annals; her involvement with Notre Dame as Theodrada and Imma's immediate predecessor may have helped to promote a certain degree of learning at Soissons.¹⁹ In a letter from Gisela and Rotrud to Alcuin from around 800, they liken Alcuin to Jerome, who "in no way would reject the requests of noble women," but would aid them in their study of scripture, a precedent that may well have acted as inspiration for Radbert's own complex variations on this theme.²⁰ Given the association between Soissons and Corbie, and certainly while Theodrada and Imma were abbesses contemporaneously with Adalhard, Wala, and Radbert, David Ganz has suggested that the Soissons community may have been responsible for the distinctive AB scriptorium, associated with, but not located at Corbie itself, and which borrowed manuscripts from numerous other Carolingian libraries.²¹ T. A. M. Bishop

¹⁸Reinhold Kaiser, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Civitas und Diözese Soissons in römischer und merowingischer Zeit* (Bonn: Ludwig Röhrschild Verlag, 1973), 253–258; Brigitte Kasten, *Adalhard von Corbie* (Droste: Studia Humaniora, 1986), 104n105. Jules Saincir goes so far as to suggest that Gisela was buried at Soissons, in *Le diocèse de Soissons*, vol. 1, *Des origines au XVIII^e siècle* (Évreux: Imprimerie Hérissey, 1935), 35. Ph. Lauer maintains that Gisela and Rotrud were at Soissons together before Gisela went to Chelles in "Le psautier Carolingien du Président Bouhier (Montpellier, Univ. H. 409)," in *Mélanges d'histoire du Moyen Age offerts à Ferdinand Lot* (Paris: Librairie ancienne Édouard Champion, 1925), 378. Lorenz Weinrich identifies Rotrud as abbess of Soissons until 810, perhaps in a misreading of Lauer, in *Wala Graf, Mönch und Rebell* (Lübeck and Hamburg: Matthiesen Verlag, 1963), 14n35. Kaiser suggests the possibility that Rotrud later became abbess of Chelles. Another Rotrud has been identified as abbess of Faremoutiers, see J. Nelson, "Women at the Court of Charlemagne: A Case of Monstrous Regiment?" in *Medieval Queenship*, ed. John Carmi Parsons (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 46; Garver, *Women and Aristocratic Culture*, 259.

¹⁹J. Nelson, "Gender and genre," 159–160. The diet of the nuns of Soissons, revealing truly staggering quantities of bread consumed, has been the subject of a study by Michel Rouche in "La faim à l'époque carolingienne, essai sur quelques types des rations alimentaires," *Révue Historique* 250, no. 2 (1973): 295–320.

²⁰"Ep. 196," *Alcuini Epistolae*, MGH Epistolae 4, ed. Ernst Dümmler (Berlin: Weidmanns, 1895), p. 342, lines 36–38: "Memento clarissimum in sancta ecclesia divinae scripturae doctorem, beatissimum siquidem Hieronimum, nobilium nullatenus spernere feminarum preces, sed plurima illarum nominibus in propheticas obscuritates dedicasse opuscula." Dümmler identifies this letter as being from Gisela, Charlemagne's sister, not his daughter Gisela. Suzanne Wemple and Janet Nelson have both drawn attention to the depiction of women writing around the seated figure of Jerome in the frontispiece of the Vivian Bible, produced at Tours ca. 844 in Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 181; Nelson, "Women at the Court of Charlemagne," 44–45. Some brief lines from a letter of Amalarius, in which he uses a passage from Jerome's commentary on Ezekiel, dedicated to Eustochium, to explain how to refer to the gender of cherubim and seraphim, illustrate the degree to which Amalarius could refer to Paula and Eustochium as stock figures without introduction: "Ubi sanctus Hieronimus dicit: 'Nos scire debemus,' Latinus Latinis fuit locutus. Ipse erat Latinus, Paula et filia eius Eustochium Latinae erant." Amalarius of Metz, "Ep. 10," MGH Epistolae 5, ed. Ernst Dümmler (Berlin: Weidmanns, 1899), p. 262, lines 22–23.

²¹David Ganz, *Corbie in the Carolingian Renaissance* (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1990), 48–56: "The manuscripts of the AB scriptorium are notable for large numbers of scribes collaborating

independently reached a similar conclusion, suggesting that the AB scribes were female, that they represented a community of nuns under Adalhard's protection at Corbie which was dissolved with the imposition of the Benedictine reform, and that they probably resided at least for a few years at Notre Dame de Soissons before forming the Benedictine daughter-house of Herford in Saxony.²² If a distinctive feature of Adalhard's abbacy at Corbie was his close relationship with a group of religious women, it suggests that Radbert's writings to Soissons, however orthodox in doctrine and reformist in tone, were not politically neutral for either Radbert or the nuns; like the life of Adalhard and the *Epitaphium Arsenii*, they were partisan works which carried within them the memory of exile and political defeat.²³

Whether or not the nuns of the Soissons community were, in fact, the AB scribes, all three works by Radbert contribute to the impression that the nuns were literate in the works of the fathers and shared, to some extent, Corbie's pretensions to classicism. In his sermon on the Assumption for Theodrada, *Cogitis me*, Radbert adopts an easy, even playful pose as Jerome in which, for example, he quite unabashedly reminds "Paula" of the empty tomb of Mary in Jerusalem, "which you, o Paula, have seen with your own eyes."²⁴ As with Alcuin and Gisela, this suggests, at the very least, that Theodrada was able to appreciate Radbert's role-playing and had a certain amount of

on single manuscripts, sometimes at speed, and decorating them with lively artistic embellishment remarkable for their uniqueness, originality, and independence from a Carolingian tradition."

²²T. A. M. Bishop, "The Scribes of the Corbie a-b," in *Charlemagne's Heir: New Perspectives on the Reign of Louis the Pious (814–40)*, ed. Peter Godman and Roger Collins (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 523–536. Like Ganz, he notes, on 532, "The a-b scribes were segregated: a condition established when they learnt to read and write in a school which cannot have been that attended by Caroline scribes. The work of the a-b scribes is generally free from gross illiteracy: they understood what they were writing. Spelling, in a period of orthographic reform, was prevalently Merovingian, and no doubt influenced by that of their exemplars. The niceties of syllabification at line-ends were not observed. The a-b scribes seem to have received a sound old-fashioned education."

²³Mayke de Jong has explored the extent to which Radbert crafts a literary persona for himself modeled on the Old Testament prophets, in particular the figure of Jeremiah, as a way to express political discontent and the experience of exile while still remaining loyal. See "Becoming Jeremiah: Paschasius Radbertus on Wala, Himself, and Others," in *Ego Trouble: Authors and Their Identities in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Richard Corradini et al. (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2010), 185–196; Mayke de Jong, "Jeremiah, Job, Terence, and Paschasius Radbertus: Political Rhetoric and Biblical Authority in the *Epitaphium Arsenii*," in *Reading the Bible in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jinty Nelson and Damien Kempf (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 57–76.

²⁴Radbert, *Cogitis me*, I.8.58–64: "Monstratur autem supulcrum eius cernentibus nobis usque ad praesens in uallis Iosaphat medio, quae uallis est inter montem Sion et montem Oliveti posita, quam et tu, o Paula, oculis aspexisti, ubi in eius honore fabricata est ecclesia miro lapideo tabulatu, in qua sepulta fuisse, ut scire potestis ab omnibus, ibidem praedicatur; sed nunc uacuum esse cernentibus ostenditur." The passage, as Ripberger notes, is modeled after a similar passage in Adomnán's *De locis sanctis*.

learning to offer to the nuns herself. Indeed, in a complex passage Radbert alludes to Paula's near-visionary experiences in Bethlehem, as described in Jerome's eulogy of Paula, and Radbert suggests to Theodrada's "daughters" that they should seek her out as someone capable of sharing insights beyond his own.²⁵ In his commentary on Psalm 44 (45), Radbert similarly defers to Imma's spiritual authority over her community, addressing her as *optima nutrix*.²⁶

Moreover, in this later work, Radbert also appears to be very much on his mettle as a Latin stylist, beginning the work with a Virgilian hexameter and closing it with an apology to the nuns for his *rusticitas*.

There is more to this, arguably, than a touch of tactful flattery on Radbert's part. In book one of the commentary on Psalm 44 (45), when he describes to the nuns the difficulties he encountered when he began to fulfill their request, Radbert launches into a long excerpt from Cicero's *De officiis* and a passage recording what Cato had once famously said of Scipio Africanus: "that he was never less idle (*otiosum*) than when idle and never less alone than when alone."²⁷ While Radbert means to use Scipio as a model for monastic life and for the nuns' spiritual development only in this particular respect, it is nevertheless an unusual and striking choice to present to a community of nuns for emulation. Radbert's other quotation from Virgil in the same work, this time from the first *Eclogue*, echoes the same theme: *Deus nobis haec otia fecit*, "God has made this leisure for us." Transplanting the late Roman ideal of *otium* into a monastic context, Radbert evokes the late antique ideal of a sophisticated, leisured correspondence between aristocratic, educated parties.²⁸ However, Radbert's seemingly neutral and detached language

²⁵Radbert, *Cogitis me*, I.5, pp. 110–111: "Sed forte conquesta me delatorem, quod te prodiderim, clamabis. Ad quod ego: Si celatum esse volebas, teste conscientia, mihi narrare, ante praesepium ubi plurimum lacrimata es, non deberes. Quod ut uerum fatear, Christi praeconia, etiamsi uolueris, adiuratus, neque tuas laudes omnino tacere queo. Idcirco tuae te interrogent filiae, quas lacte nutris: tu ea melius reserabis, quae nescio, si per speciem aliquam, certe aut in spiritu uidisti. Vnde uos, o filiae, pulsate matrem precibus; pulsate ad ostium inuitantis amici, si quomodo tandem uobis aperiantur, quae reserata sunt matri." Jerome's eulogy of Paula is Epistola 108, "Epitaphium Sanctae Paulae," *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* (hereafter cited as CSEL) 55, ed. Isidorus Hilberg (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996), 306–351.

²⁶Radbert, *Exp. in Ps. 44*, I.23–25: "Constituta est ergo a Deo dilectissimae et quae fuit filia beatae matris facta est optima nutrix cui totum debemus quod nouimus."

²⁷Radbert, *Exp. in Ps. 44*, I.10, I.26–41, III.1017–1019: "Numquam se minus otiosum esse quam cum otiosus nec minus solum quam cum solus esset." Radbert would use both the Virgilian tag and the same description of Scipio again, though not the extended quotation from *De officiis*, in his commentary on Matthew in the prologue to Bk. 11.

²⁸This is an allusion which, so far as I have been able to discover, appears in no other early medieval writer's text, but which does appear again in Radbert's commentary on Matthew in *Exp. in Ps. 44*, I.175. For the significance of *otium* in a late antique context, see Chris Wickham, *Framing the Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 157–158.

should be read in light of an ongoing and at times vehement conversation in the ninth century about the nature of monastic life. James Williams has recently suggested that one of the hallmarks of reform under Benedict of Aniane was not so much its individual rules and regulations as the Spaniard's broader emphasis on work and manual labor to counteract the creeping effects of *acedia*.²⁹ This aspect of reform was, as one might imagine, fiercely resisted or, if implemented, resented, particularly in aristocratic communities. If Williams is correct, Radbert's glorification of monastic *otium* and his insistence on its paradoxical productivity should be read at least as subversive and possibly as polemical, a mutter of coded protest to the nuns of Soissons against the prevailing culture of work within the Benedictine reform.

III. INTERCESSION, LITURGY, AND DEVOTION

The central patristic model for Radbert's interactions with the nuns of Soissons is the correspondence of Jerome with young ascetic women, and with Paula and Eustochium in particular, just as Jerome's *Epitaph o Paula* would do much to set the tone for Carolingian women's *vitae*.³⁰ Jerome and Paula's positions on the fringes of the late Roman aristocracy made this an ambivalent model even in its own time, juxtaposing as it did Jerome's spiritual and literary authority over Paula with his dependence on Paula's patronage, together with his controversial eulogizing of women's radical asceticism and the perpetual virginity of Mary.³¹ In the letter that would serve as the model for Radbert's commentary on Psalm 44 (45), Jerome could say, on the one hand, that he preferred writing to women, and on the other, that he would not have been writing to women at all if men had asked him similar questions. Women could, however, take advantage of the blessings of God if and where it was perceived that men had neglected them.³² Grudging though this might be, in

²⁹James B. Williams, "Working for Reform: *Acedia*, Benedict of Aniane and the Transformation of Working Culture in Carolingian Monasticism," in *Sin in Medieval and Early Modern Culture: The Tradition of the Seven Deadly Sins*, ed. Richard G. Newhauser and Susan J. Ridyard (York: York Medieval Press, 2012), 19–42.

³⁰Julia Smith, "The Problem of Female Sanctity," 29–30.

³¹For Paula's own vulnerable position among the aristocracy and with regard to her own finances, see Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012), 269–72.

³²Jerome, "Ep. 65," *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Epistulae*, CSEL 54, ed. Isidorus Hilberg (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996), sec. 1–2; Andrew Cain, *The Letters of Jerome: Asceticism, Biblical Exegesis, and the Construction of Christian Authority in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 133–134. See also David Hunter, "The Virgin, The Bride, and the Church: Reading Psalm 45 in Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine," *Church History* 69, no. 2 (2000): 281–303.

practice it opened up an opportunity for women to take a certain amount of initiative with regard to their own spirituality. As Peter Brown has argued, the real radical nature of Jerome's ascetic program lay not so much in the asceticism itself as in its call for privacy; the seclusion of Eustochium simultaneously perpetuated deeply traditional and aristocratic Roman values, yet was potentially troublesome to the clerical hierarchy because it cut her off from their direct supervision.³³ Radbert, significantly, would not replicate Jerome's blistering satires of married life, but he did retain the exclusive ethos of his patristic exemplar and the sense of women's monastic life as a process of perpetual spiritual grooming.

Instead of the collective church and the mediatory role of the Carolingian *doctores*, Radbert focuses on the nature of the community of Soissons itself and the direct access of the nuns to their bridegroom. In his commentary on Psalm 44 (45), Radbert describes the almost palpable connection he believed the chapel to have to the life of heaven whenever I enter in my mind the oratory of the Blessed Virgin Mary, I see that ladder of Jacob raised up by which, I do not in the least hesitate to say, the angels ascend to you and descend, in which place, I do not doubt, is the house of God and the gate of heaven.³⁴ As in his life of Adalhard, in his works for the nuns, Radbert conveys a passionate love of the music of the divine office, which he likens to David's lyre in its ability to drive away demons.³⁵ Radbert makes it clear, in all three works, that the nuns' intercession on his behalf is deeply precious to him, and he is always highly conscious of the value of their liturgical labors: "since no action in present times is more blessed or more true than to be among angelic offices, to be mingled with divine conversations, and to be present among their faces."³⁶ In a very real sense, the intercession and commemoration offered by the nuns was what a Carolingian community of women was *for*. A "powerhouse of prayer," in Peter Brown's phrase, prayer, intercession, and commemoration were significant contributions a cloistered community could make toward the

³³Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 263–265.

³⁴Radbert, *Exp. in Ps. 44*, I.710–714: "Quotienscumque oratorium beatae Mariae Virginis mente ingredior scalam illam Iacob erectam uideo per quam ascendentes ad uos descendentesque angelos minime diffido quo in loco domum Dei portamque celi esse non ambigo."

³⁵Radbert, *Exp. in Ps. 44*, I.127–137: "Probant ad solatium operis datam nobis naturaliter cantilenam. Hinc nautae qui cantu superant maritima discrimina. Hinc immenso ponderi adducunt leuamina canticorum. Hinc uiantes colles arduos facit transcendere sonora uox eremumque transire intrepidus dulcia modulamina cantus. Ac ne multa dicam quidquid durum est operis quidquid laboris asperum dulcis uincit cantilena musici carminis et leue reddit. Sic et uos sanctissimae harmonia huius cantus releuet iugis et excitet mentes. Permulceat uos fistula Daudica. Oblectent animum sponsalia dotis."

³⁶Radbert, *Exp. in Ps. 44*, I.57–59: "Quoniam nulla inpraesentiarum actio beatorum aut uerior quam angelicis interesse officiis et diuinis admisceri colloquiis et aspectibus praesentari."

welfare of the Empire.³⁷ Women's houses large and wealthy enough to be equipped with scriptoria were also responsible for producing liturgical manuscripts, just as they frequently produced liturgical textiles.³⁸ The Old Gelasian Sacramentary was produced around 750 by female scribes, either at Chelles, as Bischoff once posited, or alternately its mother-house at Jouarre, as Rosamond McKitterick has since argued, and it would not be surprising if the nuns of Soissons were similarly engaged.³⁹

IV. SOISSONS AND THEOLOGICAL CONTROVERSY

The community at Soissons was dedicated to the Virgin, and the nuns might be expected to take a certain proprietary interest in matters concerning her, "since," as Radbert tells the nuns, "I do not doubt that you love her very greatly."⁴⁰ The nuns' questions show themselves to be highly aware of contemporary theological controversy. As Leo Scheffczyk noted long ago, the ninth-century controversy over adoptionism, or what might more precisely be called the Carolingian response to the teachings of the Spaniard, Felix of Urgel, provided the immediate impetus for a whole series of questions surrounding the status of the Virgin as *Dei genetrix*. To these polemical concerns the Carolingians responded not only with formal theological treatises, but also with devotion to the Virgin, strengthening the impulse to commemorate in the liturgy the historical events of her birth, death, and, in the absence of her body, her assumption into heaven. As Rachel Fulton has shown, liturgical innovation certainly preceded and inspired Radbert's use of the Song of Songs as a narrative for the Assumption in *Cogitis me*. However, that need not preclude the broader

³⁷Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 219–231; Gisela Muschiol, "Men, Women, and Liturgical Practice," in *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300–900*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Julia Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 209–210.

³⁸Fiona Griffiths, "Like the Sister of Aaron: Medieval Religious Women as Makers and Donors of Liturgical Textiles," in *Female vita religiosa between Late Antiquity and the High Middle Ages: Structures, Developments, and Spatial Contexts*, ed. Gert Melville and Anne Müller (Vienna: Lit Verlag, 2011), 343–374; Maureen Miller, *Clothing the Clergy: Virtue and Power in Medieval Europe, c. 800–1200* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2014)."

³⁹Bernhard Bischoff, "Die Kölner Nonnenhandschriften und das Skriptorium von Chelles," *Mittelalterliche Studien* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1966), 1:16–34, esp. 23–24; Rosamond McKitterick, "Nuns' Scriptoria in Francia and England in the Eighth Century," *Francia* 19, no. 1 (1992): 6–14.

⁴⁰Radbert, *De partu Uirginis*, lines 4–5: "Quoniam uos eam plurimum amare non ambigo." See also Radbert, *Exp. in Ps. 44*, III. 777–780. A relic of the Virgin's slipper just might have been housed at Soissons as early as this period, although Radbert never mentions it. One of the later twelfth-century legends of the house concerning the acquisition of the relic was that it was a gift from Charlemagne to Gisela. Anne L. Clark, "Guardians of the Sacred: the Nuns of Soissons and the Slipper of the Virgin Mary," *Church History* 76, no. 4 (2007), 730n21.

context of the Carolingian response to Felicianism for first inspiring that liturgical innovation. In this light, in *Cogitis me*, when Radbert in his guise as Jerome warns the Soissons nuns about the apocryphal *Transitus Mariae* which might come into their hands, his caution suggests the pressing general interest of questions about Mary, that Theodrada and the Soissons community kept themselves informed about these debates, and that the nuns could acquire an apocryphal text if they thought that it would address these questions.

In all three texts sent to Soissons, Radbert shows himself to be deeply fascinated by these Christological debates arising from the adoptionist controversy and their ramifications for devotion to the Virgin, including in-depth, complex discussion of Trinitarian theology and Christology. However, Radbert's overall approach to the Soissons community suggests that the nuns' questions and concerns, however educated they might be, were urgent, immediate, and personal rather than simply academic. As their patroness, whatever touched Mary touched the identity and spirituality of the nuns. In particular, debates around Mary's perpetual virginity and the status and spiritual cachet of virginity generally speaking could be genuinely agonizing and even potentially explosive in the context of a community of women, many if not all of whom were aristocratic, encompassing a range of ages and sexual experience, many of whom would have been placed in the Soissons community without a clear vocation for the monastic life before—or after—marriages were arranged for them by their families. Radbert himself suggests that he is writing this text in part for the *simpliciores* in the care of "Paula" and "Eustochium" as a reading to accompany their participation in the liturgy, as a pastoral letter aiming to steady and reassure them in their present vocation.⁴¹ The alacrity with which *Cogitis me* was itself taken up into the ongoing Carolingian conversation about Mary shows how well Radbert's letter satisfied contemporary needs: made a lesson at Matins on the Feast of the Assumption by Hincmar of Rheims, the letter, taken to be genuine, quickly achieved popularity and a wide circulation.

It is worth noting that, however cloistered the Soissons community may have been, a work addressed to them could quickly find its way into the intellectual and liturgical bloodstream of the Carolingian world. Likewise, when Theodrada asked Radbert to address the question of the perpetual virginity of Mary, her timing was extremely adroit. Hard on the heels of the

⁴¹Radbert, *Cogitis me*, sec. 2: "Sed quia negare nequeo quicquid iniungitis, nimia uestra deuinctus dilectione experiar quae hortamini affectu, infantium more balbutientium, qui quaecumque audierint, fari gestiunt, cum necdum possint ad plenum uerba formare, maxime quia propter simpliciores quasque id me depromere compellit, ut habeant sermone latino, quibus se occupent laudibus ex eadem die quibus ue diuinis uacent lectionibus, praesertim cum et eadem in multis festiuitatibus multorum sanctorum patrum studia miro cuderunt eloquio, quae de hac quidem uberius ubique in scripturis diuinis praedicata leguntur."

eucharistic controversy, Theodrada's request allowed Radbert an opening to respond to the arguments of his fellow monk, Ratramnus of Corbie.⁴² To counter Ratramnus, Radbert resurrected the fourth-century dispute between Jerome and Helvidius, who had questioned the post-partum virginity of Mary, and recast the ninth-century debate in those terms, with Ratramnus portrayed as the late antique heretic and himself cast, however unworthily, in the dual roles of Jerome and Ambrose.⁴³ Significantly, in the eucharistic controversy proper, Radbert had rededicated the second version of *De corpore et sanguine Domini* to Charles the Bald, but in debating the perpetual virginity of Mary, it is not the king but the nuns of Soissons who enable and embolden him in his task:

But I pray, most consecrated virgins of Christ, through the mediation of your merits, that He Who granted to him [Jerome] such skill in speaking and strength in fighting against adversaries, may also deign to give me grace in speaking, and grant it to me to open those things which are worthy of this mystery in the spirit of truth, insofar as I, who am supported by no merits of my own, may be found so greatly worthy, from both directions by you and for your sake, o *matronae* of Christ, that I might be able to defend fitly the chastity of the mother of my Lord and to lay bare the truth to those not believing rightly, so they might come to their senses and cease to speak falsehood any further.⁴⁴

⁴²In sixteenth-century polemic, the Eucharistic controversy was frequently portrayed as a turning point in the theology of the medieval church, with Ratramnus idealized by Heinrich Bullinger, Nicholas Ridley, and Thomas Cranmer, among others, as a proto-Protestant road not traveled. This is a deeply anachronistic view, and obscures the degree to which other points of view were available in the ninth century and were even actively solicited by Charles the Bald before he ratified Radbert's position, but which may not have survived. That being said, even if it had not been Ratramnus's intent to attack Radbert directly (as, indeed, it seems not to have been, since his treatise was composed several years after Radbert's own *De corpore et sanguine Domini*), Radbert in 846 was clearly smarting from the degree of controversy his eucharistic work had garnered, and he is openly confrontational and even polemical in his dealings with Ratramnus in *De partu Uirginis*.

⁴³Radbert, *De partu Uirginis*, Bk. 1, lines 10–17: "Pro qua iam olim beatum Hieronymum contra Heluidium haereticum et contra eius complices scripsisse legimus, quos ita debellauit ac deiecit ut deinceps usque ad praesens nihil recidium erroris contra eam surrexit. Sed quia nunc quorundam fratrum rursus impudica quasi peruncctando laborat temeritas, decreui ad uos, Matrona Christi, de his scribere, quae ipsi curiosius contra eius pudicitiam quam religiosius conantur explorare." See also Bk. 1, 215–230, 583–594; Bk. 2, 2–15. For the controversy between Helvidius and Jerome and the broader contours of the debate, including the polemical and polarizing role of Ambrose, see David G. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), esp. at 187–192.

⁴⁴Radbert, *De partu Uirginis*, I.614–622: "Oro autem, sacratissimae uirgines Christi, uestris interuenientibus meritis ut qui illi tantam praestitit dicendi peritiam et debellandi aduersarios fortitudinem, mihi quoque dare dignetur loquendi gratiam, et quae digna sunt huic mysterio aperire in spiritu ueritatis, quatenus hinc inde per uos et propter uos, O matronae Christi, dignus inueniar tantopere qui meis nullis suffragor meritis, ut apte defendere queam matris Domini mei pudicitiam et non sane credentibus pandere ueritatem, ut respiscant et cessent iam ultra loqui falsitatem."

Radbert is, of course, invoking the trope of the humility of the monastic writer, but, nevertheless, he addressed the nuns in such a way as to suggest that they were not merely passive recipients of his teaching, but also his supporters in controversy who cast themselves as fellow defenders of the Virgin.

V. WIDOWS, VIRGINS, AND DEVOTION TO THE VIRGIN MARY

In this passage, Radbert addresses himself to both consecrated virgins and *matronae*, or widows, and is actually quite respectful about the spiritual status of the latter. In both *Cogitis me* and *De partu Uirginis*, in fact, as well as in the *Life of Adalhard*, Radbert is extremely supportive of widows in monastic life and sympathetic toward their contributions. At the same time, he repeatedly portrays the Virgin as the ideal model for both virgins and widows, arguing that the Virgin exemplifies both the purity of virgins and the fruitfulness of the married. In *Cogitis me*, Radbert enjoins the nuns to “imitate she whom you love, imitate the blessed and glorious Virgin, whose feast you celebrate today,” and goes on to make it clear that his words are applicable to everyone, “whichever of you are young women, whichever of you are mothers”⁴⁵ For Radbert, the performance of the liturgy became such a conduit of divine grace that it had the potential, if not to erase distinctions between groups, then certainly to create community around and in spite of them:

Therefore, dearest ones, because the way of our salvation is in the praises of the Savior, I urge and remind you, on this holy festivity of Mary the bearer of God: do not cease from [her] praises. But if you are a virgin, rejoice that you have deserved to be, even you, that which you praise; only take care that you may be someone who is fit to praise worthily. If, rather, you are continent and chaste, honor and give praise, because it does not come about through any other source that you may be chaste other than from the grace of Christ, which existed most fully in Mary, whom you praise. If, rather, you are married, or even a sinner (*peccatrix*), nevertheless confess and give praise, since from that source mercy has flowed out to all and grace that they may give praise.⁴⁶

In the concluding sections of the treatise, the two modes of religious life for women, with the Virgin as the most perfect model for both, become

⁴⁵Radbet, *Cogitis me*, sec. 81–82. See also sec. 21–22.

⁴⁶Radbert, *Cogitis me*, sec. 35: “Propterea, carissimae, quia iter salutis nostrae in laudibus est salvatoris, hortor uos et commoneo in hac sacra sollemnitatem genetricis Dei Mariae, nolite cessare a laudibus. Quod si uirgo es, gaude quia meruisti esse et tu, quod laudas; tantum cura, ut sis quae digne laudare possis. Quod si continens et casta, uenerare et lauda, quia non aliunde constat, ut possis esse casta, quam ex gratia Christi, quae fuit plenissime in Maria, quam laudas. Quod si coniugata, certe aut peccatrix, nihilominus confitere et lauda, quoniam inde misericordia omnibus profluxit et gratia, ut laudent.”

Radbert's central theme, and he returns to Paula and Eustochium, too, as historical types of the virgins and the married for the nuns to imitate.⁴⁷ Similarly, in *De partu Uirginis*, Radbert is able to appeal to the nuns' own experience as women to inflect their devotion to Mary, while at the same time setting the Virgin categorically apart from both virgins and widows:

Because we men do not know the nature of that sex, let us question the virgins, and let us also question the matrons joined in marriage. The virgins indeed, so that we may know what the intact nature (*integritas*) of flesh and blood is; but the married, [so that we may know] if there is any corruption or suffering in giving birth, if contamination of the blood and reception of seed has not preceded it. For we do not freely disturb your modesty, dear ones, who do not speak about these things without great shame; but the honor of outstanding piety is yours and the glory of virtue, to proclaim the incorrupt and unpolluted chastity of the most blessed Virgin and to confess her free from all taint of original sin. Concerning her, if we should ask the virgins, they know the grace of incorruption, but they do not know the fertility of offspring. But if we should ask those given in marriage, they know indeed the labors and groans of the curse of Eve, just as they also know the fertility of seed among afflictions and sadnesses, but they do not know the intact nature of virginity, neither in conception nor in birth. But the blessed Mother of the Lord remained a virgin in both, that is, as a mother in conception and as a virgin in birth, because contaminated in neither of these [states] she was a model to the rest of women⁴⁸

As John Williams has shown, differences in ninth-century gynecological theory between Spanish adoptionists and the Carolingians—namely, one-versus two-seed theories of reproduction—had a direct impact on their respective understandings of the role of the Virgin in the Incarnation and, in turn, on

⁴⁷Radbert, *Cogitis me*, sec. 106: "Rogo uos o uirgines, rogo et uiduae, imitami Paulam, matrem uiduam, exemplar continentiae et chastitatis; imitami Eustochium, quam habetis uobiscum uirginem et formam perfectae integritatis. Quodsi minus in illis est quam in matre Domini, immo quia est, habetis prole fecundam et uirginem perpetuam."

⁴⁸Radbert, *De partu Uirginis*, I.343–361: "Alioquin nos uiri quia nescimus illius sexus naturam, interrogemus uirgines, interrogemus aequae et matronas coniugio copulatas. Virgines siquidem, ut sciamus quid sit integritas carnis et sanguinis; coniugatas uero si est ulla corruptio in partu aut dolor, nisi praecesserit sanguinis contaminatio et seminis susceptio. Non enim libenter uobis uerecundiam incutimus, carissimae, qui non sine magno pudore de his loquimur; sed eximiae pietatis honor est uobis, et decus uirtutis beatissimae uirginis pudicitiam praedicare incorruptam et incontaminatam, et ab omni contagione primae originis confiteri alienam. De qua, si interrogemus uirgines, norunt incorruptionis gratiam, sed nesciunt fecunditatem prolis. Si uero quaeramus apud coniugio dedicatas, sciunt quidem maledictionis Euae pressuras et gemitus, sicut et inter aerumnas et tristitias fecunditatem seminis, sed nesciunt integritatem uirginitatis, nec in conceptu nec in partu. Beata uero mater Domini in utroque uirgo permansit, id est in conceptu mater et in partu uirgo, quia in nullo horum contaminata reliquarum exemplo feminarum fuit."

their Christologies.⁴⁹ For Radbert, the Virgin was not merely a conduit of divinity, but the bearer of God, in whose physical body and blood Christ shared. As in anti-adoptionist polemic, which stressed the special nature of Christ in comparison with humanity, Radbert repeatedly emphasizes, in both *Cogitis me* and *De partu Virginis*, the extent to which the Virgin is qualitatively different from other, ordinary women; however, it is precisely because of that difference that it is possible for the Virgin to be appropriated through devotion by virgins and widows alike.

Theodrada herself had, of course, been previously married, and almost certainly other prominent and aristocratic widows played an important role in a community like Soissons. Particularly when contrasted with Jerome's acid screeds, Radbert's insistence on the place of the married within Soissons suggests a tactful acceptance of social reality among the ninth-century Carolingian aristocracy.⁵⁰ Radbert shared with Louis the Pious and the legislators at the Council of Paris biblically derived notions of the king's responsibilities toward widows from which Louis's legislation had sprung. Radbert's encouragement of widows likely reflects the Benedictine reformers' insistence, in turn, that widows become a formal part of cloistered monastic communities instead of setting up for themselves, but it may equally show Radbert's experience of the complex strategies that wealthy widows employed to maintain some control over property, in which relationships with individual monasteries like Corbie and Soissons often played prominent roles.⁵¹ Radbert alludes to the important, and probably steady, influence exerted by older, married women within Carolingian nunneries, suggesting that both grades were necessary and mutually reinforcing elements in community life:

Therefore, widows are always well joined together with virgins, as the apostle says: "The unwed woman and the virgin thinks on those things which are the Lord's, so that she might be holy in body and spirit" [1 Cor. 7:34]. For in a certain way the school of virginity grows and is strengthened by examples of widows who have preserved chaste marriage with men. They teach that integrity should be all the more preserved by virgins to God, and they teach that it is almost of no less virtue to abstain from marriage, which has at one time given delight, than not to know the

⁴⁹James B. Williams, "The Adoptive Son of God, The Pregnant Virgin, and the Fortification of the True Faith: Heterodoxy, The Cult of The Virgin, and Benedict of Aniane in the Carolingian Age" (Ph.D. diss., Purdue University, 2009), 114–137.

⁵⁰As Wemple noted, hagiographers of the "new type of Carolingian female saint" frequently stressed her dutiful submission to her parents through marriage rather than the heroic maintenance and protection of her virginity, while the legislation of Louis the Pious repeatedly called for improved care for widows. Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 103, 257–258n29.

⁵¹Janet Nelson, "The Wary Widow," in *Property and Power in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Wendy Davies and Paul Fouracre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 82–113.

delights of marriage. In either grade, accordingly, firmness is praised, and the strength of heavenly life is proclaimed.⁵²

In small monastic communities, perceived differences in the spiritual status of virgins and widows almost certainly created lingering resentments and factionalism over time, and in all his works dedicated to Soissons, Radbert's pastoral approach aims to create consensus among the community. Radbert's tolerance almost certainly draws on the thought of Gregory the Great, which accepted the existence of multiple forms of life within the church, but nevertheless, the extent to which he encourages virgins and widows to aid one another is striking, particularly his sympathetic understanding of the difficulties of chaste life for the previously married, and his view that widows had any spiritual counsel whatsoever to offer.

VI. RADBERT'S COMMENTARY ON PSALM 44 (45) AND THE BENEDICTINE REFORM

When Radbert undertook his commentary on Psalm 44 (45), he was, very characteristically, attempting something that was simultaneously original and deeply traditional. His most immediate literary model was a fairly lengthy letter of Jerome to a young woman named Principia—not Eustochium, but clearly of her ilk—and Radbert also draws on such familiar patristic authorities as Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos* and Cassiodorus's *Expositio psalmorum*.⁵³ But to compose a three-book, free-standing commentary on a single psalm, and, moreover, to direct that commentary very explicitly to a community of nuns, was nevertheless an unprecedented feat for a Carolingian theologian. As with *Cogitis me*, the immediate cause for Theodrada's original request appears to have been to reinforce already existing liturgical practice. Psalm 44 (45) is an epithalamium and, like the Song of Songs, it contains extensive descriptions of the beauty of its two main figures, the king and his young bride, enjoined to "forget your people and your father's house" as she enters this new phase of her life.⁵⁴ The psalm would have recurred with some frequency, of course, in the nuns'

⁵²Radbert, *Cogitis me*, sec. 113: "Ideo uiduae semper uirginibus bene copulantur, ut ait apostolus: *Mulier innupta et uirgo cogitat quae sunt Domini, ut sit sancta corpore ac spiritu*. Quodammodo enim magisterium uirginitatis uiduarum gliscit et confortatur exemplis, quae cum uiris castum seruauerunt connubium docent integritatem magis uirginibus Deo seruandam, et quod prope modum non inferioris uirtutis est coniugio abstinere, quod aliquando delectauerit, quam coniugii delectamenta nescire. In utroque siquidem gradu fortitudo laudatur, et caelestis uitae praedicatur uirtus."

⁵³Jerome, "Ep. 65," *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Epistulae*, CSEL 54, ed. Isidorus Hilberg (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996), 616–647.

⁵⁴For an exploration of this, see Härdelin, "An Epithalamium for Nuns," 84–90.

performance of the Office, and in later years it would form an important part of the Common of Virgins.⁵⁵ In the course of the commentary, however, Radbert repeatedly refers to the psalm as the nuns' *titulum dotis*, or "deed of dower" in their marriage to Christ, and his commentary as the epithalamium celebrating the marriage, the *carmen pro nuptiis*.⁵⁶ *Dos* would have been a highly charged term for Radbert to use, potentially referring either to the gift to a bride from her bridegroom, the dower, or as a gift to a bride from her parents, the dowry. To refer to a piece of scripture as the deed of *dos* of the nuns suggests that Radbert intended the first of these possible meanings: the psalm as the documentary promise of Christ's future dower of the nuns. For Carolingian aristocratic women, the dower was the part of a woman's property most unquestionably hers outright, to keep or dispose of as she, and she alone, wished.⁵⁷ As such, Radbert's use of the term would have been intended to have a powerful, even visceral, impact on his female audience, arguing, as Jerome had once done, for the paradoxically liberating power of claustration. Moreover, it also suggests that Psalm 44 (45) was associated with, and in all likelihood sung, during the ceremony of the *consecratio virginum* itself, which increasingly in this period north of the Alps imitated many of the conventions of secular marriage.⁵⁸ As with his other works to the nuns, the commentary on Psalm 44 (45) is interspersed with passages of direct, even impassioned, speech in which Radbert addresses the nuns directly in the second person, suggesting that the commentary was intended not so much as a reference work as a piece to be read aloud—in chapter, for example. If this were indeed the case, then the collective reading of Radbert's commentary would have given the nuns a way to commemorate and reaffirm the moment of their own *consecratio* at the same time as they meditated on the words of the biblical text.

Alongside the intimate, personal meaning Psalm 44 would have had for the nuns, the text had a wider, more corporate resonance within the Carolingian reform and the monastic reforms of Benedict of Aniane. A paraphrase of Psalm 44:11, *Obsculta, o filii, praecepta magistri, et inclina aurem cordis tui*, forms the opening words of the Benedictine Rule, although the original text of the psalm would have addressed the young bride of the psalm—*Audi, filia*—rather than Benedict's male hearers.⁵⁹ In all, the text's editor, Paulus, has traced at least twenty-two extracts from the Rule that appear in Radbert's commentary on Psalm 44 (45), some employed multiple times. Radbert's

⁵⁵See Fulton, "Quae est ista," 74n48.

⁵⁶Radbert, *Exp. in Ps. 44*, 1.94–97, and continuing on at lines 100–124, 1.368–375.

⁵⁷Nelson, "The Wary Widow," 85–87.

⁵⁸René Metz, *La consécration des vierges dans l'église Romaine: étude d'histoire de la liturgie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954), 188–190, 206–212.

⁵⁹*Benedicti Regula*, CSEL 75, ed. Rudolf Hanslik (Vienna: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1960), prologue, sec. 1.

commentary, therefore, should probably be understood in parallel with other Carolingian commentaries on the Rule by Hildemar and Smaragdus of St. Mihiel, and with the commentaries on the liturgy by Amalarius of Metz and Walahfrid Strabo. At the same time, however, Radbert never refers to the Rule or to (either) Benedict directly, integrating his quotations and paraphrases from it into the text of the commentary. This certainly suggests that Radbert and the nuns of Soissons were so deeply familiar with the Rule that its language had been internalized. At the same time, the use of the language of the Rule may have been a tacit argument that meddling intrusion from outside the community was unnecessary. In a passage in book one, for example, Radbert drops single phrases (here italicized) from the Rule into a discussion of the nature of monastic life at Soissons: “For what else is this house, dear ones, in which you dwell, other than the *fortress of God* and the *school of divine service*, the *workshop* of the virtues, the tower of eternal contemplation, the defense of perpetual chastity.”⁶⁰

Radbert’s commentary envisions the life of the community at Soissons, therefore, in terms consistent with the Benedictine reform: the nuns “never less alone than when alone,” suggesting claustration had been imposed, with a significant number of both widows and young women living under the Rule. The psalm was particularly associated with the ceremony of the nuns’ own *consecratio*; taken as a whole, the commentary ultimately becomes a kind of apologia for women in regular monastic life, intended to build on, and perhaps to go beyond, the mere observance of the Rule itself.⁶¹ Throughout the first book of the commentary, part of Radbert’s rhetorical strategy is to provide the nuns with an elaborate sequence of images by which they were supposed to understand the life they had chosen: the wise virgins of the gospel parable, the *adulescentulas* of the Song of Songs, the classic patristic metaphor of bees in a beehive, gathering honey from the fields of scripture.⁶² Radbert continually likens the nuns to lilies, “the flowers of Christ and the lilies of the churches,” imitating Christ, the lily of the valley of the Song of Songs, “who browses among the lilies,” the lilies whose whiteness stands in contrast to the roses of the Soissons martyrs

⁶⁰Radbert, *Exp. in Ps. 44*, I.756–762: “Quid enim aliud est carissimae domus haec in qua degitis quam *castra Dei* et *schola* diuini *seruittii*, *officina* uirtutum, *turris* aeternae contemplationis, *custodia* perpetuae castitatis. Ideo ergo recte *castra* quia *casta*. Nec immerito quia *conuersatio* uestra *militia* caelestis est *diciplinae* et *genus fortissimum* monachorum ubi uirginitas excellit et frequentia propter excubias summi Regis discurrit angelorum.”

⁶¹Radbert, *Exp. in Ps. 44*, II.870–875: “In eo gloriare in quo est omnis innovatio uitae et nobilitas generis qua nouitate renati ac si in specie et pulchritudine Christi oportet intendas ne in ullo foedetur honor caelestis et decus pulchritudinis. Quinimmo uirgo es intende. Monacha es intende. Uidua uel sanctimonialis intende. Deinde prospere procede de uirtute in uirtutum.”

⁶²Radbert, *Exp. in Ps. 44*, I.156–160, I. 590–593, I.658–665.

Crispin and Crispinianus.⁶³ Radbert seems particularly pleased by analogies of flowers: he encourages the nuns to consider the flowers with which the church is adorned, the “humble violets” and, most charmingly, certain “yellow flowers,” probably daisies or sunflowers, which follow the sun’s progress across the sky.⁶⁴ Radbert plays on and even emphasizes the comparison between his daisies and the secluded condition of the nuns: “And if, as though at night, you shut yourselves up (*clausistis*), most dear ones, it is so that, because you do not know the darkness, at the rise of the eternal sun, as if reborn, you will soon be able to receive the light.”⁶⁵ Later in book one, he repeats the same verb, admitting that, to some degree, he was trying to avert potential claustrophobia among the community: “And so I ask,” he says, “so that that place where you have shut yourselves in (*clausistis*), most dear ones, may not seem narrow to you, since the house of the Lord into which you have entered is huge and great.”⁶⁶ Even such an enthusiast for spiritual withdrawal as Radbert had to concede that complete claustration had the potential to be stifling.

Radbert’s understanding of the exalted condition of the nuns, like that of the Virgin, arises out of, and is contingent upon, his Christology: the nature of the *Sponsus* defines the nature and status of his *sponsae*. As a consequence, Radbert returns again and again, particularly in book two, to the importance of the nuns’ correct and creedal understanding of the nature of Christ, as expressed through the language of Psalm 44 (45) and the Song of Songs, with book two corresponding to the first half of the psalm text, which focuses on the person of the Bridegroom.⁶⁷ Book three of Radbert’s commentary corresponds to the second half of Psalm 44 (45), which focuses on the person of the young bride of the king, and Radbert uses the language of the psalm to underscore the royal status of the nuns and the exalted nature of their chosen way of life, provided that they persevere within the community at Notre Dame. Throughout book three, he addresses the nuns as *uos felices*, “you fortunate ones,” perhaps as a classicizing alternative to

⁶³I.93–94, I.170–187, I.228–237, I.512–522: “Uere flores Christi estis et ecclesiarum lilia.”

⁶⁴“Sunt etenim in ipso eodemque agro Euangelii lilia rosae nardus et crocus humilesque uiolae quae suo uincunt purpuram regis muriceam colore. Sunt et heliotropii flores qui profecto gaudent ad ortum solis cuius colorantur intus forisue folgore et sequuntur quantum fas est post uestigia ita ut nesciant nisi solem inspicere.” Radbert, *Exp. in Ps. 44*, I.576–581. See also II.442–443, in which he again encourages the nuns to think of themselves as these “yellow flowers.”

⁶⁵Radbert, *Exp. in Ps. 44*, I.582–584: “Idcirco ac si nocte uos clausistis carissimae ut ad ortum solis aeterni mox ac si renatae quia tenebras nescistis possitis suscipere lumen.”

⁶⁶Radbert, *Exp. in Ps. 44*, I.724–726: “Et ideo quaeso ne uideatur uobis locus iste angustus ubi uos clausistis carissimae quoniam ingens et magna domus Dei est ad quam intrastis.”

⁶⁷Radbert, *Exp. in Ps. 44*, II.601–604: “Iste igitur est sponsus uester carissimae ut ipse sit Deus uobis et sponsus qui homo est idemque homo qui Deus est uerus et proprius Dei Filius. Iste est ille de Canticis dilectus uester candidus et rubicundus.”

beatae, even repeating himself at times to drive the point home.⁶⁸ The bride of Psalm 44 (45) is *regina exaltata, filia renata et adoptata, coniux*; “And let not the unfaithful soul say,” Radbert cautions, “that this crown is not mine but is promised in common to one and all,” which suggests that such objections did, in fact, occur to Carolingian nuns, and that the individual possession of their heavenly dower did matter considerably to them.⁶⁹ As in *Cogitis me* and *De partu Uirginis*, Radbert speaks to all grades of women within Soissons, assuring them of their place within the community. To those who had once fallen, *meretricabatur post idola fornicationis*, they had been made faithful, having chosen the “so-tiny nook of confined Soissons,” *angulum tantum angustae Suessionis*.⁷⁰ In one passage Radbert speaks directly to the child oblates among the community of Soissons, urging them to continue in the monastic life:

Therefore, sister, let not the vows of your parents, who have chosen what is better [cf. Mary and Martha, Luke 10:41–42], displease you. Rather consider carefully what you owe to your parents, and what to God. . . . And so, most beloved ones, complete in yourselves the fortunate (*felicicia*) vows of your parents. Complete what you vowed to God. . . . Before you left the womb of your mother, you began to be the spouse of Him in an eternal bond. Therefore it is fitting that all of us might be His—but you especially, because you were promised from your parents, because you accepted the deed of dower [*titulum dotis*] so that you might remain, fortunately [*feliciter*] consecrated in virginity to a virgin spouse. Therefore all things which were promised in this epithalamium of dower are prepared for you.”⁷¹

In this passage, Radbert may be more or less delicately privileging the claims of the religious life and the past promises of the oblates’ parents over those parents’ potential future claims, should they belatedly attempt to withdraw their young daughters from the community.

⁶⁸Radbert, *Exp. in Ps. 44*, III.79–88, III.175–180, III.377–379, III.934–946.

⁶⁹Radbert, *Exp. in Ps. 44*, III.264–266: “Et ne dicat infidelis animus non mihi haec corona sed in commune una omnibus repromittitur.”

⁷⁰Radbert, *Exp. in Ps. 44*, III.423–437.

⁷¹Radbert, *Exp. in Ps. 44*, III.664–686: “Idcirco non displiceant tibi soror parentum uota qui tibi id quod melius est elegerunt. Immo considera diligentius quid parentibus debeas quid Deo. . . Ita est uos dilectissimae complete in uobis felicia parentum uota. Complete quae uouistis Deo. . . Cuius adnatequam de uulua matris exiretis, esse coepistis sponsae foedere aeterno. Ideo licet [nos] omnes nos eius simus uos tamen specialiter quia uota parentum estis quae dotis titulum accepistis ut uirginitate feliciter consecratae permaneat. Quoniam omnia in hoc dotis epithalamio quae promissa sunt parata sunt uobis.”

VII. WOMEN'S MONASTICISM, CLAUSTRATION, AND SPIRITUALITY

The constant tension in monastic life, rarely resolved, between the ideal of solitude and the reality of layers of community and social ties in which a community was embedded, has often been hardest on women's houses, simultaneously the least capable of surviving independently and the most criticized for failing to live up to the ideal. At the same time, seclusion for women's houses has often been a deeply ambivalent ideal: alternately empowering and isolating, seeming to posit an independent value for women's existence and spirituality apart from society, and then cutting them off from the vitality of that society necessary to keep a community functioning healthily in practice. In the tradition of Paula and Eustochium, seclusion for women was the aristocratic prerogative of wealthy widows, a feasible and even a desirable and admirable course for them to follow. For all of the misogyny of which Jerome has stood accused, he was far too ambitious and adept not to advocate a way of life that would have been flattering on some level to his female audience, his social superiors, even if it set him at odds with the broader circles of Christian society. Five hundred years later, the secluded lifestyle Jerome eulogized was not open to everyone, but for those for whom it was an option, we should not automatically assume that it was not still appealing, particularly where aristocratic ideals and values also remained very much alive. In Radbert's hands, his portrayal of monastic life might well have been attractive to certain communities of aristocratic nuns, particularly when seclusion did not necessarily mean intellectual isolation and they felt that their performance of the liturgy was recognized as being of spiritual benefit to their families and to the empire as a whole. How the Soissons nuns felt about the imposition of full claustration, we do not and cannot know, but responses were, no doubt, as variegated as the cases of the individual women themselves.

Overall, Radbert's commentary on Psalm 44 (45) suggests a felt need to provide a Carolingian women's community with a powerful rationale for claustration, detailing the spiritual benefits that would accrue to the nuns if they maintained their way of life. In particular, their seclusion is understood to heighten their spiritual contributions made through liturgy and commemorative prayer. Almost inevitably, therefore, Radbert's model, like Jerome before him and the Cistercians after him, emphasizes the value of the spiritual experience of the individual soul, to which Radbert added weight by illustrating its near-mystical relation to its bridegroom, Christ. To praise a life of claustration, to describe it in terms of heroic solitude, almost necessitates placing a value on women's spirituality independent of their involvement in society. That this same emphasis appears in other works of Carolingian hagiography, as Julia Smith has shown, suggests that Radbert's

writings participated in broader Carolingian conceptions of sanctity for religious women, even if those were not as fervid or stylized as Radbert's efforts for the nuns of Soissons. A large part of these shared conceptions must stem from Jerome's influence, unimpeachable and widely recognized, although Radbert was hardly a slavish imitator of his patristic model.

We need further research to enrich our still very shadowy understanding of the experience of Carolingian religious women. But it seems clear, nevertheless, that Radbert's continuous involvement and dialogue with the community of nuns at Soissons deeply impacted his conception of monastic life as a bridal relationship with Christ. Originally crafted for its female audience at Soissons, the ideal could be reappropriated and made applicable to the experience of male abbots like Adalhard and to Radbert himself in a chaotic political landscape. One could take refuge in the cultivation of a personal, individual, direct response to Christ the Bridegroom and to the Virgin Mary, with the poetry of the Song of Songs acting as both script and emotional touchstone. Given the similarities between these works of Radbert for the Soissons community and later works of twelfth-century spirituality, it is at least worth asking the extent to which Bernard of Clairvaux and others adopted, adapted, or were influenced by Radbert's model. And if so, it is worth remembering that the individualistic and bridal spirituality of Bernard of Clairvaux was based on an ideal of the monastic life originally intended for, in the late antique and early medieval period, and rooted in the experience of aristocratic women, and that Bernard was following in Radbert's footsteps in his recognition that an ideal predominantly associated with women's religious experience could, in fact, be universal.