CAROLINE FORD'S *DIVIDED HOUSES* makes an important contribution to the study of political culture in nineteenth-century France. Examining the Catholic revival that followed the French Revolution, Ford shows the impact that women’s prominent role in religious life had on the development of French republicanism. The entrance of large numbers of women into religious orders, she argues, engendered both fears and conflicts that ultimately “contributed to the principle of *laïcité* that came to be enshrined in the French secular culture.” (6) The book thus brings together two bodies of scholarship—one on the feminization of religion and the other on the formation of a *laic* political discourse and culture—that are seldom linked. In doing so, Ford makes gender central to the discussion of France’s development as a modern republic and nation-state.

Historians of nineteenth-century France have long been aware of male republican anxieties around the perceived religiosity of Catholic women. Such anxieties, found in works by Jules Michelet among others, often portrayed these women as the dupes of antimodern priests who longed for the return of the French monarchy. Interestingly, Ford takes this clichéd view of the Catholic woman seriously even as she seeks to complicate it by analyzing how women’s devotion, especially their decision to enter religious orders, was interpreted by middle-class secular republicans as a threat to paternal authority, to the integrity of the family and to property relations. Focusing on the period from the 1820s to the 1860s, Ford organizes her study around four microhistories that examine moments of conflict involving devout women’s civil rights and their commitment to the Catholic Church. Three explore legal cases in which a woman chose to pursue her individual rights in court while a fourth looks at the rise and fall of the popular cult of Sainte Philomène in the mid-nineteenth century.

Chapter One examines the image of the devout woman that emerged during the French Revolution. Drawing on the recent scholarship on women in this period, Ford shows how revolutionaries transformed a “laudatory discourse” about women’s natural religious tendencies into a weapon to denigrate their counterrevolutionary
enemies. (36) As revolutionaries assailed religious belief and male adversaries of the Republic, the unreasoning, hysterical *femme fanatique* came to symbolize counterrevolution itself. Such imagery would have long-term consequences for women and men in nineteenth-century France.

Subsequent chapters of *Divided Houses* explore these consequences with regard to women’s civil status and republican politics. Ford is particularly interested in the ambiguous status of female religious congregations under the Napoleonic Code, which gave the women who joined religious orders a great deal of autonomy from paternal authority. Chapters Two, Three and Five examine instances in which devout women attempted to exercise individual rights and the great tumult such behavior sparked in the larger society. Each of the chapters explores a private family drama that became a public affair as government authorities debated the matter and pamphleteers sought to profit from such scandals by publishing popular tracts of the case. Through a close reading of governmental debates, pamphlets and legal texts, Ford reveals how these various cases were themselves inscribed within the period’s melodramatic literature of claustration and seduction. In this way, liberal thinkers and anticlerical republicans tended to refigure the fanatic Catholic woman into a threatening (even villainous) presence in nineteenth-century society.

Chapter Two examines the case of Emily Loveday, a Protestant convert to Catholicism who fled an angry father’s home for a convent in Restoration France. The father petitioned the French government to regain custody, claiming that his daughter had been seduced into conversion by fanatical women who ran her boarding school. Analyzing the ensuing conflict over Emily Loveday’s right to choose her religion, Ford demonstrates the contradictory positions taken by both liberals and conservatives alike. Liberals willingly abandoned their support for individual liberty when they chose to support the father’s right to reclaim his daughter. Meanwhile, conservatives championed Loveday’s right to follow her conscience, discarding their belief in paternal authority.

The anticlerical obsession with forced incarceration (claustration) is the subject of Chapter Three. Here, Ford analyzes the case of Jeanne-Françoise Le Monnier, who sued her religious order in 1845 for illegally confining her in the convent and later in an insane asylum. The lawyer who pressed the suit clearly drew on the imagery and language of captivity found in the popular gothic literature of the day. Analyzing the case as part of the social imagery of the period, Ford argues that for
The emancipation of the confined nun came to embody the urgent need to limit the power of the Church by secularizing society. The question of property relations and the Church during the Second Empire is taken up in Chapter Five. Ford examines a suit brought by Madame de Guerry/Sister Ester against her religious order for restitution of the dowry she had brought to the convent. In this case, the lawyer used the language of individual rights to argue for the inviolability of private property and to claim that civil law took precedence over ecclesiastical law. Using the suit to explore the ambiguities around women’s rights to own property, Ford suggests that the case revealed republican fears over both the hidden wealth of female congregations and the impotence of paternal authority to maintain the family patrimony. In this sense, the anticlerical sentiment of Second-Empire liberals had much to do with their desire to solidify their power over the private realm of the family, especially their female kin.

Sandwiched between Ford’s chapters on the legal cases is an exploration of the nature of female religious devotion. Chapter Four turns to the rise and fall of the cult of Sainte Philomène in the mid-to-late-nineteenth century. Allegedly tortured and killed for resisting the sexual advances of Emperor Diocletian, Sainte Philomène’s history was manufactured out of archaeological remains found in the Roman catacombs and from a series of visionary accounts. Ford interprets the cult in relation to other popular narratives of sexual danger, and she concludes that Philomène’s appeal to women lay in her resistance to sexual violence. Interestingly, she shows that Philomène’s story shared a similar language and imagery of sexual danger with secular accounts of women “martyred” during the French Revolution. For Ford, such similarities suggest that “the female image was at the symbolic center of the postrevolutionary struggle between the Catholic Church and a secularizing state.”

Ford’s analysis of Sainte Philomène attempts to show the lived experience of religiosity for devout women. Yet, its place in the book is awkward and does little to further her overall argument. Ford does not discuss how women’s embrace of the saint shaped anticlerical fears of the Catholic woman. Furthermore, if these women did feel a constant sense of sexual danger, was this danger located within the family? Ford does not say. Even as an examination of lived religiosity, the chapter falls a little short of the mark, as an extensive analysis delineating the Church’s active promotion of the cult comes at the expense of understanding how Philomène was incorporated into women’s devotional practices.
The weakness of Chapter Four reflects a larger problem with the book’s format as a series of stand-alone microhistories. Although Ford convincingly conveys that her chosen cases reflect broader cultural anxieties and social conflicts, the historical specificity of each chapter often obscures the larger argument, making the book somewhat disjointed. The three legal cases, for example, are only vaguely linked “by a ‘ramifying chain of historical concerns.’” (10) Ultimately, Ford is less interested in explaining how her cases became implicated in the larger politics of late nineteenth-century anticlericalism than she is in exploring “how the concerns of a particular society at a given historical moment came to be articulated.” (9-10) In this sense, Ford’s study is best at analyzing isolated moments of conflict than at explaining long-term changes in the development of anticlericalism.

Despite these limitations, Ford’s *Divided Houses* makes an important argument about the gendered nature of republican secularism. Her close readings of language and the law enable her to tease out the cultural landscapes within which family dramas became public spectacles. In doing so, she effectively demonstrates how private conflicts over women’s religious commitments played an important role in shaping the discourse and imagery of republican anticlericalism. She also establishes that as early as the 1820s, female congregations came to be seen as a threat to paternal authority within the family and even to the power of the state. In this sense, Ford makes clear that women’s actions—from joining a religious order to bringing a legal suit—need to be incorporated into historical treatments of French republicanism. This kind of interpretation serves to overturn still-common stereotypes about women religious as passive dupes of the Church. Ford shows well that such women enjoyed a good deal of autonomy from patriarchal strictures and were able to act in important ways to assert their rights.

Ford’s book is not only a valuable contribution to French history but also a text that is relevant for political controversies today. In an epilogue, Ford links her analysis of republican secularism to French debates over Muslim women’s right to wear the head-scarf in public. Noting the similarities between nineteenth-century and current concerns over female religiosity, she suggests that France’s long-standing fixation with the principle of *laïcité* reflects a still-unfinished debate over women’s place in modern secular society. *Divided Houses* offers considerable insight into how such a debate emerged and why we should not expect its resolution anytime soon.
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