In this monograph, Felice Lifshitz argues that much of the evidence for female scholarly and religious activity in the early middle ages has been appropriated into a masculinist intellectual output. She addresses this historical bias by recontextualising women firmly at the centre of intellectual life in the Anglo-Saxon cultural province of the eighth-century Main River Valley, through a close reading of a corpus of manuscripts made by and for women. This methodology is one of the principal strengths of this book. Though the author only notes that her ‘approach is unusual’ (p. 3), since she knows of no regional studies that investigate ideas and manuscripts rather than institutions and events, this is a welcome addition to a growing number of recent works that use manuscripts to explore the spread of knowledge in the Western early middle ages.

The manuscript corpus examined here is associated with the names of two Main Valley scribes from female houses: the Gun(t)za group (three manuscripts), made at Karlburg, and the Abirhilt group (four manuscripts), made at Kitzingen. The author identifies an additional two manuscripts thought to originate at Karlburg. In addition, Lifshitz draws on a wide range of sources, including archaeological finds, book-lists and visual art. She uses the histories of other local monastic houses to ground her study in the culture and history of the Main Valley, also taking into account its links with England and Ireland, and the influence of Carolingian reforms on the political outlook of women’s houses. This, together with an attentiveness to the agency of both elite and non-elite women, results in a rich narrative of the intellectual and monastic activity that characterised the region and its wider cultural geographical setting in the eighth century.

The author begins by explaining her use of the word ‘feminist’ for the eighth century as ‘a resistance to patriarchal ideas, particularly as they concern women’ (p. xix), before examining gender relations in Anglo-Saxon Francia in the circles of Boniface, Lul and Leoba. These were shaped by syneisactic practice, a ‘form of religious life that encouraged sexually chaste contact between men and women’ (p. 4). Chapters two and three provide a general historical outline and introduce the Gun(t)za and Abirhilt corpus, while chapter four examines the well-known Kitzingen Crucifixion miniature. Lifshitz argues convincingly that the miniature is an example of visionary art made by a ‘female theologian-artist’ (p. 85), and explores the theologically and gender-sensitive perspectives that women acquired to understand the image. Chapters five and six examine patristic commentaries and hagiography. They expose complex political and theological thinking in the appropriation of received texts for feminist purposes. The final chapters consider women’s liturgical activity in the Main Valley, and the implications of the ways in which texts were used to enact feminist strategies: a refreshing and useful reminder to scholars of the gendered nature of text production.

The narrative is concerned more with conclusions and their implications than with the examination itself. That is not to say, however, that close readings are absent. They include palaeographical and codicological observations, most notably on pp. 33–6, in which Lifshitz persuasively argues that a Basel library catalogue is a copy of a catalogue from Kitzingen and not, as hitherto thought, a list of books from Fulda. Equally convincing are her close textual readings, which bring up interesting issues such as transvestism and same-sex relations, and the impact of these on female audiences.

A full exposition of every manuscript is omitted in favour of a tighter focus. At every turn, Lifshitz returns to the question of feminism and gender, yet this rarely feels forced or unfaithful to the source material. Instead, it allows the author to re-assess the intellectual output of the eighth-century Main Valley
within the context of a creative endeavour managed by and for women, often with the active assistance of men in positions of power. The reader gains a real sense of the dynamism of manuscript production in early medieval Francia, which was so clearly dependent on the political and intellectual agendas of both men and women. Lifshitz is occasionally too quick, on too little evidence, to suggest that the authorship of saints’ lives belongs to women, but overall convincingly establishes the need to re-focus our gender-biased view of manuscript production, furnishes the evidence required to do so for the Main Valley, and proves the existence of feminist intellectual networks in the early middle ages. This is both remarkable and important.

Despite this, the omission of codicological discussions occasionally poses problems. Lifshitz uses decorated initials as evidence of the perceived importance of specific texts (e.g. p. 48), but this seems inadequate in the absence of a contextual consideration of the manuscript’s hierarchy of scripts, quire structures, number of hands and page layout (the ten plates provided are not sufficient for the reader to make an independent judgement). Nor are all the author’s more general arguments entirely reliable. For example, the ‘collection of epitaphs of abbesses’ in Bern, Burgerbibliothek, MS lat. 611, in which the deceased were named ‘athletes of Christ’ and which Lifshitz uses to illustrate the ‘heroic, even pugilistic’ expectations placed on aristocratic abbesses (p. 128), is laced with modified poetic references and metres as well as patristic extracts. While based on real epitaphs, the collection is therefore formulaic, and dubious as evidence of real eighth-century practice.

However, these quibbles do not detract from the book, which is a thoroughly well-researched, coherently argued and innovative contribution to our understanding of the Anglo-Saxon cultural province in eighth-century Francia, of its manuscript output and of the ways in which its women expressed their political and intellectual selves. Throughout, there is an explicit and conscious focus on a gendered reading that is grounded in modern feminist ideas, but it aims to raise questions and present concepts rather than polemicise, and at times produces genuinely original assessments of early medieval intellectual practice, both male and female. This book is indispensable for any scholar of eighth-century Francia, early medieval textual transmission and gender studies in the middle ages.