From the Cloister to the World: Mainstreaming Early Modern French Convent Writing: An état présent

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Joseph de La Porte’s 1769 *Histoire littéraire des femmes françaises*, his history of women “qui se sont occupées avec succès des arts agréables et des études sérieuses,” positions an abbess, Héloïse, as the first French woman author and devotes thirty pages to her letters and their translations (1–31). Despite this recognition in the eighteenth century, the paradox of convent writing is how prevalent it was, constituting in certain periods a large percentage of the published writing by women, and yet how underestimated and undervalued it has been by literary scholars and historians, and even was by the nuns themselves. For example, Joan DeJean only enumerated about twenty nuns among the approximately 220 women included in her “Bibliography of Women Writers, 1640–1715” in *Tender Geographies* (201–19). More recently, Michel Bernos in his revisionist study of the role of women in the seventeenth-century church, *Femmes et gens d'Église dans la France classique XVIIᵉ–XVIIIᵉ siècle*, remarks, “Même les nombreuses fondatrices d’ordres et de congrégations écrivent peu, hormis des règles, des avis, des lettres” (23).

However, as can be seen from the checklist at the end of this volume, books by over fifty nuns were published during the seventy-five years surveyed in DeJean’s list, a list that includes many writers for whom no published work is given. Another twenty or so names could be added if one were to count the texts written by nuns during this period, but which were published later, and the number would be much higher still if one were to count the extracts of texts by nuns included in their seventeenth-century biographies and the even more numerous obituary *lettres circulaires* and shorter *relations*. To be sure, religious texts did dominate seventeenth-century publishing, but it is easy to overlook the extent to which women who were, in fact, largely nuns participated in this production. While nuns make up only a small minority of the *femmes de lettres* that Myriam Maître describes in her *Les Précieuses: Naissance des femmes de lettres en France au XVIIᵉ siècle* (1999), they constitute a large percentage of seventeenth-century women whose texts were published. Moreover, during the Ancien Régime, we must look to convents to find women routinely doing public speaking, producing historical accounts, and staging plays.

In the 1650s, Angélique Arnauld complained to her nuns at Port-Royal that
they consumed more paper and pens than nuns in ten other monasteries (BnF, ms. f. fr. 17794, f. 134). If she was correct, it might have been because at just that moment, many of the Port-Royal nuns had been enlisted by Angélique de Saint-Jean, niece of Mère Angélique, to recount their recollections of her leadership. These texts would form the Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire de Port-Royal, published ninety years later in 1742. But it is also likely that Angélique Arnauld underestimated the amount of writing in other houses, where gathering such accounts was common practice. As Marie de Chantal Gueudré remarks in her useful overview of writing by members of her order during the Ancien Régime, “Les Ursulines...ont beaucoup écrit et même fait éditer” (2:7). Although the nuns of Port-Royal shunned the more bellettristic forms of convent writing, such as poetry, drama, and salon literature, they did practice most of the other major forms of monastic writing: autobiography, letters, hymns, devotional texts, chronicles of orders, and monastic sermons. Such texts must ultimately be understood in terms of the more routine forms of writing that surround them—organizational documents, such as constitutions and customary books; pedagogical works; and legal briefs and memoranda to ecclesiastical authorities, etc. Unfortunately, much of this convent writing has been lost, first because it most often circulated in manuscript form rather than as books, and second because, in the case of those texts that were published, the books themselves have disappeared in the course of Revolutionary confiscations, expulsions during the Third Republic, and post-Vatican II convent closings.

In sum, even if not all nuns wrote, convents could be fertile ground for writers. Thus, rather than consider a nun author in isolation, it may be more fruitful to envisage her as a participant in the construction of a common identity within a textual community where writings were shared within the monastery or order as well as outside the convent walls, along the lines proposed for medieval nuns (for an example, see Roest, “A Textual Community”). Normative texts, such as constitutions and rules, ordered lives within the convent; epistolary exchanges among nuns, family members, and supporters extended the discussions that took place in convent parlors; chronicles and hagiographic accounts recorded a convent’s memory and sought to establish its reputation in the eyes of the public. Perhaps the most complex of such textual communities centered on Port-Royal, and it would be tempting to recast in these terms Carol Baxter’s argument that bonds of sisterhood were a chief factor in maintaining resistance there to the anti-Jansenist formulary. After all, it was by a textual act—the signing of the formulary—that the “signeuses” broke solidarity with their peers. Few convents developed as extensive a network of writers within and beyond the monastery as Port-Royal. But in most, the construction of communal identity was a product of both textual interchange and the monastic oral culture.

Volume 11 of EMF is a step toward allowing what has come to be known as “convent writing” in Hispanic studies to move out of the cloister by giving it the visibility to be taken into account more widely, whether in literary studies, in the realm of spirituality, in historical accounts, or as a form of écriture féminine. Thus as a call for “mainstreaming” convent writing, this essay will be an état présent of French-language
writing by nuns. It will address (1) the reasons for its neglect, (2) the theoretical issues that must be taken into account to ground it properly, and (3) some directions that the study of French convent writing might take.

A Neglected Field

In the past twenty years, convent writing has gained a strong foothold among scholars of Italian culture (Weaver 1999, 2002; Graziosi) and legitimacy as a discipline in Hispanic studies. To be sure, two Hispanic nuns have long enjoyed canonical stature: Teresa of Avila and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz of Mexico. Representing both the Old and New Worlds, they have attracted the sustained attention of literary scholars as well as of historians; the defense of women's right to access to learning in Sor Juana's "Respuesta a Sor Filotea" has given this text the status of a feminist manifesto. But interest has expanded beyond these two figures to many other Hispanic women religious, as seen in Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau's anthology Untold Sisters (1989). The introduction to their book offers a compelling feminist rationale for rediscovering the writings of women religious, and their anthology proved to be the springboard for numerous studies and editions of convent writings. Although Arenal and Schlau's anthology included poetry, chronicles, and drama, its centerpiece was spiritual autobiography, a genre that has continued to dominate studies of Hispanic convent writing.

French nuns in general have not attracted similar consideration, despite the fact that in certain genres, such as hagiography and biography, Ursulines like Jeanne Cambounet de La Mothe and Marie-Augustine de Sainte-Paule de Pommereu, or the Benedictine Jacqueline Bouette de Blémur, enjoyed more recognition during their lifetimes than comparable Italian or Spanish nuns (Suire, 51). La Porte mentioned fifteen nuns in his eighteenth-century compendium of French women's writing. Only a few of the nuns discussed by La Porte found their way into the literary history that introduced women religious authors to the general public in the early twentieth century: Henri Bremond's Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France. La Porte's nuns were on the whole too worldly for Bremond, who was interested in women religious largely to the extent that they were mystics and illustrated what he called the "Invasion mystique." Bremond's influence is still felt, since the mystics are the women writers in the realm of spirituality who have attracted the most attention. Still, no French nun has made a breakthrough like that of Teresa of Avila or Sor Juana into the literary canon. In the realm of French spirituality, the woman who probably attracts the most current attention is a laywoman, the quietist Mme Guyon. Among nuns, the Quebec Ursuline Marie de l'Incarnation Guyart is perhaps the most widely studied, as the 1999 colloquium devoted to her shows (Brodeur). Her letters and autobiographical accounts lend themselves to multiple research perspectives: her chronicle of the early days of New France, her mystical experience, and her relations with her son and editor, Claude Martin. Interest in the best-known French convent poet, Anne de Marquets, cannot match that in Sor Juana, for whom a thirty-one page bibliography of recent scholarship has appeared (Oritiz).
Academic interest in convent writing has been the daughter of the boom in women's studies. If Hispanic scholars have been particularly active, it is in part because their tradition lacks as rich a strain of writing by laywomen as France's, where Madame de Lafayette is credited with writing the first modern novel, and Madame de Sévigné's letters have long been recognized. Indeed, the trend in women's studies among specialists of French literature has been to recover the writings of other novelists, poets, and playwrights, rather than to turn to those of nuns.

When it exists, commentary on texts by nuns has generally reflected trends in broader interpretations of women's religious life. At one end of the spectrum, Mitchell Greenberg's fascinating unraveling of the strands of sadism, narcissism, and masochism in Marie de l'Incarnation Guyart's relation to her son in his *Baroque Bodies* illustrates the view of the convent as a symbol of the justification religion provided for the patriarchal, authoritarian, and hierarchical tendencies of French Ancien Régime society; this hermeneutics of suspicion refuses to take the hagiographic tone that dominates convent writing, indeed most ecclesiastical discourse of the era, at face value. On the other hand, Philippe Sellier's more celebratory "Port-Royal: Un emblème de la réforme catholique" articulates an image of the nuns' role in the church to which they would have had little trouble subscribing. If the current tendency is more to celebrate the convent as a site of women's empowerment and autonomy than to decry it as a prison, still the most prevalent critical stance is found somewhere between the two, i.e. to emphasize the struggle that nuns had to wage in order to win some measure of autonomy and agency. In this vein, Daniella J. Kostroun argues that the nuns of Port-Royal, in refusing to sign the formulary against Jansenius in the 1660s, exploited contradictions within the dominant political and theological requirement that women accept a subordinate status to assert their rights to spiritual equality and conscience.

In her 2000 article "Crossing Boundaries: Defining the Field of Female Religious Writing in Colonial Latin America" (which is in many ways a défense et illustration of convent writing as a discipline), Kathleen Ann Myers discusses a number of reasons for the neglect of Hispanic nun authors other than Teresa of Avila and Sor Juana (152). The same reasons hold largely true for France as well, where they tend to apply to all writing by nuns.

First, according to Myers, convent writing has been dismissed as mediocre or worse because it is seen as imitative and formulaic, often employing an oral style or written without regard to aesthetic ends. Thus Christian Renoux (1989) accuses Jacqueline Bouette de Blémur of plagiarism, because in her 1679 *Éloges* she made liberal use of a lettre circulaire written by one of her subjects' successor. But to some extent, such accusations of artlessness, naïveté, or plagiarism reflect a lack of understanding of the conventions of monastic writing, where imitatio, for example, was a cherished ideal. Likewise, orality is not confined to convent writing, but characterizes much devotional writing of the period. In his overview of seventeenth-century religious genres, "Genres littéraires d'inspiration religieuse," Fritz Nies has noted that a good number of the approximately fifty seventeenth-century religious genres that he identifies were
characterized by "leur va-et-vient permanent...entre les domaines de l'écrit et de l'oral" (215). In a somewhat similar vein, although without implying any inferiority, Isabelle Landy-Houillon has contrasted the Latinate style of the relations of the Jesuit Canadian missionaries with the fluidity of the epistolary style of Marie de l'Incarnation. If the Ursuline escaped the model of the Ciceronian period, according to Landy-Houillon, it is because she, like other women of her day, was excluded from the Latin-based curriculum of the collèges (74-75).

Second, Myers notes that in the twentieth-century literary canon, devotional writing, whether produced by men or women, was suspect. While the religious dimension of much seventeenth-century writing cannot be denied, devotional texts remain on the margins of the French canon. Nies points out that most of the religious genres he lists—genres well known to seventeenth-century audiences—have all but dropped off the radar screens of many literary scholars (212). Bossuet’s sermons are perhaps the only writings to enjoy canonical status as religious writing per se; Fénelon’s Télémaque is seen as a pedagogical novel, and Pascal’s polemics against the Jesuits in the Provinciales and even his apology for Christianity in the Pensées are subsumed in the broader category of moraliste writing.

Finally, Myers remarks that the study of the minorae among Hispanic nuns could always be justified as providing background context for Teresa of Avila and Sor Juana (152). In the absence of any such canonical literary figures, the study of French nuns has been largely the province of historians of spirituality and of women’s monasticism. A sustained interest in the writings of nuns by a literary scholar such as Mary M. Rowan, who pioneered the study of convent writing among specialists of French literature, is exceptional; the three articles listed in the bibliography are only a sample of her more extensive work in the field. More frequent are studies of the portrayal of nuns and convents in literature, such as those of Jeanne Ponton or more recently of Anne Birberick and Manuela Mourão, like that of Barbara Woshinsky in this collection. It is thus not surprising that about half the contributors to this volume come from history departments, since French women religious have remained less the domain of literary specialists than of historians.

Historians have, in fact, given us excellent studies of female orders: monographs like those of Yves Chaussy on the Benedictines, Elizabeth Rapley on the congrégées (1990) and on the Ursulines and teaching orders (2001), Marie-Élisabeth Henneau on the Cistercians (1990), and Marie-Claude Dinet-Lecomte on the nursing orders. Recent colloquia illustrate the flourishing teams of research centered on many of the prominent orders: their published proceedings, like those on the Visitation (Dompnier and Julia), the Carmelites (Hours 2001), and the Annonciades (Dinet et al.) provide massive updated bibliographies. The 1,100-page Dictionnaire de Port-Royal, edited by Jean Lesaulnier and Antony McKenna, who coordinated the work of over sixty specialists, offers a bio-bibliographical article on each nun and boarding student of the abbey who can be identified, along with articles on the abbey’s directors, theologians, solitaires, and others associated with the monastery; it also includes an abundant
iconography. Two appendices containing the manuscript and printed sources of the *Dictionnaire* present an extensive bibliography of writing emanating from Port-Royal and about it. In Belgium, the Archives générales du Royaume has published a useful collection entitled *Introduction bibliographique à l'histoire des couvents belges antérieurs à 1796* that includes a number of monasticons dedicated to individual orders. Although Patricia Wittberg’s *The Rise and Decline of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective* focuses on twentieth-century American communities, her overview of the history of women’s monasticism, precisely because it is written from a sociological perspective and makes use of such concepts as the “commitment mechanism,” offers fresh insights into the success of the seventeenth-century revival.

But as these examples show, the tendency has been to remain within the tradition of an order. Overviews have been rare: Geneviève Reynes’s 1987 *Couvents de femmes*, on the cloistered contemplative orders, is complementary to Rapley’s 2001 study of the cloistered teaching monasteries, which is particularly innovative for its use of statistics based on the examination of the records of thousands of nuns. Comparative studies, such as F. Ellen Weaver-Laporte’s *La Contre-Réforme et les Constitutions de Port-Royal*, which situates the Constitutions of Port-Royal within the broader context of other constitutions, are needed. Diefendorf’s 2004 *From Penitence to Charity* goes a long way to filling this need by treating the range of communities in the crucial first half of the seventeenth century, when so many houses were reformed and orders were founded, from enclosed contemplative orders to newer, active ones without solemn vows. While all these monographs make ample use of writing by nuns, it is rare for their authors to pause, as Rapley does in discussing *lettres circulaires* (2001, 269-70), to examine the practices that produced it.

Again, we are indebted to historians for the major reference works. The *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* usually discusses the writings of the numerous Ancien Régime nuns whose biographies are included. Daniel-Odon Hurel’s *Guide pour l’histoire des ordres et des congrégations religieuses* places less emphasis on writing, but does give the location of archival sources in its succinct overview of each order.

Finally, the field of convent studies is beginning to organize itself professionally and to create Web-based research tools. In the U.S., the triennial Conference on the History of Women Religious, first held in 1989, has expanded beyond its original American and Canadian emphasis and attracts hundreds of participants. In Europe, the Centre européen de recherches sur les congrégations et ordres religieux (C.E.R.C.O.R.), based in Saint-Etienne, has published numerous acts of its colloquia. Medievalists have been the most active in creating Internet tools, such as the Monastic Matrix, a database for women’s communities between the years of 400 and 1600 (http://monasticmatrix.org), and the German Mittelalterliche Frauenklöster (http://frauenkloster.de).

The Methodological Challenge

The three general methodological concerns that Myers notes in “Crossing Boundaries”—establishing texts with historical rigor, arriving at an understanding
of relevant conventions of the period, and situating texts in their historical moment (155–56)—apply, of course, to all textual studies, but present special challenges in the case of convent writing. And it should be noted that because this is an emerging field, a bibliographical inventory of writing by nuns is a necessary preliminary to all three tasks.

The first task is securing access to satisfactory editions that enable the reader to discern the nun's voice. Frequently, as Myers remarks, the notion of a single author is not operative (156). Convent texts are often multilayered, the product of a collaborative or sometimes even adversarial process. Seldom did a text go straight from a nun's pen to the printer. The texts we have of the speeches of Jeanne de Chantal and Angélique Arnauld are based on listeners' notes. In other cases, a text written by a nun appeared in print only after having been edited by someone else, in some cases by another nun, but more often by a male director. Linda Timmermans enumerates numerous ways this editorial process could introduce "des valeurs masculines et savantes" into women's writing in her account of the relation between mysticism and the intellectual life of women (545). Changes might be made in the name of modernizing or improving the style, but often passages were sacrificed or rewritten to conform to prevailing notions of orthodoxy or sanctity. Thus we must ask whether the quotations of the nun embedded in biographies are her own words or recreations by the biographer, in the manner of Livy. What control did nuns have over the editorial process or the decision to publish? The evaluation of whose voices are being heard and the identification of the filters that have been applied to these voices are at the heart of the textual issues involved in providing accurate texts prepared according to the current norms of scholarly editions.

Today, just as before the Revolution, the task of making the texts of women religious available has fallen chiefly on the nuns' communities or on male religious with ties to them. Modern editions by academic scholars, such as those by Gary Ferguson of Anne de Marquets or by Helmut Feld of Jeanne de Jussie, are the exception. But more scholarly editions are projected, among them the works of Angélique Arnauld, under the editorship of Lesaulnier; texts by eighteenth-century nuns persecuted for their Jansenism, edited by Françoise de Noirfontaine, and chronicles of Liége convents by Henneau.

The Canadian communities have been particularly well served; all but two of their major early texts have modern editions. The 1929 edition by Albert Jamet of the Écrits spirituels et historiques of Marie de l'Incarnation Guyart has been reissued to complement Guy Oury's 1974 edition of her letters. Among her large-scale texts, only her École sainte lacks a modern edition. Likewise, Jamet's 1939 edition of Marie-Andrée Regnard Duplessis de Sainte-Hélène's Les Annales de l'Hôtel-Dieu de Québec was reissued in 1984; Marie Morin's Histoire simple et véritable of the Hôtel-Dieu of Montreal received a critical edition in 1979. In 1964, the Montreal Congrégation de Notre-Dame published an edition of the works of its foundress, Marguerite Bourgeoys. While the Jesuit Paul Ragueneau's 1671 Vie de la Mère Catherine de Saint-Augustine,
containing lengthy extracts of her writings, awaits a critical edition, at least it was reproduced in 1977.

French communities have a longer editorial tradition, but a much more extensive corpus. In the nineteenth century, the Visitation prepared an eight-volume edition of the works of its foundress, Jeanne de Chantal. In the 1980s and 1990s, their Annecy archivist, Marie Patricia Burns, produced a six-volume edition of Chantal’s correspondence, which greatly expanded the number of published letters and established their texts critically. For the Carmel, Pierre Sérouet, a Carmelite priest, has been particularly active with editions of the letters of numerous seventeenth-century nuns, among them Marguerite du Saint-Sacrement Acarie and Madeleine de Saint-Joseph; in the case of Marguerite du Saint-Sacrement Parigot, a member of her Beaune community has edited her correspondence. Paule Sagot and Marie-Claire Tihon, members of the Congrégation Notre-Dame based in Lorraine, have published the *Relation autobiographique* of their foundress Alix Le Clerc, just as Anne-Amélie Le Bourgeois included texts by the foundress of her branch of the Ursulines, Anne de Xainctonge, in her history of her community.

When such books are published privately by the community itself, instead of by a more commercial house, such as Éditions du Cerf, distribution sometimes remains narrow, and the texts can fail to make their way in significant numbers into public library holdings. One might say that for French religious, the textual problem evoked by Myers has become less one of establishing texts with sufficient rigor than of assuring their distribution. While it may be that the market for such books is not sufficient to warrant a large press run, religious communities also often seem content to maintain the old tradition of publishing chiefly for their own internal use. One hopes, for example, that the edition of the works of Catherine de Bar being undertaken by various houses of the Bénédictines du Saint-Sacrement and projected for thirteen volumes (Joël Letellier in Dinet et al., 348) will be more widely available than the various volumes of her works that have appeared separately in recent years. Given the small market for convent writing, digitalizing texts by nuns could be as crucial to making their works more widely available for study as the preparation of critical editions of the works of key figures.

Myers also points out in “Crossing Boundaries” that we must learn to recognize the various monastic genres and understand their conventions. For example, some of the religious genres catalogued by Nies, such as the *billet*, *sentence*, *solitude*, and *résolution*, have been so neglected that they must be rediscovered. Likewise, conventions that differentiate convent writing from similar genres must be identified. Myers notes two dangers of this lack of familiarity (158). One is to interpret as innovative a standard practice or theme among nuns that the critic encounters for the first time: the call of Agnès Arnauld in her *Occupations intérieures* (1665) to internalize devotion was not unique to Port-Royal, but resonated across the spectrum of Counter-Reformation orders, stemming as it did from late medieval *devotio moderna*. The second is the anachronism that can result from applying without discrimination a modern paradigm.
derived from secular genres, as when a nun's account of her spiritual life addressed to a confessor is simply seen as a form of autobiography.

A first step toward the recovery of these conventions is to carefully discern the many genres of monastic writing. Renée Bons has proposed a taxonomy that organizes them around the objective of the work: "textes intimes," "écrits d'intérêt communautaire," writings for apostolic or recreational goals (268-70). Combining such a taxonomy based on the work's finality with the consideration of its addressee should prove particularly fruitful: personal devotional writing; texts written for one's director; institutional documents for the community, whether to preserve its memory or guide its operation; pedagogical books for students; spiritual direction for individuals; books aimed at a general public; etc.

For certain genres the process of identifying these conventions is well under way. Hurel's "L'Étude des correspondances et l'histoire du monachisme: Méthodes et enjeux historiographiques" is no doubt a model in that it judges the epistolary practices of four women's orders as "plus sévères" (332) than those among male monastics only after a thorough examination of the conventions of letter-writing in monasticism in general. The key conventions of the obituary lettre circulaire have been identified in a number of articles dealing with the Visitation (Baudet-Drillat) and the Carmelites (Hours 1990), and above all in Jacques Le Brun's series of articles (1983, 1986, 1992) dealing with all orders. But much work remains. While many fine readings of individual spiritual autobiographies by French nuns exist, such as Sagot's subtle study of the literary devices used by Le Clerc in her Relation autobiographique (2004), no monograph offers an overview such as that found in work on Hispanic nuns by Isabelle Poutrin or Ronald Surtz. Likewise, other than Weaver-Laporte's study of Angélique de Saint-Jean's evolution from the chronicler to the "mythographer" of Port-Royal (1985), nuns' work as historians has been largely ignored, probably on the supposition that it is merely hagiographic and dominated by institutional loyalty. Whatever the case, the conventions of this historically oriented writing will be sorted out when French convent chronicles and annals receive the sustained attention that has been paid to Italians ones by K. J. P. Lowe or to German ones by Charlotte Woodford and Anne Winston-Allen.

Even though teaching orders made use of educational theater much as the Jesuits did, this vein has been little examined since Marie de Chantal Gueudrè's 1960 Histoire de l'Ordre des Ursulines en France. The chief exception seems to be Paul A. Scott's study of La Chapelle's L'Illustre philosophe, assuming the suffix "REL. C." stands for religieuse cloitrée. Undoubtedly, hardly any of this production was ever published; plays such as those of Anne Chevalier, the hospitale of La Flèche noted by Renée Bons (272-73), await discovery and examination in convent archives.

Finally, Myers reminds us that it is easy to overlook the institutional, geographical, and historical factors that inflect monastic texts. We assume too often that convent writing is a homogeneous discourse. While there is a special need for more comparative studies across orders, identifying the specific style and spiritual character
of each order or house is a necessary preliminary. Geopolitical factors are relevant: does the text emanate from one of the prestigious Parisian monasteries or from a provincial source, or from outside France and its colonies, as does Jeanne de Jussie's Geneva *Petite Chronique*? The writings of Canadian nuns have begun to be examined as forms of colonial discourse (Deslandres, Roy, Théry), and it should be noted that Ursulines who founded houses in Martinique in the late seventeenth century and in Louisiana in the 1720s also published texts. Elisabeth Dufourcq situates all such Ancien Régime missionary endeavors by nuns within a history of French missions in her *Les Congrégations religieuses féminines hors d'Europe de Richelieu à nos jours*. Writings that date from the heyday of the Catholic revival in the seventeenth century must be distinguished from those from later periods when voices critical of religious life were raised more insistently. The nuns and their editors often had in mind agendas that included the battle against Calvinism, Jansenism, freethinking, and the Enlightenment. And since texts written by nuns were frequently published posthumously, they were often enlisted in the service of a cause that was not necessarily that of their authors.

**Perspectives for Research**

As we come to appreciate the amount of convent writing that exists, its many forms, and its quality, it becomes increasingly evident that no single vector of reading does it justice. The earliest impetus behind the promotion of writing by nuns was probably the resolve of religious communities to win recognition for their holiness or to publicize their prominent members' spirituality. Just as obedience to a superior could trump a nun's reluctance to write of her intimate spiritual experience, so the corporate interests of an order could lead to publication of texts intended by the nun for only a few eyes at the most. Jeanne de Chantal of the Visitation, canonized in 1767, may have been the only early modern French nun to be declared a saint before the Revolution, but we undoubtedly owe the publication of many texts by other nuns of this period to the hope that their writings would advance their cause before the diocesan and Roman tribunals. The 1965 recommendation of the second Vatican Council that religious congregations return to their sources has been a more recent incentive for orders to sponsor scholarly editions of their founders' writings.

Such institutional loyalty was seconded in the last part of the twentieth century by the feminist impulse that one finds in pioneering works such as 1989's *Untold Sisters*. Although mysticism is not reserved for women, and certainly not for nuns, it has attracted attention as a form of discourse that lends itself to women's expression. After reviewing the work of previous commentators on the link between women and mysticism, Timmermans affirms, “L’expérience feminine de la mystique fut donc propice à l’élosion d’un discours proprement feminine” (614). She notes that mystical texts tend to privilege experience over learning, digression over scholastic organization, and spontaneity over logical construction.

When nuns write for other nuns, as is the case of the *lettres circulaires* studied in this volume by Rapley or in the chronicle of Jeanne de Jussie, they illustrate a relatively
rare form of *écriture féminine*: women writing specifically for a tight circle of other women. The extent to which this practice results in a distinctly feminine style or tone merits further examination. On the one hand, Le Brun finds that biographies of nuns written by women and intended for a female public have a different tone from the official biographies written by men for the general public (1986, 390). On the other hand, Diefendorf remarks, after studying nuns' biographies, “I expected to find greater difference of both substance and style between male-authored and female-authored [biographies] or autobiographical accounts than has in fact proved to be the case” (2003, 246). To what degree is the feminization of the various forms of spiritual writing practiced by nuns a reflection of the fact that nuns were not trained in formal rhetoric and were normally relegated to the minor genres (monastic conferences rather than formal sermons, devotional texts rather than treatises on theology)? Is there a more positive side to this feminization—the emergence of a conscious tradition of women's writing making use of imagery, allusions, historical models, etc.—meant to reflect the female experience and to appeal to a female audience? Convent writing is undoubtedly gendered writing, but its parameters remain largely ill-defined.

Yet as can be seen in Myers's programmatic essay “Crossing Boundaries,” neither spirituality nor feminist studies is any longer the sole rationale for reading convent writing. Besides other approaches mentioned by Myers, such as new historicism and colonial studies, and the examination of genres previously alluded to, such as autobiography and historical writing, other prominent genres merit attention. Port-Royal may have frowned on Jacqueline Pascal's poetry, but among the Visitandines (Bordes), Ursulines (Gueudré 2, 56; Oury), and Carmelites, the writing of verse and hymns was encouraged, and poetry and hymns by nuns were frequently featured at recreation sessions. While Marquets is the only nun to have the honor of a modern scholarly edition, she is far from the only Dominican to have had her poetry published during this period; and, as is the case with convent drama, much more of this verse circulated in manuscript than was published. The study of less obvious genres, such as travel literature and *récits de captivité*, will be rewarding, as will the study of the reception by early modern nuns of the writings of medieval women religious, particularly of the great mystics such as Brigitte of Sweden and Catherine of Siena. Overviews situating the publication of texts by nuns in the history of the book are needed. The number of nuns who might have thought of themselves as authors writing for publication, such as the Benedictine Jacqueline Bouette de Blémur, is extremely limited, as it was in fact for laywomen. What happened when a text written for a nun's private use or for a limited number of readers was later prepared for publication, either by that same nun or by others? The strategies used by the nuns themselves or by their editors should be compared to those implemented when texts by other women were published: use of the author's name or initials on the title page, choice of dedicatee, protestations of modesty in the preface, etc. Moreover, the practices of male editors merit further attention, along the lines of Marie-Florine Bruneau's discussion of Marie de l'Incarnation's son Claude Martin in *Women Mystics Confront the Modern World*. 
Secular currents and genres found their way into convents. In her repertory of précieuses who can be identified with confidence, Maitre lists three abbesses, Marie-Madeleine-Gabrielle Adélaïde Rochechouart-Mortemart, Marie-Eléonore de Rohan-Montbazon, and Eléonore de Souvre, who have all been published, and Antoine Baudeau de Somaize listed at least two more religious in his 1661 *Grand dictionnaire des précieuses*. Another avenue of research is the investigation of the impact nuns' writing might have had on women working in secular genres; after all, many young girls were exposed to convent writing during their stays in monastery boarding schools. Such interaction continued in exchanges in convent parlors and salons; the study of the interpenetration of these two spaces has been inaugurated by Rowan (1985) and Weaver-Laporte (1997).

Even if the infused science des saints was thought most befitting women religious, some nuns were counted among the femmes savantes known for their learning acquired by study. Dominicans like Julienne Morel of Avignon, and Louise de Marillac and Françoise Oudeau of Poissy published translations from Latin; Madame de Sévigné marveled at the learning and intelligence of Angélique de Saint-Jean Arnauld d'Andilly of Port-Royal (letter of 29 November 1679). Timmermans studies nuns who ventured into the realm of theology, which had been reserved for men, using the example of an abbess of Fontevrault, before examining the intellectuals among the second generation nuns of Port-Royal (786-806).

Studies of mysticism that consider nuns in the context of laywomen and male mystics have long been a model for the mainstreaming that makes liberal use of convent writing beyond the cloister itself. One thinks of the classic studies of Bremond and Michel de Certeau. More recently, writing by nuns has been proposed as a sort of missing link in the creation of secular genres. Volker Schröder has shown how Gabriel Joseph de Lavergne Guilleragues appropriated the spiritual yet erotic language of mystics such as Teresa of Avila in order to create in his *Lettres portugaises* a style that typifies a common notion of écriture feminine: “cette prose passionnée qui se contente de transcrire au courant de la plume, sans se corriger ni se relire, son expérience subjective” (298). Thus, Philippe-Joseph Salazar, writing specifically about female mysticism, contends that without the ecstatic writing of Madame Guyon and her convent predecessors, such as Marie de l'Incarnation Guyart, “vernacular literature as the Enlightenment would know it would have taken another course” (279). In his *Being Interior*, Nicholas D. Paige proposes that convent autobiography provides a transition in the development of autobiographical interiority between Montaigne and Rousseau. Paige found that this form of interiority “flourished best and earliest” (4) in the spiritual autobiographies most often written by seventeenth-century nuns. Broomhall presents a much broader model in her *Women and Religion in Sixteenth-Century France*. She notes that until the end of that century, “the mystic literary tradition in France seemed to have more impact among the female laity than within the convent (144). Perhaps more importantly, just as she seeks to break down confessional polarization between Catholics and Protestants, she looks for similarities in monastic and lay experience (144). Whether she is writ-
ing about external devotional practices, religious violence, or institutional religion, to enumerate three of her chapters, Broomhall includes nuns in her account.

In conclusion, considering that the concept of convent writing is hardly established at present in French studies, it is premature to envisage a time when convent writing will be so completely mainstreamed that scholars will cite works by nuns, not because they are written by nuns, but simply because they make an important contribution to the subject at hand. In reality, because of the nature of convent writing, its frontline disciplines are likely to remain women's studies, church history, and spirituality well into the foreseeable future. In the meantime, convent writing must attain sufficient visibility that texts by nuns are cited as a matter of course by these disciplines' foremost practitioners, not just by specialists in women's monasticism. A collection of essays such as this that combines work by specialists in monasticism and by contributors who bring some other area of expertise to the study of nuns represents a step in this direction. In any event, the immediate task is to provide the tools to appreciate the specificity of convent writing. We must become more aware of the significant amount of writing done by nuns, whether it has been published or awaits discovery in archives, just as we must acquire a much firmer grasp of its règles, constitutions, and coutumiers so that we can identify its genres and understand their conventions in the context of other forms of Ancien Régime writing. This approach will allow convent writing to leave the cloister and take its place in the broader world of early modern textuality.

**Bibliography**

This bibliography lists the works cited in the *état présent*, major research tools, as well as a selection of older works dealing with convent writing. Texts by the nuns themselves referred to in the article are found in the checklist at the end of the volume.


