

2007

Introduction to *EMF 11: The Cloister and the World*

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Carr, Thomas M., "Introduction to *EMF 11: The Cloister and the World*" (2007). *French Language and Literature Papers*. 51.
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INTRODUCTION

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Early modern nuns seem poles apart from women in the West today. They strove after an ideal of perfection that stressed humility, intellectual simplicity, asceticism, and submission that is the opposite of the autonomy and empowerment the contemporary feminist movement proposes for women. Even during the Ancien Régime nuns were isolated from their own society by the Council of Trent's revitalization of *clausura*. To modern eyes, the cloistered nun epitomizes a hierarchical church that cut a woman off from her own society, leaving her little initiative or voice.

However, a burgeoning number of books and articles published in the last fifteen years have shown that such a view—one that marginalizes nuns from their society—reflects the Enlightenment's bias against monasticism more than it does the realities of early modern life. Recent scholarship stresses how convents were intimately linked to the social, economic, political, and intellectual realities of their day, and points to the fact that, while most nuns had internalized what Bert Roest calls the "dominant narratives of submission" ("Female Preaching," 140),* many nuns managed just the same to manoeuvre within these gendered ideals of perfection and to stretch their limits. To cite only the most recent monographs, Barbara B. Diefendorf's *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (Oxford 2004) argues that the penitential spirituality of the foundresses of many of the new, reformed, contemplative orders in the first decades of the seventeenth century proved to be a way for women energized by the political struggles of the Catholic League to institutionalize their fervor through an asceticism that stressed interiorized devotion. Diefendorf shows that rather than merely taking their cue from priests, women initiated new institutions that would fulfill the spiritual needs they perceived in themselves and in society. The reference to charity in Diefendorf's title highlights the other current among women religious of this era: the benevolent endeavors that achieved prominence by mid-century. In her pioneering 1990 *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (McGill-Queen's), Elizabeth Rapley had already shown how women fashioned new, uncloistered forms of religious life precisely in order to better serve various publics (young girls, the sick, etc.) outside the convent. Rapley's 2001 *A Social History of the Cloister: Daily Life in the Teaching Monasteries of the Old Regime* (McGill-Queen's) studies the economic basis of the rapid expansion of women's education in the seventeenth century, made possible by the generosity of women donors.

In addition, Rapley shows that convents' financial precariousness in the eighteenth century was due in great measure to royal fiscal policy. Mita Choudhury's *Convents and Nuns in Eighteenth-Century French Politics and Culture* (Cornell 2004) situates the discourse of nuns, but more importantly about nuns, in the gendered political culture of the eighteenth century. Over the course of the century, the public's view of nuns shifted: nuns went from being seen as victims of familial and ecclesiastical tyranny to being considered dangerous counterrevolutionaries.

Volume 11 of *EMF* is born out of the convergence of two facts that become increasingly clear as scholars from various disciplines turn their attention to early modern nuns: the incessant traffic between the cloister and the world, and the considerable writing and publishing done by nuns. The first point is well documented and is the subject of several articles in this collection. Whether nuns cultivated a *mépris du monde* in the cloister, or whether they sought to transform society according to the norms of the Catholic Reformation, their spiritual aspirations were filtered through a mix of power and gender relations, economic ties, class consciousness, and literary conventions, as well as through the traditions of their order. As Choudhury puts it, "They had very real ties to the core institutions of the body politic, the clergy, the monarchy, and the family" (2). The second strand, the fact that convents were the site of much writing, is only now coming into focus. This strand underlies many of this volume's articles, even those chiefly concerned with ties to the world, since the nuns' own writings allow us to understand how they experienced this interchange between the world and the convent in ways that texts written by third parties rarely do.

The *état présent* that opens the collection notes that while in Hispanic studies, writing by nuns has now been established as an academic discipline, convent writing by French nuns awaits similar recognition. The *état présent* examines the reasons for this neglect, surveys the considerable amount of research that has been done on French nuns, and suggests new lines of inquiry. The volume closes with a checklist of published writing by approximately a hundred early modern nuns that gives some idea of how rich a corpus awaits researchers. The checklist contains more than 120 books by nuns published before the Revolution, and also includes many biographies of nuns in which their writings are cited. The list would be longer still if more short texts like *lettres circulaires* and brief relations, such as those by the Port-Royal nuns, were included. Without attempting to provide a complete overview of convent writing, this introduction will highlight ways in which the texts discussed in each article illustrate some of the contexts in which nuns wrote and published. But as rich as the collection may be, major components of convent life are inevitably missing. Ten articles can only begin to treat the rich experience of early modern convent writing.

As Gary Ferguson's article "Rules for Writing: 'The Dames de Poissy'" on the Dominican monastery at Poissy demonstrates, while writing took place in all convents, it flourished in some communities. Poissy had special advantages because of its aristocratic, even royal, connections, founded as it was in 1304 by Philippe le Bel. It had hosted Christine de Pisan and was the community of the best-known early modern nun

poet, Anne de Marquets. But similar studies, in fact, could probably be undertaken on a smaller scale for other Dominican houses, such as Saint-Praxède in Avignon, where the polyglot Julienne Morell wrote Latin and French verse, and Saint-Thomas in Paris, where Marguerite Brenne published two books of poems in the 1650s.

Most convent writing was done under the assumption that it would not leave the monastery, or at least not the tight monastic circle. The most intimate were texts that recorded a nun's private spiritual experience, sometimes destined to be read by her director. Although such autobiographical accounts have perhaps received more scholarly attention than any other genre of convent writing, they do not happen to be represented in this collection. However, many of the standard genres of convent writing do come under scrutiny here—chronicles (Broomhall, Wengler), poetry and hymns (Ferguson, Chaduc), death notices (Rapley), constitutions (Hurel); others that were relatively common, but less well known, such as legal briefs (Tuttle), or exceptional, such as marriage manuals (Carlin), are also introduced.

Texts of an institutional nature often reveal more easily than autobiography the collective identity of convent life. For example, the chronicles discussed by Elizabeth Wengler and Susan Broomhall were written to transmit the memory of a single convent from one generation of members to the next. Broomhall's study of the chronicles of the Benedictines of Beaumont-lès-Tours, "Familial and Social Networks in the Later Sixteenth-Century French Convent," traces such an interaction over a 140-year period in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries beginning in 1510, while focusing primarily on the impact of family ties, social class, and patronage on the community. Broomhall shows that even when rules of enclosure were enforced more strictly, the nuns maintained their awareness of happenings both on a national and local level, and sought to use their links to the outside to retain control of their affairs in the face of royal nominations of the abbess and interventions by their male Benedictine superiors. Jeanne de Jussie's *Petite Chronique*, analyzed by Wenger ("That in future times they will know our suffering for the love of God"), has a much more dramatic focus and covers a shorter time span, since it singles out the events of 1526–1535 as the Poor Clares of Geneva struggled against the Protestant reformers. Jussie portrays the invasion of her community by Protestant leaders who would not tolerate the presence of a group of women faithful to their vows. When the nuns could not be persuaded—coerced, Jussie would say—to return to their families, they were forced to leave the city for Annecy, where Jussie wrote the chronicle to preserve the founding experience of the community that had to rebuild itself in exile.

In the same institutional vein, the 150 death notices dating from the last quarter of the seventeenth century and analyzed by Rapley in her "Un trésor enfoui, une lampe sous un boisseau: Seventeenth-Century Visitandines Describe Their Vocation" make up a small sample of the thousands of such *abrégés de la vie et des vertus* that circulated from one Visitation monastery to the next. The Visitation, founded by Jeanne de Chantal and François de Sales in Annecy, had multiplied into well over a hundred houses throughout France by the end of the century, but had no centralized

governmental structure. The circulation of such death notices eulogizing deceased members was a means of fostering uniformity and unity. The unique qualities of the deceased were less important than how she had embodied the ideals of the founders. Nonetheless, Rapley detects in the death notices an attraction for mortification and for an “*raison fort sublime et toute passive*” that often went beyond the founders’ recommendations.

This volume also illustrates the intrusion of the “extraordinary” in the religious sense—in this case not in its more prized forms of mystical union with the divine, prophecies, or miracles, but as diabolic possession in need of exorcism. In her article “Nuns, Demons, and Exorcists: Ventriloquism and the Voice of Authority in Provence (1609–1611),” Katherine Dauge-Roth treats the case of a young Ursuline in Aix-en-Provence in the first decades of the seventeenth century. The demon that possessed Louyse Capeau was unusual because instead of proffering blasphemies and curses, he preached sermons of perfect orthodoxy, claiming to be compelled to speak the truth by God. The nun in effect became a preacher, raising fascinating questions of agency and voice that Dauge-Roth analyzes in terms of the teaching mission of the Ursulines, theories of possession, and the prohibition against women preaching publicly. Under normal circumstances, the only “preaching” allowed to nuns was the exhortations and conferences that abbesses delivered to their community in the privacy of weekly chapter meetings.

The fact that many nuns, even those in contemplative communities, were not content to pray for the outside world is not extraordinary; the grills of convent parlors could be sites of spiritual direction for laypeople. An unusual case, however, is recorded in Claire L. Carlin’s “Jeanne de Cambry: Mystic and Marriage Counselor.” The recluse Jeanne’s *Traité de la Réforme du Mariage*, finished in 1631 and published in 1655, is not only a pioneering marriage manual, but also the only one written by a female ecclesiastic in French.

The articles illustrate the diverse interventions of males on texts authored by nuns, as well as the publishing strategies that saw nuns’ books into print. In a sense, such editorial oversight was merely part of the general spiritual direction that male religious provided, often reluctantly, to women. Daniel-Odon Hurel gives an overview of this direction in the first part of his article “Moines et moniales en France aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles: les Bénédictins de Saint-Maur, Catherine de Bar, et la Trinité de Fécamp;” he goes on to apply it to a text authored by a nun and shows how Catherine de Bar made silent changes in the constitutions she wrote for her Bénédictines du Saint-Sacrement in accordance with critiques from directors.

A more radical intervention is seen in the case of a Carmelite studied by Pauline Chaduc: “L’Esprit, obstacle à la sainteté? L’itinéraire de la carmélite Charlotte de Saint-Cyprien, dirigée de Fénelon.” Charlotte seems to have stopped writing, or at least stopped allowing her poems to circulate, out of respect for Fénelon’s warnings against curiosity and his urging to become ever more simple.

Leslie Tuttle’s “Factum or Fiction? Convent Scandal, Cloister, and Publicity in

the Era of Louis XIV” chronicles a long war between two factions of the Franciscan nuns of Sainte-Catherine-lès-Provins for control of their convent. Each internal party had the support of rival male authorities who authored texts purporting to speak on behalf of the nuns. A legal brief, probably written by the deputy of the bishop of Sens, quoted accusations made by some nuns of sexual misconduct on the part of the Franciscan friars to whom the other side appealed. When the Franciscans riposted that such charges were fiction, the nuns who had been cited in the legal brief tried to reclaim their voice by taking the unusual step of signing an *acte capitulaire* in which they affirmed that they had indeed made the allegations.

One article in the collection examines the voices of nuns and other women in a frankly fictional setting, that of Madame de Villedieu’s *Mémoires de la vie de Henriette-Sylvie de Molière*. Barbara Woshinsky’s “Convent Parleys” focuses less on the kind of struggle chronicled by Broomhall or Tuttle, in which nuns attempt to control their community’s space and thus assure themselves a measure of collective autonomy, than on laywomen’s use of monasteries to defend themselves as individuals against male lovers or patriarchal family pressures.

Bert Roest has suggested that we look to convent writing to discover how nuns “constructed their religious world in the midst of dominant narratives of submission” (“Female Preaching,” 140). If the texts examined in this volume tell us anything, it is that such submission could vary in meaning depending on time, place, and religious order, and that there were thus myriad ways of “living one’s submission,” to borrow the title of Claude-Alain Sarre’s study of the Ursulines in Provence. In some cases, one does find what seems to be an exemplary submission to male direction. Charlotte de Saint-Cyprien might well have discontinued allowing her verse to circulate on Fénelon’s recommendation, just as Catherine de Bar seems to have acquiesced to her director’s critique of her draft of her order’s constitutions, despite being an especially dynamic foundress. However, such compliance was not always the case. “Insubordinate” Franciscan nuns in Provins were denied the sacraments by their bishop, only to later become the winning faction in the convent when Rome sided with the friars who served as their sponsors. When one of Jeanne de Cambry’s directors frowned on her writing, she persevered, sure that she was faithful to a higher authority. The aristocratic Poor Clares of Geneva refused the invitation of the city’s Protestant notables to throw off their submission to monastic vows; for the nuns, their submission was fidelity, and their chronicles recount a narrative of heroic opposition that reminds one of the stand the nuns of Port-Royal would take against the archbishop of Paris 130 years later. By “submitting” to exorcism, Louyse Capeau (or the devil who possessed her) was able to “preach” publicly in a way not allowed to women. Even the Visitandine *abrégés de la vie et des vertus* that are explicitly intended as narratives of submission describe modes of prayer and ascetic practices that go beyond the founders’ wishes.

The notion of gendered submission is useful, but it would be reductive to consider nuns only in this light. Submission was a core component of their ideal of perfection, but it was not the only one. Their value system—like all value systems—included

competing values: submission, yes, but also mystical union with God or an apostolic call to serve others, not to mention less spiritual values, such as a community's desire to control its own affairs. The cases examined by the contributors to this volume illustrate the fact that nuns found many ways to balance these loyalties. The challenge for those who find these values alien today is to grasp how they motivated some seventeenth-century women within one of society's most traditional institutions to be active at the frontiers of what their era allowed their sex. To understand early modern women's lives across the range of their social experience, we must add these convent voices to those of women in the world that we are more accustomed to hearing.

*See the bibliography of the next article for complete references.