

“In This Book There is Nothing of Ours”: Women’s Spiritual Biographies in  
Seventeenth-Century France

by

Lisa Kuncewicz  
B.A., York University, 2007

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of History

© Lisa Kuncewicz, 2011  
University of Victoria

All rights reserved. This thesis may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy  
or other means, without the permission of the author.

## **Supervisory Committee**

“In This Book There is Nothing of Ours”: Women’s Spiritual Biographies in  
Seventeenth-Century France

by

Lisa Kuncewicz  
B.A., York University, 2007

### **Supervisory Committee**

Dr. Sara Beam, (Department of History)  
**Supervisor**

Dr. Andrea McKenzie, (Department of History)  
**Departmental Member**

## Abstract

### **Supervisory Committee:**

Dr. Sara Beam, (Department of History)

Supervisor

Dr. Andrea McKenzie, (Department of History)

Departmental Member

As the Catholic revival that followed the Wars of Religion in France brought about the proliferation of new monasteries and religious orders, spiritual biographies of the founders and leaders of these houses were composed in unprecedented numbers. These texts, generally written by men about women, described cultural ideals about feminine piety more than the lived experience of nuns. This project seeks to examine the ways that spiritual biographies nevertheless represented literary practices in convents and actual collaboration between religious men and women. The vast array of biographical documents that were produced within convents became the source materials for the male authors of biographies, which allowed the members of convents to exert influence on the subject matter of the published work. The products of these collaborative efforts then served the interests of women as well as men, offering examples of religious communities' virtues and valuable works to potential recruits and donors in addition to providing models of the ascetic piety and self-examination endorsed by women of the Catholic Reformation. In an era when authorship was a communal, rather than individual, endeavour, the participation of men did not necessarily erase all traces of women's voices, but rather granted them the legitimacy and spiritual authority to be published before a wider audience. Spiritual biographies are therefore an example of how cloistered women could transcend the barriers of enclosure to influence a broader secular and religious public.

## Table of Contents

Supervisory Committee.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Historiography.....	12
Chapter 1 – “A Painting that Belongs to You”: The Authorship and Production of Lives.....	29
Chapter 2 – “A Mirror in Which to See Oneself”: The Multiple Uses of Lives.....	68
Conclusion.....	103
Bibliography.....	107

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Sara Beam, for her invaluable advice, guidance, and insight into all manner of things relating to early modern France, and for her endless patience and support that went far beyond what I expected or deserved.

Many thanks also go to the other members of my committee, Drs. Andrea McKenzie and H el ene Cazes, who offered encouragement, asked penetrating questions that forced me to clarify my writing, and caught some truly egregious errors. A special thanks is also due to Heather Waterlander of the Department of History, without whom I would have been lost in paperwork many years ago.

This project would not have been possible without the extensive assistance of the staff of the University of Victoria library and the Biblioth eque nationale de France, and I owe particular thanks to Ana ıs Dorey of the Mus ee d'art et d'histoire in Saint-Denis, who granted me access to a book in the museum's exhibit.

Thank you to all my friends who never stopped encouraging me throughout all these years, and finally, I cannot fully express my gratitude to my parents for their love and support. This thesis is dedicated to them.

## Introduction

In 1621 Andre Duval published *La Vie admirable de la bienheureuse soeur Marie de l'Incarnation*, the life story of Barbe Acarie, the renowned mystic and religious reformer. This book, which told of Acarie's exceptionally pious life and numerous spiritual virtues, belonged to a tradition both very old and quite new. Stories of people whose lives displayed saintly qualities for readers to admire and emulate—that is to say hagiography—had been popular since the early Middle Ages, and in many ways Duval's biography of Acarie was part of this tradition. *La Vie de Marie de l'Incarnation* was, however, also one of the first books in what became a sort of growth industry in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century France: the published biography of a religious woman who had not yet been canonized. The precise number of such books written and published over the course of the century is not known, but historians have estimated their number to be in the hundreds.<sup>1</sup> Although life stories of saintly women were not a new innovation, the new ways in which they were produced and put to use reveal significant aspects of the experiences of women in the Catholic Reformation Church, and it is these aspects which this thesis will examine.

The rise in biographies of nuns mirrored a general growth in female monasticism in France, and Acarie helped to introduce not only a new trend in religious literature but new spiritual practices for women. Between 1604 and 1650, forty-eight new monasteries opened in Paris and its suburbs alone, more than one house a year,<sup>2</sup> and other cities show similar patterns; Troyes, Blois and Reims, each the site of one small convent that had existed for several

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Le Brun, "Les biographies spirituelles françaises du XVIIe siècle. Écriture féminine? Ecriture mystique?" in *Experienza religiosa e scritture femminili tra medioevo ed età moderna* (Acireale, Italy: Bonanno Editore, 1992), 390.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara B. Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7.

centuries, became the homes of between two and four hundred nuns by the end of the 1600s.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Elizabeth Rapley quotes an official of the Parlement of Rouen who complained, “for the last twenty or thirty years, so many different religious orders have entered this city, that they outnumber all those of the previous thousand years.”<sup>4</sup> Such a large number of women joined what Rapley calls the “rush” into convents that, by the end of the century, the majority of members of religious orders were female, a reversal of the demographic trend throughout previous church history.<sup>5</sup> Women joining these new houses also had choices that their predecessors had never had; new orders emerged at this time with a variety of missions that had never been an accepted focus of religious life. Charity towards the sick and the poor and teaching girls were some of these missions, but these were only part of a larger movement toward a spirituality of self-effacement and inner connection to God, a characteristic of the Catholic Reformation.

The roots of this spiritual revival were multiple, and while certain changes were enforced by the church through the decrees of the Council of Trent of 1545-1563, it can be argued that the movement grew equally out of the suffering endured by the French people, both men and women, throughout the Wars of Religion. In the second half of the sixteenth century, France was divided by a series of civil wars that set Catholics against Protestants as well as against rival Catholic factions, and sown discord within the population. The trauma that these wars caused, particularly the sieges, hunger and destruction, affected women as much as men and help to explain the eagerness with which women embraced religious reformation throughout and

---

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 20.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Pierre Bardet, *Rouen aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, vol. 1 (Paris: Sedes, 1983), 90, quoted in Rapley, *Dévotes*, 19-20.

<sup>5</sup> Rapley, *Dévotes*, 193.

following the wars.<sup>6</sup> The first of what became known collectively as the Wars of Religion began in 1562 as a conflict between the Protestants, or Huguenots, who were gaining numbers and making increasing inroads into French political life, and the Catholics who wished to suppress this heresy. A series of weak monarchs and competing claims to power which were divided along religious lines furthered the conflict, which culminated in the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of 1572. Rumours of a Huguenot plot to take the crown inspired Catholics to assassinate the Protestant leader, Gaspard de Coligny, and to kill several thousand Protestants in Paris and the provinces. After the horror of this event, the Catholics split into two factions, the moderates and the Holy League, which opposed what its members saw as Henri III's overly conciliatory attitude towards Protestants. When Henri III was assassinated by a Catholic fanatic and was succeeded by the Huguenot Henri de Navarre, the conflict escalated into a fury of apocalyptic crusading against the king, with the League defending Paris against repeated attempts by Henri IV to capture the city. He only managed to do this in 1593 by making a final conversion to Catholicism, after which the people of Paris accepted him.

Henri IV's conversion brought peace to France, but sympathy to the League and the ecstatic and penitential mood that had pervaded Paris did not entirely disappear. Many former supporters of the League, including the husband of Barbe Acarie, became members of the *dévo*t party, which continued to oppose Protestantism and advance the cause of continental Catholic alliances. Women like Madame Acarie were at the forefront of this group, which included prominent theologians such as François de Sales, Pierre de Bérulle and Vincent de Paul, and the promotion of female religious life was one of their chief projects. Inspired by the reputation of the Spanish Carmelite reformer Teresa of Avila, who she said appeared to her in a vision, and

---

<sup>6</sup> This is the thesis of Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, who argues that the first wave of "ecstatic and apocalyptic" spiritual reform in Paris arose out of the wars, particularly the Siege of Paris of 1590.

having read Teresa's recently-translated autobiography, Acarie took charge of bringing several Carmelite women from Spain and building the first Reformed Carmelite monastery in France in 1603. This house served as the focal point of *dévot* spirituality and both Jean-Bénigne Bossuet and François Fénelon would later preach there. The Carmelites and other new religious orders were inextricably linked to the *dévot* party in the public eye and the devotion of female followers to the mystical and self-mortifying women of these new orders was sometimes met with scepticism; Barbara Diefendorf cites a satirical pamphlet of 1614 that mocked *dévote* women for their excessive attachment to the nuns of these new orders as spiritual directors.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, fourteen more Carmelite houses were founded before Acarie's death in 1618.

As Denis Richet states, the end of the Wars of Religion resulted in "an immense thirst for piety and morale,"<sup>8</sup> and the influence of the horrific events of the wars on the increasing popularity of the religious life, therefore, cannot be ignored. The process of reforming monasteries, however, was a gradual one that began as early as the fifteenth century, and was inspired by many of the same abuses that the Protestant Reformation sought to abolish. Laxity in monasteries was a widespread concern, and many critics saw convents as places where noble women could pass their days in comfort, entertaining family members or even men.<sup>9</sup> This fear was especially pronounced in some Italian cities, where as many as a quarter of the female population were nuns due to the rising price of dowries rather than to a vocation on the part of many of the women.<sup>10</sup> As an institution that was rejected in principle by the Protestant reformers,

---

<sup>7</sup> Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Denis Richet, *De la Réforme à la Révolution: études sur la France moderne* (France: Aubier, 1991), 85. "...l'immense soif de piété et de morale."

<sup>9</sup> Jo Ann McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 424.

<sup>10</sup> Jutta Gisela Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Mary Laven, *Virgins of Venice: Broken Vows and Cloistered Lives in the Renaissance Convent* (New York: Viking, 2003).

however, monasteries were a natural focus for Catholic rebuilding, and the Council of Trent was the official culmination of these early attempts at the reform of monastic abuses.<sup>11</sup>

The Council of Trent, which first convened in 1545, was the official response by the Catholic Church to what it perceived as the threat of Protestantism. However, the Gallican liberties of the French church, based on the 1516 Concordat of Bologna, set limits on papal power in France and ensured that in addition to appointing members of the clergy, the king could decide to accept or reject papal or conciliar decrees. Because of the chaos of the civil wars that lasted throughout the latter half of the sixteenth century, most of the decrees of the Council of Trent were not adopted in France until 1615, under the influence of the *dévots* who approved of increased ties to Rome.<sup>12</sup> The one ruling that the church did accept prior to 1615 was the reinstatement of *Periculoso*, the 1298 decree that officially stated that all nuns, regardless of the rule of their order, had to be cloistered. The Council of Trent not only reaffirmed the importance of this constitution, but strengthened it through Pius V's constitution of 1566, *Circa pastoralis*, which included women who had taken only simple vows among those who required enclosure.<sup>13</sup> This law banned semi-religious orders of women who devoted their lives to prayer and charity but did not live in monasteries, and along with its intended purpose of protecting the virtue of religious women, also limited the possibilities of interaction between convents and their secular communities.<sup>14</sup> The mystical fervour and the desire of laywomen such as Barbe Acarie to take a more active role in religious life therefore paradoxically emerged at the same time as the papacy restricted women's roles in the church.

---

<sup>11</sup> McNamara, *Sisters in Arms*, 391-418.

<sup>12</sup> Sharon Kettering, *French Society: 1589-1715* (Harlow, UK: Pearson Ltd, 2001), 67.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth M. Makowski, *Canon Law and Cloistered Women: Periculoso and Its Commentators, 1298-1545* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 125. Members of third orders, such as Franciscan or Dominican women, were previously considered seculars and not obliged to live in the cloister. St. Catherine of Siena, for example, was a Dominican tertiary who lived in her family home.

<sup>14</sup> Rapley, *Dévotes*, 41.

The Catholic Reformation, however, was not so much forced upon people by the church but was rather created by the many individuals who founded religious orders and houses around France. Together, the proliferation of monasteries based on an ideal of reinvigorating spiritual life and reinforcing Catholicism helped to bring about the general revival of popular piety known as the Catholic Reformation, though this movement was not at all unified. Women and men inspired by the actions of others and the general wave of reform founded new orders with a variety of missions, some not at all compatible with the decrees of the Council of Trent. Although Acarie's Reformed Carmelites were originally envisioned as cloistered, other reformers had very different ideas. In 1610, Jeanne de Chantal, a devout widow, and François de Sales, the bishop of Geneva, founded the Order of the Visitation, a congregation devoted to visiting the poor, as the name suggests. Not bound by formal monastic vows, the sisters of the Visitation were to be free to accept women whose health would not allow them to participate in the austere life of traditional convents, and they would be free to leave the convent to pursue their charitable missions. The order received support, in spite of its rejection of enclosure; when François de Sales wrote to Cardinal Robert Bellarmine in 1616, asking how to reconcile his belief in the merit of active charitable work and the requirement of enclosure, Bellarmine urged him to retain the congregation's unofficial status and to reject enclosure. In 1618, however, it was no longer possible to continue the order's active ministry, and they submitted to enclosure under the Augustinian rule.<sup>15</sup>

Several other societies of what became known as *filles séculières* followed a similar pattern of establishing a charitable mission that took them out of the convent, then submitting to enclosure under pressure from the church hierarchy. The Ursulines, who in 1535 were founded as an unenclosed order in Italy, were established in France in 1586 by the initiative of Anne de

---

<sup>15</sup> Makowski, *Canon Law*, 122.

Xainctonge, who was inspired by the Jesuits to create an order devoted to teaching girls. Across France, groups of devout women came together on their own to form similar communities.<sup>16</sup> While the Church supported the project of catechizing girls in orthodox Catholicism and the Holy See officially permitted teaching by women for the first time in 1607, over time each community came to accept enclosure as did the Order of the Visitation. Their mission of teaching was not renounced but adapted to suit the requirements of enclosure, and rather than going out into the world to serve, they brought day students into the cloister. Numerous other congregations with a variety of purposes emerged at the same time; among them, the Ordre de Marie-Notre-Dame, founded in Bordeaux by Jeanne de Lestonnac in 1607, was also dedicated to teaching girls, and Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul's interest in serving the poor led them to establish communities of laywomen devoted to this purpose which came together as the Daughters of Charity in 1633.<sup>17</sup>

The seventeenth century was not the first time that women attempted to circumvent the rules of enclosure and create new roles within the Church. In many ways the reformers of the Catholic Reformation carried on the tradition of the Beguines of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in northern Europe. Like the Daughters of Charity and the Ursulines before they submitted to enclosure, the Beguines lived communally and spent their lives engaged in prayer and charitable works without taking vows. Though their numbers had sharply declined by the time of the Reformations, neither the need for women to serve the poor nor the desire of some women to seek new ways of serving God had disappeared. The fundamental goals of these active orders, however, were very similar to those of strictly contemplative orders such as the Carmelites, and it is important not to see the two as having existed in opposition to each other.

---

<sup>16</sup> Rapley, *Dévotes*, 50.

<sup>17</sup> Susan E. Dinan, *Women and Poor Relief in Seventeenth-Century France: The Early History of the Daughters of Charity* (Aldershot, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2006).

With the 1631 papal bull condemning the English Ladies, a society whose founder, Mary Ward, envisioned as a female equivalent of the Jesuits, the Church reached a consensus that women could not travel and operate without the supervision of a bishop as did the Jesuits.<sup>18</sup> However, many women of charitable orders welcomed enclosure as part of their common goal to restore strict observance and piety to the monastic life. The Ursulines who were sent to New France are an example of the complicated ways that women negotiated a compromise between their desire for an active apostolate and the virtue that enclosure brought; although they traveled across the world to catechize girls in the new world, they did so within the walls of a convent.

The examination of one's conscience and what was called the *intérieur* was a new focus of the theologians of the *dévo*t circle, such as Pierre de Bérulle, Benoît de Canfield and François de Sales, and both active and contemplative nuns emphasized interior prayer in their spiritual practices.<sup>19</sup> While enclosure restricted their access to the outside world, these practices, in the words of Barbara Woshinsky, "open[ed] up a limitless interior space" which offered a kind of freedom to which women could aspire.<sup>20</sup> Spiritual directors advised women to keep detailed accounts of their devotional practices and prayers to aid their interior development, and this increasing attention to the spiritual life of women influenced the new genre of feminine biography. These books, which devoted far more pages to descriptions of the subject's prayers, self-mortification, and spiritual qualities than to events in her life, reflected the changing preoccupations of religious women and presented a model that the pious could follow.

Hagiography, however, was not new and seventeenth-century biographers like André Duval drew on a long medieval tradition. Thomas Heffernan writes that in the Middle Ages,

---

<sup>18</sup> Laurence Lux-Sterritt, *Redefining Female Religious Life: French Ursulines and English Ladies in Seventeenth-Century Catholicism* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2005), 200.

<sup>19</sup> Canfield and de Sales, together with Vincent de Paul, Jean-Jacques Olier and others, became known as the French School of spirituality through the works of Brémond.

<sup>20</sup> Barbara Woshinsky, *Imagining Women's Conventual Spaces in France, 1600-1800* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2010), 11.

biographies of a wide variety of pious people—“bishops, abbots, monks, nuns, hermits, and holy men and women”—abounded, and these instructional and inspirational stories presented nuns as well as laywomen with models of acceptable feminine spirituality.<sup>21</sup> Collections of saints’ lives, such as Jacobus de Voragine’s *Golden Legend*, helped disseminate standard versions of the lives of the saints to secular as well as religious audiences. While the subjects of medieval hagiography varied in age, sex and position in life, their stories were less diverse; the purpose of hagiography was to use provide numerous individual examples to prove a universal truth, and writers were thus more concerned with the similarities between the course of saints’ lives than in the differences.<sup>22</sup> Lives of saints were intended to demonstrate a model for piety that readers could emulate, or at least admire, and the variety of subjects reinforced the idea that God acted in similar ways upon the lives of many people, and were communal rather than individual in function.<sup>23</sup> The virtues that hagiographies promoted, however, were not static throughout the Middle Ages, and as Weinstein and Bell point out, hagiographers constantly shaped saints’ lives according to contemporary concerns, including political interests and the requirements for sainthood.<sup>24</sup> As for the canonization and hagiography of female saints, there was a marked change from the veneration primarily of virgin martyrs of the early church, to an emphasis on more contemporary female saints, particularly mystics, during the later Middle Ages.<sup>25</sup> Virginity became a less important aspect of feminine sanctity, and as martyrdom became a more elusive goal, hagiographies increasingly described women who experienced personal visions of Christ.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 8.

<sup>22</sup> Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 13.

<sup>25</sup> André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 239.

<sup>26</sup> On martyrdom, see Jacques Le Brun, “Mutations de la notion de martyre au XVIIe siècle d’après les biographies spirituelles féminines,” *Problèmes d’histoire du christianisme* (Brussels: Éditions de l’Université de Bruxelles,

However, as I have suggested, the emphases in the biographies of pious women changed in the seventeenth century, with mystical inner union with God becoming the preferred theme, authors continued to follow certain narrative tropes. Marie-Elisabeth Henneau calls this formula a “classical diptych” that included “genealogy, education, conversion, convent life, illness, death, followed by a reminiscence of her virtues.”<sup>27</sup> The seventeenth-century biographies would perhaps be more accurately described as a triptych, as most consisted of three sections which described the life of the woman in the secular world and her vocation, her life and death in the cloister, and an enumeration of her virtues. The women invariably showed precocious piety in childhood, accompanied by an early vocation which was usually nurtured through a convent education. The young girls faced opposition to their religious vocations, often in the form of hostile family members or other circumstances that prevented them from taking vows, and sometimes faced temptation themselves to abandon their ascetic paths. After they surmounted the obstacles to the religious life, the focus of the narratives shifted to their inner lives and to the development of the virtues for which they were later known; in keeping with the inward-focused spirituality of the Catholic Reformation, the main events in these women’s lives related to their interior development and union with God. The books themselves were generally significant in length; as the printing press made the production of many pages of text both easier and less costly than in the past, most biographies were around four hundred pages long. Indeed, the printing press made most popular works of religion, including the Life of Teresa of Avila, available to women, and Barbara Diefendorf writes that they took advantage of this availability,

---

1989), 77-90. On changing images of female sanctity in the late Middle Ages, see Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 13-30.

<sup>27</sup> Marie-Élisabeth Henneau, "Femmes en quête de rôles dans l'histoire du salut : biographies de religieuses et religieuses biographes," in *Les Femmes et l'écriture de l'histoire* (Rouen: Publications des Universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2009), 225. "...un diptyque désormais classique (généalogie, éducation, conversion, vie conventuelle, maladie, décès) puis de l'évocation des vertus."

“avidly devour[ing]” the Lives of their recent predecessors, late medieval saints like Catherine of Siena and Catherine of Genoa.<sup>28</sup>

Literary production, however, had also changed with the decline of manuscript culture; whereas convents were centres for medieval book production, wherein women could copy texts needed for their own devotional practices, this was to change with the printing press and the greater requirements for ecclesiastical approval of published works. Although France did not comprehensively ban the printing of all books on the Vatican’s 1559 Index of Prohibited Books, the Faculty of Theology at the University of Paris was responsible for censoring religious books.<sup>29</sup> The Faculty was at first concerned principally with Protestantism, but by the end of the seventeenth century new heresies had emerged. Increasingly, authors had to print ecclesiastical approbations within their books to prove they had avoided unorthodox theology. Jansenism, a theology that emphasized predestination, and Quietism, a mystical theology of self-perfection, were both prominently espoused by women, abbess Angelique Arnauld and writer Jeanne Guyon, respectively, so women’s lives were seen as having the real potential to promote heretical beliefs. Moreover, the generally accepted theological ignorance of women required such books to be written by men, as had been the case throughout most of the history of medieval hagiography. As Diefendorf argues, this male authorship is largely to blame for obscuring the role of women in the history of the Catholic Reformation; the biographies of active and often radical women like Barbe Acarie emphasized their more traditionally female virtues, such as submissiveness and obedience.<sup>30</sup> The reasons for this were complex, though, and I will argue in this thesis that even biographies written by men furthered the goals of Catholic Reformation women and provided a means for their voices to be heard.

---

<sup>28</sup> Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 20.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Brun, *Le livre français* (Paris: Presse Universitaire de France, 1969), 63.

<sup>30</sup> Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 21.

Finally, because of the complexity of voices of different authors and the collaborative nature of life-writing in the early modern era, I have followed the example of Nicky Hallett and many other historians and used the term “Life” to refer to any such biographical writing. The distinction between autobiography and biography was not always relevant in this era, and rarely applied to texts which were divine in focus. “Life” therefore refers to any text that documented the spiritual experiences of an individual, though I have used the term biography generically as well.

### **Historiography**

Historians of women have traditionally seen the validation of marriage, the disproportionate involvement of women in the Reformation, and the destruction of convents, seen as places where disobedient young girls were held against their will, as evidence that Protestantism liberated early modern women.<sup>31</sup> The enforcement by the Council of Trent of strict enclosure behind convent walls of all religious women only reinforced this impression. Consequently, when historians did turn their attention towards Catholic women, it was usually to the new active orders of non-cloistered women and to lament the fact that over the course of the century, these orders were almost all eventually brought under the control of ecclesiastic authorities. As enclosure and formal vows were introduced, the elements that were seen as liberating women were also suppressed.

Likewise, the wave of devotional literature produced for Catholic women has attracted little interest until recently. Despite their original popularity, spiritual biographies were for a long time considered of interest only to the chroniclers, historians and devotees of the religious orders

---

<sup>31</sup> Sherrin Marshall Wyntjes, "Women in the Reformation Era", in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977); Nancy Roelker, "The Appeal of Calvinism to French Noblewomen in the Sixteenth Century," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2 (1972), 391-418.

to which the books' subjects belonged. They were thus read as factual accounts of the lives of the founding members of particular orders, and were decreasingly read as spiritual literature as monasticism declined and spiritual practices changed over time. Very few such works have been reprinted in the twentieth century, and those that were are generally the Lives of women who are noteworthy in their own right, such as Marie Guyart de l'Incarnation, whose writings are unusually extensive and who is more often studied in light of her contributions to the French settlement of Canada than the religious context to which she belonged.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, as Kathleen Ann Myers notes in a survey of Hispanic convent writing, over the course of the twentieth century devotional writing has generally been considered suspect and such works, despite their popularity at the time they were written, have remained on the margins of modern scholarship.<sup>33</sup>

Following the rise of women's history in the 1970s, scholarly attention was finally returned to the lived experiences, as well as the written Lives, of religious women in early modern Europe. In light of the interest at this time of finding the voices of women previously lost to history, it is not surprising that attention was focused on the rare examples of feminine spiritual autobiography, through which the actual voices of women could be heard.<sup>34</sup> Studies of Teresa of Avila, by far the most well-known and influential autobiographer of the early modern era, flourished at this time. Historians such as Alison Weber, Gillian Ahlgren and Jodi Bilinkoff

---

<sup>32</sup> For re-issues of nuns' writing from Quebec, see Marie de l'Incarnation, Claude Martin, and Albert Jamet, *spirituels et historiques* - , 1636-1716 - tel-Dieu, 1939), Marie de l'Incarnation and Guy-Marie Oury, *Correspondance* (Solesmes: Abbaye Saint-Pierre, 1971), Marie de l'Incarnation and Guy Marie Oury, *Marie de l'Incarnation: la relation autobiographique de 1654* -sur-Sarth , 1976), Morin, Marie and Ghislaine Legendre, - , 1659-1725. , 1979.

<sup>33</sup> Kathleen Ann Myers, "Recent Trends in the Study of Women and Religion in Colonial Mexico," *Latin American Research Review* 43, no. 2 (2008): 290-301.

<sup>34</sup> Daniel Bornstein, *Introduction to Life and Death in a Venetian Convent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 3, argues "Sources written by men reveal not so much what women did as what men admired and abhorred... It is therefore especially important for future historians to turn to detailed study of these works in which women wrote about their own visions and mystical experiences and about life among the sisters in their households, beguinages, and convents."

studied her writings from a feminist perspective while placing the saint within her historical context, and examined how she and other pious women negotiated the authority to write within a patriarchal world.<sup>35</sup> In response to the prevailing opinion that Teresa, as an untutored woman, wrote with “antirhetorical, subjective spontaneity,” Weber argues that in fact she deliberately adopted a “rhetoric of femininity,” a conscious imitation of stereotypically female tropes which permitted her to publish for a wider audience.<sup>36</sup> Teresa and other women writers thus began to be seen as active in the creation of their own Lives and in the presentation of themselves to a public audience, rather than simply as spiritual figures who wrote solely for personal reasons.

The study of spiritual autobiography expanded when literary scholars began examining the genre as a whole, thus bringing attention to a wider range of women writers and setting writers such as Teresa of Avila and the French mystic Jeanne Guyon in greater literary, as well as historical, context. In a recent review of literature dealing with early modern Hispanic nuns, Kathleen Myers describes how, by the late 1990s, the study of female religious writing had become a “booming subfield.”<sup>37</sup> The idea that autobiographies truly represented the “voice” of the subject was also put into question, to great effect. Indeed, these literary specialists concentrated on two principal themes: the definition of the genre of autobiography and the degree of autonomy of the writer in the face of the institutional powers that sought to control individual expression. This latter question is of particular relevance to the study of female writers, who did not have the authority to write and publish on their own without male oversight.

Perhaps following the lead of scholars engaged in studying Teresa of Avila’s writing, studies of Hispanic nuns’ writing dominated this emerging field. In the English- and French-

---

<sup>35</sup> Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996), 188; Jodi Bilinkoff, *The Avila of Saint Teresa: Religious Reform in a Sixteenth-Century City* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 218; Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 183.

<sup>36</sup> Weber, *Teresa of Avila*, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Myers, “Recent Trends,” 292.

speaking worlds of scholarship, Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlauf brought a number of writers to mainstream attention through their edition of several such Lives in *Untold Sisters*, arguing that women besides Teresa of Avila and Mexican Carmelite poet Juana Inés de la Cruz, the only women considered part of the literary canon, deserve to be studied as part of the literary and cultural life of Golden Age Spain.<sup>38</sup> Arenal and Schlauf therefore introduce selections of writing by various religious women of both Spain and New Spain, categorizing and analyzing them by genre and geography, and concluding that the convent was a place in which nuns could to some extent “[evade] the gendered structure of society.”<sup>39</sup> Ibsen, in her book on women’s spiritual autobiography in colonial Spanish America, continues to build upon the theme that writing could provide a means towards the interior liberation of women who were restrained not only by convent walls and patriarchy, but also by a colonial society. Indeed, the notion that it was only in artistic production that women could fight the oppressive nature of post-Tridentine convents was common, as also seen in the many studies of Italian convent music and theatrical production.<sup>40</sup>

The feminine autobiography was more exceptional in France, with no local model of the stature of Teresa of Avila appearing to create a tradition for other women. Moreover, no French nun achieved Teresa’s official approbation; the only work written by a religious woman in the first person that was not condemned within the seventeenth century was Marie de l’Incarnation’s *Life*, which was heavily edited by her son, Claude Martin, a Dominican priest.<sup>41</sup> While Henri Brémond, in his *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France*, describes several dozen

---

<sup>38</sup> Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlauf, *Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in their Own Words* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 2.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 411.

<sup>40</sup> Craig A. Monson, ed. *The Crannied Wall: Women, Religion, and the Arts in Early Modern Europe* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1992), Laven, *Virgins of Venice*.

<sup>41</sup> Other books that could be considered autobiographical included the Lives of Jeanne des Anges and Jeanne Guyon, which will be discussed in the first chapter.

female mystics who formed part of what he called the “Invasion mystique,” their writings were not well-known to a wider audience and are largely unknown today.<sup>42</sup> Most were not published independently, but only as edited, anthologized versions.

Studies of French literary women of the seventeenth century have therefore traditionally concentrated on secular writers, despite the fact that religious texts dominated seventeenth-century publishing;<sup>43</sup> Joan DeJean’s influential survey of female writers, *Tender Geographies*, focuses on the salon and the development of the novel, and her “Bibliography of Women Writers, 1640-1715” includes only twenty religious women of approximately 220 writers.<sup>44</sup> Religious women were similarly rarely included among the *femmes de lettres* of Myriam Maistre’s *Les Précieuses: Naissance des femmes de lettres en France au XVIIe siècle*.<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth Goldsmith, in a book specifically on life-writing by French women, examines the emergence of women in the world of publishing and the ways in which they created an identity for themselves in this new environment.<sup>46</sup> Like DeJean’s, her examples are predominantly secular women such as Hortence and Marie Mancini, though she also includes case studies of Marie Guyart de l’Incarnation and Quietist mystic Jeanne Guyon in order to explore the religious dimension of women’s writing. By placing these women alongside secular writers, she focuses on the ways in which private, interior prayer was made public and took on political meaning, much as the private lives of secular memoirists did.<sup>47</sup> Because of her interest in the public faces

---

<sup>42</sup>

2, *L’invasion mystique* (Paris: Bloud, 1930):

947-995.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas M. Carr, ed. *The Cloister and the World: Early Modern Convent Voices* (Charlottesville, VA: Rookwood Press, 2007), 7.

<sup>44</sup> Joan DeJean, *Tender Geographies: Women and the Origins of the Novel in France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 297.

<sup>45</sup> Maistre, *Les Précieuses*, 17-18. (Paris: H. Champion, 1999).

<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth C. Goldsmith, *Publishing Women's Life Stories in France, 1647-1720: From Voice to Print* (Aldershot, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2001), 172.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 5-6.

of these writers, she deals with women – Jeanne des Anges, who was possessed at Loudun, Marie de l’Incarnation, and Jeanne Guyon – whom she considers “‘public’ figures who had broken free of the isolating female spaces of convent and household.”<sup>48</sup>

Thomas Carr, in contrast, laments the relative absence of convent writers from the literary canon. In addition to editing a selection of articles bringing to light different aspects of writing by religious women, he assembled a comprehensive bibliography of nuns’ writing, which illustrates the wide range of genres that were produced and makes the argument that such writing is more extensive than previously thought.<sup>49</sup> A somewhat potentially problematic feature of this bibliography, however, is the lack of distinction between feminine writings that make up only a small part of a larger piece of writing by a male author, such as a prayer inserted within a biographical work, and those rare works published by women like Jeanne Guyon. While both are ostensibly the words of women, to accept them as such without considering the genre obscures the significant editorial role that male authors played. Of the 93 women listed by Carr as authors of *Lives*, few published under their own name.<sup>50</sup> Carr recognizes this issue, and points out the need for scholarly editions of convent writing that “enable the reader to discern the nun’s voice,” as most of the existing works he lists do not do so.<sup>51</sup> This task is, however, not as simple as separating sections as delineated in the original text. It is thus necessary to complicate the idea of the voice of the writer, as do several subsequent scholars in the field of early modern Spanish autobiography, and *moreso* in the study of medieval hagiography. Extensive recent

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>49</sup> Carr, *The Cloister and the World: Early Modern Convent Voices*, 267; Thomas M. Carr, *Voix Des Abbesses Du Grand Siècle: La Prédication Au Féminin à Port-Royal* (Tuebingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2006). Carr also considers speeches given by abbesses, recorded at Port-Royal, as forms of convent writing.

<sup>50</sup> Examples of such were Jeanne Guyon, Jeanne Belcier (Jeanne des Anges), and Alix Le Clerc, and the latter was reconstructed recently through her notes.

<sup>51</sup> Carr, *Cloister and the World*, 13

literature has dealt with this question and taken on the task of separating the voice of women from their male scribes.<sup>52</sup>

Jodi Bilinkoff notes in her article “Navigating the Waves (of Devotion)” that, despite the fact that more exemplary lives were produced during the early modern era than ever before, hagiography continues to be seen as a medieval genre which disappeared with the emergence of a more “modern” world view.<sup>53</sup> Although she makes a convincing argument that the seventeenth century, particularly in Spain, was actually the golden age of hagiography, the fact remains that the vast majority of scholarship on the production and social function of the genre is written by medievalists. Hagiography of the Middle Ages was produced in a very different context, namely that of monastic scriptoria, and promoted markedly different ideals, particularly those of martyrdom and extreme self-mortification, than seventeenth-century texts. Recent critical studies of the genre, however, provide useful ways to consider the relationships between women and their biographers. This literature deals primarily with visionary women, whose visions were often made public in biographical form. The narratives of these Lives were primarily centred around the emergence of visionary gifts; Catherine of Siena’s visions, for example, became known chiefly through Raymond of Capua’s biography rather than her own written dialogues, and thus the genres of biography and visionary literature overlapped to a great extent.<sup>54</sup>

Before the printing press, the creation of a manuscript was by default a collaborative activity that involved copying, illuminating and glossing texts. Authorship itself was generally

---

<sup>52</sup> In addition to other works listed, see E. Ann Matter, “The Personal and the Paradigm: The Book of Maria Domitilla Galluzzi,” and Anne Jacobson Schutte, “Inquisition and Female Autobiography: The Case of Cecilia Ferrazzi,” in Craig Monson, ed., *The Crannied Wall: Women, Religion, and the Arts in Early Modern Europe* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 87-104, 105-118.

<sup>53</sup> Jodi Bilinkoff, “Navigating the Waves (of Devotion): Towards a Gendered Analysis of Early Modern Catholicism,” in *Crossing Boundaries: Attending to Early Modern Women* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2001), 161-172.

<sup>54</sup> See Catherine M. Mooney, ed. *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999)

understood to be a communal activity, which involved numerous people and even the writers of much older texts that were refashioned and included in new works. This was especially the case of less literate women writers who by necessity worked with men in order to write and publish.<sup>55</sup> Studies of visionaries must necessarily also consider the male scribes who played an essential role in transcribing and legitimating their visions, and the extent to which existing manuscripts represent the precise words of mystics is therefore debated. Common lines of inquiry are the comparison of the voices of women in their own writings with the voices of the men who wrote about them and the discernment of women's voices in ambiguously authored texts.<sup>56</sup> Echoing the scribes themselves, who often asserted that they only transcribed the very words of the mystics in order to insist upon the direct revelatory nature of the visions, feminist scholars have often favoured and emphasized the individual contribution of the women whose visions provide one of the only ways to hear their voices. In regard to Catherine of Siena, Karen Scott argues:

Another argument for privileging Catherine's voice over Raymond's is to focus on her gender. Considering how rare it is for a medieval Italian woman mystic's own words to have survived, as opposed to hagiographic accounts or writings heavily controlled by male confessors, feminist scholars would give more weight to Catherine's voice to circumvent the necessity of studying women of the past through the eyes of men and to seek better answers, for example, to questions about medieval women's developing self-image, consciousness, and mode of thought.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Kimberley Benedict, *Empowering Collaborations: Writing Partnerships Between Religious Women and Scribes in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>56</sup> See Barbara Newman, "Hildegard and Her Hagiographers: The Remaking of Female Sainthood," Frank Tobin, "Henry Suso and Elsbeth Stagel: Was the *Vita* a Cooperative Effort?" and Dyan Elliot, "Authorizing a Life: The Collaboration of Dorothea of Montau and John Marienwerder," in Mooney, *Gendered Voices*.

<sup>57</sup> Karen Scott, "Mystical Death, Bodily Death: Catherine of Siena and Raymond of Capua on the Mystic's Encounter with God," in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 136-167, 143.

Scott argues further that because Catherine's own writings were less formulaic and contained references to events that Raymond did not mention, her dialogues and correspondence are the more reliable source and should be considered the "normative" version of her life.<sup>58</sup>

A few scholars have, however, recently begun to question the value of assessing individual contributions and the merit of isolating women's voices. Rather than presenting the dual authorship of the Lives of visionaries as a problem that must be solved, Kimberly Benedict and John Coakley in particular have examined it as a collaborative process which is in itself a worthy subject for study. Benedict even argues that this approach better exemplifies feminist principles, as she recognizes that women possessed agency and authority even when their exact words were altered.<sup>59</sup> Presenting edited texts as corruptions of an inaccessible original document obscures important aspects of these hagiographies, argues Benedict, and Anne Clark calls for an examination of how women as a "repressed group" related to the dominant group and how their absorption and rejection of male ideals was actually an important part of medieval literary culture. Furthermore, considering biographical writings as collaborative works allows one to acknowledge and examine the role of women in the practical aspects of writing and production.<sup>60</sup> Benedict's book is, however, primarily an examination of "partnerships as narrative constructions, rather than about partnerships as lived realities,"<sup>61</sup> and thus illustrates the need for studies of the latter as well.

---

<sup>58</sup> Scott, "Mystical Death," 141.

<sup>59</sup> Benedict, *Empowering Collaborations*, xii.

<sup>60</sup> Cynthia J. Cyrus, *The Scribes for Women's Convents in Late Medieval Germany* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009) is one such example. Cyrus analyses how convents chose particular scribes to copy books for them.

<sup>61</sup> Benedict xix

Adopting this perspective in the previously described context of early modern Spanish autobiography are Isabelle Poutrin and Jodi Bilinkoff.<sup>62</sup> Both approach the texts as social historians more than as literary scholars, and seek concrete evidence about the lives of their authors and readers. With the majority of scholarly interest in religious life-writing being devoted to the autobiography and the discovery of female voices, less attention has been paid to the far more common genre, that of biographies written by men about noteworthy pious women. While autobiographies remain the focus of Bilinkoff and Poutrin's work, they both analyse the biographies that were usually written by women's confessors in order to compare them to the more unusual genre of autobiography. Both find the two forms of writing to have existed on a kind of spectrum, with autobiographical writings often being incorporated into biography in an act of cooperative authorship. Bilinkoff argues that these works are revealing not only of the religious experience of nuns, but also of the lives of the confessors who participated in the writing of these lives and reflected therein upon their roles in the lives of their penitents.<sup>63</sup> Proposing a comparative approach, Bilinkoff uses biographies from France, Italy and the New World as well as from Spain; her French sources, however, which are selected because of the close ties between their male authors and female subjects, are atypical for this reason.<sup>64</sup> Unlike in Spain, where the majority of biographies were written by the confessors of their subjects, in France this often involved clerics whose help was enlisted after the death of the subject, a theme which will be explored in greater detail in the first chapter of this thesis.

---

<sup>62</sup> Jodi Bilinkoff, *Related Lives: Confessors and their Female Penitents, 1450-1750* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Isabelle Poutrin, *Le Voile et la plume: autobiographie et sainteté féminine dans l'Espagne moderne* (Madrid: Casa de Velazquez, 1995), 495.

<sup>63</sup> Bilinkoff, *Related Lives*, 35.

<sup>64</sup> Claude Martin, ed., *La Vie de la Vénérable Mère Marie de l'Incarnation* (Sablé-sur-Sarthe: Solesmes, 1981). The Life of Marie de l'Incarnation, as previously mentioned, was extensively edited by her son, Claude Martin, with whom she had maintained a correspondence her entire life, despite the distance between Canada and France. Originally intending to publish her life as a biography, he was persuaded to edit it but present it in her own words.

Literary critic Nicholas Paige examines a more extensive selection of French nuns' biographies in a study of the emergence of literary autobiography; he portrays spiritual biographies as having constituted a sort of "gateway" to the modern autobiography, whereby accounts of interior spirituality, primarily feminine, introduced the public to narratives that examined the inner lives of individuals.<sup>65</sup> He thus implies that the former are an inferior genre and argues that the decline of biography and the parallel rise of autobiography coincided with the rise of modernity and individualism.<sup>66</sup> Paige generally minimizes the role of women within the production of such biographies, and presents a picture of men searching the country for women about whom to write. He dismisses claims by male authors of collaboration with women as a literary trope that was intended to prove the veracity of their words.<sup>67</sup> Other evidence, however, supports the contention that French nuns, like their Spanish counterparts, did indeed participate in the writing of their own and their sisters' Lives. This thesis, therefore, though dealing with many of the same primary sources as Nicholas Paige's study, will draw upon the methods used by Bilinkoff and particularly by Poutrin in order to analyze them as evidence of the social conditions that led to their production.

The various forms of life-writing by and about religious women, both medieval and early modern and in France and in other countries of Europe, have therefore been well documented by historians and literary specialists. They have examined the cultural forces that both encouraged and forbade women from writing, the complex interplay between the men and women who constructed the lives, and the historical context in which such works were composed. The focus

---

<sup>65</sup> Nicholas D. Paige, *Being Interior: Autobiography and the Contradictions of Modernity in Seventeenth-Century France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

<sup>66</sup> Paige, *Being Interior*, 65-118.

<sup>67</sup> Paige, *Being Interior*, 82.

on Spanish and Italian women, the association of hagiography with a medieval context, and the emphasis upon the literary content of such writing (and sometimes the dismissal of such works because of a perceived lack thereof) has, however, left the significance of the French historical context relatively unexplored.

The experiences of religious women in Catholic Reformation France were not entirely distinct from those of nuns in other Catholic countries. Although the Gallican Church did not accept most decrees of the Council of Trent until 1615, the decree reinforcing the enclosure of women in convents was adopted immediately, putting French nuns in the same position as their Spanish, Italian and German counterparts. Furthermore, there was direct interaction between Spain and France with the arrival of Spanish Carmelites in France in 1601, thus precipitating a spiritual revival in France. Nevertheless, the impact of the Wars of Religion, the lasting fear of Protestantism and the existence of different demographic patterns made the experiences of French nuns unique. This experience has recently been the topic of an active and rapidly growing field of historical research. The first studies of early modern nuns after the birth of women's history, by historians such as Gabrielle Zarri and Elissa Weaver, concentrated primarily on Italy, where, as previously stated, coerced monachization was very common due to particular marriage practices. The image thus formed of the Catholic Reformation nun was that described by Archangela Tarabotti, a woman condemned to a convent despite a complete lack of vocation. The artistic achievements of these women, therefore, were of great interest to historians, who saw them as the only arena in which women could exercise agency.<sup>68</sup>

It was indeed in part due to this image, best epitomized in France by Diderot in his novel *La Religieuse*, that Elizabeth Rapley began her examinations of French teaching convents. Although several French historians, such as Jean Delumeau and Roger Devos, had previously

---

<sup>68</sup> Lavan, *Virgins of Venice*, 5.

written on the topic,<sup>69</sup> principally in the form of demographic studies of convents, Rapley's first book, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France*, introduced the field to English-language scholars and precipitated a growing trend in women's and religious history.<sup>70</sup> Rapley argues that the new orders of *filles seculières*, women who had not taken monastic vows, that emerged in the beginning of the seventeenth century represented the feminisation of the Catholic Church. Examining several teaching congregations, including the Ursulines and Filles de Notre-Dame, and charitable orders, Rapley put forth the case that these women experienced a promotion in status at a time when other women, both non-religious and members of cloistered orders, experienced greater restrictions in society. In contrast to earlier studies of women in the Reformation, Rapley contended that Catholicism was the true avenue for female agency in early modern Europe. Following this "Mystical Conquest" of France, women had the power to create new religious orders that operated, at least in their original form, on the women's own terms.

Rapley's work inspired a field of research which Craig Harline a few years later referred to as "indisputably a growth industry."<sup>71</sup> Most previous studies, particularly among French historians, were institutional histories of individual orders; some examples were Yves Chaussy's work on Benedictines and Marie-Elisabeth Henneau's on the Cistercians.<sup>72</sup> While all contributing to the understanding of religious women's lives, few historians integrated these diverse studies.<sup>73</sup> English-language historians, furthermore, tended to concentrate on the new,

---

<sup>69</sup> Jean Delumeau, "Regard à l'intérieur d'une congrégation féminine," in *Un Chemin d'histoire* (Paris: Fayard, 1981); Roger Devos and Robert Mandrou, \_\_\_\_\_, 1973).

<sup>70</sup> Rapley, *The Dévotes*, 3.

<sup>71</sup> Craig Harline, "Actives and Contemplatives: Female Religious in the Low Countries before and After Trent", *Catholic Historical Journal* 81, no. 4 (1995), 541

<sup>72</sup> Yves Chaussy, *Les Bénédictines et la réforme catholique en France au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Éditions de la Source, 1975); Marie-Élisabeth Henneau, *Les Cisterciennes du pays mosan: Moniales et vie contemplative à l'époque moderne* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1990).

<sup>73</sup> Geneviève Reynes, *Couvents de femmes : la vie des religieuses contemplatives dans la France des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Fayard, 1987) was a notable exception, examining convents of contemplative women of several orders.

uncloistered orders of the seventeenth-century. Linda Lierheimer continues Rapley's work on the teaching orders of France. She concentrates specifically on Ursulines and argues that the order's teaching mission was used strategically in order to permit women to preach in public, which was usually forbidden.<sup>74</sup> Lierheimer sees these women as early feminists who employed such strategies to escape ecclesiastical control.<sup>75</sup> Laurence Lux-Sterritt and Anne Conrad have also examined the ways in which Ursulines negotiated a place in the public world, while Susan Dinan's work introduces Louise de Marillac's Filles de la Charité, who successfully avoided enclosure.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, Ursulines and other secular orders dominate the historiography, and in this view of religious life, major contemplative orders such as the Carmelites tend to be neglected. Craig Harline argues that the evidence shows that women in the Low Countries had genuine choice regarding the form that their vocation would take, as well as having actively chosen the religious life in the first place.<sup>77</sup> Such findings are almost certainly regional and cannot be applied cleanly across Europe. It has been shown that even in Italy, however, where vocations were generally forced, women continued to interact with their families and the world beyond convent walls.<sup>78</sup>

Two important challenges to the idea that only the new orders engaged with the outside world were Claire Walker's *Gender and Politics in Early Modern Europe* and Amy Leonard's *Nails in the Wall*, both of which examine communities of cloistered nuns and their interactions

---

<sup>74</sup> Linda Lierheimer, "Preaching or Teaching?: Defining the Ursuline Mission in Seventeenth-Century France," in *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 212-226.

<sup>75</sup> Linda Lierheimer, "Female Eloquence and Maternal Ministry: The Apostolate of Ursuline Nuns in Seventeenth-Century France" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1994).

<sup>76</sup> Laurence Lux-Sterritt, "Between the Cloister and the World: The Successful Compromise of the Ursulines of Toulouse, 1604-1616," *French History* 16, no. 3 (2002): 247-268; Laurence Lux-Sterritt, *Redefining Female Religious Life: French Ursulines and English Ladies in Seventeenth-Century Catholicism*, Catholic Christendom, 1300-1700 (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005); Anne Conrad, *Zwischen Kloster und Welt: Ursulinen und Jesuitinnen in der katholischen Reformbewegung des 16./17. Jahrhunderts* (Mainz: Zabern, 1991); Dinan, *Women and Poor Relief*.

<sup>77</sup> Elizabeth Rapley, "Women and the Religious Vocation in Seventeenth-Century France," *French Historical Studies* 18, no. 3 (Spring 1994).

<sup>78</sup> Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic*.

with bishops and civic authorities.<sup>79</sup> Ulrike Strasser also explores these themes in her studies of Munich convents, examining the ways in which the emerging state placed convents under its control, and arguing that this in turn strengthened the ideology of gender divisions and increasingly relegated women to a private sphere. Strasser shows, however, that women did not passively accept their exclusion from public engagement, and she creates a microhistory of a congregation of women who purchased and arranged for the transportation of the relics of St. Dorothy from Rome against the wishes of the man in charge of the convent. Strasser is one of several historians to use the image of a permeable membrane to describe convent walls, often previously assumed to be impenetrable when claustration was enforced.<sup>80</sup>

Barbara Diefendorf's work is particularly useful in breaking down the perceived divisions between active and contemplative orders, as she emphasizes the cultural changes that shaped women's spiritual experiences in general and describes the actions of pious noble laywomen in bringing about a religious revival in the wake of the Wars of Religion.<sup>81</sup> Like Rapley, she recognizes two distinct but related waves of this movement, which culminated in a shift towards charitable work by the middle of the century. Diefendorf, however, emphasizes interior spirituality by focusing on the penitential wave that swept elite society at the beginning of the seventeenth century, while Rapley emphasizes the emergence of teaching orders at the same time. These waves correspond roughly to the two periods within the century in which the greatest number of spiritual biographies were produced, which shows the close connection between women's spiritual activities and the production of devotional literature.

---

<sup>79</sup> Claire Walker, *Gender and Politics in Early Modern Europe: English Convents in France and the Low Countries* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Amy Leonard, *Nails in the Wall: Catholic Nuns in Reformation Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>80</sup> Ulrike Strasser, "The Cloister as Membrane: Recent Convent Histories and the Circulation of People and Ideas", *Gender and History* 19, no. 1 (April 2007 2007), Elizabeth Leffeldt, *Religious Women in Golden Age Spain: The Permeable Cloister*, ed. Allyson Poska and Abby Zanger (Aldershot, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2005).

<sup>81</sup> Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*.

Diefendorf contends that “the Catholic revival was the product of a vast collaboration between clerics and lay people, women and men.”<sup>82</sup> The sources relating to the relationships between religious women and men tend to show either great tension, as in the case of ecclesiastical visitation records documenting problems within convents, or deep spiritual partnership and friendship, as shown through Bilinkoff’s examples of confessors and penitents, or the correspondence of co-founders such as Jeanne de Chantal and François de Sales. While historians have often portrayed nuns as battling against the limitations set by men, it also cannot be assumed that these relationships were always fundamentally antagonistic and that the goals of men and women never coincided; Diefendorf in particular shows how women could in fact exercise agency even while they worked to reform convents and introduce enclosure.

The abundant literature relating to early modern French nuns recognizes that women, despite enclosure, were actively engaged with society at this time. There were many similarities between active and contemplative women, and it cannot be said that only non-cloistered women exhibited agency. Also evident throughout this literature is the tension between men and women in the formation and administration of these congregations. Historians have recently effectively emphasized the creative, rather than reactive, roles of women, but sometimes fail to consider the importance of collaboration with male clerics, which can give the impression of a more antagonistic relationship than actually tended to exist. While there is debate about the cause of monastic decline in eighteenth-century France, the fact remains that the “feminisation” of the Church was short-lived.

Just as literary scholars have begun to argue that religious women entered into collaborations with male scribes, both in the production of medieval manuscripts and in early modern autobiographies, it should also be noted that religious women’s collaborations with men

---

<sup>82</sup> Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 240.

extended beyond the literary. There have been numerous studies of such partnerships as shown through the correspondence of major figures such as Jeanne de Chantal and François de Sales, and Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul.<sup>83</sup> These relationships are by far the best documented and explored. Other women, as well as these notable figures, however, still conducted economic and spiritual relationships with the world outside of the convent.

It is the aim of this thesis to show how the spiritual biographies of women published in seventeenth-century France represented a practical partnership between the female subjects of these works, the members of their congregations, and the male clerics charged with the writing of these books. Often ignored and overlooked because of their formulaic and sometimes impersonal nature, biographies of this type actually illustrate the collaborative efforts of nuns and priests in a sort of publishing industry. French spiritual biographies involved the women of a convent in the preparation of materials for publication and the commissioning of works, as well as the confessors, spiritual directors, censors and sometimes several authors. The texts of these biographies demonstrate the development of religious ideals over the course of the century, and their writing and publication also reveal aspects of convent literacy. As women attempted to bring about religious renewal, often from behind convent walls, life-writing offered a means of stating their beliefs and goals publicly.

---

<sup>83</sup> For example, Dinan, *Women and Poor Relief*; Wendy M. Wright, *ois de Sales : A Study of the Nature of Spiritual Friendships between Men and Women in the Christian Contemplative Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983).

## Chapter 1 – “A Painting that Belongs to You”: The Authorship and Production of Lives

From devotional journals to theatrical works, early modern convents were the sites of an extensive and varied literary culture. Although literacy rates varied among religious women, they were on average the recipients of far more education than their secular counterparts, and reading and writing were both fundamental aspects of their spiritual lives.<sup>84</sup> Although some historians, like Mary Laven, paint a picture of women who were “denied access to pen and ink,”<sup>85</sup> many other nuns helped create what Nicky Hallett describes as “a vast array of personal writings” to serve both administrative and spiritual functions.<sup>86</sup> Sherry Velasco writes that “putting pen to paper was an integral part of daily life for women in the convent,” and describes how Isabel de Jesus, a Spanish Carmelite, wrote for an hour a day on the instruction of her spiritual director, a devotion to self-examination that Velasco argues was in fact widespread.<sup>87</sup>

Stricter supervision of convents following the Council of Trent required nuns to provide extensive written records of their activities, resulting in a proliferation of convent chronicles, visitation records, and expanded records relating to the profession and death of members of the house. A new emphasis on confession and the examination of one’s conscience encouraged a growing number of women to document their thoughts and prayers, which were often later

---

<sup>84</sup> Marie-Élisabeth Henneau, “Un Livre sous les yeux, une plume à la main. De l’usage de la lecture et de l’écriture dans les couvents de femmes (17e-18e siècles),” in *Lectrices d’Ancien Régime* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2003), 74, notes that by the time of the Catholic Reformation, convents were discouraged from accepting choir nuns who could not at least read the Office. Therefore the majority of nuns knew how to read, if not how to write.

<sup>85</sup> Mary Laven, *Virgins of Venice: Broken Vows and Cloistered Lives in the Renaissance Convent* (New York: Viking, 2003), 5.

<sup>86</sup> Nicky Hallett, *Lives of Spirit: English Carmelite Self-Writing of the Early Modern Period* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007), 8.

<sup>87</sup> Sherry M. Velasco, “Visualizing Gender on the Page in Convent Literature,” in *Women, Texts, and Authority in the Early Modern Spanish World* (Aldershot, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 128.

pieced together to create a narrative of the woman's spiritual journey.<sup>88</sup> Many women were prolific writers of letters,<sup>89</sup> and sharing texts of all sorts was an important part of monastic life. In addition to the works of theatre and poetry that were usually condemned by church officials, the Lives of saints and other pious people were read communally during meals, and women meditated independently upon such works as well.<sup>90</sup>

Yet despite the high degree of literacy in convents, the majority of the hundreds of biographies published during the seventeenth century were in fact composed by men, primarily members of male religious orders or the secular clergy. In some cases, these men were previously connected to the convent as a confessor or spiritual director, while others were members of separate orders. Jesuits, despite their prohibition against serving as spiritual directors to women, wrote a number of such books.<sup>91</sup> Despite the overwhelmingly female subject matter of spiritual biographies, published accounts by women of their own lives were rare, and most of those were eventually banned by the end of the seventeenth century for their unorthodox content. The most notable of these banned books were those of Jeanne Guyon, a laywoman born in 1648 who remained unaffiliated with a religious order despite her intense devotion to prayer. She began to write and preach her mystical ideas in Geneva, speaking against the church hierarchy and in favour of a more individual form of piety. While in Geneva, her book *Le Moyen court et*

---

<sup>88</sup> Gabriella Zarri, "From Prophecy to Discipline, 1450-1650," in *Women and Faith: Catholic Religious Life in Italy from Late Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 108. See also Elizabeth C. Goldsmith, *Publishing Women's Life Stories in France, 1647-1720: From Voice to Print* (Aldershot, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2001), 172..

<sup>89</sup> Adriano Prosperi, "Spiritual Letters," in *Women and Faith: Catholic Religious Life in Italy from Late Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 113.

<sup>90</sup> Elissa B. Weaver, *Convent Theater in Early Modern Italy: Spiritual Fun and Learning for Women* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Ruth Morse, *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages: Rhetoric, Representation, and Reality* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 129.

<sup>91</sup> Antoine Boissieu, *La Vie de la vénérable Mère Jeanne-Marie Chezard de Matel, fondatrice des religieuses de l'Ordre Du Verbe Incarné* (Lyon: Molin et Barbier, 1692); Jean-Étienne Grosez, *La Vie de dl Mère Marie Madeleine de la Trinité, fondatrice des religieuses de N. Dame de Misericorde* (Lyon: Jean Thioly, 1696); Jean Maillard, *La Vie de la Mère Marie Bon de l'Incarnation, religieuse Ursuline de Saint Marcellin, en Dauphiné* (Paris: Jean Couterot and Louis Guerin, 1686) are a few such examples of Jesuit-authored books.

*autres écrits spirituels* was condemned by the bishop despite it having been published with due approbations. As accusations of witchcraft and heresy followed her, she sought approval from Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, who she asked specifically to read a selection of her unpublished writings, including her autobiography, in order to prove her orthodoxy. Instead, Bossuet condemned her for Quietism, and even had her imprisoned for several years.<sup>92</sup> Marguerite-Marie Alacoque's *Dévotion au Sacre-Coeur de Jésus* was likewise published only posthumously, after the practice of devotion to the Sacred Heart was suppressed for seventy-five years. Only the Life of Marie Guyart de l'Incarnation, which was heavily revised and edited by her son, Claude Martin, was published during the seventeenth century with full approbation.

Indeed, although some religious women had opportunities to write and share their texts within the confines of the convent, nuns' literary culture was heavily influenced by the male collaborators whose approval was necessary for women's writing to be published for readers outside of their own monasteries.<sup>93</sup> The veneration of devout women and their intense involvement in religious was a hallmark of Catholic Reformation spirituality, but women were admired more for their inherent piety than their religious knowledge, and had limited authority to speak and write about matters of doctrine or theology.<sup>94</sup> Spiritual biographies, though not considered theological texts, were not exempt from such censure.

The encouragement to engage in mental prayer and to constantly examine one's conscience

---

<sup>92</sup> Marie-Florine Bruneau, *Women Mystics Confront the Modern World: Marie De l'Incarnation (1599-1672) and Madame Guyon (1648-1717)* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 124-130.

<sup>93</sup> David T. Pottinger, *The French Book Trade in the Ancien Régime, 1500-1791* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 56.

<sup>94</sup>

: actes - ,

Saint-Etienne, 1994), 9. Remy Amino notes that the distinction between the spiritual authority of men and women was bolstered by Thomas Aquinas, who stated that women, not having been created from earth, had a limited intellectual quality and should therefore be placed under the authority of those who had "the double monopoly of Knowledge and Writing, the clerics." See also Linda Lierheimer, "Preaching or Teaching?: Defining the Ursuline Mission in Seventeenth-Century France," in *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 212-226, who stresses the basis of this distinction in Paul's commandment that women not speak in public.

introduced the possibility for women to describe their own ideas, and it was feared that they would encourage forms of personal piety that bypassed or even denied Church hierarchy. It was therefore necessary that, when a woman's life was put forth as exemplary, her experiences passed through the filter of a male author who ensured the orthodoxy of the text. Like those of the medieval female saints whose hagiographies provided a model for these seventeenth-century texts, the lives of nuns were reshaped according to both ancient and more recent models, from St. Augustine to Teresa of Avila, into narratives far more reflective of cultural ideals than of the actual experiences of women.<sup>95</sup>

Neither the fact that biographies were written nor their authors' adherence to a particular hagiographic model were therefore new to Catholic Reformation-era France. The number of these books, estimated to be in the hundreds, nevertheless demands a closer examination.<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, this popularity of Lives of women indicates a widespread fascination with religious women, a preoccupation which was natural given the rapid increase in the number of women in convents. Even in the midst of this so-called feminization, however, to what extent could women exercise agency in writing books that were seemingly produced in a perfunctory manner by men who appeared to dismiss female contributions? When biographies were the products of commissions rather than a desire to share memories of a long and intimate relationship between confessor and penitent, one asks how priests came to write the Lives of nuns they had sometimes not even known in life, and how they viewed this task which appears at first glance to have required only

---

<sup>95</sup> Barbara B. Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 28; Jacques Le Brun, "Les Biographies spirituelles françaises du XVIIe siècle. Écriture féminine? Écriture mystique?" in *Esperienza religiosa e scritte femminili tra medioevo ed età moderna* (Acireale, Italy: Bonanno Editore, 1992), 390.

<sup>96</sup> Le Brun, "Les Biographies spirituelles," 390; Jodi Bilinkoff, "Navigating the Waves (of Devotion): Towards a Gendered Analysis of Early Modern Catholicism," in *Crossing Boundaries: Attending to Early Modern Women* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2001), 61, writes that the greatest number of hagiographies were actually produced during the seventeenth century, rather than the Middle Ages.

borrowing themes and phrases from the abundance of hagiographies that had recently been published. A closer examination of these books, however, reveals a deep concern for the accurate presentation of the subject's life, both by the women of her convent and by the author.

The attitudes of the writers towards their subjects and their role as biographer can best be seen in their prologues and prefaces. Nearly universal in such documents, prologues explained the author's intentions and justified his authority to write a work, and also offered the work in dedication to a notable religious or secular figure. Their form was well-established, defined by A. J. Minnis as the Aristotelian prologue: based on the Aristotelian theory of causality, each prologue had to outline the "causa efficiens," the author and his reason he had been directed to write, the "causa materialis," the materials they used as sources, the "causa formalis," the pattern imposed by sources, and the "causa finalis," the good the author hoped to bring about through his work.<sup>97</sup> Although the role of historian, like that of hagiographer, was reserved for men, these methods also point to engagement in the process by women; information as well as the initial impetus for many biographies came from within female communities.

In spite of the fact that it was their knowledge and spiritual authority that permitted them to publish biographies, male writers nevertheless made fervent declarations of humility in their introductory remarks and denied their own role in the authorship of their books. The standard conventions of prologues demanded that credit be given to God rather than to the individual author,<sup>98</sup> but credit was also given to the subjects themselves and to

---

<sup>97</sup> A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Scolar Press, 1984), 4.

<sup>98</sup> Maillard, in the Preface to *La Vie de la Mère Marie Bon de l'Incarnation*, for example, writes "Aussi Jésus-Christ est l'auteur, l'Ouvrier et le directeur d'une vie si extraordinaire..."

their fellow nuns, who, it was often said, were the true “authors” of these holy Lives. In his introduction to the Life of Catherine de Montholon, François Senault begins by telling the Ursulines of Dijon “I offer you nothing that does not already belong to you, and the gift that I make to you is a favour I already received from you.” He emphasizes their contribution to his work by stating “I worked with only the memoirs with which you provided me, and the life of Madame de Sanzelles, your dear founder, is more your work than mine.”<sup>99</sup> While such phrases must of course be understood as a literary device more than as literal truth, it is significant that the contributions of women are highlighted at the very beginning of the books.

The composition of a spiritual biography was framed as an act of devotion, performed by an author who, despite or even because of his own superior religious education, admired the unlearned piety of the subject. This was a common theme in depictions of female spirituality; Nicholas Paige argues that for many men in the Church, “nuns were nearly as far from the world of theological speculations as cowherds, and much closer at hand” which made them popular subjects for documenting authentic spiritual experiences.<sup>100</sup> Although the subjects of these books were well-educated and literate women for their era, who often wrote extensively themselves, authors stressed their ignorance of Latin and Church doctrine in order to show the direct intervention of God in their lives. Fenelon, for example, paid little attention to Jeanne Guyon’s writings on Quietism and mysticism, and presented her instead as an “illiterate” just by virtue of her

---

<sup>99</sup> François Senault, *La Vie de Madame Catherine de Montholon, veuve de Monsieur de Sanzelles, maistre des requestes et fondatrice des Ursulines de Dijon* (Paris: Pierre le Petit, 1653). “Je ne vous offre rien icy qui ne vous appartienne deja, et le present que je vous faits, est une faveur que j’ay receüe de vous. Je n’ay travaillé que sur les memoires que vous m’avez fournis, et la vie de Madame de Sanzelles vostre chere Fondatrice, est plustost vostre ouvrage que le mien.”

<sup>100</sup> Nicholas D. Paige, *Being Interior: Autobiography and the Contradictions of Modernity in Seventeenth-Century France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 75.

sex.<sup>101</sup> Even Jeanne-Marie Chezard de Matel's knowledge of Latin and the Bible was explained by her biographer as a gift from God that followed a period in which she displayed extreme religious fervour:

He gave without any study the knowledge of Latin and of the holy Writing; of the sort that attending Mass she understood perfectly the meaning of the Letter and the Gospel. She was very surprised by this knowledge, and she then remembers the words that she had previously spoken to God, that if he gave her the grace to understand the Gospel in Latin, as he had done to Catherine of Siena, she would love him as much as she had...<sup>102</sup>

By minimizing the education and literacy of these women, writers situated them in a long tradition of exemplary religious women. Twelfth-century visionaries Elizabeth of Schonau and Hildegard of Bingen were both presented as essentially ignorant, claims that were demonstrably false given their sophisticated compositions and extensive correspondence.<sup>103</sup>

Indeed, the convention of denying their own contribution to the work was so strong that it was common for male authors to absolve themselves of all responsibility for the composition and claim that they had allowed all the natural holiness of the life they described to show through. In his typically extravagant style, Henri Maupas du Tour begins by telling readers of the spiritual benefits of his book, but states that he himself is not responsible for them. He asks readers to “cast your eyes, my readers, so that you cannot refuse your heart which I want to

---

<sup>101</sup> Paige, *Being Interior*, 74.

<sup>102</sup> Boissieu, *La Vie de la vénérable Mère Jeanne Chezard de Matel*, 11. “Quelque tems après avoir reçu cette faveur du Ciel le Seigneur lui en fit une autre, il lui donna sans aucune étude l’intelligence de la langue Latine et de l’Ecriture sainte; de sorte qu’assistant à la Messe elle entendit parfaitement le sens de l’Epître et de l’Evangile. Elle fût fort surprise de cette connoissance, et se ressouvint alors des paroles qu’elle avoit dites autre fois à Dieu que s’il lui faisoit la grace d’entendre l’Evangile en Latin, comme il l’avoit faite à Sainte Catherine de Sienne, elle l’aimeroit autant qu’elle...”

<sup>103</sup> Sophie Houdard, "Possession et spiritualité: deux modèles de savoir féminin," in *Femmes savantes, savoirs des femmes: du crépuscule de la Renaissance à l'aube des lumières : actes du colloque de Chantilly (22-24 Septembre 1995)*, 1999). “... toutes les femmes qui s’engagent sur les voies difficiles de l’itinéraire spirituel – quelle que soit l’époque considérée – ne savent rien. Du mois le disent-elles: Elisabeth de Schonau ploie sous le faix de son ignorance, comme la grande abbesse de Bingen, sainte Hildegarde. L’auteur de la vita d’Elisabeth développe le motif en la présentant comme ignorant le latin et n’ayant appris des hommes que l’art de psalmodier; Hildegarde ne prétendait-elle pas elle aussi qu’elle connaissait fort mal le latin, elle qui composa le superbe Scivias, qui correspondit avec Bernard de Clairvaux, avec Guibert de Gembloux, Frédéric Ier, qui écrivit au pape, à Jutta von Spanheim à Elisabeth, son amie visionnaire dont on vient à peine de parler. Il faut bien sûr faire la part du topos de l’ignorance prophétique.”

take to give to God. No, it is not me [who will do this]; I am too weak for such a grand design.”<sup>104</sup> S. Jaques even cited his own lack of skill as a writer as an advantage; he was, he argued, such a “poor worker” that he would be unable to add anything that would detract from the simple and natural piety of his subject, Thérèse de Jesus.<sup>105</sup> Were one to take these authors at their words, the project of speaking on behalf of a woman so inherently superior would seem almost impossible. Bonneau recounts that he required repeated entreaties by the successor of Louise de Fontaine before he finally accepted the task, writing “the Venerable Mère Louise Eugenie de Fontaine was so well-known and illustrious through the great services that she rendered her order, that I would never dare undertake to write her life.”<sup>106</sup> The only way to accurately record these lives, argued many of the writers, was without “ornaments of discourse”<sup>107</sup> or other stylistic flourishes. While historians, declared Boissieu, made use of a “variety of reflections... to embellish their works to attach and to satisfy the spirit of readers,” he added nothing, persuaded that “the subject he dealt with was beautiful enough on its own.”<sup>108</sup> By insisting that they had added nothing at all, authors asserted that their books were completely accurate, containing only a divinely inspired life transposed directly to paper.

---

<sup>104</sup> Maupas du Tour, Henry de, *La Vie de la vénérable Mère Jeanne-Françoise Frémiot*, 2d ed. (Paris: Simeon Piget, 1647), 9. “Pretez icy vos yeux, mes Lecteurs, puis que vous ne scauriez refuser vostre coeur que je veux enlever pour donner a Dieu. Non, ce n’est pas moy; je suis trop foible pour un si beau dessein.”

<sup>105</sup> Albert de S. Jacques, *La Vie de la vénérable Mère Térèse de Jésus, fondatrice des Carmelites de la Franche-Comté de Bourgogne* (Lyon: Mathieu Liberal, 1673). “Et je puis dire qu’elles [the Carmelites of Franche-Comté] sont industrieuses à choisir un si mauvais Ouvrier, pour travailler à un si bel Ouvrage.”

<sup>106</sup> M. Bonneau, *La Vie de la vénérable Mère Louise-Eugénie de Fontaine, religieuse du monastère de la Visitation de Sainte-Marie*: “La venerable Mère Louise Eugenie de Fontaine a esté si connue et si illustre, par les grands services qu’elle a rendue a son Ordre, que je n’aurois jamais osé entreprendre d’en écrire la vie.”

<sup>107</sup> Jean Passavant, *La Vie de la révérende Mère Madelaine Gautron, prieure du monastère de la Fidélité de Saumur* (Saumur: Arnoult Seneuze, 1690).

<sup>108</sup> Boissieu, *Vie de Jeanne Chezard de Matel*, “Epitre à Monseigneur Messire Charles de Neufville”: “C’est un Ouvrage tout simple, où vous ne trouverez ni ce langage poli, ni ce stile noble et sublime, ni les pensées delicates et relevées, ni ce choix des relexions dont les Historiens ont coûtume d’embellir leurs Ouvrages pour attacher et pour satisfaire l’esprit des Lecteurs: j’ay negligé tous ces ornemens empruntés, persuadé que la matiere que j’avois à traiter étoit assez belle d’elle-même...”

At the same time, authors were also eager to prove the veracity of their work in more material terms, and they emphasized the sources from which they obtained their information alongside their assurances of divine inspiration. Increasingly, and in contrast to the medieval hagiographical tradition, biographies began to deal almost exclusively with contemporary subjects of whom memories were still very recent, and greater realism was thus desired. In medieval texts, especially in the early Middle Ages, emphasis was traditionally placed upon universal, rather than particular, truths in a saints' life.<sup>109</sup> For this reason, the ways in which subjects' lives were similar to others were considered more important than individual particularities and variances. By the seventeenth century, miraculous healings and visions remained the essential elements of hagiography, but Lives also became more solidly rooted in a specific time and place, in a history that readers were themselves experiencing, and particular truths became more important as well.

Margit Thofner points to this trend among visual portraits of holy people in early modern Italy, arguing that portraiture became less idealized during this period, as attention turned towards the veneration of the recently deceased. In her study of the iconography of Teresa of Avila, she notes that "what [was] new in the post-Tridentine period was perhaps the sheer detail of the portrayals, based, as they were, on actual likenesses rather than on a generic type."<sup>110</sup> This attention to detail can be perceived despite the formulaic structure of biographies; Jodi Bilinkoff, in her study of European and colonial women's life-writing in the seventeenth-century, notes that she could discern unique elements in each Life. "In more than a decade of reading these texts, however," she writes, "I have never found one

---

<sup>109</sup> Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 2; Morse, *Truth and Convention*, 6.

<sup>110</sup> Margit Thofner, "How to Look Like a (Female) Saint: The Early Iconography of St. Teresa of Avila," in *Female Monasticism in Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 74.

that did not have its own unique features, some detail not found in any other account.”<sup>111</sup> Françoise de Saint-Bernard’s conversion of her Protestant husband, for example, which occupied the first third of her biography, was not unexpected subject matter but nevertheless distinguished her life narrative from others.<sup>112</sup> Authors, moreover, were consciously aware of the difficulties associated with publishing biographies of their contemporaries, and Vernon notes that his inaccuracies and inadequacies as an author were particularly apparent in his life of Françoise de Saint-Bernard, stating that “this weakness appears principally when it is a question of writing the Life of those who were known in our age.”<sup>113</sup> Writing the Life of contemporaries not only meant that authors received information from those who had known the women in life, but also that their final product would be read and evaluated by the same people, who, as will be discussed later in this chapter, did not hesitate to point out their objections.

The unique details contained within each biography did not come from the author’s personal experience as often as might have been expected, nor was this necessarily considered a problem. Pierre de Cambry, for example, excuses himself for having written his own sister’s biography: “It is true that if the collection had been done by a stranger, the life would have had more weight and grace.” He thus implies that his perspective was less than objective because of his personal connection to his sister and that it would be natural to distrust him for this reason.<sup>114</sup> He justifies his decision, however, by citing other men

---

<sup>111</sup> Jodi Bilinkoff, *Related Lives: Confessors and their Female Penitents, 1450-1750* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 9.

<sup>112</sup> Jean-Marie de Vernon, *La Vie de la vénérable Mère Françoise de Saint-Bernard, religieuse de Ste-Claire à Verdun, nommée dans le monde Mme de Maisons* (Paris: Mathieu Colombel, 1657). “Cette foiblesse paroist principalement quand il est question d’escrire la Vie de ceux qui ont vescu de nostre temps.”

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> Pierre de Cambry, *Abrégé de la vie de Dame Jeanne de Cambry, premièrement religieuse de l’Ordre de S. Augustin à Tournay*, “Preface” (Anvers: J. Mesens, 1659). “Il est bien vray, que si le recoeil en avoit esté fait par un estrangier, la vie en auroit plus de poinds et de grace.”

who wrote Lives of women to whom they were close, including St. Gregory, who composed the Life of his sister, St. Gorgonia, St. Cogitofus who did the same for his aunt, St. Brigit of Ibernia, and St. Augustine, who praised his mother, St. Monica, in his Confessions.<sup>115</sup> Counting himself among those “people who wrote Lives of those who were touched by sanctity,” he argues that while one might assume him to be an unreliable narrator, his approach was in fact rooted in tradition.<sup>116</sup>

Despite the inherently personal nature of the genre of biography, however, most authors and subjects did not have this close relationship, which reflects the idea that a biography written by a stranger had more authority. The majority of authors were therefore commissioned by others following the death of the subject, and took great care to assure the reader that they had relied upon the testimony of trustworthy witnesses. Grosez notes that he thoroughly evaluated the information that he had received, and that:

Before beginning this Work, I took all the precautions that seemed to me to be the most certain, to distinguish the true from the false in these memoirs that had been put into my hands. I consulted many worthy people of faith, who particularly knew this Founder.<sup>117</sup>

Even Pierre Cambry, who was well acquainted with his subject, insists that his work is reliable not because of his own knowledge of his sister, but because he had added nothing of his own to the biography and based it rather upon the writings of his sister, the “responses to examinations and interrogations of her directors, and the notes that they kept, under the order of the superiors, to appraise the spirit that moved and guided her.”

---

<sup>115</sup> Cambry, *Vie de Jeanne de Cambry*, “Preface.”

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Grosez, *La Vie de Marie-Madeleine de la Trinité*, Avertissement: “Avant que de commencer cét Ouvrage, j’ai pris toutes les précautions, qui m’ont paru les plus sûres, pour démêler le vrai du faux dans les Mémoires, qu’on m’a remis entre les mains. J’ai consulté plusieurs personnes dignes de foi, qui avoient connu très-particulièrement cette Fondatrice.”

The sources of information for biographies consisted of what Nicky Hallett calls “institutional, conventual and individual” materials.<sup>118</sup> The first includes constitutions and rules that related to the entire order, and conventual sources refers to annals and chronicles that documented the history of a particular house. Individual sources include those documents composed by women on their own behalf, such as letters, journals, prayers and other accounts of their spiritual lives. Although these texts were not usually considered appropriate for publication without a male editor, they were nevertheless valued as documentation. Like Cambry, many biographers noted that they obtained information from their subjects’ own words, and emphasized that their information was obtained directly from eye-witnesses. The participation and contributions of confessors were therefore particularly important; the biographer of Agnez de Jesus argues that his work’s accuracy is assured because he received the memoirs of Père Arnaud Boyre, a Jesuit who acted as a longstanding spiritual director to Agnez.<sup>119</sup>

This portrayal of themselves as objective reporters of impartial truth was another important justification for excluding women from publishing in this genre. Although they could reflect on their own experiences, and their journals and letters were considered evidence of their exceptional spiritual practices, they were not able to write works that were considered histories. The verification of sources and facts that these authors describe seem to have been left to men. In his biography of Marie Madeleine de la Trinité, for example, Grosez argues that his book was different from previous Lives of the same woman; because he was “uniquely attached to what [he] believed to be true,” he was forced to reject some parts of the document composed by the Mère de la Conception which he

---

<sup>118</sup> Hallett, *Lives of Spirit*, 8.

<sup>119</sup> Charles-Louis de Lantages, *La Vie de la vénérable Mère Agnez de Jésus, religieuse de l’Ordre de S. Dominique au dévot monastère de Sainte Catherine de Langeac* (Puy: André et Pierre Delagarde, 1665).

believed to not have been proven. The Mère de la Conception's memoirs, he writes, are more aptly called a "Panegyrique than a History."<sup>120</sup> This distinction, drawn despite Grosez's admission that this nun had unparalleled knowledge of his subject, reinforces the idea that women's devotional writings were based on personal relationships and feelings but were not objective history.

Barbara Diefendorf concurs that historical accuracy gained new importance at this time, and describes how Hilarion de Coste, author of the *Histoire Catholique* of 1625 and a collection of pious women's lives, took particular cares as a historian:

The conventionalized format, with its emphasis on pedigree and heavy-handed attempt at moral edification, should not be allowed to obscure the fact that Brother Hilarion was a patient and careful scholar. He collected information widely from both published and oral sources. In certain cases, he even tells us how he came by a particular bit of information, a citing of sources that was still quite rare among scholars of his era.<sup>121</sup>

These citations of sources were often framed in the books as expressions of gratitude to the people who had helped the author, rather than references according to the modern concept of scientific evidence. Though Thérèse de Jesus burnt her own writings, her biographer, S. Jacques, noted that he had sought out information from the Jesuit Père de Buz, "a man of great knowledge and of a rare conduct, God having directed a number of chosen souls to him in several places, this soul among them."<sup>122</sup> By praising the contributions of the Père de Buz, S. Jacques not only gives additional testimony to the worthiness of his subject, but

---

<sup>120</sup> Grosez, *Vie Marie-Madeleine de la Trinité*, "Avertissement." "... si cette vie est différente en quelque chose de celle qui parut d'abord après la mort de la Mère Madeleine; car n'ayant rien oublié pour m'éclaircir, et m'étant attaché uniquement à ce que je croiois véritable, j'ai rejetté plusieurs faits, qui ne paroissent pas assez prouvez, quoi qu'ils se rencontrent dans la vie du Père Yvan, et dans celle dont je viens de parler, qu'on appelleroit plus proprement un Panegyrique qu'une Histoire."

<sup>121</sup> John E. Rybolt and Barbara B. Diefendorf, "Madame De Gondi: A Contemporary Seventeenth-Century Life," *Vincentian Heritage Journal* 21, no. 1 (2000): 25-44., 27.

<sup>122</sup> S. Jacques, *Vie Térése de Jésus*. "Le R. P. De Buz de la compagnie de Jesus (homme de grand sçavoir et d'une rare conduite, Dieu luy ayant adressé en divers lieux quantité d'ames choisies, et entre les autres celle-cy) répondit en ces mêmes termes aux Religieuses qui luy demandoient des remarques sur sa Vie."

also points out that his information came from a reliable and devout source. Though authors rarely gave references for specific details within their narratives, their naming of eyewitness sources shows their adherence to standards of evidence that would not permit them to publish the biography of a long-dead saint based only on legend.

The importance of documenting sources required the participation of women, in part due to the difficulties of obtaining this kind of information about women who were so isolated from the secular world. While seclusion from men was obviously a constant feature in religious life throughout the Middle Ages, the Council of Trent mandated greater isolation from even the priests who served as confessors and spiritual directors. With the exception of infrequent confessions, men were discouraged from entering female monasteries, and most nuns therefore had little contact with even the men who oversaw their houses. The relationships between male and female orders were often “conflicting and contradictory”<sup>123</sup> and, although the Jesuits were among the biggest supporters of female convents, they were also prohibited by papal order from providing spiritual direction to women. The authors of women’s Lives therefore depended greatly upon the materials given to them by other women, members of the subject’s convent who had known her personally. These nuns were able to collect the relevant memoirs, letters and journals, and select those that they then gave to an author. These decisions essentially allowed the nuns to make editorial decisions that began the process of shaping the form that the biography would take.

Just as François Senault told the Ursulines of Dijon that they were the true authors of the Life of Catherine de Montholon, writers frequently used the rhetorical device of

---

<sup>123</sup> Anne Conrad, *Zwischen Kloster und Welt: Ursulinen und Jesuitinnen in der Katholischen Reformbewegung des 16./17. Jahrhunderts* (Zabern: Mainz, 1991), 12.

giving authorial credit to women. While such statements were formulaic and intended to demonstrate humility, there was nevertheless some truth to their statements. When he describes her inadequacy to undertake the task of writing the life story of Louise de Fontaine, Bonneau not only credits Mère Marie-Thérèse Fouquet with giving him encouragement, but also notes that she “had the goodness to furnish me with the memoirs from which I created this work.”<sup>124</sup> Indeed, her *Life* shows evidence of such information; in addition to giving a conventional account of her spiritual experiences, Bonneau mentions the names of other women and gives details about the foundation of her house that can be presumed to have come from sources such as Fouquet. Based on testimony from “one who declared to me,” he describes how Louise de Fontaine became so distressed at leaving her school and moving to a new convent that she became ill and nearly died.<sup>125</sup> Jean Grosez similarly relied on material provided by the sisters of Marie-Madeleine de la Trinité. Although he disputed some of her facts, he nevertheless noted that “there were none who illuminated more for me than the Mère de la Conception,” whose own *Life* of Marie-Madeleine he referenced.<sup>126</sup>

Moreover, there is evidence that women had agency in the selection of authors, and even influenced the initiation of the process by which the biography would be completed. The Ursulines of Lyon were familiar with Grosez *Life* of Mère Anne de Xainctonge, the founder of the Société des Soeurs de Sainte Ursule in Dole, which he had edited based on the manuscripts of Fathers Orset and Binet. Their knowledge of this book led them to commission him to write a similar *Life* of their superior, Marie-Madeleine de la Trinité.

---

<sup>124</sup> Bonneau, *Vie de Louise-Eugenie de Fontaine*, “Avis aux très-honorées Mères et Soeurs de la Visitation de Sainte Mère.” “... elle a eu la bonté de me fournir des mémoires sur lesquels j’ai travaillé cet Ouvrage.”

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Grosez, *Vie de Marie-Madeleine de la Trinité*, “Avertissement.” “Il n’en est point qui m’ait donné plus de lumière, que la Mère de la Conception.”

Grosez explains that “the Life of the Mère Anne de Xainctonge that I published several years ago gave rise to this one. Since the Sisters of Notre-Dame de Misericorde read it, they instantly asked me to work on that of the Mère Madeleine their founder, which I could not refuse.”<sup>127</sup> This statement was made in part out of humility, as Grosez had to justify the reason he had chosen to undertake a project for which he also claimed to be unworthy. Nevertheless, the often tenuous personal connections between authors and subjects – Anne de Xainctonge had died seventy years before Grosez re-edited her Life – and the general independence of daily life in convents lends credence to his statement. Claude Allard likewise declares that it was at the request of the members of the Royal Monastery of Sainte-Croix that he composed his Life of Charlotte-Flandrine de Nassau, and he thanked them for the memoirs “of which I made use.”<sup>128</sup>

Despite the many layers of convention that overlay the authors’ prologues to biographies, it nevertheless becomes clear that these books could not have been written without the direct participation and collaboration of women. Nicholas Paige argues that this insistence upon collaboration was simply evidence of the “fetishization” of the words of unlearned yet mystical women. In order to lay claim to the virtues that such women were said to possess, such as “authenticity, experience, interiority, and so on,”<sup>129</sup> men constructed images of women that they “reappropriated ... for his own needs.”<sup>130</sup> The influence that men had in shaping biographical narratives is indisputable. However, Paige’s argument does not fully account for the ways in which religious women’s interests were

---

<sup>127</sup> Grosez, *Vie de Marie-Madeleine de la Trinité*, “Avertissement.” “La Vie de la Mère Anne de Xainctonge que je fis imprimer il y a quelques années, a donné occasion a celle-ci. Car les Religieuses de Notre-Dame de Misericorde l’ayant lue, ells me prièrent instamment de travailler a celle de la Mère Madeleine leur Fondatrice, ce que je ne pus refuser.”

<sup>128</sup> Allard, *Vie de Charlotte-Flandrine de Nassau*, “Preface”: “les memoires... dont je m’y suis servy.”

<sup>129</sup> Paige, *Being Interior*, 77.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

furthered through the publication of these books. Not only were women able to influence the writing of their sisters' Lives through their curatorship and selection of convent records, but also the participation of men in some cases gave women the authority to publish their own words. Printing extracts of women's writings as part of a larger, male-authored work was one method through which women's words could be distributed to a wider audience. The willingness of priests to publish selections of women's journals and advertise this fact on the title pages of their books illustrates a widespread tension between the lack of spiritual authority that women possessed, and the esteem that clerics gave their thoughts and words.

"There is more than one Author, there are two," writes Claude Martin in his introduction to the *Vie de la Mère Marie de l'Incarnation*, the Life of his mother that he edited.<sup>131</sup> All evidence supports his assessment; although Marie Guyart stands, unusually, as the author of this work, the significant influence of her son on the work is also obvious. Their co-authorship of this book, while certainly unusual enough to require a lengthy explanation and justification by Martin, points to the complicated issue of the authorship of women's biographies. Just as Marie was not the sole author of her Life, so too were other women collaborators in the creation of theirs, even when not publically recognized as an author. The voices of men and women were often entwined in intricate ways that cannot easily be unravelled.

The idea of multiple authors was not as exceptional to seventeenth-century readers as it might seem today; Sara Poor argues that the single author is a twentieth-century concept rarely applicable to medieval and early modern texts which were more often

---

<sup>131</sup> Claude Martin, *La Vie de la vénérable Mère Marie de l'Incarnation*, ed. Guy Oury (Solesmes: Abbaye Saint-Pierre, 1981), "Prologue": "Il y a plus d'un Auteur, il y en a deux."

understood as collaborative works.<sup>132</sup> While Kathleen Ann Myers extends this concept to the nineteenth century, she concurs that the “single, autonomous, inspired Author” was not relevant to the early modern period.<sup>133</sup> God was regarded as the ultimate author of all, of both words and of things themselves, with human authors acting merely as his scribes. As such, the unique authorial role of the individual was diminished. This weaker sense of individual ownership of texts made it far easier for writers to incorporate sections of other texts, including sections of women’s writing, into their own.

Although authors of published works were understood as inherently male in early modern Europe, certain forms of content were considered appropriate for both reading and writing by women. Devotional journals and letters, relatively informal genres, were particularly associated with women, and these texts were often collected and edited by men, and these collections published because of the life lessons they presented.<sup>134</sup> However, because these texts were edited and compiled into larger manuscripts, and reshaped into a traditional narrative, it is often difficult to separate the contributions of men and women, and near impossible to reconstruct the original writings of women.

The relationship between female visionaries and the men who composed their Lives had a long history, dating back to earliest medieval female saints. Traditionally, this task was performed by a woman’s confessor, though there were often other contributors as well. Hildegard of Bingen’s *Vita*, though sometimes referred to as the first “autobiography” of the Middle Ages, was in fact the joint product of Hildegard and three men, one of whom had never met her, and the result was what Barbara Newman describes as a “splendid

---

<sup>132</sup> Sara S. Poor, *Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book: Gender and the Making of Textual Authority* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 10.

<sup>133</sup> Kathleen Ann Myers, "Crossing Boundaries: Defining the Field of Female Religious Writing in Colonial Latin America," *Colonial Latin American Review* 9, no. 2 (2000): 151., 155.

<sup>134</sup> Prospero, “Spiritual Letters,” 56.

instance of cultural creativity” brought about by a “tangle of collective authorship.”<sup>135</sup> The core of this work was Hildegard’s own memoir, which was most likely written both as a spiritual testament and expressly to help her scribe prepare her biography. Another secretary redrafted the document into a standard narrative in the third person, and added various other documents with supporting details. Finally, following the death of Hildegard’s two previous secretaries, a third editor, Theoderic, was commissioned by her friends to complete the work, using the documents already collected. He chose to intersperse Hildegard’s accounts of her visions with the more straightforward narrative, which resulted in a unique text that nonetheless demonstrates a long tradition of shared authorship between the subjects and editors of biographies.<sup>136</sup>

Collaborative authorship continued to be commonplace in hagiography throughout the Middle Ages, and even the *Life of Teresa of Avila*, the best-known and most influential female writer of the early modern period, was the product of multiple authors to some extent. Although the *Book of Her Life* is, in the words of J. M. Cohen, “a piece of candid self-revelation, written in the liveliest and most unforced conversational prose,”<sup>137</sup> members of the public beyond the walls of her own convent could not read her book until it had been edited and prepared for publication by Fray Luis de Leon, an Augustinian monk. Even though she had a remarkable amount of influence over her own book, which was, unusually, composed in a short period of time as a complete narrative and was extensively revised as such by Teresa herself, changes nevertheless began to be made to the manuscript when it started to be widely circulated. The original manuscript was handed over to the

---

<sup>135</sup> Barbara Newman, "Hildegard and Her Hagiographers: The Remaking of Female Sainthood," in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 16.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

<sup>137</sup> J. M. Cohen, ed. *Introduction to the Life of Saint Teresa of Avila by Herself*, (London: Penguin, 1957), 11

Inquisition where it remained for twelve years, before Ana de Jesus, a member of the order founded by Teresa, finally successfully petitioned for its publication and passed it on to Luis de Leon; the Archbishop of Toledo granted permission because of the “sound and wholesome doctrine” of the work.<sup>138</sup> Despite the latter’s reverence for Teresa, he made significant changes to her manuscript. Assembling a variety of letters and other documents also written by Teresa, he created a “singularly incomplete” additional chapter which was considered an integral part of the text until the nineteenth century.<sup>139</sup>

In most cases, however, this path to publication cannot be traced, as original manuscripts have been lost and never existed in a single manuscript. While Teresa’s Book was the prototypical model for women’s spiritual biographies across much of Europe, her successors’ Lives were produced in very different circumstances. Even among other purported spiritual autobiographies, published under the names of women, the confessor played a paramount role that was widely recognized.<sup>140</sup> In these circumstances, Velasco writes, “after the death of the penitent nun, her confessor could then compile, organize, edit, create chapter descriptions, give the notebook compilation a title and finish the final chapters; in other words, create a product that would represent not only the potential saint but her spiritual leaders and her religious order.”<sup>141</sup> In short, male editors transformed incidental writings into a polished narrative that conformed to the accepted standard of hagiography as was understood at the time.

---

<sup>138</sup> David Lewis, Introduction to the *Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila: The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus : Including the Relations Or Manifestations of Her Spiritual State which St. Teresa Submitted to Her Confessors* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1997), 27.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. 28. Don Vicente de la Fueva traced these documents to their sources and printed what amounted to a second Life of Teresa in 1861.

<sup>140</sup> Velasco, *Visualizing Gender on the Page in Convent Literature*, 129. Velasco notes that authority of the confessor is implicitly accepted when the censor of the writings of Isabel de Jesus writes “There is no need for more approval of this book than to know that it recounts the life of a woman guided by Father Manuel de Paredes.”

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

In France, there were even fewer autobiographies published than in Teresa of Avila's Spain; readers encountered even Teresa's Life more commonly in the form of a French translation of the 1590 biography by Francisco de Ribera rather than Teresa's own text of 1588. As previously noted, few books survived the censors over the course of the seventeenth century: one was the Life of Marie de l'Incarnation, a fascinating case study in authorship that highlights the complexities in separating the multiple voices in texts. Marie Guyart de l'Incarnation had been a well-known mystic in France even before she travelled to New France to found the first female teaching monastery there. Her letters to her son, Claude Martin, and to her aristocratic patrons provided an account of her activities even before her official Life was published and told of events such as the fire that destroyed her order's first building in 1650 as well as her prayers, visions, and spiritual developments. Due to her well-connected supporters, including Madame de la Peltrie, Marie's writings earned a degree of legitimacy even before her death.

Following her death, Claude Martin took the usual step in accumulating documents relating to his mother in order to prepare a Life for publication. As in many other instances, it appears that it was Marie's fellow Ursulines who made this possible; Martin sought out her original 1633 *Relation* that detailed her mystical experiences before leaving France but could not find it until the Ursulines of St-Denis sent it to him upon hearing that he was working on the Vie.<sup>142</sup> What was unusual, however, was his choice to publish his mother's own words in the first person rather than rewriting them into the more traditional third-person narrative. Martin realized this decision was unusual and explained his decision at length in his prologue. Like other authors, he maintained that no artifice was

---

<sup>142</sup> J. Lonsagne, "Introduction to *La Vie de la vénérable Mère Marie de l'Incarnation*," in (Solesmes: Abbaye Saint-Pierre, 1981), iii.

allowed to obscure the “interior annointment” of his subject’s life, but unlike the majority, argued that by apparently removing his own voice entirely, her natural simplicity would create an even more edifying work.<sup>143</sup> He admits that her style is not polished, however, and while praising her for the “honesty” of her writing, he also notes that her outmoded vocabulary and the “roughness” of her style necessitated some changes on his part.<sup>144</sup>

Natalie Zemon Davis describes this work as commonplace at his time: “So, very much in the literary spirit of his day, Claude went through his mother’s *Relation*, changing certain words, adding phrases of his own, and omitting some of hers as he prepared to publish it as part of the *Vie*.”<sup>145</sup>

Even at first glance, however, the fact that Martin’s editing of his mother’s memoir was more than stylistic becomes obvious. After having organized and subdivided her *Relation* into chapters, he added extracts of other documents and clarifications of her words in separate “Additions” at the end of each of her sections. Bringing her use of often-antiquated language in line with the tastes of late seventeenth-century readers was only one of his missions as editor; more important was to be certain that nothing she wrote could be taken as heretical in terms of doctrine, and to make readers take her seriously as a mystic. Whereas Marie tended to emphasize the experiential and emotive aspects of her visions, drawing upon the traditional language of mystics, her son substituted words that suggested a more considered response.<sup>146</sup> Martin was aware that his claim to be nothing more than an echo was not precisely accurate, and Lonsagne argues that the passages in which he

---

<sup>143</sup> Martin, *Vie de Marie de l’Incarnation*, 11. “onction intérieure”

<sup>144</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 129.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

attempted to explain and justify his personal intervention were the least clear and most embarrassed.<sup>147</sup>

Claude Martin's Prologue and historians' comparisons of the original manuscript and his revised text reveal something of the complex nature of the authorship of biographies. He states that "one and the other [he and his mother] were necessary to achieve the completion of the Work" and while the collaboration may not have been quite as straightforward as he presented it, the contributions of both are clear.<sup>148</sup> Marie de l'Incarnation was exceptional in many ways; though Henri Bremond attributes the publication of her own *Relation* solely to her exceptional literary ability,<sup>149</sup> it is also true that she had secured a reputation and a network of patrons in France, not to mention her close connection to the Benedictine house of her son, and through her communications with them her writing was already known. This exceptionality, however, explains only why Marie's *Relation* was not transformed into a more conventional biography, and it is likely that many other biographers made a different choice and edited their subjects' writing so that the entire text was in the third person. Martin's straightforward declaration that he had been planning to rewrite his mother's memoirs as a biography shows that readers recognized the convention and understood that the biographies they read had multiple authors.<sup>150</sup>

Not all women wrote, however, for writing brought with it the risk of criticism and even occasionally accusations of heresy, and silence was indeed sometimes viewed as evidence of their piety. The life itself of a holy woman, Adriano Prosperi notes, was

---

<sup>147</sup> Lonsagne, Introduction to *La Vie de la vénérable Mère Marie de l'Incarnation*, ix.

<sup>148</sup> Martin, *Vie de Marie de l'Incarnation*, "Prologue."

<sup>149</sup> Brémond, *Histoire du sentiment religieuse*, vol. 1, 259.

<sup>150</sup> Martin, *Vie de Marie de l'Incarnation*, "Prologue."

supposed to serve as evidence of her sainthood, and they were praised for not having been bold enough to set words in writing. There was a long tradition of sainted women refusing to write; fourteenth-century mystic Angela de Foligno was stated to have not composed a single text, and two centuries later Maria Maddalena da'Pazzi similarly wrote no more than two dozen letters which were eventually transcribed by her sisters in religion.<sup>151</sup> This reluctance did not necessarily contradict the orders that were frequently given to women to narrate their spiritual experiences; limits were also placed upon their writing, and many women, such as the aforementioned Thérèse de Jesus, took care to note that they wrote no more than what was required of them, and burned their journals before their deaths.<sup>152</sup> Nevertheless, as argued previously, many such memoirs and letters did survive and were placed in the hands of biographers, with the understanding that the subject did not take so audacious a step as to do so herself.

Indeed, women's texts were most commonly made public through male-authored biographies, which served as a legitimating intermediary for their words. Nicholas Paige argues that "it was via its incorporation into hagiographic works that the writing of religious women found a public outside of the convents,"<sup>153</sup> and Thomas Carr's bibliography of writings by early modern French nuns highlights this fact very clearly, as the vast majority of the books he lists are biographies published under the names of men, but including extracts of other texts. Lives were very often a "true collection of spiritual writings" under the name of biography,<sup>154</sup> and a variety of texts was published alongside the main body of the Life. For example, the publishers of the Life of Antoinette de Jesus

---

<sup>151</sup> Prosperi, "Spiritual Letters," 56.

<sup>152</sup> S. Jacques, *Vie de Tèreèse de Jésus*, "Preface."

<sup>153</sup> Paige, *Being Interior*, 71.

<sup>154</sup> Lonsagne, *Introduction to la vie de la vénérable Mère Marie de l'Incarnation*, xvi.

underscore the contribution of women on the first page, where it is noted that her Life is accompanied by “a summary of the letters collected by the nuns of the same convent.”<sup>155</sup> These letters, which were assured to have not contained “pompous and magnificent expressions” in a “polished style,”<sup>156</sup> were addressed to a variety of priests, nuns, and unnamed gentlemen, ladies and secular friends. Besides selecting appropriate extracts, the anonymous author of the book also summarized each letter, emphasizing the moral lesson of each, and further divided the collection of writings into two chapters, one for Antoinette’s letters to religious men and women, and the other for her spiritual guidance to laymen. Through the mediation of the anonymous author, Antoinette de Jesus thus became in effect the author of a published work of spiritual direction, intended for members of the secular public as well as religious women. For example, she encouraged other nuns to endure suffering, consoled them following the deaths of their sisters and exhorted them to rejoice in their death to the world, but also counselled a “gentleman” to reject the cloister and be a light in the world instead.<sup>157</sup> Historians have recently turned their attention to the important but largely undocumented role that women played as spiritual directors,<sup>158</sup> and the example of Antoinette de Jesus shows how such work could even be made public through an indirect route.

---

<sup>155</sup> *La Vie de la Mère Antoinette de Jesus, religieuse chanoinesse de l'ordre de S. Augustin* (Paris: Jean Villette, 1685).

<sup>156</sup> Ibid, “Preface.” “Ces Lettres ne sont pas à la vérité écrites d’un stile poly, et l’on n’y verra point ces expressions pompeuses et magnifiques, dont on se sert dans le siècle...”

<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 258. “Lettre à un Gentilhomme.” “Si j’avois quelque chose à souhaiter, ce seroit qu’il plût à Dieu de vous donner un rayon de sa lumière, pour discerner ce qu’il demande de vous, et où il vous appelle. Pour moy je ne suis pas capable de vous conseiller, mais je ne vois pas que Dieu vous tire dans le Cloître pour plusieurs raisons.”

<sup>158</sup> Barbara B. Diefendorf, “Barbe Acarie and Her Spiritual Daughters: Women’s Spiritual Authority in Seventeenth-Century France,” in Cordula van Wyhe, ed. *Female Monasticism in Early Modern Europe: An Interdisciplinary View* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), 155-172; Patricia Ranft, *A Woman’s Way: The Forgotten History of Women Spiritual Directors* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

Long extracts from interior prayer were also commonplace in biographies, which served both to instruct readers in this increasingly important aspect of Catholic Reformation spirituality and to further complicate mixture of voices in these books. The ephemeral nature of private prayer naturally makes such texts impossible to truly capture, yet authors reproduced prayers as part of the narrative. When describing her practice of self-mortification, Grosez included her prayers as a sort of dialogue in the midst of his account:

It is true that God was sure to console her internally: But the zeal that she had for suffering obliged her to sometimes say to Jesus Christ: *Leave, Lord, leave my heart in bitterness; you have swallowed the Chalice of your passion, without any consolation: your heavenly Father abandoned you on the Cross, to the fury of your persecutors; is it not just that I participate in your insults, that you abandon me to the violence of persecution, without mitigating them by your consolations...*<sup>159</sup>

The use of italics implies this kind of statement to be a direct quotation, though it is more likely to have been composed by Grosez as a model of interior prayer. However, when Mauroy reproduces the words of Agnez de Jesus to Monsieur Rougeron, written to urge him to prepare for his death, he notes that these words had been “carefully conserved... because they came from such a dear hand.”<sup>160</sup> In this case, therefore, it is probable that the attribution is genuine and that this was another example of the publication of a woman’s spiritual guidance.

In their prologues and dedications, authors habitually stated that the lives that they wrote in fact belonged to the members of the monastery. Claude Allard, for example, writes of

---

<sup>159</sup> Grosez, *Vie de Marie-Madeleine de la Trinité*, 314. “Il est vrai que Dieu ne manquoit pas de la consoler intérieurement: Mais le zèle qu’elle avoit pour les souffrances, l’obligeoit de dire quelquefois à Jesus-Christ, *Laissez, Seigneur, laissez mon coeur dans l’amertume; vous avez avalé le Calice de vôtre passion, sans nulle consolation: vôtre Père céleste vous a abandonné sur la Croix, à la fureur de vos Bourreaux: n’est-il pas juste que je participe à vos outrages, et que vous m’abandonniez à la violence de la persécution, sans l’adoucir par vos consolations...*”

<sup>160</sup> Mauroy, *Vie d’Agnès de Jesus*, 624. “Ce lettre a esté conservée precieusement et par ce qu’elle venoit d’une main si chère, et parce qu’avec le temps elle a esté l’instrument de quelque guérison miraculeuse...”

Charlotte-Flandrine de Nassau that her life was “a painting which belongs to you.”<sup>161</sup> However, given that it was essential to recruit men to edit, write and approve these books, these statements seem slightly disingenuous. Women nevertheless did appear to consider themselves as having a stake in what was written about members of their orders. Conflicts of this kind can rarely be seen, for obvious reasons; records have been lost and the published copy presumably represented a consensus, for the same reason that no books that did not pass the censors’ approval have also been lost. A few examples of differing opinions over the form of biographies do appear, however, and show the investment that women felt in the production of a life of one of their sisters.

The publication of the *Vie de Anne-Marguerite Clément* was a long affair, though the process began not long after her death. The superior, inspired by “a zeal filled with a sincere affection,” drafted the *mémoires* considered necessary for “une si sainte Vie.”<sup>162</sup> Within a year, it is said, these *mémoires* were sent to Rome where they were put into the hands into Père Jean Augustin Galice, a member of the Barnabite order, who they said to be “preferred to those who presented themselves, and to those we could have chosen to work on it,” because of his unequalled knowledge of Mère Clément.<sup>163</sup> Despite Galice’s desire to begin work on the biography and the promises he reportedly made to the sisters to do so, as well as obtaining the consent of the General of his order, he was, however, not at leisure to undertake the project for another nine years. During this time he sent the *memoires* to several people in Rome, including Jean Bona, who later became cardinal and wrote the official letter of approval of the final work,

---

<sup>161</sup> Claude Allard, *Vie de Charlotte Flandrine de Nassau*, 447. “une peinture qui vous appartient.”

<sup>162</sup> Jean Augustin Galice, *La Vie De La Vénérable Mère Anne-Marguerite Clément, Première Supérieure Du Monastère De La Visitation De Ste-Marie De Melun* (Paris: Coignard, 1686): “un zèle plein d’une sincère affection”

<sup>163</sup> Galice, *Vie d’Anne-Marguerite Clément*. “...préférè à ceux qui s’offroient, et qui on auroit pu choisir pour y travailler...”

encouraging its translation into French.<sup>164</sup> The nuns of the Visitation de Melun were to receive the letters exchanged by Galice and the “illustrious and learned” men with whom he discussed the manuscript, in which he recorded her “extraordinary virtues and graces.”<sup>165</sup> An ecclesiastic, described as the most knowledgeable in Rome in mystical theology, was also asked to examine the *mémoire*, and he also encouraged Père Galice to work quickly, presumably because he was also impressed by the piety of Mère Clément.

When they finally received the document, however, the nuns were disappointed that Galice chose to write in Latin despite their wishes, which indicates that most of the congregation was not able to read this language. Fortunately for the sisters, Galice was persuaded that his book could quickly be translated into French for the benefit of the sisters and they stated their gratitude of being given this book, concluding the letter: “We have always felt the effects of his generosity, through his disinterested charity that he has shown towards this community,” and their recognition that the author was “a person of merit, and whom knowledge, experience and piety had greatly contributed to elevate the humility of this holy soul.”<sup>166</sup>

Attempting to reconstruct the history of the production of Anne-Marguerite Clément’s biography, as well as that of Marie Guyart and other women, shows that the authority in presenting these lives to the public rested largely in the hands of men. In subtle ways, however, women helped to shape them, by commissioning authors and providing information that portrayed their sister in the appropriate light, and ensuring that the finished product was satisfactory. Biographies, as a result, can be seen as a collaborative project whereby the words and voices of both men and women were inextricably linked.

---

<sup>164</sup>Galice, *Vie d’Anne-Marguerite Clément*, “Epistre.”

<sup>165</sup> Ibid. “illustre et docte;” “vertus et graces extraordinaires.”

<sup>166</sup>Ibid.. “...nous a toujours fait ressentir depuis les effets de sa generosité, par la charité si desinteressée qu’il exerce envers cette Communauté...” and their recognition that the author was “une personne de ce merite, et dont la science, l’expérience et la pieté, auroient beaucoup contribué a relever l’humilité de cette sainte ame.”

Women's voices can, however, be heard more clearly in their own writings, in the extensive collections of life-writing that were produced in convents throughout the course of monastic history. Nuns wrote, preserved and even circulated Lives of their sisters, and they did this much more frequently than they sent material to people outside the convent for inclusion in published biographies. These written accounts existed in many forms, from notices of a few sentences composed upon the death of a woman, to lengthy and detailed narratives written with care and creativity.<sup>167</sup> These short and unpublished biographies have been given little attention.<sup>168</sup> At first glance, they are, as Bernard Dompnier writes, only part of a "documentary collection of mediocre quality" that allow only a "superficial vision of monastic life."<sup>169</sup> Moreover, in his studies of feminine biographies, Jacques Le Brun draws a firm distinction between the published biographies composed by men, which were destined to be disseminated in public and also reflected male clerics' fascination and fear of women's spirituality, and the thousands of biographies that were written "by women for women," which constituted a "private literature" with a "completely different tone from that of official biographies."<sup>170</sup> While there is an obvious difference between published lives that were approved for distribution by church

---

<sup>167</sup> Hallett, *Lives of Spirit*, 8. Nicky Hallett calls these "more or less sustained autobiographical or biographical accounts contained either in individual Lives or in official histories and necrologies." Ellen Weaver, "The Convent Muses: The Secular Writing of Italian Nuns, 1450-1650," in *Women and Faith: Catholic Life in Italy from Late Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 133, likewise agrees that "Convent record books took on some of the characteristics of the chronicle or diary, whereas the necrology, that is, the registers that gave essential information about the deceased nuns – acceptance into the monastery, veiling, profession, and death – became collections of brief biographies, more or less informative and expressive depending on the inspiration or the rhetorical ability of the convent scribe."

<sup>168</sup> The letters of the Visitandine Order are one exception, as this order has been the subject of a significant number of institutional histories.

<sup>169</sup> Bernard Dompnier, "La cordiale communication de nos petites nouvelles": les lettres circulaires, pratique d'union des monastères," in *Visitation et Visitandines aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles: actes du colloque d'Annecy, 3-5 Juin 1999*, (*Ecole Des Hautes Études En Sciences Sociales, Paris*) (Saint-Étienne: Université Jean Monnet, 2001), 279.

<sup>170</sup> Le Brun, "Biographies Spirituelles," 136. Burkhardt, "Reconnaissance et dévotion : les *Vies de saints* et leurs lectures au début du XVIIe siècle à travers les procès de canonisation," *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* (1996), 215, draws a similar distinction: "Dotées ou pas de l'aureole romaine, toutes ces Vies partagent néanmoins des conditions de production semblables : à chaque fois il s'agit d'oeuvres "destinées à être diffusées dans le public." Si l'on voulait distinguer d'ells un tout autre genre de Vies, ce serait bien celui des biographies spirituelles féminines, faites à "l'usage purement privé," qui circulaient en très grand nombre dans les couvents de femmes à cette époque

officials and those simply recorded to commemorate the death of a member of the convent, a closer examination of the biographical texts written by religious women complicates the picture to a degree and shows that spiritual Lives, whether the work of men or women, were based on similar models and resembled each other in both form and function. Women's writings cannot be categorized exclusively as private, as the complex nets of circulation of communication between convents show.

Monasteries produced a wide variety of biographical texts. From the Middle Ages on the administrative tasks in convents included recording the professions of vows and the deaths of each member of the house, in books known as *necrologes* or *registres de vêtture*. While many were simply ledgers recording the date the final sacraments were given to each woman, many others related the story of the deceased woman's life, including her jobs in the convent and an account of her spiritual life and admirable death. Whereas annals and chronicles, such as Mère Marie-Angelique de Pommereu's well-known *Chroniques de l'Ordre des Ursulines* of 1673, documented the history of a house over the course of many years, monastic houses also recorded and circulated their history through letters that described the life and death of members, an extended version of an entry in a necrology. Due in large part to the priority that François de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal placed on writing about one's spiritual experiences and communicating with other houses through writing, the Visitandine order produced a vast number of such letters, perhaps 23,000 over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The sisters of the Visitation, however, were not alone in their desire to make the lives of their members known to people outside of their convents. The majority of orders produced circulatory letters to encourage other women to follow the examples of their deceased members,

with large collections belonging to the Ursulines and Carmelites remaining in the archives today.<sup>171</sup> Nor were these new innovations of the post-Tridentine church; Gertrud Jaron Lewis describes how in late medieval Germany the women of several Dominican houses, together with their male confessors who acted as editors, wrote and circulated the life stories of their members in a manner very similar to that of the *lettres circulaires* of seventeenth-century France. Like the Visitandines and the Ursulines, these Dominican houses were originally uncloistered beguinages, but were forced by the Inquisition to come under the umbrella of the Dominican order; like the lives of women in Catholic Reformation France, these books described the mission of the community and made a case for their legitimacy.

Although Burkhardt's categorization of such works as "purely private" may be sustained by the fact that they were intended for members of the same order rather than the public at large, the biographical writings of women were also widely circulated and used as much for communication as for simple record-keeping. Among the Visitandines, for example, the requirement to exchange letters between convents regularly was instituted at the order's foundation, when Jeanne de Chantal herself stated in the order's Constitutions that superiors were to exchange at least one or two letters a year with other houses, more frequently with nearer ones, in order to "encourage perfect observance" in each other.<sup>172</sup> In their letters, what one Visitandine called the "cordial communication of our small notices,"<sup>173</sup> superiors asked for prayers for the deceased, pointed out the admirable virtues in their sisters, and simply informed other houses of their news. Soeur Genevieve de S. Bernard, an Ursuline in Elboeuf, after recounting the life of her sister, Genevieve de la Place, mentions that her house

---

<sup>171</sup> Philippe Bonnet, "Le Pratique des arts dans les couvents de femmes au XVIIe siècle," *Bibliothèque de l'École de Chartres* 147 (1989), 438.

<sup>172</sup> Dompnier, "Cordiale communication," 291.

<sup>173</sup> Dompnier, "Cordiale communication," 279, quoting a letter of 5 November, 1698, by the superior of the second monastery of Lyon.

would be holding elections the following May and asks readers to pray for them.<sup>174</sup> Although these small biographies were limited in size and in readership, it is nevertheless clear that they were a way of making the lives of members of the community known outside their houses.

The importance of these lives to the houses that received them can be seen in the way the letters were stored and read in convents. Jeanne de Chantal told the Visitandines in her *Réponses* of 1665 to note the arrival of each set of *lettres circulaires*, and to put them in the chapter room, where they would be kept.<sup>175</sup> The Ursulines in the area around Paris collected their letters and even bound them into a book every few years, with nearly each day of the year being represented by a Life of a woman who had died on that day.<sup>176</sup> In this way, the Ursulines created something similar to the calendars of saints popular in the Middle Ages, a devotional work that increased unity among a new and still somewhat decentralized order. The superior of the Paris house reminded the women of the necessity of sending their *mémoires* for inclusion in such a book, writing “If you have not yet sent your *mémoires*, I ask you to do it soon to advance the printing of this book; do not forget to note the age and the time of the Profession of your Deceased, with the best virtues of their life, their spiritual maxims, and the words that they were able to speak at their death: wherein this sample can serve you as a model.”<sup>177</sup> So many letters of this type were sent that they became a significant expense for convents, as the membership of convents grew. Included in the Ursulines’ collection of letters is a note asking superiors of other houses not to send these letters by the post because of the excessive cost of sending letters that were sometimes

---

<sup>174</sup> Paris, Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, Ms. fr. 4991. 18 February 1686. “Nous vous supplions de recommander à Dieu en vos saintes Prières le bon succès de nos Elections qui se doivent faire le mois de May prochain.”

<sup>175</sup> Dompnier, “Cordiale communication,” 291.

<sup>176</sup> Paris, Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, Ms. fr. 4990 and 4991.

<sup>177</sup> Paris, Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, Ms. fr. 4991. “Si vous n’avez pas encore envoyé vos mémoires, je vous prie de le faire au plustost, pour avancer l’impression de ce Livre; en n’oubliez pas de marquer l’âge et le temps de la Profession de vos Defuntes, avec les plus belles vertus de leur vie, leur maximes spirituelles, et les paroles qu’elles auront pu prononcer à la mort: en quoy cet echantillon vous pourra servir de modele.”

twelve or fifteen pages each.<sup>178</sup> These long letters also became difficult to copy by hand, and by the end of the seventeenth century both the Visitandines and the Ursulines increasingly had the letters printed which allowed multiple copies to be circulated easily, with the use of small type reducing costs.<sup>179</sup> The distinction between published and unpublished works was further blurred when the same texts were distributed in a manner more akin to books than letters, with many readers instead of a single recipient, and with the personal connection between the writer and the recipient lessened. The desire to reduce the cost of sending multiple pages indicates the importance that convents placed on sending and receiving these letters; as the note in the aforementioned collection of Ursulines' letters demonstrates, nuns found ways to alleviate the burden of postal fees rather than limit their distribution of biographical notices.

Because they were not officially published, short biographical works by women did not have to receive approbation from the Church. Despite this relative freedom, the content of these Lives was noticeably similar to that of the published biographies written by men. The narratives contained in even the shortest circulatory letters resembled those of full-length biographies, with both centred around the subject's exemplary death and an enumeration of her virtues. The three-page handwritten death notice of Louise de France, the daughter of King Louis XV and a member of the Carmelite house in St-Denis under the name Thérèse de St-Augustin, told of her early piety and dissatisfaction with the frivolous life of the court, her affinity for the sacraments and her ability to combine secular nobility and religion. These themes were also present in published biographies; after a childhood in a convent, Marie-Madeleine de la Trinité faced a

---

<sup>178</sup> Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Ms. fr. 4990. "Nous supplions très-humblement les Reverendes Mères des Monastères éloignez, de ne nous plus envoyer des Lettres circulaires par la poste, les ports estant excessifs et quelquefois de douze ou quinze fols pour une seule Lettre. Nous ferons très-souvent des prieures pour celles qui décèderont; et comme tout se rend de toux côte à Paris, nous les supplions d'envoyer leurs Lettres circulaires pour notre Maison, par leurs amis, aux Reverendes Mères du Fauxbourg S. Jacques et nous aurons soin de nous les faire rendre seurement de la même manière."

<sup>179</sup> Dompnier, "Cordiale communication," . 281.

short-lived temptation towards vanity after which she decided upon a religious life at the age of only fifteen,<sup>180</sup> and Marguerite Pignier was said to have provided an example of both royal and saintly virtues.<sup>181</sup> The themes of unofficial biographies thus echoed those in the official literature, as the women who composed these letters modelled their sisters' Lives after those they had read and previously admired. This influence, however, presumably went in both directions as authors in turn adopted the motifs contained in their sources.

The shared language and content of these works did not, however, mean that there were no differences between the writings of men and women, and the priorities they reveal. Without the authoritative voice of men, women refrained from attributing controversial signs of sanctity to their subjects. Not only were the topics of visions, revelations and miracles, which were contentious following the Council of Trent, not introduced, but women were also praised more for virtues like humility and charity than their propensity for self-mortification, which was a consistent theme in published books.<sup>182</sup> Rather than presenting certain women as exceptional examples, in the *lettres circulaires* that documented the life of each woman in a community, the writers emphasized the spiritual gifts possessed by the average woman. Similarly, Lewis finds in her study of fifteenth-century Sister-books, through a comparison of different editions of the manuscripts, that the scribes and editors were more concerned with emphasizing the women's asceticism and prayers, while women used the books primarily to tell a communal history of the convent.<sup>183</sup> This communal emphasis can be seen in seventeenth-century examples as well; having lived and worked together with their subjects, women recorded the jobs their subjects had

---

<sup>180</sup> Grosez, *Vie de Marie-Madeleine de la Trinité*, 3.

<sup>181</sup> Paul du Saint-Sacrement, *Idée de la véritable piété en la vie, vertus, et écrits de Marguerite Pignier* (Lyon: Claude Bourgeat, 1669), "Epistre."

<sup>182</sup> Jacques Le Brun, "L'institution et le corps, lieux de la mémoire, d'après les biographies spirituelles féminines du XVIIe siècle," in *La Mémoire* (Paris: P.U.F., 1984), 111-121.

<sup>183</sup> Gertrud Jaron Lewis, *By Women, for Women, about Women: The Sister-Books of Fourteenth-Century Germany* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1996), 9.

performed within the convent with particular assiduity considering the small number of details that could be featured in a Life of only a few paragraphs. Françoise-Madeleine de Chaugy, whose works will be examined in more detail shortly, remarked that Marie-Françoise Sosion, in addition to helping the domestic sisters with their work, “took extraordinary care to ensure that the community was well-served,” demonstrating an interest in her practical service to her house that was unusual among authors.<sup>184</sup>

Furthermore, there was greater variety in the life stories themselves of the subjects of these Lives when each woman – not only founders and abbesses – were included. The traditional hagiographic narrative had to be altered to include women who died too young to attain the kinds of spiritual achievements that usually made up biographies. Claudine de l’Assomption was a member of the Ursulines of Lyon for only a year and four months before she died at a young age, but still merited a biography that lauded her obedience, her courage at renouncing the world and her family at a young age, and her particular zeal for austerity and penitence.<sup>185</sup> Nevertheless, these texts, whether they were edited or incorporated into a larger work or read and circulated just among women, all served the purpose of encouraging virtues of the post-Tridentine Church – such as interior prayer, charity and self-discipline – among their readers.<sup>186</sup> The unnamed superior of the Visitation de Sainte Marie at Melun even noted the conformity of the *Vie de la Vénérable Mère Anne-Marguerite Clément* to the order’s circulatory letters; she states that

---

<sup>184</sup> Chaugy, “La Vie de nôtre très vertueuse Soeur Marie-Françoise Sosion”, in *Les Vies de VII religieuses de l’Ordre de la Visitation Sainte-Marie* (Annecy: J. Clerc, 1659), 94. “Elle apportoit un soin extraordinaire pour faire que la Communauté fût bien servie...”

<sup>185</sup> Bibliotheque de l’Arsenal, MS 4990.

<sup>186</sup> Dompnier, “Cordiale communication,” 289. Jeanne de Chantal instructs authors to write “naively, faithfully..., and simply” (“naivement, fidèlement ..., simplement”) and that they should write “only what was particularly capable of edifying” (“qu’on ne dise [dans les billets mortuaries] que des choses particuliere capables d’edifier”)

according to the wishes of Mère Clément her “extraordinary graces” were “only manifested in our simple manner and the style of our circulatory letters.”<sup>187</sup>

Perhaps even more than published biographies, *lettres circulaires* were products of a communal effort, with no single author. While personal memories were often written in the first person, this did not necessarily stand for the person whose name was signed at the bottom; letters were exchanged not between superiors but entire communities.<sup>188</sup> In early modern biographies, David Lewis asserts, the author was not an exclusive term, but signified “initiator, author, compiler, editor, narrator” and could include multiple women.<sup>189</sup> The men associated with convents presumably also contributed. In a letter from Anne Felix, the superior of the Sisters of St-Joseph of Vienne, announcing the death of Marguerite Burdier, a different hand added a note at the end stating “This is the testimony of the Reverend Father Baltazard, her long-time director.”<sup>190</sup> Whether this indicates that the director had provided information, written the text or simply approved it, this indicates collaboration between men and women in the composition of even the shortest Lives.

The idea of authorship is further complicated in the work of Françoise-Marie Chaugy whose abridged Lives of women of Visitation were published with official approbation in the same way as those of men. As a member of the original house of the order, she received instruction directly from Jeanne de Chantal and was chosen to be the order’s first historian and to write the biographies of the order’s other first members. These Lives were of significant length,

---

<sup>187</sup> Galice, *Vie d'Anne-Marguerite Clément*, “Epistre.” “Convaincu qu’il est avec nous, que nôtre humble Mère veut encore estre humiliée après sa mort, et que les graces extraordinaires qu’elle a reçeuës de Dieu, ne soyent manifestées que dans nôtre maniere simple, et le stile ne nos lettres circulaires; ce que nos Soeurs anciennes ont écrit avec tout le Zele et l’affection qu’elles devoient à cette premiere Superieure de nôtre maison, dont elles ont admiré les vertus.”

<sup>188</sup> Dompnier, “Cordial communication,” 280.

<sup>189</sup> Lewis, Introduction to the *Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila*, 6.

<sup>190</sup> Vacher, Marguerite. *Nuns Without Cloister: Sisters of St. Joseph in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. Trans. Patricia Byrne and the United States Federation of the Sisters of St. Joseph. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 2010, 120.

around thirty to forty pages each, and resembled full biographies in their tone more than the very condensed narratives of *lettres circulaires*. Her *Abrégé de la Vie de Mgr François de Sales*, however, was published anonymously in 1644 and was later incorporated into Sebastian Huré's *Oeuvres complètes du Bienheureux François de Sales* in 1652.

The close relationship between the *lettres circulaires* and published books can be seen in Chaugy's *Mémoires sur la vie et les vertus de Jeanne-Françoise Fremyot de Chantal*, which she originally wrote as a letter to Mère Hélène-Angelique Lhuillier, the superior of the Visitation of Rue St-Antoine in Paris. Lhuillier in turn gave the manuscript to Mgr. Henri Maupas du Tour who published it in 1644 under his own name and changed the style considerably. Chaugy's twentieth-century biographer Ernestine Lecouturier criticizes this decision, stating that "her naive and charming simplicity had disappeared under the pomposity of a heavy rhetoric."<sup>191</sup> Chaugy, however, lauded Maupas du Tour and in her *Vies des quatre premières Mères*, she describes him as having a "quill sweeter than honey and as pure as that of an angel."<sup>192</sup> She was also said to have rejected publicity and praise, believing it to be contrary to the spirit of her order. Whatever she truly felt about Maupas du Tour's revisions to her work, Chaugy nevertheless publicly accepted his changes as the final stage of publication, one that helped her to make her work known while maintaining the humility required of a nun. Alexandre Fichet wrote in his *Les saintes reliques de l'Erothée ou la sainte Vie de Mère Jeanne-Françoise de Fremyot* that Chaugy had "composed the Life of this Mother with such judgement and spirit that it could be printed and see day with the most enlightened approbation."<sup>193</sup> This approval was

---

<sup>191</sup> Ernestine Lecouturier, *Françoise-Madeleine de Chaugy et la tradition salesienne au XVII siècle: Françoise-Madeleine de Chaugy et la Visitation après la mort de Sainte Chantal* (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1933), 121. "Mais leur naive et charmante simplicité avait disparu sous l'emphase d'une lourde et pompeuse rhétorique." Maupas du Tour's books feature unusually ornamental language, which lends credence to Lecouturier's charge.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 122. "une plume, plus douce que le miel et aussi pure que celle d'un ange."

<sup>193</sup> Lecouturier, *Françoise-Madeleine de Chaugy*, 124. "Elle a composé la Vie de cette Mère avec tant de jugement et d'esprit qu'elle pouvait être mise sous presse et voir le jour avec approbation des plus éclairées."

indeed important to the publication of her books, and Charles Auguste de Sales, the bishop of Geneva, emphasizes in his introduction that she was commanded to write, thus reassuring readers of her humility, and that her work was carefully examined.<sup>194</sup>

Françoise de Chaugy declares herself to be a simple woman, ignorant of the world beyond her convent. She justifies her biographies, however, by arguing that they did not include the Lives of their members among “current news” and that they could not abstain from publishing such works with “a thousand thrills of joy.”<sup>195</sup> Her writing was nevertheless a way for her to engage with the world outside the house of the Visitandines, and while she claims to be writing only the universal truth of God, she also explained the ideals of the new Visitation order and the thoughts of François de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal. For example, because de Sales created the order in part to allow women who were otherwise considered too frail to also live a communal religious life, the gratitude of such women was a frequent element in their narratives. When her doctors told Marie-Françoise Sasion that the ulcers she suffered from were tubercular, she begged the superior not to exclude her from the community despite the contagious nature of her illness:

Out of fear of losing the grace of her vocation that was dearer to her than her own life... she prostrated herself at the feet of our very-honoured Mère Marie-Aymée de Blonay, who was her superior, and begged her... to have compassion for her misery and to not exclude her entirely from participation in the Institute, and that she would be content to withdraw to a corner of the garden. Her speech, animated by the spirit of God, moved the Mother’s heart so deeply that for consolation she heard this response; that persevering in

---

<sup>194</sup> Françoise-Madelène de Chaugy, *Les Vies de VII religieuses de l'Ordre de la Visitation Sainte-Marie* (Annessy: J. Clerc, 1659), “Prologue.”

<sup>195</sup> Ibid. “Il est vray, Madame, que nos retraites du monde, où nous devons être toutes caches en Dieu avec Jesus-Christ, nous obligent d’ignorer les nouvelles du siècle, et à metre en oubly la proper maison de nos Pères et de nos Mères, selon la chair et le sang: Mais nous ne croyons pas, que la maison du Père commun des Fideles, doive être comprise dans ce conseil, et dans cet oubli, Nous ne mettons pas au nombre des nouvelles du siècle ce que l’on nous raconte de la sainte Maison de l’Oinct du Seigneur; et nous ne pouvons nous abstenir, d’ouïr publier, avec mille tressaillemens de joy, et des transports d’allegresse, qui surpassent tous sentimens.”

the spirit of humility, as she had begun, the congregation would follow the spirit of charity and that she could live contentedly, putting all her trust in the holy Virgin.<sup>196</sup>

Given the novelty of the Visitandines' mission to attract women not able to withstand the austerity of most convents and the doubt with which some initially regarded the order, it was necessary to show the direct hand of God in placing such women in their houses.

Chaugy, along with the Dominican Jacqueline Bouette de Blémur, the Visitandine Marie-Claude de Maselli, and other women whose collections of Lives were published, further demonstrate how women participated in the creation of this genre in a variety of ways, and that their interactions with male editors reflect the complicated relationship between religious women and their male counterparts.<sup>197</sup> Just as men shaped the spiritual Lives of women according to the Church's model, women helped to shape these Lives through the large amount of information convents circulated, thus providing a much-needed foundation without which the male authors could not have written so effectively.

---

<sup>196</sup> Chaugy, "Vie de Marie-Françoise Sosion," 94. "Neantmoins les Medecins reconneurent d'abord que c'étoient les êcrouëlles: alors son coeur fut outrepercé d'un glaive de douleur, par l'apprehension de perdre la grace de sa vocation qui luy estoit plus chere, que sa propre vie, n'ignorant pas que les Constitutions donnent absolument l'exclusive aux personnes atteintes de cette contagieuse maladie. Pressée de cette affliction d'esprit, elle s'alla prosterner aux pieds de nôtre tres-honorée Mère Marie-Aymée de Blonay, qui étoit sa Superieure, et la conjura, avec abondance de larmes, d'avoir compassion de sa misere, et de ne l'exclurre point de la participation de l'Institut, et qu'elle se contentoit de vivre retirée en un coin du jardin. Son discours animé de l'esprit de Dieu, toucha si vivement le coeur de la Mère, que pour consolation elle ouït cette réponce; que perseverant en esprit d'humilité, comme elle avoit commencé, la Congregation suivroit l'esprit de la charité, et qu'elle pouvoit vivre contente, mettant toute sa confiance en la sainte Vierge."

<sup>197</sup> Christian Renoux, "Mère de Blémur: une plagiaire méconnue ou une historienne consciencieuse?" *Bulletin de la Société d'histoire moderne* 4 (1989): 39-45. Renoux examines Blémur's *Éloges* in order to determine to what extent she plagiarized other texts, ignoring the fact that this was not perceived as plagiarism but collaboration in this context.

## Chapter 2 – “A Mirror in Which to See Oneself”: The Multiple Uses of Lives

The rapidly changing print culture of early modern France, argues Roger Chartier, consisted not only of the expanding rates of literacy, book ownership, and distribution of printed materials made possible by the printing press, but also of the new acts and cultural practices that arose from this production.<sup>198</sup> Chartier thus emphasizes that the consumption of new texts was a communal experience as well as an individual one, and that the ways in which texts were used and read varied enormously.<sup>199</sup> It is impossible, Chartier writes, to “establish exclusive relationships between specific cultural forms and particular social groups,” since a single document could serve different communities differently: a book used as a text for study in a highly literate community could also serve as a devotional relic to less literate people. Religious texts, Marie-Elisabeth Henneau adds, could be “listened to, recited, proclaimed, chanted and sung.”<sup>200</sup>

Women’s spiritual biographies likewise performed a variety of functions which went far beyond their authors’ stated purposes. Not only did the ability to print these books in greater numbers promote their circulation, and hence the reputations of women and, with them, their communities, but the proliferation of new religious orders and the expanding role of women in religious life also meant that life writing was used to support these new female endeavours. Increasing control by the Church over the veneration of holy people led to new models of

---

<sup>198</sup> Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987) 1

<sup>199</sup> Alain Boureau and Roger Chartier, *The Culture of Print: Power and the Uses of Print in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 1. “Their festive, ritual, cultic, civic, and pedagogic uses were by definition collective and postulated decipherment in common, those who knew how to read leading those who did not.”

<sup>200</sup> Marie-Élisabeth Henneau, “Écritures masculines d’un héroïsme au féminin: portrait moderne d’une mystique médiévale,” in *Saintes ou sorcières ? L’héroïsme chrétien au féminin* (Paris: Les Éditions de Paris, 2006), 169. “L’Écriture sainte peut être écourtée, lue, récitée, proclamée, psalmodiée, chantée.”

hagiographic writing and new ways of reading and interpreting pious Lives. This chapter will examine the possible patterns of consumption of feminine biographies, and the multiple reasons that, following the monastic revival in France and the birth of new monastic models, both men and women particularly sought to read and circulate these books.

There are three principal benefits to be gained from reading the Lives of saints, Jean Auvray concludes in his *Life of Jeanne Absolu*: to convert, to comfort and console, and to instruct,<sup>201</sup> and in the words of the authors of these books their purpose is clearly and simply didactic. Auvray cites the example of the *Life of St. Anthony* as having “turned many souls away from the vanities of the world;”<sup>202</sup> given that “a religious person [was] obliged under pain of committing a mortal sin to have the will... to attend to her state of perfection, that is to say, to keep the obligation of a Christian and of a member of a religious order,” reading their Lives was an invaluable part of the spiritual education of nuns and the stated motivation for writing them.<sup>203</sup> From accounts of unusual piety in childhood to descriptions of the ways a woman embodied the virtues associated with her vocation, biographies presented a narrative that instructed other women in the activities and attitudes of a truly pious woman and the qualities they were to cultivate in their own lives. Pierre de Cambry likewise succinctly described his work as a mirror in which readers ought to see themselves.<sup>204</sup> Because of the value of such works, church authorities declared it an act of devotion to make the virtues of these women known to the world. In his approbation of the *Vie de la Venerable Mère Louise-Eugenie de Fontaine*, Bishop of

---

<sup>201</sup> Jean Auvray, *Modèle de la perfection religieuse, en la vie de la vénérable Mère Jeanne Absolu, dite de Saint Sauveur, religieuse de Hautes-Bruyeres, de l'Ordre de Fontevrault*, 2d ed. (Paris: S. Huré, 1655), 351: “Or l'utilité de ces livres consiste en trois biens principaux qu'ils nous apportent, dont le premier est de convertir, le second de soulager et de consoler, et le troisieme d'instruire.”

<sup>202</sup> Auvray, *Vie de Jeanne Absolu*, 352: “Depuis la lecture de sa vie retira plusieurs âmes des vanitez du monde...”

<sup>203</sup> Auvray, *Vie de Jeanne Absolu*, 354: “Il faut sçavoir qu'une personne Religieuse est obligée sous peine de peché mortel d'avoir la volonté... de tendre à la perfection de son état, c'est à dire, de garder exactement l'obligation de Chretien, et de Religieux.”

<sup>204</sup> Pierre de Cambry, *Abrégé de la Vie de Dame Jeanne de Cambry, premièrement religieuse de l'Ordre de S. Augustin à Tournay* (Anvers: J. Mesens, 1659), “Prologue.”

Montauban Henri de Nesmond states that he was “delighted that the eminent virtues of this illustrious daughter [would] pass into posterity” and adds “I do not believe that one could find a more perfect model of all religious virtues... I am delighted that my testimony can contribute to making her merit known.”<sup>205</sup>

Apart from such statements by the authors of these works, however, little is known about the response such books received or even the extent to which they were read. As Albrecht Burkardt writes, “few things are known about the precise circumstances of use [of biographies], nor about the reception of these works among readers.”<sup>206</sup> A consideration of the wider context in which these books were written, however, points to numerous other ways in which biographies could be read and put to use to further the interests of individuals, convents and the Church. Burkardt, indeed, goes on to argue that biographies were intended not principally as reading matter but were created as something akin to a relic, a physical monument to the subject’s spiritual status. The existence of a biography was therefore more important than its contents, and he states that by “collecting the marvellous effects attributed to the intercession of the venerated person, the biography itself became, for those who made use of it, the cause or at least an assurance of the veneration.”<sup>207</sup> There was a long tradition of the worship of Lives of saints as artefacts; Alain Boureau writes that in the early Middle Ages, illustrated hagiographical manuscripts were kept in the treasury of a monastery rather than the library which showed the

---

<sup>205</sup> M. Bonneau, *La Vie de la vénérable Mère Louise-Eugénie de Fontaine, religieuse du monastère de la Visitation de Sainte-Marie*, “Prologue.” “Je suis ravy que les vertus eminentes de cette illustre Fille passent à la connoissance de la posterité... Je ne crois pas que l’on puisse trouver un plus parfait modelle de toutes les vertus Religieuses... je suis ravy que mon temoignage puisse contribuer à faire connoistre son merite.”

<sup>206</sup> Albrecht Burkardt, “Reconnaissance et dévotion : les *Vies de saint* et leurs lectures au début du XVIIe siècle à travers les procès de canonisation,” *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* (1996), 214. “... peu de choses sont néanmoins connues, tant des circonstances plus précises de la mise en oeuvre, que de la réception de tels ouvrages parmi les lecteurs.”

<sup>207</sup> Burkardt, “Reconnaissance et dévotion,” 223. “Collectionnant les effets merveilleux dus à l’intercession du personnage vénéré, la biographie devient ainsi elle-même, chez ceux qui s’en servent, la cause ou pour le moins une assurance de la vénération.”

close association between such documents and physical relics.<sup>208</sup> Although the veneration of manuscripts had declined by the seventeenth century, this idea is nevertheless reflected in Auvray's story of Marguerite du Saint-Sacrement, who, when her confessor brought her spiritual diaries to her upon her death bed, kissed them "with an admirable devotion" because of her love of both the practice of writing and for the death of Jesus Christ.<sup>209</sup>

The publication of such a large number of very similar books over the course of the century does indeed indicate that the eventual circulation and readership of the books was less important than the fact of their existence. Moreover, despite authors' wishes that their books serve as models, the superior spiritual gifts possessed by the biographies' subjects were not necessarily attainable or even desirable among other religious women. Women were presented as passive recipients of such gifts from God, and therefore their achievements could not necessarily be emulated. From early childhood these women were set apart; Thérèse de Jesus is described as experiencing a mystical visit to Bethlehem at the age of only three or four, and while she is credited by persisting in her devotion to the Church, it is clear that her vocation was not her choice.<sup>210</sup> As she was named superior of her convent, Galice describes Anne-Marguerite Clément as having been "fortified by a special grace" as she faced the challenges of her new position.<sup>211</sup>

---

<sup>208</sup> Boureau, *Culture of Print*, 32.

<sup>209</sup> Jean Auvray, *L'Enfance de Jésus, et sa famille, honorée en la vie de Sr Marguerite du S. Sacrement, religieuse Carmélite du Monastère de Beaune* (Paris: Imprimerie Royal, 1654), 263. "Elle donna mesme a son Confesseur cette pratique par escrit et sur une image qui l'en peust mieux faire souvenir; et au temps de sa mort une des Religieuses du Monastere luy ayant presente la mesme pratique escrite en un papier, elle tesmoigna, baisant le papier avec une devotion admirable, combine elle aimoit la pratique et l'affection qu'elle avoit que sa mort comme sa vie honorast les momens de la vie et de la mort de Jesus-Christ."

<sup>210</sup> Albert de S. Jacques, *La Vie de la vénérable Mère Térèse de Jésus, fondatrice des Carmelites de la Franche-Comté de Bourgogne* (Lyon: Mathieu Liberal, 1673), 16. "Elle étoit âgée de trois ou quatre ans, lorsque pendant les jours dediés à celebrer les devots mysteres de Jesus naissant, comme on la voyoit dans un si grand recueillement, qu'elle sembloit être ravie, et qu'on luy demandoit au sortir de ce sommeil mystique, d'où elle venoit, elle répondoit dans son innocence ordinaire, qu'elle venoit de Bethléem; qu'elle y avoit veu l'Etable, et la Ste Vierge qui couchoit le petit Jesus dans la creche..."

<sup>211</sup> Jean Augustin Galice, *La Vie de la vénérable Mère Anne-Marguerite Clément, première supérieure du monastère de la Visitation de Ste-Marie de Melun* (Paris: Coignard, 1686), 66, "Dieu l'a fortifié par une grace speciale..."

Mysticism in particular was considered more to be admired than emulated. Given the suspicion with which visionaries such as Marie de l'Incarnation met, it would be reasonable to assume that her Life was not intended to be adopted as a model for the average nun. In her *Relation* of 1633, she alludes to some of these often-forbidden practices but is reticent in the details; describing the beginning of her attraction to a new form of mystical connection to God, she writes that she “felt completely filled and surrounded by this heavenly sweetness, and though I felt myself so abundantly in God, I desired to unite with him in a completely different way, ” but gives few further allusions to the new way that she experienced union with God.<sup>212</sup> Some women practiced mortifications in secret that were in fact forbidden by their superiors. Catherine de Ranquet, for example, found creative ways to mortify herself even after her cilice and discipline were taken from her:

They also found planks in her bed under the sheets, [and] the love that is inventive suggested to her to put powdered aloe into her soup, over a very long time, persuading a white-veiled serving sister who was the cook , that this powder was good for her health, and forbade her to say anything of it to anyone, which she obeyed blindly, and continued until by chance one day her *compagne d'office* wanted to taste her superior's soup, which she found so bitter and unbearable to taste that she demanded that she no longer put it in her food... She was troubled by fleas, and when the nuns were astonished that she never slapped them, she told them for recreation at the beginning of the summer, I made my peace with fleas, and promised them to let them live, and that [although] she had many, she never experienced worry....<sup>213</sup>

---

<sup>212</sup> Marie de l'Incarnation, Claude Martin, and Albert Jamet, de Brouwer, 1929), 157. “Je me sentais toute remplie et environnée de cette douceur céleste, et quoique je me sentisse si abondamment en Dieu, mon coeur désirait s'unir à lui d'une façon tout autre.” Jamet notes that this was “la seule allusion que Marie fasse à une phase très importante de sa vie mystique, sur laquelle, à en juger par l'analogie de la Relation de 1654, elle avit dû s'étendre plus longuement.”

<sup>213</sup> Gaspard Augeri, *La Vie et vertus de la vénérable Mère Catherine de Jésus Ranquet, religieuse Ursuline, native de la ville de Lyon* (Lyon: M. Liberal, 1670), 144-145. “Car dez ses premieres années de la Religion, la haire et la discipline et le cilice, luy estoit très-familiers, elle prenoit fort-souvent la discipline, et bien qu'elle eut des adresses nonpareilles pour se cacher, on n'a pas laissé de l'avoir surprise à la prendre un an durant tous les jours, elle s'en s'est servie d'une de fer, quoy qu'elle fut d'une complexion très-delicat, jusqu'à tant que l'usage luy en fut interdit par ses Superieurs, on a luy aussi trouvé des ais dans son lict sous ses draps, l'amour qui est invantif luy suggera de faire mettre de la l'Aloës en poudre dans son potage, tres-long temps, persuadant à une bonne Soeur du voile blanc qui estoit cuisiniere, que cette poudre estoit utile à sa santé, et luy deffendant d'en rien dire à personne, à quoy elle obeit à l'aveugle, et continua jusques à ce que par hasard sa compagne d'Office voulut un jour gouter du potage de la Superieure qu'elle trouva si amer et si insupportable au gout, qu'elle fit en forte qu'on ne luy en mit plus... elle ne

Once their unusual piety was established through other means, these acts could be presented as admirable and their judgement better than those who tried to stop them, but imitating this behaviour would be perceived simply as disobedience in others. As traditional forms of self-mortification such as those practiced by Catherine Ranquet became increasingly discouraged during the Catholic Reformation, alternate forms of suffering were nevertheless alluded to and praised. Marie de l'Incarnation described this pain as coming from other people, stating "The mortifications that I endured on the part of my neighbours were painful, but I was silent, because I always believed that Our Lord permitted them for my own good, and therefore I loved those who inflicted them on me with a tender and sincere love."<sup>214</sup> Like many other nuns, Charlotte-Flandrine de Nassau was described as having suffered the mortification of chronic illness,<sup>215</sup> but she took her practices further than other women, and experienced "heavenly joy" through them.<sup>216</sup> The exceptional and inimitable spiritual states achieved by these women support the assertion that their Lives were to be used more as proof of their sainthood than as a model for other religious women.

---

sortoît point de sa Cellule qu'au temps qu'on luy avoit marqué, quoy qu'elle se levât au premier branle de la cloche, et qu'elle fit son Oraison comme les autres, en quoy on l'a surprise tres-souvent depuis son entrée en Religion, elle a souffert l'importunité des puces, et quand les Religieuses s'estonnoient de ce qu'elle ne s'en prenoit jamais aucune, elle leurs disoit par recreation au commencement de l'Esté, je fais ma paix avec les puces, et leur promet de les laisser vivre, et qu'elle en eut beaucoup, elle n'en témoignoît jamais de l'inquietude..."

<sup>214</sup> Jamet, *Écrits spirituels et historiques*, 334. "Les mortifications que j'endurais de la part du prochain étaient bien autrement sensibles, mais je m'en tais, parce que j'ai toujours cru que Notre-Seigneur les permettait pour mon bien, et ainsi j'aimais d'un amour tendre et sincère ceux qui me les suscitaient.

<sup>215</sup> Jacques Le Brun, "Mutations de la notion de martyr au XVIIe siècle d'après les biographies spirituelles féminines," in *Saineté et martyre dans les religions du livre* (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1989), 77-90.

<sup>216</sup> Claude Allard, *Le Miroir des âmes religieuses, ou la vie de très-haute et très-religieuse princesse, Madame Charlotte Flandrine de Nassau, très-digne abbesse du Royal Monastère de Ste. Croix de Poitiers* (Poitiers: J. Thoreau, 1653), 282: "Enfin ses transports dans les mortifications estoient si celestes, qu'elle ne sentoit pas les disciplines qu'elle se donnoit, car à l'exemple de Sainte Radegonde... Elle n'echappoit pas au zele de ses Religieuses, qui l'ont surprise souvent en ce rude exercise: dont ayant esté bien dispensée par l'âge, elle voulut encore participer au merite des autres, faisant les disciplines pour leur usage."

There is, however, no need to draw a strict line dividing the use of biographies as relics from their use for spiritual enrichment, and there is also evidence that biographies were indeed read, by women as well as by the men who wrote them. As previously described, the women of Marie Madeleine de la Trinité's house in Aix indicated that they were not only familiar with the reputation of Anne de Xainctonge, the founder of the Ursuline order in France, but that they had read his biography of her, published in Lyon seven years previously, in 1691.<sup>217</sup> It was not only the elite members of convents who were familiar with the Lives of notable religious women; Geneviève Fayet, the founder of the Ladies of Charity in Étampes, was taken for Barbe Acarie by a young nun who knew of Acarie's reputation through André Duval's *Vie*.<sup>218</sup> This event illustrates how pervasive Acarie's model of female penitential spirituality became, and how her biography helped to shape a widespread image of religious women.

The Life of Teresa of Avila formed a model not only for the composition of other spiritual biographies, but its popularity also served as a model for reading contemporary biographies. Teresa's Book of Her Life was enormously popular, not only among members of her Carmelite order but among other orders as well, and it was particularly important in inspiring devotions among religious women. Nancy Cushing-Daniels describes her writings and the many books about her as "required reading," in seventeenth-century Spain, even among secular women.<sup>219</sup> Likewise, the Benedictine reformer Marguerite d'Arbouze was said to have read the work of Teresa so fervently that she was often taken for a Carmelite in disguise.<sup>220</sup> The narrative of Teresa's life was made known in a number of ways; although she is best known for her

---

<sup>217</sup> Jean-Etienne de Grosez, *La Vie de la mère Anne de Xainctonge*, Lyon, 1691.

<sup>218</sup> Barbara B. Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 28.

<sup>219</sup> Nancy Cushing-Daniels, *Breaking Boundaries, Forging Friendship: The Convent and Women's Writing in Seventeenth-Century Spain* (New Orleans, LA: University Press of the South), 130.

<sup>220</sup> Henri Brémond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France depuis la fin des guerres de religion jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris: A. Colin, 1967), 488.



produced more commonly for personal reading than for scholarship or ceremonial use, and the biographies of women examined here were generally of a size suited for individual ownership.<sup>224</sup> These books were also designed to be read; large print and relatively simple vocabulary made the texts more accessible to women, whose levels of literacy varied.<sup>225</sup> Writers too appeared to be conscious of the necessity of promoting access to readers. Claude Allard, for example, tells readers that he decided to divide his work thematically into six books, and each of these books into chapters in order to “facilitate reading.”<sup>226</sup> Short, often repetitively-themed chapters made possible the kind of reading that was encouraged in convents, namely meditation upon a text for short periods of time. Short intervals of personal reading often replaced the practice of *lectio divina* in female convents, and the format of these chapters seems particularly well-suited to such habits. Consecutive brief chapters which offered elaboration on similar themes potentially facilitated the contemplation of a subject over the space of several days. It was common to subdivide chapters on the same topic into two separate short chapters which were more suitable for the brief periods of personal reading that nuns were allowed; in the *Vie de la Vénérable Mère Françoise de Saint Bernard*, for example, the chapter “On her profound humility” was followed by another entitled “Continuation of the same subject” as were many other sections in the book.<sup>227</sup>

The modest qualities of these books also doubtlessly reflected the modest spiritual position of their subjects, who were neither theologians nor canonized saints. However, when biographies were published in a form inaccessible to women, their protests showed the importance they placed not only on having a book published, but also on being able to read and

---

<sup>224</sup> David T. Pottinger, *The French Book Trade in the Ancien Régime, 1500-1791* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 16.

<sup>225</sup> Marie-Élisabeth Henneau, “Un Livre Sous Les Yeux,” 74.

<sup>226</sup> Allard, *Vie de Charlotte-Flandrine de Nassau*, “Prologue.”

<sup>227</sup> Jean-Marie de Vernon, *La Vie de la vénérable Mère Françoise de Saint-Bernard, religieuse de Ste-Claire à Verdun, nommée dans le monde Mme de Maisons* (Paris: Mathieu Colombel, 1657), 359-370.

understand the work. When Jean-Augustin Galice wrote the *Life of Anne-Marguerite Clément* in Latin, the disappointment of the sisters of the Visitation de Sainte-Marie of Melun and their insistence that it be published in translation demonstrated that the women saw their ability to read the book themselves was more important than the prestige of a book written in the language of the Church.<sup>228</sup> Although Latin extracts, such as dedications to members of the Church, approbations by priests and some quotations, were included as well, the main bodies of the text were always in French, and in a language that ordinary nuns could understand. The Benedictine reformer Marguerite d'Arbouze, on the other hand, reportedly learned Italian and Spanish in order to understand spiritual books that were written in those two languages.<sup>229</sup>

Reading spiritual Lives, whether of early saints or more contemporary women, was not only an individual activity but a communal one, and they were therefore an important part of shared convent culture. Monastic communities were, in the words of Ruth Morse, “bookish,” and even lay sisters who were not involved in teaching, writing, or other aspects of convent literary culture heard the Lives of religious figures read aloud at mealtimes. Morse argues that this practice was not simply intended to educate members, but to entertain them as well:

Freestanding biography received its greatest impetus from the monastic habit of reading the lives of saints at mealtimes. The discipline which insisted that the religious listen instead of talk encouraged, however contingently, the ordinary impulse to take pleasure from stories: mealtimes were not times for listening to sermons, or any other kind of ‘difficult’ text, but for the relaxing, and yet instructive, kind of reading which is remarkably close to fiction enjoyed for its own sake.<sup>230</sup>

Women were generally discouraged from studying texts as scholars, and while this limited their access to Biblical sources and other unedited texts, it did not prohibit them from reading other

---

<sup>228</sup> Galice, *Vie d'Anne-Marguerite de Clément*, “Epistre.”

<sup>229</sup> Brémond, *L'histoire du sentiment religieuses*, t. II, p. 410.

<sup>230</sup> Ruth Morse, *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages: Rhetoric, Representation, and Reality* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 129.

texts for enjoyment as well as for edification.<sup>231</sup> Even silent reading became a communal activity through the common ownership of books in convents; Henneau cites the 1604 Constitutions of Annonciades of Liège which state that books were allowed in cells, but only one at time and only with the permission of the superior.<sup>232</sup> Women thus shared books and a culture of reading, and in this way, the reading of nuns' biographies became a way of reinforcing a group identity as well as promoting individual spiritual growth. News from distant monasteries as well as spiritual direction was shared through biographies, both in the contents of the narrative itself or as an addendum. Lives described the histories of convents and the struggles women faced in establishing them, but also shared more mundane news, as did the Ursuline sister Geneviève de S. Bernard when she informed the women to whom she addressed the letter telling of the death of her sister, Genevieve de la Place.<sup>233</sup> The inclusion of this kind of information in *lettres circulaires* implies that the letter's contents were intended to be shared with the general population of the convent receiving the letter. The reading of biographical books and letters therefore helped to form a common ideal of female religious life that would be recognized by all members of a community, and to cast some women almost in the role of patron saint of an emerging congregation.

The proliferation of new religious orders in the first half of the seventeenth century as well as new missions for existing orders required both models of behaviour and methods for publicizing their presence and recruiting new members. As shown by how the reputation of Barbe Acarie – not to mention Teresa of Avila – spread by means of her Life, biographies served to promote the status of an order or convent's founder and thus to legitimate it to members of the

---

<sup>231</sup> Henneau, "Un Livre Sous Les Yeux," 73. "L'histoire sainte est préférée aux textes bibliques et de pieuses anthologies aux textes intégraux."

<sup>232</sup> Henneau, "Un livre sous les yeux," 71.

<sup>233</sup> Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal, MS 4990.

wider community whose daughters were potential members. Although François de Sales insisted that biographies were to serve a divine, not earthly function,<sup>234</sup> in truth the diversity of uses to which they were put shows that they played an important role in bridging the gap between the secular world and the convent.

After the enclosure of convents, a process which began in the fifteenth century in France but was not completely until the seventeenth, it became increasingly difficult for houses to raise funds while maintaining the ideal of isolation from the world. At the same time as new orders flourished, their members were expected to retreat from public attention, and while in pre-Reformation Europe convents were usually “both urban and aristocratic or patrician,”<sup>235</sup> the secular orders drew more members from the “lower strata of society,” who brought less money to the convent when they joined.<sup>236</sup> Patronage for growing convents was more necessary than ever as the enclosure of nuns limited them in their traditional financial activities, which sometimes included the administration of large estates and significant assets, and even communities of religious men as well.<sup>237</sup> Enclosure, however, was intended to be spiritual as well as physical; according to the decrees of the Council of Trent, not only were nuns expected to remain behind convent walls, but to devote themselves fully to spiritual rather than temporal matters. Near the end of the seventeenth century, theologian Jean-Baptiste Thiers described in his *Traité de la clôture des religieuses* how fundamental enclosure had become to the mission of the female religious life: “Enclosure was also regarded as the foundation of the religious life for women; and it is from that that, as Saint François de Sales remarks very well, ‘depends the good

---

<sup>234</sup> Ernestine Lecouturier, *Françoise-Madeleine de Chaugy et la tradition salesienne au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle: Françoise-Madeleine de Chaugy et la Visitation après la mort de Sainte Chantal* (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1933), 37.

<sup>235</sup> Olwen Hufton, Introduction to *Women in the Religious Life*, Olwen Hufton, ed. Yearbook of the Department of History and Civilisation (Florence: European University Institute, 1996), 16.

<sup>236</sup> Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990) 193.

<sup>237</sup> See Penelope D. Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession: Religious Women in Medieval France*, ed. Catharine R. Stimpson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), on the decline of the double monastery

order of all the rest.”<sup>238</sup> Despite the many attempts, by the Ursulines, Filles de la Charite, Filles de Notre-Dame and others, to circumvent the requirement for enclosure and to expand the opportunities for religious women, enclosure came to be seen as essential to safeguard the virtue of women in convents.

Nuns had always traditionally held prominent civic roles in spite of their seclusion, both symbolically and practically. Convents were central to communities and their spiritual presence was constantly felt though the members were rarely seen. Helen Hills describes how, for example, relics belonging to the Carmelite convent in Naples were displayed in the church on feast days and paraded through the city in processions to remind citizens of the continued spiritual protection provided by the nuns’ prayers. To the people of Naples, Hills argues, the knowledge that the Carmelites were watching over them from their monastery on a hill was similar to the feeling of being watched over by saints, and relics were visible reminders of the link between religious communities and the saints. Even as enclosure was enforced more strictly following 1642, and visitors were no longer allowed into the convent, the use of relics in public could make the presence of the nuns felt “prosthethically”:

Displaying their relics within their church allowed the nuns not only to receive directly the blessings secured by them, but also to draw the faithful (with alms) into their inner church on special occasions, and to associate the relics’ holiness directly with the nuns themselves... After 1642 the nuns combined this centripetal exploitation of their relics with one that was centrifugal, and more ambitious and urbanistic in conception. Although they could not leave their enclosure, their sacred relic could do so prosthethically on their behalf. It could cross the city, draw acclamation, and accumulate spiritual and social capital for the convent.<sup>239</sup>

---

<sup>238</sup> Jean-Baptiste Thiers, *Traité de la clôture des religieuses...*, 1681. “Aussi doit-elle [la clôture] estre regardée comme le fondement de la vie religieuse pour les Filles; et c’est d’elle, comme le Remarque très-bien S. François de Sales, ‘que depend le bon ordre de tout le reste.’”

<sup>239</sup> Helen Hill, “Nuns and Relics: Spiritual Authority in Post-Tridentine Southern Italy,” in *Female Monasticism in Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 24-25.

Although relics declined in importance in the seventeenth century, biographies could, however, serve similarly as symbols of the continued existence and authority of nuns in the community both through their descriptions of the work these women performed and simply through the physical presence of a book in the absence of the person it represented. As Burkhardt describes, biographies function as sacred artefacts, and their publication introduced these objects to a wider audience for admiration and recognition. The purpose of enclosure was not only to preserve the undiluted virtue of women within the convent, but also to produce holiness which would saturate the world; Lives were a reminder of the sorts of holiness that monasteries produced, and of their civic function to supporters and patrons who could no longer visit convents in person.

Indeed, the flow of prayers and news between convents and their surrounding communities was extensive. Recent scholarship has uncovered the numerous ways in which early modern nuns were active in the secular world, and this activity was not limited to the charitable, non-cloistered orders that appeared at the beginning of the century. While, as Barbara Diefendorf explains, a penitential zeal gave way to an impulse towards caring for the poor and sick, which in turn lessened as religious orders came increasingly under the control of the Church, women's spiritual interests were nevertheless turned outward throughout the Catholic Reformation. The active and contemplative lives were not seen to be inherently contradictory, and intensely mystical women connected to the *dévo*t political movement saw the revival of religious life as a way to restore the French state to Catholicism following the Wars of Religion. Emphasis upon these women's mysticism within the enclosure of the convent can obscure their other activities, and Diefendorf argues that portraying Barbe Acarie as a "swooning mystic," historians have "overlooked her work raising funds and securing permissions for these

foundations, along with the very active role she played on the worksite, supervising the construction of the Carmelites' Paris convent."<sup>240</sup>

Even after submission to enclosure, Marie-Thérèse Notter states that the convents of Blois “made every effort to establish relationships and exchanges with the surrounding urban environment,” and these relationships involved real estate transactions and paying for labour and daily supplies for the monastery.<sup>241</sup> Françoise-Marie de Chaugy's description of her role as supervisor of the expansion of the Visitation's church also supports this assertion; alongside her writing and duties as convent secretary, she was responsible for supervising and paying the workers as well. At the Royal Abbey at Fontevraud, Soeur Binet de Montifroy's description of the work of Jeanne-Baptiste de Bourbon also testifies to the extensive duties of some religious women; the abbess, who had powers in the spiritual and temporal sphere “sans mesures,” slept less than six hours a night due to the demands of devotions, business and the care of her conscience.<sup>242</sup> With her connections to the royal court as the illegitimate daughter of Henri IV, Jeanne de Bourbon was able to conduct business and promote the interests of her house from within the cloister. Sustaining these connections was of great importance to convent, and biographies also facilitated the preservation of links to members' families, who were often influential in nearby cities.

The vast majority of biographies were written about women from elite families, and the social status of these women was reflected in their Lives. Saintliness was considered to be an

---

<sup>240</sup> Barbara B. Diefendorf, "Barbe Acarie and Her Spiritual Daughters: Women's Spiritual Authority in Seventeenth-Century France," in *Female Monasticism in Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 155.

<sup>241</sup> Marie-Thérèse Notter, “Société urbaine et communautés féminines à Blois” in \_\_\_\_\_, and Nicole Bouter,

\_\_\_\_\_ : *actes* \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ (Saint-Etienne), 835. “Soumis à la clôture, ces couvents vont cependant tout mettre en oeuvre pour établir rapports et échanges avec le milieu urbain environnant.... Tractations immobilières, travaux, approvisionnement journalier... permettent les premiers contacts avec le milieu qui les entoure.”

<sup>242</sup> Patricia Lusseau, \_\_\_\_\_ (1986), 5.

\_\_\_\_\_ -Editions,

almost inherited trait, so an account of a nun's family background was yet more proof of her special virtue. Indeed, Vernon explicitly states that

Although true nobility consists of virtue, which we obtain the use of through work rather than through heritage or succession, we nevertheless confess that virtue receives an extraordinary vigor and incomparable beauty from noble birth, since the generosity of the blood of ancestors gives not only courage to their children for undertaking great plans, but also a powerful incentive which obliges them to imitate those illustrious people from whom they are descended.<sup>243</sup>

This social distinction was present in all life-writing, including the most brief *lettres circulaires*; Rapley notes only one death notice of a lay sister whose exceptional piety was remarkable, while in contrast the detailed and carefully composed entry for Louise de France, the daughter of Louis XV, in the necrology of the Carmelites of St-Denis is a testament to the prestige that her royal status brought to the convent.<sup>244</sup> Indeed, despite the Counter-Reformation principles of many orders of accepting women from less elite backgrounds, the social status of professed nuns generally rose over the course of the century; Michelle Marshman finds this to have been the case in the Ursuline convent in Bordeaux and notes that in 1642 the house included many more members of the noble and magisterial class than at its foundation in 1607.<sup>245</sup> Women from elite families moreover were often given prominent positions within convents, and despite the Council of Trent's attempt to end such abuses, it is clear that the dowries that many women brought with them to the convent secured their position. Angélique Arnauld, for example, was named abbess of Port Royal through the influence her grandfather, Simon Marion, had with

---

<sup>243</sup> Vernon, *Vie de Françoise de Saint-Bernard*, 1-2: "Bien que la véritable Noblesse consiste dans la vertu, dont nous obtenons la jouissance plustost par le travail, que par heritage et par succession, advouons neantmoins que la vertu reçoit de la naissance Noble un extraordinaire vigueur et une incomparable beauté, puis que la generosité du sang des ancestres ne donne pas seulement du courage à leurs enfans pour l'entreprise des grands desseins: mais encor un puissant aiguillon qui les oblige d'imiter ces Illustres dont ils sont descendus."

<sup>244</sup> Elizabeth Rapley, *A Social History of the Cloister: Daily Life in the Teaching Monasteries of the Old Regime* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 241. Archives Municipales de St-Denis, GG 220.

<sup>245</sup> Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France*, 59, Michelle Marshman, "Patronage and Kinship in Women's Teaching Orders of Seventeenth-Century Bordeaux," *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* 31 (2003): 34-49., 44, finds this pattern of aristocratization of Ursuline convents repeated throughout France.

Henri IV, her younger sister Jeanne was likewise made abbess of Saint-Cyr, and all her other sisters joined Port-Royal as well, along with their mother following the death of her husband.<sup>246</sup>

Just as a nun's noble family reflected her spiritual status, the women who featured in these biographies in turn brought prestige to their family in the secular world. The presence of a published biography was clear recognition of the social, as well as religious, prominence of the family as a whole, and authors, who were clearly aware of this fact, used their writing to enhance the connections between convents and noble families. Charlotte-Flandrine de Nassau, the daughter of the prince of Orange and the abbess of the Royal Monastery of St-Croix de Poitiers, in another example of a well-connected abbess. When her biographer, Claude Allard, dedicates his *Life* to one of her successors, Diane Françoise d'Albret, he praises both women's families; in this work, he tells her, "I will present the scene of a very pious and very august abbess, descended from monarchs and emperors, with a truly royal soul like your own, since the purity of the blood of the Albrets, from which you draw your origin, allows nothing but to distinguish itself in the hearts that it brightens."<sup>247</sup> Indeed, Allard emphasizes how their noble birth in fact elevated religious virtues. Stating that the purpose of the book was to create "a magnificent present, as I will give you a sure guide for the conduct of your life,"<sup>248</sup> he also notes the elite status that they shared: "In this fine mirror, you will see a perfect humility, united with a high birth."<sup>249</sup> Many such alliances were successfully forged; another abbess of St-Croix, Françoise-

---

<sup>246</sup> Sharon Kettering, *Patronage in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate/Variorum, 2002), 831.

<sup>247</sup> Allard, *Vie de Charlotte-Flandrine de Nassau*, "Epistre." "...je presente le Tableau d'une très-pieuse et très-auguste Abbess, descendue de Souverains et d'Empereurs, à une Ame vraiment Royale comme la vostre, puis que la pureté du sang d'Albret, dont vous tirés vostre Origine, ne souffre rien que d'Illustre, dans les coeurs qu'il anime."

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.* "... un magnifique present, car je vous donne un Guide assure pour la conduite de vostre vie."

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, "Dans cette belle Glace, vous verres une parfaicte humilite, jointe a une haute Naissance."

de Laval-Montmorency, was able to attract the admiration of Louis XIV who addressed her as his “cousine” in his letters.<sup>250</sup>

The honouring of noble families was not just a feature of dedications but was woven into the very narratives of biographies. Vernon followed his above statement with appeals to various authorities on the royal origins of various saints and religious figures, an argument which he used to prove the natural piety of Françoise de S. Bernard’s family, which included several bishops and archbishops as well as alliances with many of the most prominent families in France.<sup>251</sup> Anne-Marguerite Clément’s family, which “did not become less considerable for its piety in the eyes of God as it was in the eyes of men by the standards they were more accustomed to value,” was also praised for being the source of more than sixty people who were consecrated to the Church.<sup>252</sup> The parents of the women in question were almost universally praised for their virtue, even those, such as those of Marie-Marguerite de la Trinité, whose father’s position as a soldier did not fully reflect his daughter’s future role in founding a religious order.<sup>253</sup> In cases where women were born to Protestant families, however, biographies served as a reminder of the power of God to overcome heresy; women like Jeanne de Lestonnac who were “fed Calvinism” in childhood nevertheless had personal attributes and an instinct towards saintliness from their earliest years.<sup>254</sup> It might be expected that the marriage of women portrayed as having been destined to the religious life would be a difficult narrative to shape, but unlike in early hagiographies, where virgin martyrs went to great lengths to choose the cloister, to these women

---

<sup>250</sup> Charles Chergé, *Histoire des congrégations religieuses d’origine Poitevins* (Poitiers: A. Dupré, 1856), 29.

<sup>251</sup> Vernon, *Vie de Françoise de Saint-Bernard*, 3.

<sup>252</sup> Galice, *Vie d’Anne-Marguerite de Clément*, 2. Cette famille ne s’est pas renduë moins considerable par sa pieté aux yeux de Dieu, qu’elle l’étoit aux yeux des hommes par les avantages qu’ils ont coûtume d’estimer; et on compte en remontant seulement jusqu’à son grandpère plus de soixante personnes de l’un et de l’autre sexe, qui se sont consacrées à Dieu, dont plusieurs ont rendu des services considerables à l’Eglise, et à leur Ordre, dans les principaux emplois par leur merite, et leur capacité.

<sup>253</sup> Jean-Étienne Grosez, *La Vie de la Mère Marie Madeleine de la Trinité, fondatrice des religieuses de N. Dame de Misericorde* (Lyon: Jean Thioly, 1696), 2.

<sup>254</sup> Françoise Soury-Lavergne, *Histoire ODN: Livre I* ( Bordeaux: Imprimerie La Neuf, 1994), 5.

marriage was a chance to practice the virtues of charity and humility. Auvray writes that it was with her mother-in-law, “one of the wisest and most honourable ladies of her time,” that Jeanne Absolu saw her first example of great virtue.<sup>255</sup> She was said to have had great sympathy for the poor and used her high position in her husband’s house to do good: she exercised great charity towards both her servants and strangers, “looking at both in the depths of the mercy of God, and caring for them without sparing herself even the most vile duties... and often enough her kitchen was equally busy cooking for the poor as for her family.”<sup>256</sup> Her husband’s house was therefore credited with nurturing her exceptional piety. In contrast to the preoccupation with virginity of the hagiographers of the patristic and early medieval eras, which created the trope of “heroic virgins” who chose self-mutilation or death to avoid sacrificing their virtue,<sup>257</sup> chastity of a more general sort is valued by seventeenth-century writers.

The dedication of books to individuals within the Church also helped to form ties between houses. Grosez writes to Charles Le Goux de la Berchère, the archbishop and lord of Alby, that his predecessor, Monseigneur de Serroni, had been among their “Protecteurs” and invites Le Boux to continue providing patronage, adding: “I have reason to hope that you will imitate the conduct of that great man, in regard to that Founder, and that you will protect her,

---

<sup>255</sup> Auvray, *La Vie de Jeanne Absolu*, 2. “Et d’autant que sa mère Paule de Marle, veuve de Pierre Hotman, Conseiller en la Cour, estimée une des plus sages et plus honorables Dames de son temps, s’offrit de la tenir près de soy, deslors ils la luy consignerent volontiers, et y demeura mesme jusqu’à la mort de cette bonne Dame, laquelle estant de foy fort grave et majestuese, avoit neantmoins un abord si gratieux que cette jeune fille; au lieu d’appréhender en elle cette humeur serieuse, elle s’en approchoit par inclination, et se plaisoit tellement à sa compagnie qu’elle ne l’abondonnoit point. Cette Dame estoit en si bonne odeur de vertu, que Madame de Nemours demanda au Parlement, qu’une de ses parentes fust mise en sa garde, afin d’estre formée au bien par sa conversation. Ce fut avec elle que Jeanne Absolu prit les premieres impressions de cette grande vertu, qu’on a depuis reconnu à ses actions.

<sup>256</sup> Auvray, *La Vie de Jeanne Absolu*, 6. “...regardant les uns et les autres dans les entrailles de la misericorde de Dieu, et les sollicitant sans s’épargner mesme aux plus vils offices... et bien souvent sa cuisine estoit autant occupée pour les pauvres que pour sa famille.”

<sup>257</sup> Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, “The Heroics of Virginity: Brides of Christ and Sacrificial Mutilation,” in Mary Beth Rose, ed. *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 29.

You, who know her true merit so well.”<sup>258</sup> Grosez explicitly uses the dedication to praise his recipient publically, stating:

This is your happy destiny, Monseigneur, it is impossible to resist the charms of your conversation, and the impressions of your merit... When a prelate of noble birth, supported by the reputation of his dignity, by a great collection of knowledge, by a very exemplary life, by irreproachable conduct; always attentive to his duties, always hardworking in the functions of his ministry or to see to all the temporal or spiritual necessities of the faithful of his diocese; it is impossible that the people do not have for a prelate of this character all the tenderness, esteem and veneration... as for Saint Charles Borromeo.<sup>259</sup>

This flattery was presumably not intended for Le Goux alone, but also for other readers. As Grosez recounted the successes of the archbishop’s career, he publicized it to a wider audience and openly tied the convent of Notre Dame de Misericorde to the archbishop’s reputation, and gained the archbishop’s favour in order to continue his support of this new order. Biographers could use their writing to form bonds over greater distances as well; Pierre de Cambry, a canon at Renaix, dedicated the life of Jeanne de Cambry, an Augustinian nun at Tournai, to the Archbishop of Malines, thereby fostering ties between different regions of France.

The search for patronage was undeniably influential in the supervision of convents, and Diefendorf argues that the simple power to give and withhold funds gave secular patrons extensive powers even behind cloistered walls.<sup>260</sup> In addition to the prayers they of course expected to receive on their behalf from the houses they supported, patrons also received “privileged access to convent life” despite the ostensible prohibitions against members of the

---

<sup>258</sup> Grosez, *Vie de Marie-Madeleine de la Trinité*, “Prologue.”

<sup>259</sup> Grosez, *Vie de Marie Madeleine de la Trinité*, “Prologue.” “Telle est votre heureuse destine, Monseigneur, il est impossible de resister aux charmes de votre conversation, et aux impressions de votre merite.... Quand un Prelat d’une naissance illustre, soutient l’eclat de sad ignite, par un tres-grand fonds de science, par une vie tres-exemplaire, par une conduite irreproachable; toujours attentif a tous ses devoirs, toujours appliqué aux fonctions de son ministere, ou bien a pour voir a toutes les necessitez temporelles ou spirituelles, des fidelles de son Diocese; il est impossible que les peuples n’aient pour un Prelat de ce Caractere toute la tendresse, l’estime et la venerations... pour Saint Charles Borromee.”

<sup>260</sup> Barbara Diefendorf, “Contradictions of the Century of Saints: Aristocratic Patronage and the Convents of Counter-Reformation Paris,” *French Historical Studies* 24, no. 3 (2001), 471.

secular public entering monasteries. Jeanne de Chantal gave special rights to founders of Visitandine houses in the Constitutions of her order, allowing them to come and go as they pleased, to eat with the nuns, sing in the choir, and even wear the habit in exchange for their financing the establishment of the house.<sup>261</sup> The presence of unprofessed laywomen was not a feature of only the new orders; even the Annonciades, whose enclosure was the strictest of all orders, opened their doors to members of the royal family, and Diefendorf quotes Père Joseph who, when asked whether women still made retreats to monasteries, said “I mean the most reformed houses; as for the others, no one deigns to go there. And not only do they enter, but they stay there a week or two at a time, eating and sleeping and bringing with them five or six young girls.”<sup>262</sup> Spiritual biographies also indicate the numerous possibilities for widows not only to retreat to convents following their husbands’ death – a popular practice throughout the Middle Ages, though supposedly discouraged by the Council of Trent – but to rise to high positions within them. Like Jeanne Absolu, the majority of subjects of biographies examined here were widows with substantial assets that they brought to the convent with them or even used to found a new house, and biographies that recognized the families of such women had an obvious practical use. Although Church authority over convents was held by men, this authority was not absolute and women could exercise considerable authority through the alternate route of patronage.<sup>263</sup> Furthermore, female patronage in the literary realm resulted in the commissioning of numerous religious texts that were particularly intended to portray women in a positive light.<sup>264</sup>

---

<sup>261</sup> Ibid, 478

<sup>262</sup> Diefendorf, “Contradictions in the Century of Saints,” 478.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid 498-9.

<sup>264</sup> Susan Broomhall, *Women and the Book Trade in Sixteenth-Century France* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002), 32.

Biographies were presented to readers, particularly noblewomen, as a devotional aid, a way to gain spiritual fulfillment when one's worldly demands made prayer impossible. Jean Auvray thus addresses his biography of Marguerite du Saint-Sacrement, the well-known Carmelite mystic, to the mother of the king: "If your necessary engagements to the cares of public affairs of the State do not permit you to make enough retreats and prayers for your devotions, nor to perform as many exercises of piety as are found in the life of this saint Carmelite, you can still have the merit for them before God, who sees your good will influencing these virtues."<sup>265</sup> Beyond their use for inspiring piety among the elite, biographies allowed religious women to present their sisters to the secular world as proof of the authority of the entire house. By organizing and providing the materials for men to write the Lives of their sister, or occasionally even doing so themselves, women could thus bring the legitimacy of their convents' activities to the attention of those who could possibly help them. Given their comparative lack of spiritual authority, women were however in some ways a surprising subject for books intended for noble men as well as women. Biographies of women nevertheless served a unique role: while laypeople could not be expected to emulate the knowledge of religious men such as François de Sales, the unlearned and natural piety of women made them an ideal object of devotion. Paradoxically, while the bodies of women were to be protected from public, the details of their spiritual lives were considered worthwhile reading far beyond their cloisters.

Repeatedly, nuns argued that they were not interested in secular affairs beyond their convent, but their Lives showed this to have often not been the case.<sup>266</sup> Alongside the activities

---

<sup>265</sup> Auvray, *Vie de Marguerite du Saint-Sacrement*: "Si vos engagements nécessaires aux soins des affaires publiques de l'État ne permettent pas à votre dévotion de faire autant de retraites et d'oraisons, ny de multiplier autant d'exercices de piété qu'il s'en trouve en la vie de cette sainte Carmelite, vous en pouvez pourtant avoir le mérite devant Dieu, qui void votre bonne volonté touchant ces vertus."

<sup>266</sup> Concha Torres, "A Nun and Her Letters: Mother Ana de Jesus (1598-1621) in Olwen Hufton, ed., *Women in the Religious Life. Yearbook of the Department of History and Civilisation*. Florence: European University Institute, 1996), 98, notes that the correspondence of Ana de Jesus did not often touch on "matters of great political

that brought them into contact with surrounding towns, women used biographical writing to comment on major current affairs. Founding member of the Visitandines Françoise-Madeleine de Chaugy dedicates her Lives of nine members of her order to the Princess of Chigi, whose “admirable qualities were the delight of Rome, and whose virtue, according to our holy wishes, were the rampart and one of the most firm columns of the Church,” and begs her to thank the Archbishop for his defence of their order during recent upheaval and “calamitous times.”<sup>267</sup> Chaugy praises the princess’s relative Pope Alexander VII, comparing him and François de Sales to Moses and Aaron, both being great religious leaders during times of great suffering.<sup>268</sup> Although she insisted that it was not the place of women to “wish to understand the alliances of princes, nor the chronicles of the Church” and that she had to “profess to knowing nothing but of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ,”<sup>269</sup> her comments nevertheless indicate that she was very much aware of the politics surrounding the foundation of the Visitation order and of the implications of events taking place as far away as Rome, and furthermore of her desire to subtly influence them in the interests of her community. Such commentary could also be made indirectly, though no less pointedly; Jeanne Chezard de Matel’s biographer recounts her visions regarding the destiny

---

significance even though she was in contact with the governors of the Low Countries. Rather, in most cases, they consist[ed] of reports to the benefactors of the convents about the activities of the nuns.” It can be argued that biographies allowed more oblique references to contemporary politics, under the auspices of simply recounting biographical events and because of the mediating voice of male authors.

<sup>267</sup> Françoise-Madelène de Chaugy, *Les Vies de VII religieuses de l'Ordre de la Visitation Sainte-Marie* (Annessy: J. Clerc, 1659), “Prologue.” “Mais outré tous ces honneurs, Madame, qui sont autant de rayons réfléchis, qui doivent rejaillir sur Votre Excellence, et sur la personne de Monseigneur l’Excellentissime Prince D. Augustin vôtre incomparable Epoux, dont les admirables qualitez sont les delices de Rome, et de qui le vertu, selon nos saintes esperances, doit être le rampart et l’une des plus fermes Colomnes de l’Eglise.... Ces cheres filles de nôtre bon Père vous suppliant aussi, Madame, de leur permettre de rendre entre vos mains leurs tres-humbles reconnaissances, à Monseigneur l’Eminentissime Cardinal Patron, digne fils et heritier de toutes les vertus d’un si digne Père; qui a paru à ses côtez Durant ce temps calamiteux, comme un autre Iosué au côté de Moyse...”

<sup>268</sup> Ibid. Chaugy describes this time as “le temps deplorable de la calamite publique, et le fleau de la peste qui faisoit un ravage si furieux dans l’Italie, la ville sainte...” Introduction to *Les Vies de VII religieuses de l'ordre de la Visitation Sainte-Marie*.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid. “...il n’appartient pas à une Fille, de vouloir faire la sçavante des alliances des Princes, ny des Chroniques de l’Eglise, et que je dois faire profession de ne sçavoir autre chose que Jesus-Christ crucifié: je prendray seulement la liberté de représenter à Vôtre Excellence, ce que je ne peux mêconnoître sans une ignorance crasse, ny passer sou silence, sans ingratitude.”

of Cardinal Alphonse after he opposed her newly-established *Ordre du Verbe Incarné* in 1637. He tells of her having received a vision in which the Incarnate Word told her that Cardinal Richelieu had been chosen “like another Moses, to lead France... and that he would show his power through miraculous events in the armies he commanded and that he would confuse the councils gathered against him and overthrow them like those of Achitophel against David.”<sup>270</sup> Though the author recognizes the controversy of attributing visions to those not of “perfect souls” the political expediency of this vision was nevertheless clear.<sup>271</sup>

By presenting narratives of the lives of religious women to people in the secular world, biographies brought attention to the missions of new religious orders and legitimated them by proving the piety—and, as Jeanne de Matel shows, the divine inspiration—of their founders. While the genre of life-writing existed and was read in all religious orders, it was particularly popular among new orders: Visitandines, Ursulines and Carmelites adopted the practice with particular zeal and produced the majority of biographies, as well as circulating a great number of death notices and other biographical notes about their members. Reading their own histories was undoubtedly an important part of devotional practices among these orders; French Carmelites of course had the example of Teresa of Avila’s *Life* in its many French translations, and Jeanne de Chantal was the subject of a number of biographies in the years following her death.<sup>272</sup> While there was not an equivalent figure among the Ursulines, the order’s emphasis upon chronicling their activities culminated in the Mère de Pommereu’s 1673 *Chroniques de l’ordre des Ursulines*

---

<sup>270</sup> Boisseau, *Vie de Jeanne Chezard de Matel*, 148. “Le Verbe Incarné lui fit voir une baguette verte, et lui dit en même tems, qu’il avoit choisi le Cardinal de Riche-lieu, comme un autre Moyse, pour conduire la France, et pour donner de l’admiration à toute l’Europe, qu’il feroit voir avec cette verge sa puissance par des événemens merveilleux dans les armées qu’il ordonneroit et qu’il confondroit les conseils assemblez contre lui, qu’il renversa ceux d’ Achitophel contre David...”

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Maupas du Tour, Henry de, *La Vie De La Vénérable Mère Jeanne-Françoise Frémot*, 2d ed. (Paris: Simeon Piget, 1647), Alexandre Fichet,

1643), in addition to unpublished works by Chaugy circulated to members of the order

*recueillies pour l'usage des religieuses du mesme ordre*. In addition to the Rules and Constitutions of orders, of which Jeanne de Chantal's *Réponses sur les Règles, Constitutions et Coutumes* was a notable example, individual communities each published a sort of prospectus, usually under the name *L'Esprit de...* which were "circulated for the purposes of recruitment."<sup>273</sup> Members of these new and reformed orders developed a strong culture of reading and writing the stories of their founders, which likely helped new orders to reaffirm their mission and spiritual authority.<sup>274</sup> In New Spain, where the foundation of a great number of reformed convents was being used to Christianize the new colony, Elisa Sampson argues that "the spiralling number of *vidas* of uncanonised people after 1630 has been connected to competition between different religious orders as well as to the promotion of pious individuals by spiritual directors, religious communities and confraternities,"<sup>275</sup> and this analysis could be applied to France as well.

Lives offered the members of recently-formed orders a chance to state their mission publicly and thus attract new members, through the mediation of male authors who ensured that the lives of these exemplary women were portrayed in an orthodox and acceptable way. As with all other aspects of these women's lives, controversy was minimized or excluded in order to create a more formulaic model of sanctity. Louise de Marillac's biographer, for example, makes no mention of her illegitimacy and simply praises her father for educating her and cultivating her typically precocious piety "with all imaginable cares."<sup>276</sup> Nevertheless, as new and reformed orders struggled to define their role in French society following the Council of Trent and the Wars of Religion, biographies established a spiritual legacy to be passed from the founders of the

---

<sup>273</sup> Rapley, *Dévotes*, 248.

<sup>274</sup> Nicky Hallett, *Lives of Spirit*, 12, notes that important events within English convents prompted the production of public writing, in order to commemorate and keep a record of the convent's history.

<sup>275</sup> Elisa Sampson, "Writing in the New Spanish Cloister," in Olwen Hufton, ed. *Women in the Religious Life*, Yearbook of the Department of History and Civilisation (Florence: European University Institute, 1996), 57.

<sup>276</sup> Gobillon, *La Vie de Mademoiselle Le Gras, fondatrice et première supérieure de la Compagnie des Filles de la Charité, servantes des pauvres malades* (Paris: André Pralard, 1676), 6. "Son père découvrant dans son esprit un fonds capable de toutes sortes d'instructions, le cultiva avec tous les soins imaginables."

order to their successors. The authors of biographies intentionally created a heritage for these new houses, emphasizing their connections to venerated figures. Bonneau, in his *Vie de Louise-Eugenie de Fontaine*, the abbess of the Visitandines of Rue-St-Antoine in Paris between 1661 and 1694, compares her and her sisters to flowers in the garden of François de Sales, reminding readers that the women of the Visitation were fulfilling the plans of the saint.<sup>277</sup> Bonneau also evokes the visual imagery of the order; his description of Louise de Fontaine's heart being pierced recalls the image on the arms of the Visitandines which portrays the piercing of Jesus' heart likewise. The Life would therefore be read as a representation not just of Louise de Fontaine's own life, but of that of all Visitandines. Jean-Marie de Vernon similarly expresses his desire that his Life of Françoise de S. Bernard would "bring as much edification to the children of the Church, as glory to those of your house."<sup>278</sup>

Growing fears of heresy, particularly towards the end of the seventeenth century when the majority of feminine biographies were published, provided another reason for biographers to emphasize the similarities of their subjects' lives to the traditional model of convent life. Jansenism and Quietism were two of the heterodox religious movements that attracted women, with the Parisian convent of Port-Royal becoming a stronghold of the former, and writers had to be careful not to open themselves or their subjects to accusations of such heresies.<sup>279</sup> Biographers deliberately invoked saints of previous ages to emphasize the continuity of these nuns' mission; Jeanne Cambry's biographer declares her to have been only one in a line of many "Pauls, François, Brigittes and Thérèses," whose lives were worthy of imitation, thus placing her in the

---

<sup>277</sup> Bonneau, *La Vie de Louise-Eugenie de Fontaine*, "Avis."

<sup>278</sup> Vernon, *Vie de Françoise de Saint-Bernard*, "Preface." "J'espere que ce livre apporte autant d'edification aux Enfants de l'Eglise, que de gloire a ceux de vostre Maison."

<sup>279</sup> As already mentioned, Jeanne de Guyon was one of the most notable cases of censorship of religious women's life-writing because of her advocacy of Quietism.

company of some of the Church's most important eminent saints.<sup>280</sup> Rather than innovating, therefore, these women thus restored their convents to their proper states, as in the eras of the aforementioned saints. To this end, biographers did not emphasize the differences between orders, some of which had already brought controversy. In addition to her potentially contentious visions, Jeanne de Matel had also not taken a vow of poverty when her order was established, an omission which her biographer took pains to justify, explaining that it was nevertheless certain that she had “a spirit that consisted of detachment from worldly goods.”<sup>281</sup>

It would be wrong, however, to attribute this conformity solely to the fear of attracting censure. As previously noted, biographies were above all written in a common hagiographical language, and adhering to this formula had long been seen as a marker of sanctity. Moreover, religious women did not necessarily see in themselves the vast differences between contemplative and active orders that have been presented by modern historians. Craig Harline and Laurence Lux-Sterritt argue that the majority of women favoured the cloistered life, and saw charity as an extension of that vocation, not a substitute.<sup>282</sup> In most cases the difference between orders was not in the character of their piety but in their occupations, and even in this regard the social context in which convents existed were often more influential than monastic constitutions.<sup>283</sup> The Visitandines, for example, were required to take responsibility for a convent for “wayward women” in order to secure permission to establish a house, despite this not being

---

<sup>280</sup> Cambry, “Preface.” “...les Ecrivains ont de tems en tems eu soin, de les marquer, pour en laisser la memoire a la posterite, et nous faire voir dans la suite des siecles, les vies saintes des Paules, des François, des Brigittes, des Therezes et autres personnages des deux sexes, pour les imiter, et suivre a la piste, es voyes qu’ils nous ont fraye de la vie eternelle.”

<sup>281</sup> Antoine Boissieu, *Vie de Jeanne-Marie Chezard de Matel*, 303: “Quoy que le Mère de Matel n’aye fait voeu de pauvreté qu’au dernière periode de sa vie il est certain neantmoins qu’elle en avoit l’esprit qui consiste au détachement des biens de la terre.”

<sup>282</sup> Craig Harline, “Actives and Contemplatives: Female Religious in the Low Countries before and After Trent”, *Catholic Historical Journal* 81, no. 4 (1995): 541-567.; Laurence Lux-Sterritt, *Redefining Female Religious Life: French Ursulines and English Ladies in Seventeenth-Century Catholicism* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2005).

<sup>283</sup> Diefendorf, *Contradictions of the Century of Saints: Aristocratic Patronage and the Convents of Counter-Reformation Paris*, 469-499.” 475.

an aspect of their original mission.<sup>284</sup> In the words of Ursuline women themselves, their pride in their teaching mission was clear, but other than one fear that a woman would not be able to withstand the austerities of their house,<sup>285</sup> the Ursuline abbesses did not set their order in opposition to others, and focused their accounts of members' vocations on their calling to the religious life in general. These letters were written long after the controversy over the enclosure of the Ursulines, but the order's attitude towards the cloister was complicated; while it limited their teaching and charitable activities, the granting of official status by the Church also brought recognition, legitimacy and therefore patronage. A similar dynamic was at work in the publications of biographies, for although women often had to give their very words to be revised by men, it was through this process that their Lives could be read and admired by a wider audience. There were limits, however, to the qualities that could be attributed to pious women. Following the Council of Trent, the procedure to canonize new saints was standardized and made increasingly strict, and as a result few new saints were declared during the seventeenth century. Biographies thus represented a tension that existed between the desire to prove the subject to have been a saint, and a fear that such a claim violated new prohibitions against the worship of people not already canonized by the Church.

Following the Protestant Reformation, when the entire concept of sainthood was called into question, the Catholic Church had to deal with conflicting attitudes towards the institution. As Peter Burke writes, for the Church "to create saints was to invite mockery, but to refrain from creating them was to yield the initiative in propaganda to the other side."<sup>286</sup> After all, while railing against the worship of saints, Calvinists and Lutherans nevertheless venerated their own

---

<sup>284</sup> Ibid, 476.

<sup>285</sup> Bibliotheque de l'Arsenal, Ms. fr. 4990.

<sup>286</sup> Peter Burke, "How to Become a Counter-Reformation Saint," in *Religion and Society in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1800* (London: German Historical Institute, 1984), 45-55.

martyrs, creating collections of stories of their martyrdoms that filled a gap left by the rejection of saints' Lives. The immediate response to the Protestant threat and recognized problems in the system was to cease the creation of saints; from 1523 until 1588, no new saints were canonized. In the final sessions of the Council of Trent, however, it was decided to continue and even enhance the veneration of saints, but to eliminate the abuses of the tradition by replacing existing accounts of the lives of saints with more reliable ones, and to make the procedure for declaring new saints increasingly strict.<sup>287</sup>

Collections such as "The Lives of the Most Holy Virgins" was suggested to women to supplant works such as Jacques de Voragine's Golden Legend, which was extremely popular throughout the late Middle Ages but began to decline in popularity as the Catholic Reformation Church drew a firmer line between historical and non-historical hagiography, work which the Bollandists took up with dedication in the seventeenth century. Clearly legendary saints such as St. Ursula declined in popularity and saints of the early church were promoted.<sup>288</sup> Jacques Ferraige's 1627 biography of the sixth-century Sainte Scholastique was one such example; this Life of the patron saint of nuns was composed in a similar way to biographies of contemporary women, and thus served as a model for them of a historical saint who had actually lived an exemplary life. Ferraige's book was written for Marguerite d'Arbouze, the abbess of the Benedictine house of Val-de-Grâce, and a Life of the sister of St. Benedict emphasized the historical foundations of the order.<sup>289</sup> Claude Allard likewise compared Charlotte-Flandrine de Nassau several times to her royal ancestor and monastic predecessor, Saint Radegonde, who established the Abbaye Sainte-Croix, thus emphasizing both the history of the house and the

---

<sup>287</sup> Burke, "Counter-Reformation Saint," 46.

<sup>288</sup> Gabriella Zarri, "From Prophecy to Discipline, 1450-1650," in *Women and Faith: Catholic Religious Life in Italy from Late Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 83-112.

<sup>289</sup> Jacques Ferraige, *La Vie de la B. Mère Ste Scolastique, vierge et première abbesse des Bénédictines* (Paris: S. Pigoreau, 1628).

spiritual legitimacy of Princess Charlotte-Flandrine.<sup>290</sup> At the same time as hagiography increasingly turned to the past, the seventeenth-century Church actively sought more recent people to venerate, in whose portraits accuracy and detail was paramount.<sup>291</sup>

While recently deceased people could serve as objects of admiration and emulation, the post-Tridentine Church ruled, however, that they could not be worshipped as saints. As part of what Burke describes as a general “increase in central control of the sacred,” the papacy moved to abolish local cults and saints even during a surge in canonizations; while only six new saints were declared during the sixteenth century, the seventeenth century saw the canonization of twenty-four.<sup>292</sup> A 1610 treatise argued that the right to canonize saints belonged to the pope alone, and in his 1634 decree, *Sanctissimus Dominus Noster*, Urban VIII officially prohibited the veneration of people reputed to have died in sanctity without the approval of the Holy See. Biographers were clearly aware of the limitations imposed by the rule, and in his *Life of Jeanne de Cambry*, Pierre de Cambry explicitly states that he did not intend to declare his sister to have been a saint, writing “I declare and protest that I do not claim and have no intention of making what is reported in this book heard to anyone in another manner than what is contained in the aforementioned Papal constitution.”<sup>293</sup> He clarifies that the virtues he attributes to her were only those that all could aspire to:

If by any chance I have in some places here given to Soeur Jeanne Maria de la Presentation the name of Saint or blessed, I wish only to say that she was gifted with extraordinary graces and virtues... which St. Paul gives to all the faithful, and not to misrepresent her or to put her among the canonized saints, which belongs only to the Holy See.<sup>294</sup>

---

<sup>290</sup> Allard, *Vie de Charlotte-Flandrine de Nassau*, 282.

<sup>291</sup> Margit Thofner, "How to Look Like a (Female) Saint: The Early Iconography of St. Teresa of Avila," in *Female Monasticism in Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 37.

<sup>292</sup> Burke, "Counter-Reformation Saint," 46.

<sup>293</sup> Cambry, "Preface." "Je declare et proteste, que je ne pretens et n'ay aucune intention de faire entendre à personne ce qui est rapport en ce livre, en autre manier qu'en celle, contenu en la constitution Papale avant dite."

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid*: "...si par aventure j'aurois en quelques endroits d'iceluy, donné a Soeur Jeanne Maria de la Presentation, le nom de Sainte ou bien-heureuse, je veux seulement dire, qu'elle estoit douée de graces et vertus extraordinaires, et

Françoise de Chaugy similarly declares her intention to not infringe upon papal authority in a *Protestatio Auctoris* to her *Vies de IX religieuses de l'ordre de la Visitation Sainte-Marie*.

Composed in Latin, this letter may have been addressed to Charles Auguste, the bishop of Geneva whose gave his approval to the book, and its language suggests the participation of a priest and his approval of the endeavour. Chaugy recognizes that it was prohibited to print books which attributed miracles or divine visions to people without the recognition and approbation of the pope, and thus makes it clear that she was not making this claim about her subjects. As one of the few female authors of religious biographies, this was particularly important, as the Visitandines' efforts to canonize François de Sales were already controversial.

Despite their assertions that they would never presume to grant sainthood, many authors nevertheless strongly implied that their subjects were worthy of the title, sometimes through their very statements to the contrary. When Grosez declares that he will not in his book attribute miracles or other qualities of saints to Marie Madeleine de la Trinité, he in fact also uses a something like the technique of *praeteritio* to imply just the opposite. He assures readers that “I do not claim, however, that either the miracles that I will recount, or the name of saint Daughter, that I often give to Mère Madeleine, attract to her the honours that are due only to canonized saints; because far from wishing to alter the Brief of Urban VIII, I submit to it completely.”<sup>295</sup>

The frequency with which authors insisted upon their submission to this law suggests that it was the only thing preventing them from explicitly declaring subjects to be saints, and implies that they very much wanted to put them forth for canonization. Indeed, confessors had great

---

qu'y passoit le commun, et je m'enfers au sens, auquel S. Paule le donne à tous les fidels, et non pour la faire passer, ou metre au nombre des Saints Canonisez, ce qui n'appartient qu'au S. Siège.”

<sup>295</sup> Grosez, *Vie de Marie-Madeleine de la Trinité*, “Avertissement.” “Je ne prétens pas cependant, que les Miracles que je raconterai, ni que le nom de sainte Fille, que je donne assez souvent à la Mère Madeleine, lui attire des honneurs, qui ne sont dûes qu'aux Saints canonisez: car bien loin de vouloir alterer le Bref d'Urban VIII, je m'y souûmets parfaitement.”

motivation to encourage the canonization of their penitents. Through collaborating on the spiritual memoirs of a nun, a confessor could direct her thoughts, learn from her intuitive mystical knowledge, and if she was later found to be a saint, his spiritual reputation would naturally increase as well.<sup>296</sup> Teresa of Avila took credit for the appointment of one of her confessor's to the Chair of theology at Durando,<sup>297</sup> but she also expressed her concern that some spiritual directors falsely encouraged their directees to believe they had visions to enhance their status as the advisor of a saint.<sup>298</sup>

Such was the strength of the prohibition, however, that it called into question the very concept of writing the Lives of nuns. On the one hand, the adherence to hagiographic models and language provided a justification of the enterprise, emphasizing the author's and subject's places in a long Catholic tradition at a time when spiritual innovations were distrusted. The explicit references, however, to great saints of previous centuries clearly challenged the papal decree regardless of the author's stated intentions; publishing the Life of a contemporary woman that described her in terms similar to Catherine of Siena, for example, implicitly invited readers to understand her to have had the same spiritual favours. Although male authors granted such works a measure of legitimacy and spiritual authority, they were not immune to censure, which the priest Jean Auvray shows when he offers a lengthy defence for his *Modele de la Perfection Religieuse en la Vie de la Vénérable Mère Jeanne Absolu* and his *L'Enfance de Jesus et sa famille, honorée en la Vie de Soeur Marguerite du S. Sacrement*. Auvray admired the mystical gifts of these two women, but recognized that they would not meet with universal approval.

---

<sup>296</sup> Hufton, Olwen, ed. *Women in the Religious Life*. Yearbook of the Department of History and Civilisation. (Florence: European University Institute, 1996), 23; Patricia Ranft, *A Woman's Way: The Forgotten History of Women Spiritual Directors* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 124.

<sup>297</sup> 125. Patricia Ranft, *A Woman's Way*, 125.

<sup>298</sup> Alison Weber, "Saint Teresa, Demonologist" in Anne J. Cruz and Mary E. Perry, ed. *Culture and Control in Counter-Reformation Spain* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 98.

As the confessor to Jeanne Absolu, Auvray was acquainted with the controversy surrounding her. Influenced by Benoît de Canfield, she practiced a form of spirituality motivated by the abandonment of self to God, and was therefore suspected of illuminism. As a “singular consequence” of her outstanding piety, writes Charles Berthelot de Chesnay, “the witch hunters, at all times, in all places, were always lying in wait.”<sup>299</sup> The Faculty of Theology at Paris had investigated her purported visions and had found her to have been within the bounds of orthodoxy, which permitted Auvray to publish the first edition of her *Life*, which he followed with the *Life of Marguerite du S. Sacrement*. The approval of the Faculty of Theology, though enough to justify her serving as an exemplary model, still did not sanction the portrayal of Jeanne Absolu as a saint.

Writing about Jeanne Absolu, Auvray admits, was “delicate” because of the “many extraordinary things”<sup>300</sup> that happened in her life. He alludes to the wonders of these events as he states that he writes of the “many visions and revelations that she had”<sup>301</sup> only in his own *mémoires*, as he claimed to have feared that others would not recognize her exceptional qualities. He compares his experience of her visions to Peter’s witnessing the Transfiguration of Christ at Mount Thabor, stating that only those with direct experience of such things could understand them.<sup>302</sup> After he published the first edition of the *Life*, however, he writes that many people wanted to hear more of the extraordinary events that he had excluded from the first version, which led to the publication of the second edition in 1654 with a third part, and additional material in the first two sections as well, which, though still circumspect on the matter of visions,

---

<sup>299</sup> Charles Berthelot de Chesnay, “Review of Joseph Augereau, “Jeanne Absolu, mystique du grand siècle”,” *Revue d'histoire de l'Eglise De France* 47, no. 144 (1961), 260.

<sup>300</sup> Auvray, *Vie de Jeanne Absolu*, “Avant-propos au lecteur.” “Ce qui est de son oraison est delicat, à cause des choses extraordinaires que s’y sont passées.”

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.* “On n’a pas jugé qu’il fust à propos maintenant d’écrire plusieurs visions et revelations qu’elle a eues.”

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*

gave a more detailed description of her spiritual practices.<sup>303</sup> He states that he did not wish either of these women to remain hidden when their lives could be of use to others, but, on the advice of learned people “by their doctrine and their piety, by their knowledge in the science of the Saints, by their long experience, and by the rank that they hold in the Faculty of Theology” had written his book in complete conformity to the orders of the Council of Trent. Furthermore, he writes “it is enough that God be the judge of my motive, and as for the work, since it is his, it is for him to give success as he wishes to his own glory.”<sup>304</sup> Though he clearly believed strongly in the sainthood of Jeanne Absolu, Auvray renounces his own personal interest in the work.

At the conclusion of the *Vie*, it is argued that the most sincere evidence of faith is that given without extraordinary proof, as was the Virgin Mary’s who heard only the baby Jesus’ cry rather than the singing of angels.<sup>305</sup> In the same way, readers who believed in the holiness of Jeanne Absolu, or another such nun, without reading of the miracles they performed or visions they received showed greater faith than those who required such proof, though this principle seems antithetical to the very idea of hagiography. Indeed, as the century went on such reported miraculous visions and revelations became even rarer as ideals of piety slowly began to change. In his examination of her biography, Jacques Le Brun describes Madame Gondi as having chosen to remain in “mediocre virtue,” never having committed any great sin, rather than achieving a great virtue through redemption from sin in a heroic manner, a choice that he attributes to a growing conservatism in regards to the religious actions of women by the end of

---

<sup>303</sup> Ibid. “Ce qui m’a fait user de reserve dans l’une et dans l’autre de ces histoires conformement au conseil de personnes considerables, par leur doctrine et leur pieté, par leur intelligence dans la science des Saints, par une longue experience, et par le rang qu’ils tiennent dans la faculté de Theologie de Paris...”

<sup>304</sup> Auvray, *La Vie de Jeanne Absolu*, “Avant-propos.” “Ce me doit estre assez que Dieu soit juge de mon motif; et quant a l’ouvrage, comme il est a luy, c’est a luy d’en rendre le success tel qu’il vouldra pour sa gloire.”

<sup>305</sup> Ibid, 398.

the seventeenth century.<sup>306</sup> Martyrdom, the ultimate expression of self-subjugation to the will of God, was no longer possible for even the most devout individuals. Although the beginning of the century was marked by an unusual trend towards extreme penitence and self-mortification that have been more commonly associated with medieval piety, these practices had fallen out of favour by the end of the century and the spiritual biographies of women reflected the change.

While it can be argued that biographies simply reflected, belatedly, attitudes already present in society, they also helped to shape them. As Nicky Hallett writes, Lives were “self-patterning” as women modelled their lives after their books;<sup>307</sup> just as Barbe Acarie was said to have breathed in the smell of soldiers’ wounds to better experience their suffering, in an attempt to imitate Catherine of Genoa and Catherine of Siena, other women likely imitated her.<sup>308</sup> Even if this event never actually took place but rather was drawn from her biographer’s knowledge of commonly understood saintly actions, the ideals presented to other women in this action still influenced readers and their understanding of the possibilities of feminine piety. It is an apparent contradiction of the Catholic Reformation that while nuns faced increasing control by the Church, cloistered women became powerful symbols of post-Tridentine spirituality. The biographies examined here help to explain how religious women from Madame Acarie to Jeanne Absolu made themselves public figures while simultaneously offering a model of piety that was, above all, turned inward to the nurture of their own souls.

---

<sup>306</sup> Jacques Le Brun, *Conversion et continuité intérieure dans les biographies spirituelles françaises du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*,” in *La Conversion au XVII<sup>e</sup> Siècle* (Marseille, 1982), 329.

<sup>307</sup> Hallett, *Lives of Spirit*, 9.

<sup>308</sup> Barbara Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 20.

## Conclusion

In 1674, over fifty years after Andre Duval's *Life of Madame Acarie* helped to make Acarie's mysticism and interior spirituality known to people throughout France, Charles Cotelendi published the *Life of Madame de Montmorency*, another noble laywoman who became the superior of a religious house. The publication of this biography, however, met with some dismay among Montmorency's former sisters in religion. The superior of the Visitandine's Paris monastery wrote to Cotelendi that although she felt "great joy" at the appearance of his "fine work," she was disappointed that he had ignored her "ardent prayer" that he give his subject the title of "Mère," as was mandated by the order's Constitutions, and this letter is included with the other letters of approbation and permission at the beginning of the book.<sup>309</sup> Cotelendi's response is included as well; he replied that when he had considered her illustrious birth as well as the fact that that was the name by which he known her, the title of "Dame" seemed more appropriate.<sup>310</sup> Why this correspondence was included in the final edition of the work is not known, but it reveals yet again the interest that women took in the biographies of their sisters, and the sense of ownership that they felt towards these women's Lives, even when those with greater authority disregarded their wishes. The superior reminds the author of the conferences they had held to discuss the work, and how they had urged him to abide by their beliefs in simplicity and humility.

---

<sup>309</sup> Charles Cotelendi, *La Vie de Madame la duchesse de Montmorency* (Paris: Claude Barbin, 1684). "Après vous avoir témoigné ma joye de l'approbation que Monseigneur le Prince, et plusieurs personnes d'esprit donnent à vôtre bel ouvrage de la Vie de nôtre Venerable Mère de Montmorency, souffrez que je vous décharge mon coeur sensiblement touché, de ce qu'il ne paroist pas que vous ayez fait attention à l'ardente priere que je vous avois faite de ne luy pas donner le titre de Madame, cela nous estant absolument deffendu par nos Constitutions."

<sup>310</sup> Cotelendi, *La Vie de Madame de Montmorency*. "...il est vray aussi que j'avois promis de vous obeir, mais après que j'ay pensé que son illustre naissance et le grand rang qu'elle a tenu me dispensoient de ma parole: et de plus comme c'est moy qui parle dans l'ouvrage, j'ay crû pouvoir l'appeller Dame, comme on l'appelle ordinairement dans le monde."

Moreover, this little conflict between Cotelendi and the unnamed Parisian mother superior reminds us that while these biographies served a number of functions, their purpose above all was to commemorate the spiritual qualities of their subjects. Madame de Montmorency's royal status certainly brought prestige and connections to her monastery, no doubt the reason she was named superior, but her sisters insisted that her primary identity was that of a nun. The many convents of seventeenth-century France were not simply places to which women were banished, but communities that they actively created in order to institute the religious reforms they wanted to see. Recently historians have offered many critiques of the previously held notion that the reforms of the Council of Trent were "carried out by men and against women,"<sup>311</sup> as it is clear that women were instrumental in bringing about many of these very changes, even as they also espoused the virtues of humility, obedience, and enclosure.

The ways in which women took action in the secular world, therefore, were different from those taken by men and often less straightforward. Intercessory prayer, spiritual direction of laymen, and even the relation of visions were all considered ways that cloistered women could influence the world outside their convents, and representations of their life stories was another way for otherwise hidden women to make themselves known. Historians have also recently broadened the definition of autobiographical writing and recognized a more diverse range of ways that early modern women could write about their lives; Ronald Bedford and Philippa Kelly, for example, argue that wills were in fact a form of female autobiography in which women could describe the achievements and accumulations of their lives and thus to critique patriarchal

---

<sup>311</sup> Ulrike Strasser, "Clara Hortulana of Embach or How to Suffer Martyrdom in the Cloister," in Cordula van Wyhe, ed. *Female Monasticism in Early Modern Europe: An Interdisciplinary View* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), 40.

inheritance laws.<sup>312</sup> Likewise, letters and spiritual testimonies which were not originally intended for public consumption could also serve as commentaries on religion and politics by women when they were printed alongside texts composed by men. Although women sometimes had different interests and concerns when writing these texts than did the men who edited and published them, as the example of Charles Cotelendi and the women of the Visitation above demonstrates, collaborating with men to publish their life stories was yet another way for women to circumvent the restrictions on their access to the public sphere.

Indeed, an examination of spiritual biographies shows that this distinction between public and private writings was not always clear in the early modern period, and that the classification of women's writing as such is not always useful. While convent necrologies and *lettres circulaires* were purported to serve as a form of internal communication between monasteries, nuns also knew that such accounts of their sisters were often used as source material for published works, thus extending the readership of their documents. The emergence of the printing press was once seen as the definitive divide between the medieval and early modern eras,<sup>313</sup> bringing "standardization, permanence, and the possibility of mass dissemination."<sup>314</sup> However, manuscript and print sources were often used concurrently, and the use of print to circulate copies of death notices to multiple convents, alongside handwritten letters, shows that unpublished writings by women cannot be so absolutely categorized as private works intended for an individual reader. Lives that were composed by men likewise cannot be dismissed solely as evidence of male clerics appropriating the lives of women without their input or consent.

---

<sup>312</sup> Lloyd M. Davis, Philippa Kelly, and Ronald Bedford. *Early Modern Autobiography*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 214.

<sup>313</sup> See Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979) for an example of this argument.

<sup>314</sup> Julia C. Crick and Alexandra Walsham, *The Uses of Script and Print, 1300-1700* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 3, offer a critique of Eisenstein's argument.

“It is not for women, who should be more devoted to good acts than good words, to write books,” wrote the prioress of the Royal Abbey of Sainte Perrine in a letter introducing the *Life of Antoinette de Jesus*.<sup>315</sup> Nevertheless, she begs her readers’ forgiveness, though printing this *Life* seemed contrary to this sentiment, because, she states, the book contained nothing but “a sincere and natural narrative of what we saw,” and thus the book contained “nothing of our own.”<sup>316</sup> In spite of her protests, it is clear that this book was very much the work of the sisters, who had nevertheless succeeded to “give to the public a work that could only be very useful.”<sup>317</sup> Even while maintaining their commitment to a cloistered life of prayer and to the virtue of humility, women disseminated a new vision of Catholic piety that helped transform the French Church.

---

<sup>315</sup> *La Vie de la Mère Antoinette de Jesus, e royale de Sainte Perrine* (Paris: Jean Villette, 1685), Preface. “...il n’appartient pas à des Filles, qui se doivent plutôt attacher à bien faire qu’à bien dire, de composer des Livres.”

<sup>316</sup> *La Vie d’Antoinette de Jesus*, Preface. “Il est vray que le resolution que nous avons prise de faire imprimer la vie de cette grande Religieuse, paroîtera peut être contraire à ce sentiment; mais on supplie très-humblement ceux qui se donneront la peine de la lire, de considerer qu’il n’y a rien du nôtre, puisque la premiere partie ne contient qu’un recit sincere et naturel de ce que nous avons vû...”

<sup>317</sup> *La Vie d’Antoinette de Jesus*, Preface. “... de donner au public un ouvrage, qui ne sçauroit luy être que très-utile.”

## Bibliography

### Manuscript Sources

Archives municipales de St-Denis  
GG212: Carmel de St-Denis

Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal  
Ms. fr. 4990-4991: Lettres de décès et éloges funèbres des religieuses Ursulines de France.  
1633-1694.

### Published Primary Sources

*Récit de la vie de la vénérable Mère Louise-Catherine Vernat, décédée dans le monastère de la Visitation de Chaines, le 10e mai 1689.* Lyon: A. et H. Molin, 1690.

*La vie de la Mère Antoinette de Jésus, religieuse chanoinesse de l'ordre de S. Augustin en l'abbaye royale de Sainte Perrine, à la Villette proche Paris.* Paris: J. Villette, 1685.

Allard, Claude. *Le Miroir des âmes religieuses, ou la vie de très-haute et très-religieuse princesse, Madame Charlotte Flandrine de Nassau, très-digne abbesse du Royal Monastère de Se. Croix de Poitiers.* Poitiers: J. Thoreau, 1653.

Augeri, Gaspard. *La Vie et vertus de la vénérable Mère Catherine de Jésus Ranquet, religieuse ursuline, native de la ville de Lyon.* Lyon: M. Liberal, 1670.

Auvray, Jean. *Modèle de la perfection religieuse, en la vie de la vénérable Mère Jeanne Absolu, dite de Saint Sauveur, religieuse de Hautes-Bruyeres, de l'Ordre de Fontevrault.* 2nd ed. Paris: S. Huré, 1655.

Auvray, Jean. *L'Enfance de Jésus, et sa famille, honorée en la vie de Sr Marguerite du S. Sacrement, religieuse carmélite du monastère de Beaune.* Paris: Imprimerie Royal, 1654.

Boissieu, Antoine. *La Vie de la vénérable Mère Jeanne-Marie Chezard de Matel, fondatrice des religieuses de l'Ordre du Verbe Incarné.* Lyon: Molin et Barbier, 1692.

Bonneau, M. *La Vie de la vénérable Mère Louise-Eugénie de Fontaine, religieuse du monastère de la Visitation de Sainte-Marie.* Paris: F. Muguet, 1696.

Cambry, Pierre de. *Abrégé de la vie de Dame Jeanne de Cambry, premièrement religieuse de l'Ordre de S. Augustin à Tournay.* Anvers: J. Mesens, 1659.

Chaugy, Françoise-Madelène de. *Les Vies de VII religieuses de l'ordre de la Visitation Sainte-Marie.* Annessy: J. Clerc, 1659.

- Cotolendi, Charles. *La Vie de Madame la Duchesse de Montmorency, première supérieure de la Visitation de Ste. Marie de Moulins*. Paris: Claude Barbin, 1684.
- Ferraige, Jacque. *La Vie de la B. Mère Ste Scolastique, vierge et première abbesse des bénédictines*. Paris: S. Pigoreau, 1628.
- Galice, Jean A. *La Vie de la vénérable Mère Anne-Marguerite Clément, première supérieure du monastère de la Visitation de Ste-Marie de Melun*. Paris: Coignard, 1686.
- Gobillon, Nicolas. *La Vie de Mademoiselle Le Gras, fondatrice et premier supérieure de la Compagnie des Filles de la Charité, servantes des pauvres malades*. Paris: A. Pralard, 1676.
- Grosez, Jean-Étienne. *La Vie de la Mère Marie Madeleine de la Trinité, fondatrice des religieuses de N. Dame de Misericorde*. Lyon: Jean Thioly, 1696.
- Lantages, Charles-Louis de. *La Vie de la vénérable mère Agnez de Jésus, religieuse de l'ordre de S. Dominique au dévot monastère de Sainte Catherine de Langeac*. Puy: André et Pierre Delagarde, 1665.
- Martin, Claude. *La vie de la vénérable Mère Marie de l'Incarnation*. Edited by Guy Oury. Solesmes: Abbaye Saint-Pierre, 1981.
- Maupas du Tour, Henry de. 1657. *La Vie du vénérable serviteur de Dieu François de Sales, evesque et prince de Genève*. Paris: J. Langlois.
- Maupas du Tour, Henry de. 1647. *La Vie de la vénérable Mère Jeanne-Françoise Frémiot*. 2nd ed. Paris: Simeon Piget.
- Nicolas de Tralage, Françoise. 1658. *La Vie de la vénérable mère Isabelle des Anges, religieuse Carmelite Deschausée, professe du couvent de Salamanque*. Paris: Antoine Vitré.
- S. Jacques, Albert d. 1673. *La Vie de la vénérable Mère Térése de Jésus, fondatrice des Carmelites de la Franche-Comté de Bourgogne*. Lyon: Mathieu Liberal.
- Vernon, Jean-Marie d. 1657. *La Vie de la vénérable Mère Françoise de Saint-Bernard, religieuse de Ste-Claire à Verdun, nommée dans le monde Mme de Maisons*. Paris: Mathieu Colombel.

### Secondary Sources

- Bilinkoff, Jodi. "Confession, Gender, Life-Writing: Some Cases (mainly) from Spain." *Penitence in the Age of Reformations*. Eds. Katherine Jackson Lualdi and Anne T. Thayer. Aldershot, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2000: 169-183.
- . "Confessors as Hagiographers in Early Modern Catholic Culture." *A New History of Penance*. Ed. Abigail Firey. 14 Vol. Leiden: Brill, 2008: 419-437.

- . "Navigating the Waves (of Devotion): Towards a Gendered Analysis of Early Modern Catholicism." *Crossing Boundaries: Attending to Early Modern Women*. Eds. Jane Donawerth and Adele Seeff. Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2001: 161-172.
- . *Related Lives: Confessors and their Female Penitents, 1450-1750*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005.
- . "Soul Mates: Spiritual Friendship and Life-Writing in Early Modern Spain (and Beyond)." *Female Monasticism in Early Modern Europe: An Interdisciplinary View*. Ed. Cordula van Wyhe. Aldershot, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2008.
- Bonnet, Philippe. "La Pratique des arts dans les couvents de femmes au XVIIe siècle." *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes* 147 (1989): 433-72.
- Boureau, Alain, and Roger Chartier. *The Culture of Print: Power and the Uses of Print in Early Modern Europe*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- Brémond, Henri. *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France depuis la fin des guerres de religion jusqu'à nos jours*. 1 Vol. Paris: A. Colin, 1967.
- Broomhall, Susan. *Women and the Book Trade in Sixteenth-Century France*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002.
- Bruneau, Marie-Florine. *Women Mystics Confront the Modern World: Marie De l'Incarnation (1599-1672) and Madame Guyon (1648-1717)*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998.
- Burke, Peter. "How to Become a Counter-Reformation Saint." *Religion and Society in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1800*. Ed. Kaspar von Greyerz. London: German Historical Institute, 1984: 45-55.
- Carr, Thomas M., ed. *The Cloister and the World: Early Modern Convent Voices*. 11 Vol. Charlottesville, VA: Rookwood Press, 2007.
- . *Voix des abbesses du grand siècle: la prédication au féminin à Port-Royal*. 164 Vol. Tuebingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2006.
- Chartier, Roger. *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.
- Coakley, John W., ed. *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and their Male Collaborators*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.
- Cohen, J. M., ed. *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila by Herself*. Trans. J. M. Cohen. London: Penguin, 1957.

- Conrad, Anne. *Zwischen Kloster und Welt: Ursulinen und Jesuitinnen in der Katholischen Reformbewegung Des 16./17. Jahrhunderts*. Zabern: Mainz, 1991.
- Cyrus, Cynthia J. *The Scribes for Women's Convents in Late Medieval Germany*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009.
- Davis, Natalie Zemon. *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Delumeau, Jean. "Regard à l'intérieur d'une congrégation féminine." *Un Chemin d'histoire*. Ed. Jean Delumeau. Paris: Fayard, 1981.
- Diefendorf, Barbara B. "Barbe Acarie and Her Spiritual Daughters: Women's Spiritual Authority in Seventeenth-Century France." *Female Monasticism in Early Modern Europe*. Ed. Cordula van Wyhe. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008: 155-172.
- Diefendorf, Barbara B. "Contradictions in the Century of Saints: Aristocratic Patronage and the Convents of Counter-Reformation Paris." *French Historical Studies* 24:3 (2001): 469-499.
- . *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Dompnier, Bernard. "'La Cordiale communication de nos petites nouvelles:' les lettres circulaires, pratique d'union des monastères." *Visitation et Visitandines aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles: actes du colloque d'Annecy, 3-5 Juin 1999*. Eds. Bernard Dompnier and Julia Dominique. Saint-Étienne: Université Jean Monnet, 2001: 277-300.
- Elliott, Dyan. "Authorizing a Life: The Collaboration of Dorothea of Montau and John Marienwerder." *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters*. Ed. Catherine M. Mooney. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999: 168-192.
- Goldsmith, Elizabeth C. *Publishing Women's Life Stories in France, 1647-1720: From Voice to Print*. Aldershot, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2001.
- Hallett, Nicky. *Lives of Spirit: English Carmelite Self-Writing of the Early Modern Period*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007.
- Harline, Craig. "Actives and Contemplatives: Female Religious in the Low Countries before and After Trent." *Catholic Historical Journal* 81:4 (1995): 541-67.
- Heffernan, Thomas J. *Sacred Biography: Saints and their Biographers in the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Henneau, Marie-Élisabeth. "Écritures masculines d'un héroïsme au féminin: portrait moderne d'une mystique médiévale." *Saintes ou sorcières ? L'héroïsme chrétien au féminin*. Eds.

- Véronique Alémány, Monique Cottret, and Bernard Cottret. Paris: Les Éditions de Paris, 2006: 159-176.
- . "Femmes en quête de rôles dans l'histoire du salut: biographies de religieuses et religieuses biographes." *Les Femmes et l'écriture de l'histoire*. Eds. Jean-Claude Arnould and Sylvie Steinberg. Rouen: Publications des Universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2009: 219-230.
- . "Un Livre sous les yeux, une plume à la main. De l'usage de la lecture et de l'écriture dans les couvents de femmes (17e-18e siècles)." *Lectrices d'Ancien Régime*. Ed. Isabelle Brouard-Arends. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2003: 69-80.
- . "Saintes femmes en terre liégeoise. Lecture de biographies spirituelles inédites des 17e et 18e siècle." *Confessional Sanctity (c. 1500 - c. 1800)*. Eds. J. Beyer, et al. Mainz: Verlag Ph. Von Zabern, 2003: 113-131.
- Hill, Helen. "Nuns and Relics: Spiritual Authority in Post-Tridentine Southern Italy." *Female Monasticism in Early Modern Europe*. Ed. Cordula van Wyhe. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008: 11-39.
- Houdard, Sophie. "Possession et spiritualité: deux modèles de savoir féminin." *Femmes savantes, savoirs des femmes: du crépuscule de la Renaissance à l'aube des lumières: actes du colloque de Chantilly (22-24 Septembre 1995)*. Ed. Colette Nativel., 1999.
- Johnson, Penelope D. *Equal in Monastic Profession: Religious Women in Medieval France*. Ed. Catharine R. Stimpson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- Le Brun, Jacques. "Les Biographies spirituelles françaises du XVIIe siècle. Écriture féminine? Ecriture mystique?" *Esperienza religiosa e scrittura femminili tra medioevo ed età moderna*. Ed. Marilena Modica. Acireale, Italy: Bonanno Editore, 1992: 135-151.
- . "Conversion et continuité intérieures dans les biographies spirituelles françaises du XVIIe siècle." *La Conversion au XVIIe siècle*. Ed. Louise Godard de Donville. 17 Vol. Marseille, France: Centre méridional de rencontres sur le XVIIe siècle, 1983: 317-335.
- . "L'Institution et le corps, lieux de la mémoire, d'après les biographies spirituelles féminines du XVIIe siècle." *La Mémoire*. Ed. Béatrice Didier. Paris: P.U.F., 1984: 111-121.
- . "Mutations de la notion de martyr au XVIIe siècle d'après les biographies spirituelles féminines." *Sainteté et martyr dans les religions du livre*. Ed. Jacques Marx. 19 Vol. Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1989: 77-90.
- . "Rêves de religieuses. Le désir, la mort et le temps." *Revue des sciences humaines*. 211 (1988): 28-44.

- Lecouturier, Ernestine. *Francoise-Madeleine de Chaugy et la tradition salesienne au XVII siecle: Francoise-Madeleine de Chaugy et la Visitation après la mort de Sainte Chantal*. Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1933.
- Leonard, Amy. *Nails in the Wall: Catholic Nuns in Reformation Germany*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Lewis, David. *Introduction to the Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila: The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus : Including the Relations Or Manifestations of Her Spiritual State which St. Teresa Submitted to Her Confessors*. Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1997.
- Lewis, Gertrud Jaron. *By Women, for Women, about Women: The Sister-Books of Fourteenth-Century Germany*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1996.
- Lierheimer, Linda. "Preaching or Teaching?: Defining the Ursuline Mission in Seventeenth-Century France." *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millenia of Christianity*. Eds. Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998: 212-226.
- Lonsagne, J. "Introduction to *La Vie de la vénérable Mère Marie de l'Incarnation*." Solesmes: Abbaye Saint-Pierre, 1981.
- Marshman, Michelle. "Patronage and Kinship in Women's Teaching Orders of Seventeenth-Century Bordeaux." *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* 31 (2003): 34-49.
- Martin, Henri-Jean. *The French Book: Religion, Absolutism and Readership, 1585-1715*. 22nd ed. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996..
- . *Print, Power, and People in 17th-Century France*. Metuchin, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1993.
- Mayer, Thomas F., and D. R. Woolf, eds. *The Rhetorics of Life-Writing in Early Modern Europe: Forms of Biography from Cassandra Fedele to Louis XIV*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995.
- McNamara, Jo Ann. *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millenia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Minnis, A. J. *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*. London: Scolar Press, 1984.
- Mooney, Catherine M., ed. *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.
- Morse, Ruth. *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages: Rhetoric, Representation, and Reality*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

- Newman, Barbara. "Hildegard and Her Hagiographers: The Remaking of Female Sainthood." *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters*. Ed. Catherine M. Mooney. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999: 16-34.
- Paige, Nicholas D. *Being Interior: Autobiography and the Contradictions of Modernity in Seventeenth-Century France*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.
- Pottinger, David T. *The French Book Trade in the Ancien Régime, 1500-1791*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958.
- Poutrin, Isabelle. *Le Voile et la plume : autobiographie et sainteté féminine dans l'Espagne moderne*. 11 Vol. Madrid: Casa de Velazquez, 1995.
- Rapley, Elizabeth. *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990.
- . *A Social History of the Cloister: Daily Life in the Teaching Monasteries of the Old Regime*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001.
- . "Women and the Religious Vocation in Seventeenth-Century France." *French Historical Studies* 18.3 (1994): 613-31.
- Reynes, Geneviève. *Couvents de femmes : la vie des religieuses contemplatives dans la France des XVIIe Et XVIIIe siècles*. Paris: Fayard, 1987.
- Sallmann, Jean-Michel. "Image et fonction du saint dans la région de Naples à la fin du XVIIe et au début du XVIIIe siècle." *Mélanges de l'Ecole Française de Rome* 91.2 (1979): 827-74.
- Scott, Karen. "Mystical Death, Bodily Death: Catherine of Siena and Raymond of Capua on the Mystic's Encounter with God." *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters*. Ed. Catherine M. Mooney. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999: 136-167.
- Strasser, Ulrike. "'Bones of Contention: Cloistered Nuns, Decorated Relics and the Contest Over Women's Place in the Public Sphere of Counter-Reformation Munich'." *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte/ Archive for Reformation History* 90 (1999): 255-88.
- . "The Cloister as Membrane: Recent Convent Histories and the Circulation of People and Ideas'." *Gender and History* 19.1 (2007).
- . *State of Virginity: Gender, Religion, and Politics in an Early Modern Catholic State*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004.
- Thofner, Margit. "How to Look Like a (Female) Saint: The Early Iconography of St. Teresa of Avila." *Female Monasticism in Early Modern Europe*. Ed. Cordula van Wyhe. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008: 59-80.

- Vauchez, André. *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*. Tran. Jean Birrell. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Velasco, Sherry M. "Visualizing Gender on the Page in Convent Literature." *Women, Texts, and Authority in the Early Modern Spanish World*. Eds. Marta V. Vicente and Luis R. Corteguera. Aldershot, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2003: 127-148.
- Walker, Claire. *Gender and Politics in Early Modern Europe: English Convents in France and the Low Countries*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Weaver, F. Ellen. "Women and Religion in Early Modern France: A Bibliographical Essay on the State of the Question." *The Catholic Historical Review* 67.1 (1981): 50-9.
- Weber, Alison. "The Three Lives of the Vita: The Uses of Convent Autobiography." *Women, Texts and Authority in the Early Modern Spanish World*. Eds. Marta V. Vicente and Luis R. Corteguera. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2003: 107-126.
- Weinstein, Donald, and Rudolph M. Bell. *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- Zarri, Gabriella. "From Prophecy to Discipline, 1450-1650." *Women and Faith: Catholic Religious Life in Italy from Late Antiquity to the Present*. Eds. Lucetta Scaraffia and Gabriella Zarri. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999: 83-112.