

Introduction

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Monasticism denotes an ascetic mode of living that demands removal from the world, subjection to religious vows, and the pursuit of its primary aim, perfecting one's love of God. However, the monastic ideal has frequently been portrayed as a misconceived ideal. Denis Diderot, for example, characterised female monasticism in his novel *La Religieuse* (published 1796 and written 1760) as a compelling manifestation of a misunderstood Catholicism.¹ Only family pressure and psychologically cunning strategies can lure young girls into the unnatural environment of an enclosed community of women who are victims of their own maliciousness, sexuality and rivalry, contorted and exacerbated by the oppressiveness of convent life. Diderot's heroine Suzanne writes about her novitiate: 'If one observed all its austerities one would never survive A novice-mistress ... subjects you to a course of the most carefully calculated seduction. Her function is to darken still more the shades of night which surround you, to lull you into slumber, to throw dust into your eyes, to fascinate you'.² Indeed, the failures, betrayals and falsities of convent life have long attracted the attention of scholars.³ The monastic experience, however, was not mere convent routine, stifling rather than energising the spiritual ideal, but was an integral part of the rich and diverse fabric of Catholic life. The complexity of European monasticism was not only contingent to time, locality and orders, but also to individual convents and abbeys and the range of individuals within them and belonging to the secular and ecclesiastical hierarchies connected to them. The Protestant attempts to eradicate monasticism as a papist aberration had only encouraged a widespread revival and reform of the monastic ideal.⁴ There were, of course, several reform initiatives prior to the Protestant Reformation which continued to be significant after the

¹ The argument that Denis Diderot does not take issue with Christianity in general, but merely with monasticism as 'misunderstood Christianity', was put forward by Leonard Tancock in his introduction to Denis Diderot, *The Nun* (London, Folio Society, 1972).

² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

³ Judith Brown, *Immodest acts: the life of a lesbian nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York 1986); Craig Harline, *The burdens of Sister Margaret: inside a seventeenth-century convent* (New Haven and London, 2000).

⁴ Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 195–203; Patricia Ranft, *Women and the Religious Life in Premodern Europe* (New York, 1996), pp. 95–111; Gabriella Zarri, 'Gender, Religious Institutions and Social Discipline: The Reform of the Regulars', in Judith Brown and Robert Davis (eds), *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy* (New York, 1998); Craig Harline, 'Actives and Contemplatives: The Female Religious of the Low Countries Before and After Trent', *Catholic Historical Review* 581 (1995), 541–67; Anne Jacobson Schutte, 'Religion, Spirituality and the Post-Tridentine Church', in John Marino (ed.), *Early Modern Italy. 1550–1786* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 125–42.

Council of Trent (1545–1563), such as St Colette's (1381–1447) reforms of the Poor Clares (a branch still known as the Colettines) and the Franciscan friars.⁵ However, the Catholic response to Protestant criticism of the monastic ideal generated a confluence of political factors and economic resources which bolstered the unprecedented restoration and revitalisation of female monasticism in the second half of the sixteenth century.⁶ This revitalisation, however, should not be understood as a continuation of medieval conditions. As Kathryn Norberg put it: 'Trent and the host of reformers who followed in the Church's wake changed Catholicism and with it the position of women both within and outside the Church'.⁷

The surge of scholarly interest in religious women in early modern Europe during the last two decades has generated a more nuanced and detailed picture of post-Tridentine monasticism. One direction of studies, for example, focuses on the activities of the nun as writer and author of chronicles, letters and autobiographies, as artist, pedagogue, political activist, saint and mystic.⁸ The methodology of this strand of scholarship is based on sociological models and investigates the limitations and potentials created by religious, national and gender-specific perceptions and mentalities for the formation of individual and communal identity. While collections of most recent scholarship in early modern religion are available, a broader synthesis of studies in post-Tridentine female monasticism is still lacking.⁹ In this respect, the present collection of twelve essays addresses the multifaceted nature of female religious identity in early modern Europe from a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary viewpoint. By dismantling the boundaries between individual academic disciplines of history, art history, musicology and literary studies, this book produces new

⁵ Élisabeth Lopez, *Culture et sainteté: Colette de Corbie. 1381–1447* (Saint-Étienne, 1994).

⁶ For an overview of these processes, see R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The World of Catholic Renewal, 1540–1770* (Cambridge, 2005), esp. chs 1 and 2; for a collection of essays focusing on religious orders as disseminators and initiators of the Catholic Reform, see Richard L. DeMolen (ed.), *Religious Orders of the Catholic Reformation* (New York, 1994).

⁷ Norberg, Kathryn, 'The Counter-Reformation and Women: Religious and Lay', John O'Malley (ed.), *Catholicism in Early Modern History: A Guide to Research* (St Louis, 1988), p. 134.

⁸ See, for example, Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau (eds), *Untold Sisters: Hispanic nuns in their own works*, trans. Amanda Powell (Albuquerque, 1989); Silvia Evangelisti, 'Art and the Advent of Clausura: The Convent of Saint Catherine of Siena in Tridentine Florence', in Jonathan Nelson (ed.), *Suor Plautilla Nelli. 1523–1588. First Woman Painter of Florence*, Proceedings of the Symposium Florence, May 27 (Cadmò, 2000); Craig Monson, *Disembodied voices: music and culture in an early modern Italian convent* (Berkeley and London, 1995).

⁹ Recent studies on literature and female monasticism can be found in Marta V. Vincente, Luis R. Corteguera, *Women, Texts and Authority in the Early Modern Spanish World* (Aldershot, 2003); a collection of essays with a strong focus on Italy is Craig Monson (ed.), *The Crammed Wall. Women, Religion and the Arts in Early Modern Europe* (Ann Arbor, 1992); a collection which contains a section on the early modern period is Gabriella Zarri and Lucetta Scaraffia (eds), *Women and Faith: Catholic Religious Life in Italy from Late Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge/Mass., 1999).

cross-cultural readings essential to a more comprehensive understanding of female spirituality in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The religious and cultural aspects of female monasticism in early modern Europe is an immense field. The essays therefore focus on four key areas of the female religious experience which have only recently come to the forefront of research, namely 'Femininity and Sanctity', 'Convent Theatre and Music-Making', 'Spiritual Directorship' and 'Community and Conflict'. Although, several important studies of these areas have appeared, the essays in this collection address aspects still needing primary investigation. Each section assembles case studies from various national contexts allowing the reader to examine specific local expressions of these aspects of convent life, while also observing transnational similarities. Moreover, the European perspective of the book corrects the over-emphasis on Italy in previous publications by presenting contributions on countries which have received much less scholarly attention, in particular France, the Low Countries and Germany.¹⁰

Owing to the multidisciplinary commitment of this study, a particularly wide variety of cultural artefacts are placed at the centre of individual discussions. Contributors investigate art and architecture, as well as writings and music commissioned or produced by or on behalf of early modern nuns. The contributors, however, also transcended disciplinary boundaries in order to achieve a genuinely interdisciplinary and integrated investigation of these cultural artefacts. Elissa Weaver, to choose only one example, draws on textual, musical and visual sources in her discussion of early modern convent theatre and thus illustrates that music and painting complemented and enhanced the theatrical experience. In such a manner, this book aims to picture the early modern nun not only as a 'creator and purveyor of culture' (Hufton) through her writings, but also through the visual and musical rhetoric she employs for the communication of her spirituality.¹¹

A cluster of important studies which materialised in the new field of femininity and sanctity have shown that multiple models of holiness existed for women, even within the same locality. The first section of the present volume explores

¹⁰ For recent publications on non-Italian topics, see Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal and Kingston, 1990); Anne Conrad, *Zwischen Kloster und Welt: Ursulinen und Jesuitinnen in der katholischen Reformbewegung des 16./17. Jahrhunderts* (Mainz, 1991); Laurence Lux-Sterritt, *Redefining Female Religious Life. French Ursulines and English Ladies in Seventeenth-Century Catholicism* (Aldershot, 2005); Craig Harline, *The Burdens of Sister Margaret: Inside a Seventeenth-Century Convent* (New Haven, London, 2000); Merry E. Wiesner, *Gender, church, and state in early modern Germany: essays by Merry E. Wiesner* (London, 1998); Amy Leonard, *Nails in the Wall: Catholic Nuns in Reformation Germany* (Chicago, 2005); Ulrike Strasser, *State of Virginitiy* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2003).

¹¹ Olwen H. Hufton, *Whatever happened to the history of the nun?* (Egham, 1999), p. 8; Kate Lowe, 'Nuns and Choice: Artistic Decision-Making in Medicean Florence', in Eckhardt Marchand and Alison Wright, *With and Without the Medici: Studies in Tuscan Art and Patronage. 1434–1530*, (Aldershot, 1998), pp. 129–55; M. Dunn, 'Nuns as Art Patrons: The Decoration of S. Marta al Collegio Romano', *Art Bulletin*, 70 (September, 1988), 451–77; G. M. Radke, 'Nuns and their Art: The Case of San Zaccaria in Renaissance Venice', *Renaissance Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (2001), 430–59; Jerydene Wood, *Women, art, and spirituality: the Poor Clares of early modern Italy* (Cambridge, 1996).

the various strategies and media that nuns and clerics devised in pursuit of spiritual authority. Helen Hills investigates how the aristocratic nuns of the Santa Patrizia convent in Naples competed with the spiritual prestige of cults at other religious institutions in the city through the management and control of their relics. Relics were synonymous with the incorruptibility of the saintly body which has already been restored to its prelapsarian, divine state during life. As such they were tangible tokens of the doctrine of resurrection and the transience of physical decay. Combining a wealth of visual and textual primary sources in her analysis, Hills establishes intriguing parallels between architecture, relics and nuns. Nuns, according to Hills, were viewed themselves as living relics and their convent architecture as the reliquary in which they were displayed. Margit Thøfner and Ulrike Strasser then consider two other models of sanctity operating within seventeenth-century European culture. Ulrike Strasser introduces the female, charismatic sanctity of the Poor Clare Clara Hortulana (1662–1689) from the Angerkloster in Munich, whose visionary powers and ultimate martyrdom were promoted by dedicated male reformers after her death. Strasser investigates the adaptable, verbal conventions of hagiographic arguments with which Hortulana's visionary experiences were made acceptable. The fact that various cultural models of female charismatic spirituality continued long after Trent should, according to Strasser, caution us not to regard the Tridentine reforms merely as an institutionalised infringement of the miraculous and mystical aspects of female monasticism. Thøfner then examines the visual construction of female sainthood in print by looking at the first visual hagiography of St Teresa of Avila, published by Collaert and Galle in Antwerp, as a celebration of her imminent beatification in 1614. Thøfner cogently illustrates that these images make the unusual aspects of Teresian sainthood publicly acceptable by rendering it with conventional patterns of sanctity. This visual strategy, according to Thøfner, aided the recognition of St Teresa's form of sanctity under post-Tridentine rules and helped to dispel the arguments against the compatibility of femininity and sanctity which her supporters faced in the quest of her canonisation.

Theatre and music-making in early modern convents evidence the profusion of artistic expressions, yet also reveal the frictions generated by the social and artistic norms within which nuns operated. Colleen Baade introduces some of these fundamental polarities by investigating attitudes towards nuns' music-making in more than two dozen constitutions of orders active in the almost one thousand houses present in seventeenth-century Spain. Music, often perceived as possessing a celestial beauty, could be conducive to pious edification and the devotional quality of the Divine Office and was even believed to bring about visions. Yet Baade emphasises that public performances in convents which were renowned for their musical expertise frequently compromised the observance of self-effacement and humility. Furthermore, polyphony or plainchant were regarded as a danger to monastic austerity, the preservation of meditation and contemplation. Robert Kendrick observes similar frictions in his examination of the relation between music-making and the institutional and spiritual identity of the Santa Catarina convent of the Humiliate order

in seventeenth-century Milan. Kendrick points out that the convent's most important musical manifestation, the publication of Sister Claudia Francesca Rusca's (c. 1603–c. 1676) motet book in 1630, may have been aimed to give the convent a more prestigious musical presence, yet would also have compromised the public recognition of the Humiliate's house as a model of the monastic ideal. In Kendrick's view, the motet book is primarily reflective of Rusca's own conservative musical education and the devotional and ritual peculiarities of the convent, rather than the episcopal, devotional and aesthetic priorities of the convent's patron, Cardinal Frederigo Borromeo or an urban audience. Elissa Weaver augments this argument in her examination of the extent to which convent plays not only entertained and diverted, but also educated and strengthened the commitment to shared values. Weaver focuses on the particularly popular play of the five prudent and the five foolish virgins, based on Matthew 25, in its various sixteenth- and seventeenth-century versions. Weaver argues that the foolish virgins are anti-types of monastic virtues and as such thematise actual communal problems and individual failings such as pride, vanity and the inability to sever oneself from worldly things. The story and its staging could be reformulated and reinterpreted by various convents to fit their specific objectives and occasions and concerns. In this way, as Weaver points out, theatrical activities could function as a malleable forum for communal problem-solving.

The spiritual guidance and direction of nuns, or pious women in general, was a vital part of the female religious experience in early modern Europe and forms the subject of the penultimate section of the book. Jodi Bilinkoff is concerned with the way in which spiritual ties between exemplary penitent women and their confessors were cultivated, conducted and recorded in the bibliographic life-writings of such women. These widely translated and disseminated texts were written by their spiritual directors to record these intimate and passionate, yet chaste, friendships, but also to promote the Catholic faith. Bilinkoff's essay complements the focus of this book by investigating womens' religiosity outside the convent. In her comparative approach, Bilinkoff looks at memoirs from across the Iberian Peninsula, France and Italy and some of Europe's colonies. She investigates not only conventions of gender which informed these friendships, but also the motivations each partner had in seeking and fostering these bonds, and the erotic literary topoi through which they were represented. Barbara Diefendorf and Cordula van Wyhe then focus on spiritual directorship in Discalced Carmelite convents after St Teresa. Diefendorf is concerned with Barbe Acarie, mystic and foundress of the French branch of the Teresian order, whose example and teaching had a significant impact on the roles of prioresses and mistresses of novices in second-generation Carmelite communities. Acarie was formative in reinforcing the authority of the mother superior as spiritual director, which ultimately led to a wider acceptance of women imparting spiritual counsel nationwide. Acarie, according to Diefendorf, not only preserved and realised the Teresian ideas on spiritual directorship, but also the incarnational quality of Discalced Carmelite mysticism which was directly opposed to objectless prayer and

abstract mysticism aimed at an immediate dissolution into the divine. Van Wyhe complements Diefendorf's analysis by investigating how these Discalced Carmelite spiritual ideals were imparted visually to the ever-growing number of novices in convents after Teresa. The focal point is an anonymously authored emblem book entitled *Idea Vitae Teresiana*, published in 1686 in Antwerp, which also circulated in the Teresian convent in Pontoise, France, founded in 1605 by Barbe Acarie. Van Wyhe shows that the conceptual framework of this book combines the genuine incarnational and affective emotivity of Teresian mysticism as promoted by such women as Acarie with more Thomistic-intellectual doctrines on the human mind, its faculties and the acquisition of virtues. In this way, this devotional book has to be regarded largely as a visual interpretation of the popular manual for the instruction of novices by Teresian friar Juan de Jesús María, the Calagurritan (1564–1615).

The final section of this book is dedicated to the manifold causes of conflict and strife in female monastic communities and to the processes of resolution employed there. Alison Weber illustrates how the role of boarders (*doncellas*) in Discalced Carmelite convents could lead to a coalescence of interior and extraneous conflicts within the convent community. The presence of these young girls could clash with the monastic virtue of emotional detachment, but also potentially violated the Tridentine guidelines on the freedom of vocations and the minimum age of legal consent (which was sixteen). By focusing in particular on St Teresa's attachment to her niece, Teresita de Cepeda, Weber unravels larger dissensions with regard to inter-convent controversies and family rivalries the saint accepted or actively attempted to circumvent. Ultimately, St Teresa's perception of little girls allows for intriguing conclusions regarding ideas of childhood in early modern Europe. Claire Walker, on the other hand, looks at the strategies with which nuns could air dissent, negotiate power struggles and challenge authorities beyond the immediate convent community. On the basis of her investigation into the factional rivalries and rebellions in the English Benedictine convent in Brussels, as recorded in correspondence and missives, Walker illustrates that gossip can generate divisiveness and disunity in a monastic community, but can also be conducive to spiritual and political cohesion. Walker looks in particular at the gendered nature of gossip, the centrality of female spaces and networks and their formative role in constructing the desired identity of the individual nun and the community of which she is part. In the collection's final essay, Charlotte Woodford is concerned with the way in which German monastic communities attempted to avert displacement, loss of land, exile and the resulting internal strife brought about by the Thirty Years War. Focusing on the recordings of these historical events by two abbesses, Woodford not only gives an account of the practical means by which the nuns coped with their ordeal and trials, but also examines a range of formulaic language such as literary tropes aimed to strengthen belief in divine providence and protection. In this way, Woodford argues, the historical chronicles were a means to impart trust in the durability and survival of the monastic community and reveal the nuns' sense of their own history.

The contributors share the belief that the early modern nun has to be viewed as an active agent rather than a passive receptor of social dictates and ecclesiastical wishes. Indeed, the idea that post-Tridentine Catholicism was a monolithic movement administered by a top-down enforcement of religious and institutional control has been replaced by a more nuanced picture which foregrounds the reciprocity, and adaptiveness, of the Roman Catholic belief system.¹² The studies in this volume illustrate how nuns actively negotiated these reciprocal processes in response to their individual or communal needs. For example, Robert Kendrick argues that the personal musical proclivities and pedagogical concerns of the Italian nun Claudia Francesca Rusca primarily motivated the concept and publication of her motet book rather than the episcopal and devotional priorities of the convent's patron. Alison Weber, furthermore, shows how St Teresa herself gave exception to the rule of her order and Tridentine decrees by admitting little girls to her convents who were not suitable for the austere way of life. Lastly, Ulrike Strasser, Jodi Bilinkoff and Margit Thøfner demonstrate the inherent malleability of visual and verbal conventions through which various forms of female sanctity could be appropriated and made to fit officially sanctioned models of holiness. In a different context, Barbara Diefendorf and Cordula van Wyhe illustrate the religious independence of Teresian nuns, who understood spiritual progress as a self-governing activity in a convent where the prioress was largely granted authority in spiritual matters above the male confessor.

The Council of Trent's demand for compulsory claustration had profound effects on female monasticism. This innovation has become a major focus of scholarly studies and is also a recurrent theme throughout this volume.¹³ Helen Hills, Colleen Baade, Claire Walker and Charlotte Woodford illustrate that the Tridentine enforcement of claustration has to be understood as a flexible schema which was constantly manipulated in response to local conditions rather than as a universal, seamless implementation of Roman legislation. Helen Hills, for example, illustrates how Neapolitan nuns circumvented the limitations of their claustration by deploying their portable and mobile relics within and beyond the convent walls, while Ulrike Strasser shows how intercessory prayer could transcend convent walls and create an 'imagined

¹² Simon Ditchfield, 'Tridentine Worship and the Cult of Saints', in *Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 6, Reformation and Expansion, 1500–1600, R. Po-chia Hsia (ed.) (Cambridge 2007), pp. 201–24; see also Robert Bireley, *The Refashioning of Catholicism 1450–1700* (Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 1999), p. 2.

¹³ See, for example, Elizabeth A. Leheldt, 'Discipline, Vocation, and Patronage: Spanish religious Women in a Tridentine Microclimate', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 30 (1999), 1009–30; Francesca Medioli, 'Dimensions of the Cloister. Enclosure, Constraint and Protection in Seventeenth-Century Italy', in Anne Jacobson Schutte, Thomas Kuehn and Silvana Seidel Menchi (eds), *Time, Space, and Women's Lives in Early Modern Europe* (Kirkville, 2002), pp. , 640–43; Silvia Evangelisti, 'Art and the Advent of Clausura: The Convent of Saint Catherine of Siena in Tridentine Florence', in Jonathan Nelson (ed.), *Suor Plautilla Nelli*, pp. 67–82; Katherine Gill, 'Open Monasteries for Women in Late Medieval and Early Modern Italy: Two Roman Examples', in Craig Monson (ed.), *The Crannied Wall*, pp. 15–47; Jutta G. Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in late Renaissance Venice* (Chicago, 1999), pp. 115–70.

community' of cloister and city, heaven and earth. Colleen Baade, meanwhile, argues that the public quality of music-making in Spanish convents and the practice of polyphony or plainchant caused frictions with the prescription of enclosure. Moreover, Claire Walker investigates the 'verbal permeability' of English convents through the communication of internal conflicts to the outside world via legitimate and illegitimate talk, while Charlotte Woodford shows how war disrupted enclosure either by intrusion of enemies or exile.

The historiography of early modern nuns is a thriving and continuously expanding field of research. This collection of twelve essays is both an introduction to and a progress report on the field. I hope it will help stimulate further debates, revise old assumptions and forge new approaches.