Literature by Women Religious in Early Modern Catholic Europe and the New World

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‘As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says.’ These words from 1 Corinthians 14:34 would appear to have greatly circumscribed, if not silenced, much of women’s religious expression in early modern Catholic Europe. Indeed, ecclesiastics often cited the Apostle Paul to chastise women who attempted to teach doctrine, engage in scriptural exegesis or otherwise trespass on the apostolic prerogatives of the priesthood. Yet scholars have increasingly recognized that Catholic women did indeed engage in all of these activities. If Catholicism, particularly after the Council of Trent, adhered to a discourse of women’s inferiority, alternate discourses of spiritual equality kept the door open for religious writing and, in some cases, a spiritual magisterium for women. However, this success was often possible because these women were perceived to be exceptions to their sex. Nevertheless, by manoeuvring in the fault lines between Christianity’s discourses of spiritual equality and female exceptionalism, some Catholic women wielded the pen to celebrate their religion, defend their church and bring others closer to God.

As this telegraphic introduction suggests, scholarship on Catholic women’s religious writing has undergone a sea change in the past 20 years. This can be attributed to the convergence of several trends: a critique of canon formation; a return to historical contextualization after a period of theoretical abstraction; a tendency to decentre aesthetic judgment; and an interest in gender’s effect on writing. The realities of a post-9/11 world have also rendered religious belief a more urgent object of inquiry. As a consequence, recent decades have witnessed a burgeoning number of editions, translations and studies on women and religion.

In Hispanic literature, prior to the 1980s only two women were regularly included in the canon of early modern writers: Teresa of Ávila (1515–82) and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648–95). In 1989, however, Arenal, Schlau and Powell published a landmark bilingual anthology, Untold Sisters, which included...
selections from the works of 13 little-known nuns, dramatically demonstrating that there was more than one Teresa. Surtz’s *Writing Women in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain* further revised the notion of Teresa’s singularity, showing that the Carmelite saint also had literary mothers. Subsequently, although Teresa and Sor Juana continue to be central to the canon, they are no longer studied in isolation.

The field of convent literature has grown in tandem with developments in the history of Catholic spirituality. Zarri’s pioneering work elucidated the paradox that although Christianity established a theological basis for gender equality, it has also historically circumscribed women’s dignity; whether women were able to achieve self-actualization through the church varied according to chronological and social context. Recognizing continuities with the Middle Ages, Zarri nevertheless showed that attitudes towards women’s role in the church changed dramatically during the early modern period as ecclesiastics increasingly attempted to direct and control holy women’s prophetic and charismatic authority.

The field has also benefited from historical studies of female monasticism and the impact of Tridentine legislation. Despite mandates for enclosure, many post-Tridentine convents remained permeable to the interests of the secular world. Research has also revealed that some nuns had access to rich cultural resources – works of art, musical instruments and libraries. We have similarly put to rest the idea that nuns were minimally literate. There is now greater appreciation for the ways the Protestant Reformation stimulated Catholic women’s desire for active roles as teachers, missionaries and, paradoxically, as contemplatives dedicated to prayer for their Church. The work of historians has thus contributed to literary scholarship by revealing the interconnectedness of convents and secular society. Monastic women lived and wrote behind impenetrable walls, but they were often motivated to write by their desire to influence the world *extramuros*.

One of the most influential ideas to emerge from the early years of feminist criticism was the concept of the ‘anxiety of authorship’. In 1979, Gilbert and Gubar postulated that women suffered from fears that their authority as writers was by definition inappropriate to their sex. Although formulated on the experience of nineteenth-century women writers, the concept was productively applied to

1 Arenal and Schlau, with Powell, 2010.
3 Bergmann and Schlau, 2007; Weber, 2009; BIESES, n.d.
4 Representative surveys, anthologies, and check-lists include Amelang, 1990; Bowden, 2012–13; Carr in Carr, 2007; Cox, 2008; Hallet, 2007; King and Rabil, 2007; Morujão, 2009; van Gemert et al., 2010; Vollendorf in Vollendorf and Kostroun, 2009; and the website ‘The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe’, n.d.
8 Cruz and Hernández, 2011; Howe, 2008; Weaver, 2002.
10 Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, pp. 50–51.
women religious, who, labouring under the Pauline injunction to ‘keep silent’ in the churches, similarly suffered from the internalization of negative stereotypes and the fear of antagonizing male readers. But scholarship on female monasticism has also discovered confident female voices, revealing that multiple factors permitted nuns to overcome their anxiety of authorship – elite status, patronage, a sense of divine mission, obedience to a superior and the support of a monastic community. A persistent question, nevertheless, is whether writing firmly anchored in the exclusionary/exceptionalist ideology of the Church and closely modelled on sanctioned models of discourse constitutes self-actualization. Although scholarship has largely moved beyond polarized voluntarist or cultural-determinist positions, the question of agency remains polemical.

Much productive work on nuns’ writing has focused on how gender shapes the choice of subject matter and rhetorical strategies, and how reader expectations govern the circulation and reception of texts. Scholars have found authorial anxiety in works that venture into theological abstraction or claim mystical experience but they have identified more confident voices in works of devotion or moral instruction intended for an intra-monastic readership. However, the author/reader relationship for monastic genres has proved to be surprisingly complex.

Female-authored spiritual autobiographies provide a case in point. These texts were not self-celebratory autobiographies in the modern sense, but rather ‘autobiographies on command’ – works written under a confessor’s mandate.11 This was primarily, although not exclusively, a female genre. The locus classicus for this genre is Teresa of Ávila’s *Life* (written 1560–65). Teresa was not the first nun to write an ‘autobiography on command’, but the posthumous publication of her *Life* in 1588 and her subsequent rapid canonization in 1622 inspired many imitators within and outside Spain. There is no doubt that some nuns, especially those who reported supernatural favours, found the command oppressive; and all were vulnerable to accusations of heterodoxy.12 However, the process of spiritual examination was not necessarily antagonistic. Some women were skilled writers who managed to subvert their confessors’ control over their discourse by strategically conforming to stereotypes of female speech and submissive behaviour.13 In other cases, the command to write was essentially a licence to write, with the confessor providing encouragement or even collaborating with the nun.14

We find yet another dynamic in the spiritual autobiography of Marie de l’Incarnation (secular name: Marie Guyart; 1599–1672). As a young widow, Guyart abandoned her son, became an Ursuline, and in New France dedicated her life to the catechesis of indigenous peoples. Marie wrote not at the command of her confessor but in response to the repeated requests of her son, Claude Martin, who, in his mother’s absence, had become a Benedictine monk. Martin ignored his mother’s entreaties not to reveal her writings and in 1676 published his heavily revised

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11 Herpoel, 1999.
12 Velasco, 1996.
14 Durán López in Kallendorf, 2010; Myers and Powell, 1999.
version of her narrative. The resulting text is a hybrid one, ‘written by two hands, her own and her son’s’.\textsuperscript{15} Spiritual autobiographies must be read, consequently, with an eye for complex intimacies and unstable power dynamics.

Many confessors elicited autobiographies not to censor, but to promote a nun’s reputation for holiness. Fragments of descriptions of visions, poems and letters were often incorporated in hagiographic biographies that were intended for posthumous publication. In some cases, the confessor’s mediation was heavy-handed, but there are examples of confessors who served more as editors or co-authors.\textsuperscript{16} The life-writing of holy women is often formulaic, giving the impression of a totally scripted subjectivity. However, at times, ironically ‘what originally pretended to be an instrument of spiritual control for confessors … ended up ‘authorizing’ women to speak for themselves and for others … ’\textsuperscript{17}

Scholars have also begun to analyse women’s religious writing from an unlikely source. When Inquisitorial tribunals investigated cases of feigned holiness, the accused were often required to begin with the story of their lives. The resulting documents are obviously written under coercion and therefore represent problematic evidence. However, these ‘autobiographies under duress’ can offer insights into how gender, class and individual charisma interact to build (or sabotage) a career as a living saint.\textsuperscript{18} Presenting similar hermeneutic challenges from the opposite end of the spectrum are the beatification proceedings and documents related to the lives of canonized and forgotten potential saints.\textsuperscript{19}

Nuns cultivated genres that did not obviously transgress injunctions against women’s theological discourse. This literature was often multi-generic, permitting some nuns to embed theological statements in them or surreptitiously defend controversial positions. Once again, we can turn to Teresa of Ávila for an influential example. \textit{The Way of Perfection}, ostensibly a gloss on the Lord’s Prayer, in fact offers a defence of women’s right to practice mental prayer (a position regarded with suspicion in some quarters of the church).\textsuperscript{20} Although Teresa was especially adept at this tactic, other nuns adopted it successfully. Books on the instruction of novices, for example, could be used to criticize male confessors and define a semi-sacerdotal role for prioresses as spiritual directors.

Nuns’ chronicles, many of them collaborative, had multiple purposes: to celebrate the convent, commemorate the lives of beloved sisters, advance a political agenda, praise patrons or recruit novices. Despite their heterogeneity, they shared several typical characteristics: narration that concludes in the present, affirmation of collective identity, portraits of exemplary nuns, prophecies related to their convent, linguistic features associated with oral expression and a providentialist

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Greenberg} Greenberg, 2001, p. 169.
\bibitem{Bilinkoff} Bilinkoff, 2005; Poutrin, 1995.
\bibitem{Amelang} Amelang, 2005, p. 160, my translation.
\bibitem{Schutte} Schutte, 2001; Zarri, 1991.
\bibitem{Myers} Myers, 2003.
\end{thebibliography}
perspective.\textsuperscript{21} Some nuns showed considerable skill in providing narrative coherence and suspenseful pacing within an overarching providential design.\textsuperscript{22} Chronicles were hardly unbiased; they made use of ‘fictional’ elements such as allegory, portraits of exemplary figures and teleological plotting.\textsuperscript{23} In the Americas, chronicles acquired an additional ideological function – representing colonized lands as fertile ground for the transfer of Catholicism. Like their European sisters, these nuns wrote to celebrate their communities, but they also deployed a ‘rhetoric of colonization’ to justify the New World enterprise.\textsuperscript{24} Studies have shown that chronicles, even those that appear to be most transparently descriptive, need to be read with attention to persuasive intent and ideological subtexts.

The practice of embedding problematic discourses, whether theological or political, is evident in other kinds of convent writing. For example, the \textit{Book for the Hour of Recreation} by María de San José Salazar (1548–1603) places foundation narratives within the framework of an informal conversation among several nuns. But embedded in the dialogue is a defence of nuns’ right to govern their convents without undue influence from male clerics and to choose their confessors.\textsuperscript{25} Jacqueline Pascal (1625–61), a nun at the Jansenist Port-Royal convent in France and sister of the famous philosopher Blaise Pascal, similarly embedded her Jansenist ethos in \textit{A Rule for Children} (written 1657), a treatise on educating boarding students at her convent.\textsuperscript{26} Here, and in other works, we find nuns emphasizing the scope of the role of the nun-teacher, prioress, or novice mistress in spiritual guidance in ways that sometimes allowed them to make sharp critiques against clerics.\textsuperscript{27}

Not all women who wrote on religion did so subversively. Some, assured by class privilege or animated by a sense of crisis, wrote unapologetically polemical texts. For example, Jeanne de Jussie (1503–61), a Genevan Poor Clare, fought to uphold her monastic vows against the opposition of Protestant reformers, and Arcangela Tarabotti (1604–52), a Venetian Benedictine, famously denounced the tyranny of fathers who forced their daughters to take monastic vows.\textsuperscript{28} Continued research on these genres of monastic women’s writing – whether subversive, celebratory or polemical – will further illuminate how these works were used to instruct, entertain and advance political and religious objectives.

Holy women such as Catherine of Siena, Caterina de’ Ricci, Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi, Angela of Foligno and Paola Antonia Negri produced notable examples of the genre of spiritual letters, which flourished especially in Italy. These were letters \textit{sensu lato}, since they often included spiritual advice with descriptions of visions, ecstasies and prophecies. Furthermore, they were not always \textit{written} by women

\begin{footnotes}
\item 22 Coolahan, 2010, pp. 78–95.
\item 23 Woodford, 2002, pp. 78–105.
\item 24 Carr, 2009; Owens, 2009.
\item 25 Salazar, 2002.
\item 26 Conley in Pascal, 2003, pp. 6–7.
\item 27 Lay in Lux-Sterritt, 2011; Diefendorf in van Wyhe, 2008.
\item 28 Jussie, 2006; Tarabotti, 2004.
\end{footnotes}
but instead dictated to a confessor or sister nun, and subsequently transcribed, collected, edited and published through the intervention of men. By the middle of the sixteenth century, as churchmen became increasingly suspicious of women’s revelations, men dominated the genre. The female-authored genre did not die out, however. In Spain, Maria de Jesús de Ágreda (1602–65) maintained an epistolary relationship with Philip IV for over 40 years, providing him with spiritual and political counsel. And on the threshold of the Enlightenment, the Tuscan visionary Maria Caterina Brondi (1684–1719) dispensed spiritual instruction to her devotees, including high-ranking ecclesiastics. Diachronic studies of this genre can thus provide insights into how tolerance for women’s spiritual authority might rise and fall, only to re-emerge over the longue durée.

The private letters nuns wrote to clerics, family and friends generally fall into two categories: the confessional and the quotidian. Written confessions, or rather spiritual ‘reports’ to confessors, were sometimes later recycled in hagiobiographies. Through quotidian letters, some nuns exerted influence on family decisions. Teresa of Ávila often gave her brothers financial advice and weighed in on the vocational plans of her nieces and nephews. Nuns might also use informal letters to give spiritual direction. Teresa guided her brother Lorenzo through a period of spiritual depression and advised him on his penitential practices. She mixed recipes for herbal remedies with spiritual counsel in her letters to her prioresses.

Through her familiar letters Jacqueline Pascal incorporated defences of women’s rights to pursue a religious vocation against family objection and, in certain cases, to reject the counsel of confessors and theologians. From the continent, exiled English nuns maintained postal networks with relatives in England, promoting family interests and bolstering their loved ones’ recusant piety. In this context, ‘no letter may be classified simply as family news; each served a personal, spiritual and practical purpose.’

Yet a third category consisted of official letters of petition or grievance. The most famous practitioner of this sub-genre was undoubtedly Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the celebrated Mexican polymath, whose mastery of forensic rhetoric is brilliantly illustrated in her Answer to Sor Filotea (1691). Other nuns with less classical erudition were nonetheless familiar with letter-writing rules from widely available vernacular handbooks. Furthermore, they proved able to use the rhetoric of subordination effectively to assure that their complaints would be heard. The challenge for scholars is to weigh rhetoric against more-or-less ingenuous

expression and to understand how letter writers used conventions but also adapted form and language according to their persuasive goals.  

Recent scholarship has recovered a substantial corpus of plays by nuns from Italy, Spain and the New World, which incorporates a wide variety of subject matter from biblical, hagiographic, allegorical or romance traditions. Some plays allude to the isolation and tedium of the convent; others, while giving voice to intramural conflict, encourage reconciliation to monastic life. The works of Sor Marcela de San Félix (1605–87), the illegitimate daughter of the playwright Lope de Vega, suggest how these plays might simultaneously register the joys and dissatisfactions of a cloistered life. Marcela’s allegorical plays follow the spiritual development of ‘Alma’ from her troubled novitiate to settled maturity. In each play ‘Alma’ must triumph over a particular vice – ‘Appetite’, the ‘World’, ‘Apathy’ and ‘Indiscreet Zeal’, aided by her sister nuns ‘Mortification’, ‘Simplicity’, ‘Truth’, ‘Love’ and ‘Peace’. As the plays trace the career of a model nun, they also suggest the particular perils of monastic life and betray a certain protofeminist solidarity and resistance to male authority. In the last play in the series, ‘Indiscreet Zeal’ is personified as the confessor to the convent. At the beginning of the play, ‘Alma’ admires his fervour, but she becomes increasingly aware of his hypocrisy and with the help of the female virtues she throws him out of the convent. Despite their didacticism, the plays provided opportunities for wit, gender-bending (nuns impersonated male characters) and slapstick humour. Recovering more of these often delightful texts will give us insight into how nuns celebrated their vocations, satirized their society, diffused interpersonal tensions and explored theological questions.  

The recovery of little-known texts has stimulated critical interest in the aesthetic and ideological functions of religious poetry by nuns. A great variety of genres, ranging from ballads, couplets, hymns and carols to more sophisticated Italianate verse forms such as sonnets and madrigals are represented. Two broad categories have emerged, however: popular songs for work or recreation, which were generally anonymous and improvisational, and ‘high culture’ poems of known authorship intended for broader circulation. In both cases, poets drew upon a wealth of poetic traditions, providing further evidence that secular literary currents found their way into convents.

Women’s religious poetry raises questions similar to those that have preoccupied scholars of secular poetry of the period. Given a poetics predicated on imitatio, how can we evaluate the creativity of individual poets? And given the conventionality of lyric poetry, is the presumed sincerity of the lyric subject merely an effect of a successfully executed rhetoric of sincerity? Women’s mystical poetry presents additional questions. What accounts for the considerable variation in the freedom

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38 Weaver, 2002, pp. 113–68.
40 Recent editions include Del Sera, 1990; María de San Alberto, 1998; Pulci, 2011; Sten and Gutiérrez Estupiñán, 2007.
with which female poets used the erotic language of nuptial mysticism? Women poets in late sixteenth-century Spain, apprehensive that they would be associated with the heresy of Alumbradismo, evidently felt the need to attenuate the eroticism of mystical poetry by emphasizing the allegorical signified of erotic metaphors or by avoiding a first-person lyrical voice altogether. Others embraced the nuptial language with a surprising lack of inhibition. There is, for example, striking sensuality in a poem by Marcela de San Félix, in which a simple country bride longs to be alone with her bridegroom once the wedding festivities are over. In women’s mystical poetry we sometimes find the same androgynous imagery that Bynum identified as an aspect of female piety in the High Middle Ages. Christ is at once male and female; the lyric voice longs to enter into Christ’s wounds or drink from his wounds and breasts. In Eucharistic poems, the principal metaphors for merger are, not surprisingly, alimentary. Why was female devotio so intensely focused on the body? And why was suffering so often eroticized? In studies of prose as well as poetry, these questions continue to be debated from psychoanalytic as well as historical-functionalist perspectives.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that most convent poetry was informed by nuptial mysticism or that women poets constantly feared censure. The French nun Anne de Marquets (c. 1533–88) wrote and published two collections of religious verse during her lifetime. Marquets enjoyed the patronage of Marguerite de Valois, the king’s sister, and developed a life-long friendship with the Catholic theologian Claude d’Espence; the two translated each other’s poetry and collaborated on a bilingual Latin and French edition of liturgical collects. Although her poetry is devotional rather than mystical, the Sonets spirituels reflect interest in methods of silent meditation popular in late sixteenth-century Catholic Europe, particularly meditation on Christ’s Passion. Like other women in this period, Marquets finds a precedent for a female apostolate in the women who first witnessed Christ’s resurrection. In one of her sonnets for Resurrection Sunday she writes, ‘Mark how today women are granted the honor/ Of being the first to see their sovereign Lord,/ Of kissing his feet, and announcing to the Apostles/ That he has vanquished death and now lives.’ The sonnet ends by defiantly challenging men: ‘And so, henceforth, rail against us no more:/ Begrudge us not our honors, be satisfied with your own.’ In addition to this strain of Christian feminism, Marquets’s poetry displays other characteristics that can be usefully examined in relation to gender: ‘the prevalence of imagery relating to motherhood [and] to the nursing and care of infants; … the extensive use of positive female exemplars; the strongly evoked sense of female community; [and] the emphasis on the human qualities of Christ, particularly those of humility, patience, and obedience, traditionally gendered as feminine …’.45

42 Arenal in ibid.
45 Ferguson and Hampton, 2000, p. 219. For women’s religious poetry in Italy, see Graziosi, 2005; for an anthology of Spanish poetry, Olivares and Boyce, 2011; for critical
Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz deserves special comment here. Until relatively recently her religious writing attracted much less interest than her secular compositions. Whether she had at any point in her life a genuine religious vocation is still intensely debated. However, studies of her religious verse, such as *villancicos* (carols) dedicated to Saint Catherine and her explicitly theological ‘Letter Worthy of Athena’ (1690), have argued for the continuity of her religious and secular feminism.\(^{46}\)

The questions raised by these poets may be relevant to other female poets of the period yet to be studied: What is the relation between the biographical subject and the lyric subject? What networks of friendship and patronage made it possible for women to overcome their anxiety of authorship and usher their poems into print? When do women ventriloquize male discourse and when do they parody it? When is it legitimate to assume the sincerity of lyric expression?\(^{47}\) And finally, in our effort to avoid pathologizing mystical writers, have we ignored what the erotic language of mysticism might say about the authors’ sexual desires and sexual guilt? Greenberg’s comments on the visions of Marie de l’Incarnation are also apposite for mystical poetry: mystic language calls attention to ‘the inextricably bound strands of an intensely felt sexuality, expressed in and through an equally intense rhetoric of loss of self in union with the divine other’.\(^{48}\)

Scholars are now beginning to attend to the histories and literature of semi-religious women, those who took informal vows of chastity and poverty but lived ‘in the world’, either alone or in informal communities. Eluding enclosure necessitated compromise, support from powerful ecclesiastics, or both. One of the most successful of these associations was the Company of St Ursula, founded by Angela Merici (c.1470–1540) in Brescia in 1535. Merici dictated two treatises to her secretary that, like some of the works described above, embed spiritual teaching in pedagogical guides.\(^{49}\) To the extent that semi-religious women lacked the guidance of learned confessors or the protection of a religious order, those who ventured into the terrain of religious reform were more vulnerable than their monastic sisters to accusations of pretence of sanctity.\(^{50}\) Others, blessed with aristocratic status or elite patronage, successfully fashioned an extramural apostolate. The Spanish noblewoman Luisa de Carvajal (1566–1614) travelled to London, where, with the support of the Jesuits, she proselytized and ministered to recusant Catholics. Carvajal was a prodigious writer. She left behind volumes of letters, memoirs, a corpus of 50 poems and a rule for the group of semi-religious women who lived with her in London.\(^{51}\)

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\(^{46}\) Wray in Bergmann and Schlau, 2007; Kirk, 1998; Parker, 2008.

\(^{47}\) Powell in Olivares, 2009.

\(^{48}\) Greenberg, 2001, p. 178.


\(^{50}\) Ahlgren, 2005; Schutte, 1996.

\(^{51}\) Carvajal, 2000. For analysis of her poetry, see Cruz in Olivares, 2009; for selections of poetry, Olivares and Boyce, 2011; for her letters, Levy-Navarro in Couchman and Crabb, 2005. The letters have been edited by Redworth and Henstock, 2012.

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studies of Spanish and Portuguese poets, Fox, 2008.
obsession with martyrdom, aristocratic hauteur and self-mortification, willingness to submit to clerical authority and rejection of enclosure – demonstrates how the impulses of penitential and apostolic piety were intertwined in the lives of pious laywomen. Elite women such as Carvajal, Barbe Acarie (1566–1618) and the Parisian dévotes point to a phenomenon that deserves further study from a comparative perspective: ‘state-of-emergency feminism’, or the conviction that in times of crisis, God calls upon women as reserve troops, especially when men have let him down.52

As I have argued, the pioneering scholars of women’s religious literature were motivated in large part by the desire to recover forgotten female-authored texts and expand the literary canon to include women. Despite enormous advances, the task of recovery – of preparing modern editions and translations with philological rigour – remains unfinished. We can also profit from applying the traditional tools of literary analysis – considerations of genre, sources, reception and rhetoric – to newly recovered texts. Concepts derived from poststructuralist theory – attention to misprision, narrative gaps and silences, and logical impasses – can also deepen our understanding. However, many of the assumptions literary scholars bring to the study of belles lettres – individual authorship, the ideal of a definitive edition, the primacy of the aesthetic function of the text – are not fully applicable. The notion of authorship in particular requires reassessment. As Myers stated, ‘In our eagerness to discover new voices to add to literary canons and histories, at times we have failed to question whose voice, in fact, we really hear.’53 Just as we cannot always locate a single author in women’s monastic writing, we must listen for those instances in which, paradoxically, third-person discourse is less mediated than first-person discourse. Nuns’ voices can also be heard in florilegia (spiritual commonplace books) and in translations of male-authored texts and their paratexts.54 Future research needs not only to consider the mediated nature of many texts but also to refine distinctions among different kinds of collaboration, such as coaching, quoting, rewriting and anthologizing.

We also need a more sophisticated analysis of nuns as rhetoricians. Even though few nuns studied rhetoric formally, it is increasingly evident that some had absorbed the informal registers of sacred oratory.55 Humility topoi are readily identifiable, but we might look for examples of apoplanesis (‘evading the issue by digressing’), argumentum ex concessis (‘reasoning from the premises of one’s opponent’), occultatio (‘emphasizing something by pointedly seeming to pass over it’) and so forth.56 It will be important to study male-authored examples as well. Did male authors embed controversial messages in their devotional writing? Do we find the same frequency and distribution of rhetorical techniques? To what extent is the difference of women’s rhetoric one of degree rather than kind? A similar attention to gender will be fruitful for examining the pragmatic dimensions of

52 On Acarie, see Diefendorf in van Wyhe, 2008; on the dévotes, Rapley, 1990.
53 Myers, 2000, p. 156.
women’s monastic writing. How is the presence of imagined addressees, whether male or female, sympathetic or hostile, reflected in discursive strategies?

As the corpus of women’s religious writing expands, it will be important to trace how writers responded to and modified previous models of female authority and holiness. Studies on biblical foremothers (Martha, Mary Magdalene and the Samaritan woman) and local or national saints (Catherine of Siena and Bridget of Sweden) can shed light on how these women authorized behaviour and literary activity.\(^57\) How women responded to male models such as Augustine, Paul, Joseph and Francis also deserves further attention.\(^58\) As in the case of women’s use of authorities in general, we need to ask if women ‘misread’ (deliberately or not) their model saints.

The Romantic idea of a single, definitive version of a spiritual autobiography, like the notion of the ingenuously expressive author, should be abandoned in favour of the recognition of multiple non-definitive textual versions. To understand how texts are ‘repurposed’ (especially in the promotion of a saint) it will be important to place them in the context of hagiobiographies, beatification testimonies and other evidence of an emerging or failing cult.

As I have argued, the study of monastic women’s writing has been enriched by parallel developments in women’s history, gender studies and the history of spirituality. Directions for future research may lie more comfortably within one discipline but will benefit from awareness of the critical paradigms in cognate disciplines. Comparative studies that move beyond the usual focus on single language areas, on single orders or on religious communities of one sex can help clarify why creativity and activism flourished in some places and were suffocated in others. Another promising area for comparative investigation is the relation between texts by nuns and visual images associated with them, which sometimes played complementary roles in the construction of sanctity.\(^59\) The close relationship between poetic composition, music and singing begs for further analysis. Studies on convent material culture represent yet another promising path. We note, for example, that some Italian nuns were required to bring pens and inkwells with them when they professed, but these instruments were forbidden in other convents.\(^60\) The Dominican nuns of Saint Louis in Poissy, France, enjoyed the privilege of owning and bequeathing books and manuscripts from one generation of their sisters to the next, but Spanish Discalced Carmelites often found it difficult to obtain decent paper and pens, much less pay their letter couriers.\(^61\) How convent finances, physical environment (gardens, scriptoria and libraries), monastic rules

\(^{57}\) Grieco in Zarri and Scaraffia, 1999.
\(^{58}\) On Saint Joseph as a model of holiness for women, see Sabat de Rivers, 1998.
\(^{60}\) Lowe, 2003, p. 7.
and customs (periods of recreation, the regulation of visitors, celebratory rituals and property rights) influenced literary production are provocative questions.62

Research on women’s religious writing might contribute to a revision of larger historical narratives about women’s agency and the emergence of social discipline in the early modern confessional state. Scholarship has rightly emphasized a historical trajectory leading from a broad cultural acceptance of female charismatic spirituality in the late Middle Ages to heightened suspicion and control throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But as Strasser warned, ‘It becomes easy to lose sight of the extent to which women partook, of their own accord and often quite enthusiastically, in the ascetic renewal and disciplining of spiritual life that was under way in society at large.’63 It is important, therefore, to recognize that women were sometimes agents (and collaborators with men) as well as objects of social discipline. Moving forward, scholars will need to develop a more flexible narrative of Catholicism that can account for local differences in the implementation of post-Tridentine social discipline.

We might also cast a critical eye well beyond Trent. Scholars have demonstrated continuities between late medieval and early modern female spirituality, but the relationship between the latter and eighteenth-century spirituality in Europe is less fully developed. The growing tendency for churchmen to dismiss the power of women visionaries and thaumaturges in the course of the seventeenth century seems to confirm Max Weber’s paradigm of the disenchantment of the early modern world, one in which ecstatic spirituality came to be seen as extravagant, irrational and indecorous.64 But what accounts for the sporadic resurgence of the charismatic female well into the eighteenth century? How would a more thorough understanding of women’s spirituality and women’s writing in the autumn of the age of the miraculous alter the reigning paradigms of secularization?65

The question of agency is also implicated in the question of women’s somatic spirituality. We have seen that women’s religious writing in this period is often intensely focused on the suffering body. The contributions of Bynum have encouraged us to see how some women, previously dismissed as hysterics, found spiritual affirmation and social recognition in suffering. But it is equally important not to fall into the trap of essentializing historical behaviours. As Bruneau remarks: ‘[W]omen’s bodies are a locus of contradictory and paradoxical expressions of protest and retreat, of collusion and resistance to their subordinate status, and they reflect both subordination and impulses toward empowerment.’66 We might also look at penitential suffering diachronically. How did practices change over the course of a women’s life? Did periods when the attraction for physical mortification

62 Pioneering studies include Evangelisti, 2000; Hills, 2004; Lehfeldt, 2003; Ortiz Lottman and Carrión, both in Kallendorf, 2010.
64 Amelang, 2005, pp. 163–6.
65 For an exemplary collection of essays that examine female Catholic spirituality over the longue durée, see Lux-Sterritt and Mangion, 2011.
was irresistible alternate with happier states of tranquillity? When did an individual
or community come to prefer a sound body for apostolic service over a body
wracked by pain? A task for future scholars, then, is to discriminate between the
self-actualizing and self-destructive potential of women’s somatic spirituality and
also be aware of the interplay of what Diefendorf has described as ‘two distinct but
related spiritual impulses’ in female religiosity – to suffer and to serve.67

A related question is the relation between women’s religious literature and the
creation of a secular feminist consciousness. Gerda Lerner’s definition continues to
provide a useful framework for analysis. Lerner posited a historical progression by
which women became aware of belonging to a subordinate group, recognized that
their subordination was socially determined, developed a sense of sisterhood and
ultimately defined and developed an alternative vision of the future.68 Although
some nuns did indeed express an awareness of women’s socially determined
subordination within the church and develop strategies for changing their condition
within the church, it would be difficult to argue that any one of them developed
an alternative vision of the future predicated on the civil equality between the
sexes and among all classes. It may be more useful to think in terms of plural
feminisms: ‘state-of-emergency’ feminism, described above; ‘ecclesial feminism’,
or the conviction that women have been unjustly deprived of their role as Christ’s
legitimate disciples; and ‘matriarchal feminism’, a sense of spiritual authority,
based on identification with a holy foremother, that supersedes patriarchal laws.69

As Rapley noted, men such as François de Sales (the co-founder of the Visitandines
with Jeanne-Françoise de Chantal in 1609) also subscribed to a variant of state-of-
emergency feminism – the notion that God sometimes made use of weak women
to confound proud men: ‘[T]his paradox of strength in weakness allowed others
... to acknowledge women’s capacity for holiness while at the same time retaining
traditional prejudices about their natural weaknesses.’70 Our task, then, is to identify
how the pro- and anti-woman strands of Christian discourse might converge,
without ignoring the spiritual rewards that some women found in submission and
obedience or the special gifts some men were willing to concede to them.

Finally, I return to the question of gender, ‘voice’ and agency. Is agency
compatible with a Catholic ideology that affirms women’s intellectual and
emotional inferiority – save for divinely appointed exceptions to the rule – and
exalts abnegation as a cardinal feminine virtue? One promising approach has
been proposed by Martin, who argues that Renaissance men and women thought
not in terms of ‘individuality’ but rather plural identities: ‘a collective self’
(in which group identity was paramount), ‘a performative self’ (reflecting the need
to assume different roles in different contexts), and a ‘porous self’ (a sense that
the body was permeable to supernatural forces).71 Close readings of women’s texts

70 Rapley in Carr, 2007, p. 156.
can reveal imbricated discourses of holy submission and holy disobedience, group will and individual calling, demonic vulnerability and divine empowerment. Following Connell’s fruitful observation that there are subordinate and dominant masculinities, we might also contemplate similar variants of femininity, focusing attention on how age, class and economic power intersect with gender in shaping power relations. This approach should also remind us that the awareness of subordination does not automatically result in female solidarity. Such a conceptual framework acknowledges the ideological forces that constrain women but also imagines women as actors capable of subverting, defying or otherwise improvising upon gendered codes of behaviour. To conclude, if it is difficult to envisage a time when women’s religious writing will be incorporated into the mainstream of national literary disciplines, the field can nevertheless serve as an example of the value of interdisciplinary scholarship when we attend to the complex relations of gender, religion and early modern creativity.

References


