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A Review by Mityline Myhr

Birberick, Anne L., Thomas M. Carr and Russell J. Ganim, eds. *The Cloister and the World: Early Modern Convent Voices*. Studies in Early Modern France 11. Charlottesville: Rookwood Press, 2007. 267 pages.

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This most recent addition to the *Studies in Early Modern France* series addresses the growing body of work dedicated to the explosion of new and reformed women's religious communities in France. In the past fifteen years a wide variety of studies have established the importance of these communities to French society, emphasizing their intimate connections to the secular world and rejecting older interpretations that viewed religious women as isolated and marginalized from their families, friends, and events of the day. The purpose of this volume is to build on this previous work and suggest new avenues of research, most notably by focusing on published and unpublished writing produced by nuns. For researchers interested in Early Modern religious women and French history in general, this is a very useful book in terms of its evaluation of the historiography and the variety of approaches to convent writing offered by scholars from different academic disciplines. It is equally helpful to scholars of French literature, as convent writing spans many different genres: poetry, history, biography, chronicles, hymns, death notices, constitutions, legal briefs, devotional guides and even marriage manuals.

In his *état present*, Carr notes that the convent writing published in France during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has so far attracted the most attention from historians rather than literary scholars. In Hispanic studies convent writing is an academic discipline and is moving in that direction in Italian studies. Carr hopes that this volume will help to "move [French convent writing] out of the cloister by giving it the visibility to be taken into account more widely, whether in literary studies, in the realm of spirituality, in historical accounts, or as a form of *écriture féminine*." (8) To this end, he highlights a number of areas in need

of research and includes a checklist of works published by French nuns before the Revolution.

Since a short review cannot possibly do justice to the different texts and methodological approaches modeled in the chapters, I therefore will note a couple of thought provoking themes. Several chapters utilize institutional texts to gain insights into the construction of a communal identity. Convent chronicles, such as those examined by Susan Broomhall in “Familial and Social Networks in the Later Sixteenth Century French Convent: the Benedictines of Beaumont-lès-Tours,” demonstrate the strong connections that existed between the nuns and their families, even after reforms that reinforced the cloister were enacted. Those connections, in fact, were essential in maintaining the community’s sense of autonomy in the face of outside intervention, whether royal or by their male Benedictine superiors. In “*Un trésor enfoui, une lampe sous un boisseau*: Seventeenth-Century Visitandines Describe their Vocation,” Elizabeth Rapley analyzes death notices. These short descriptions of deceased sisters help to pass from one generation to the next the values of the founders. They preserve the original *institut* even in the face of changing times and devotional trends. These three essays highlight the resilience of women’s communities in the face of challenges to their identities and traditions.

Another set of essays uses a variety of texts to better understand how communities and individual nuns interacted through published work with religious and government officials as well as the broader secular society. In her very interesting essay on demonic possession, “Nuns, Demons, and Exorcists: Ventriloquism and the Voice of Authority in Provence (1609-1611),” Katherine Dauge-Roth suggests that Louyse Capeau, an Ursuline nun from Provence, and her exorcists, were able to use her possession to allow her to transgress the usually strict line between teaching and preaching. The demon, through Capeau, preached a message of orthodox Counter-Reformation theology, which, particularly at a time when the Ursulines of Provence were being moved into the cloister, would have been normally prohibited (77). All the authors are acutely aware, however, that nuns’ voices were usually mediated or edited by their male superiors. Catherine de Bar, a Benedictine nun whose work is analyzed by Daniel-Odon Hurel in “*Moines et moniales en France aux XVIIe et*

*XVIIIe siècles: les Bénédictines de Saint-Maur, Catherine de Bar, et la Trinité de Fécamp,*” made changes to the constitutions she was writing after receiving critiques from her spiritual directors. Still more stark were the nuns who stopped writing because it was considered to be in violation of the central female virtue of humility. The example of Carmelite Charlotte de Saint-Cyprien is nicely illustrated in Pauline Chaduc’s “*L’Esprit, obstacle à la sainteté? L’itinéraire de la carmélite Charlotte de Saint-Cyprien, dirigée de Fénelon.*”

As Carr points out in his introduction, the women whose works are examined in these articles lived lives very different from our own today. The careful attention to the historical context as well as the sensitive analysis of their texts preserves their differences as well as offers many insights into their lives and values as well as those of their communities and broader societies. I hope that this volume will inspire many more such profitable studies.

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