From Salons to Convents: Female Emancipation in Seventeenth-Century Paris, 1600-1670

Isobella Goonetillake
Honors Thesis Submitted to the
Department of History, Georgetown University
Advisor: Professor James Collins
Honors Program Chair: Professor Katherine Benton-Cohen

May 7, 2018
Table of Contents

I. Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................. 3

II. Chapter One: Introduction ................................................................................................. 4

III. Chapter Two: The Relationship Between the Catholic Church of France and Female Emancipation in Seventeenth-Century Paris................................................................. 10

IV. Chapter Three: The Convent: A Place of Strict Enclosure or a Platform for a Newfound Female Religiosity? The Development of Female Spirituality in Paris in the seventeenth Century ................................................................................................................. 35

V. Chapter Four: The Nobility as an Obstacle to Female Liberty........................................... 65

VI. Chapter Five: The Parisian Noblewoman’s Response to Inequality: Contempt, Disconformity, Combat and Reinforcement ............................................................................................................ 89

VII. Chapter Six: Conclusion .................................................................................................. 107

VIII. Bibliography ..................................................................................................................... 113
Acknowledgements

I would like to extend thanks to my thesis advisor, Professor James Collins. Without his help this project would simply not have been possible. I would also like to thank Professor Amy Leonard of the Georgetown History Department who was a valuable resource in writing Chapters Two and Three of this project. Of course, I would also like to thank Dr. Katherine Benton-Cohen who guided me through this project.

I would also like to extend thanks to my parents, siblings and roommates.

I give permission to Lauinger Library to publish this thesis and make it available to the public.
Chapter One: Introduction

In the latter part of the 16th century, the ecumenical council that convened at Trent added a critical and groundbreaking term to their treatise that would permanently modify the role of women in Catholicism and beyond. “Clausura” called for all religious women to be plainly subordinated by their male bishops: limited to the sphere of convents and denied of all mobility, freedom of speech, or autonomy. By the late eighteenth century, and at the point of Revolution, the most progressive element of the National Convention—the Jacobins—were sentencing countless Parisian women to the guillotine for their so-called counterrevolutionary behavior. Any observer would ask themselves how the political, economic and social character of women in French society changed so drastically and dramatically, and why at every step their male counterparts—regardless of their religion or politics—proceeded to quash female attempts to be heard. By the 1670s, although Paris may have been booming and developing into “the new Rome,” many of its norms and standards remained shockingly inegalitarian towards its women. This thesis explores the limits to and potentialities of female emancipation in the seventeenth century, specifically in Paris.

Paris was a society that needed to incorporate women for its development towards modernity but did so at the reproach of its elites, both ecclesiastical and noble. In other words, Paris was a society at odds with a minority that would come to form an integral part of its modern identity. The city did not necessarily have a rigid social structure, but every level of its hierarchy had a distinct culture distinctive from the other. For this reason, choosing Paris as a case study meant that it has been relatively simple to extricate the study of religious women from aristocratic for the purpose of this thesis. This study will treat aristocratic women as those from the titled, and occasionally landed, elite class of Parisian society, and this definition is tied to
social status rather than monetary wealth. From a class perspective, the lives of the “personnes de qualité” could not be further from those of at the bottom rung of the social ladder, and for this reason, the quotidian experience of a Parisian varied immensely from class to class. The critical component of this study is that, as established, almost all Parisian women experienced discrimination on account of their gender but did so in different setting, means and contexts. An aristocratic woman whose life was filled with letter writing, salons, reading, maintenance of the family estate 1 and social duties could not be immediately compared with the life of a female prostitute or street seller.

These groupings of women were united by three measures of inequality (as I will use to evaluate equality in this particular study): their participation in society at large, to what extent discrimination played a role in their quotidian experience and societal attitude towards them. Through these measures, it is clear that while the quotidian experience differed between aristocratic women and religious women, their exclusion from society at large and the general animosity towards them from men (including prevailing negative depictions of women) were more comparable. For this reason, there is merit to comparison between women of different social classes in seventeenth-century France, and Paris acts as the perfect case study for this thesis.

Beyond the geographical space of Paris, the temporal space of the seventeenth century is also a crucial part of this study. The seventeenth century corresponded with a certain back-and-forth for female freedom, which eventually ended in a drastically improved state of affairs by 1700. Beginning with the policy of “enclosure”\(^1\) and ending with the almost complete

\(^1\) Enclosure and clausura refer to the requirement from the Council of Trent that meant that the majority of religious women were forced to live segregated from men and others in society in the convent, denied mobility or interaction with the outside world.
deterioration of clausura, this time period saw a turn around in the place of women in French society. Two female Regents, Marie de Medici (1610-1614, but dominant until 1617) and Anne of Austria (1643-1651), nominally ruled France in the names of their underaged sons: both women retained considerable power after Louis XIII (October 1614) and Louis XIV (September 1651) reached their legal royal majority, at age 13.\(^2\) The female tendency to fill and excel in male roles will be explored further with the “Frondeuses,” and such examples are demonstrative, again, of the benefit of studying Paris as a city in which women regencies encouraged others to take on traditionally masculine occupations.

Temporally, the seventeenth century provides an ample context for the study of the changing role of women due to religious movements. During the 1630s, France became involved in the Thirty Years War and in 1610 the King himself--Henry IV-- was assassinated by a religious fanatic. Although the Paris of early modern France was fundamentally a fortress of Roman Catholicism, it was consistently on the brink of religious warfare. In the upper echelons of the Catholic Church, bishops and members of the clergy sought political gain and had little care for charity. Cardinals and bishops alike came from noble families who held a large proportion of the city’s wealth, meaning that ecclesiastical matters were inevitably wedded with the political-- a marriage that would come to anger Parisian people in years to come. Furthermore, in despite of Henry IV’s policy of toleration towards Protestants as laid out in the 1598 Edict of Nantes, there was widespread antagonism towards Protestantism. From the 1630s, the growth of Jansenism amongst the Catholic clergy created another religious problem. Such movements could potentially undermine the supposedly absolute authority of the Church. To

\(^2\) By the seventeenth century, jurists’ interpretation of French law stated that the king became a legal adult at the start of his 14th year, that is, on his 13th birthday. Private individuals became legal adults at ages varying from 21 to 25, depending on local customary law. In Paris, unmarried individuals disposed of their property at age 25; legally married people obtained this right at 20.
undermine the Church was to subvert the divine right of the King, and therefore that of the executive power of the state. Louis XIV would eventually resolve Henry’s edict, in a direct attack on France’s Protestant population, highlighting how turbulent a time the seventeenth century was for faith movements, and for the Parisian woman’s relation to them. Catholicism took the forefront of most political and social dialogue, yet by the eighteenth century, the power of faith had undeniably declined. For many members of the Parisian elites, religion and the Church would no longer remain the deciding factor on female emancipation. Ultimately, the rise and fall of religious movements gave women a space for participation that they had previously been denied, and the complex and often strained relationship between Catholicism and Paris’ women faithful makes the social grouping of cloistered nuns a particularly intriguing collectivity to study.

Above all, the study of seventeenth-century Paris provides the historian with a distinct case of emboldened patriarchy, in that the male elites of the ecclesiastical, and of the royalty, government, and nobility were occupied with the same concerns. The cloistering of women arguably benefitted male elites, disregarding the prospective spouses of the cloistered. A cloistered woman could not freely express her views, protest, or stand up to male discrimination. A cloistered woman could not reproduce, and therefore could not produce illegitimate heirs that might tamper with the family structure or inheritance. A cloistered woman, in theory, could also not meddle in family affairs, or even worse, affairs of the state. Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, a cloistered woman forfeited her right to property and any monetary inheritance and therefore did not dilute the line of male inheritance. It may be counter-intuitive for the historian to consider the patriarchy as one force against women, and this is not altogether true, but the effects of cloistering was undoubtedly advantageous to propertied men economically, and for
this reason, the concerns of the elite were the same as the ecclesiastical. Female emancipation was limited in large part due to the unification of the Parisian patriarchy against a woman’s right to inherit.

But what truly entails emancipation, or even liberty in this context? For the purpose of this study, female liberty must be understood as separate from gender equality. In the context of the seventeenth-century France expecting the same level of societal participation and tolerance between men and women of any social ranking simply was not feasible. Similarly to expecting the women of this study to all exhibit modern feminism, the historian cannot expect an equal playing field between men and women in a time when women would not even be permitted to cast a vote for several centuries. For that reason, this thesis will define liberty in different terms. Female liberty may be understood as the ability to be mobile, to be permitted to divine for oneself a role in society, to have freedom of speech to the extent where one can defend themselves and to be sexually liberal. From this standpoint, this thesis will assess the difference between the liberty of aristocratic women and religious women.

In order for this study to adequately ascertain the difference in female emancipation between these two classes of women, the obstacles to this emancipation must be assessed. From examination of the historiography of the period, it becomes clear that there are three definite obstacles to emancipation that historians are divided on: the Church, the legal system, and the nature of the Parisian aristocracy. Although study of the legal system may illuminate the restrictions a Parisian might face, it does not reveal the realities of life in seventeenth-century Paris. Analysis of the Church’s relation to freedom of Parisian religious women has rarely been done extensively and has often wrongly situated women solely as victims of a male-dominated system. This thesis will demonstrate how nuns used the injustice of Catholic doctrine against the
ecclesiastical system, to their advantage. The savviness of such women can be compared to the intellect and wit of Parisian noblewomen like Madame de Sévigné who orchestrated social and political matters around herself. The comparison between the obstacle of religion and that of aristocracy allows the historian to compare a codified system of oppression to one that was inherently uncodified, intangible and as a result more difficult to subvert. This thesis will assess the different obstacles to emancipation posed by religion and nobility, and how women from both walks of life attempted to overcome them, and to what extent they did.
Chapter Two: The Relationship between the Catholic Church and Female Emancipation in Seventeenth-Century Paris

Until the latter part of the 20th century, historians widely acknowledged that the Catholic Church was a bulwark against the development of female liberty: the growth of female spirituality, the ability for women to be mobile, to have freedom of speech to defend themselves and to be sexually liberal. The Church at the beginning of the seventeenth century certainly denied religious women the same liberties as working class or bourgeois women. Even before formal legislation from Council of Trent, bulls and treatises were often targeted at nuns, aiming to inhibit their ability to rise through the ranks in the Church and participate in wider society. With the Council of Trent, the rhetoric of the Catholic Church became more explicitly aimed towards all religious women. A particular decree was made on nuns which detailed the minutiae of clausura: the doctrine of enclosure of women within the cloister. This chapter will explore the roots of such inegalitarian thinking, the crystallization of this thinking through the Council of Trent, the transference of these ideas into Protestantism and Jansenism, and the reflection of them in the writings of women such as Jeanne de Chantal, Mere Angelique and Marie de l’Incarnation. This particular chapter will posit that religion—both Catholic and Protestant—did originally pose an obstacle to female emancipation, even if its power lessened over the course of the seventeenth century.

The roots of female subordination within Catholicism

Although the Council of Trent acted as the first clear demarcator of women’s roles within the church, and instituted a new status quo for nuns with the formal codification of enclosure, it was by no means the beginning of inegalitarian practices within the Catholic Church. Bruneau argues in *Women Mystics Confront the Modern World* that female disempowerment principally began as
early as the 11th century.\textsuperscript{3} She argues that it was Gregorian reform in the mid 11th century that allowed the Catholic Church to be placed under the sole control of the male clergy, whose role itself had increased.\textsuperscript{4} In fact, some historical research suggests that disempowerment of religious women in favor of men began as early as Roman law which granted unprecedented power to the paterfamilias. Although Bruneau wrongly implies that religious women had almost unchecked liberty in the Middle Ages, she is correct in her assertion that Gregorian reforms and Lateran Councils of the 11th century codified discrimination against women in a new and more institutional fashion. From the 11th century onwards, priests alone had the right to approach and touch the Eucharist and the Church was officially under the exclusive control of men. By the time of the 13th century, rhetoric from male religious figures became even more directed towards the oppression and demotion of devout women. Canons and theologians began to emphasize that women were prohibited from priesthood, and could not teach, preach or study religion. There even emerged ditties and verses that mocked the monastic life, but specifically the malicious sexuality of women and in particular nuns: “desir de fille est un feu qui devore/ Desir de nonne est cent fois pis encore,”\textsuperscript{5} (the desire of a girl is a fire that devours/ The desire of a nun is one hundred times worse still). Higher Church officials defanged women and vilified them in wider French society through both legislation and rhetoric. More specifically, the comparatively unrestrained liberty that religious women had possessed in the Middle Ages had become entirely corroded. Bruneau summarises the deterioration of female rights in the Church

\textsuperscript{3} Marie Florine Bruneau, \textit{Women Mystics Confront the Modern World: Marie De L'Incarnation (1599-1672) and Madame Guyon (1648-1717)} (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998) 7
\textsuperscript{4} Bruneau, 8.
well, saying that the developments “deprived women of the quasi-sacerdotal religious functions they had held and of the independence they had enjoyed before that time.”

Legislation from Rome, too, ensured that the ever increasing gap between men and women of the Church could be fully realized. Pope Boniface promulgated the bull Periculoso in 1298 which made clausura part of law for all women who had taken the three monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The bull was the first reassertion of clausura in writing, and occurred as male monastics were relieved of this burden. Even before the Council of Trent officially reinforced and expanded clausura, as a phenomenon it was legally codified at this moment in 1298.

Such bulls gave way to a kind of begrudgement towards female presence within the Church, and a persisting negative depiction of women. One can argue that the perception of female inferiority was present at Catholicism's very beginnings: Eve was, after all, the perpetrator of the original sin and the first instance of female disorderliness. But from the 13th century and onwards, the male clergy no longer perceived Eve as the source of female inferiority. Instead, the image of Eve as a malicious woman was employed to justify any maltreatment of religious women whatsoever. The clergy need only reference I Corinthians to note that women were to “keep silence in churches,” to support their claims. In the eyes of the Church, asserts Bruneau, womanhood became associated with “tears, weakness, compassion and irrationality.” Rapley agrees that nuns of the Old Regime were often accused of “idleness, childishness, back-biting, hypocrisy, sentimentality in prayer, prudery, preciousness, affectation

---

6 Rapley, The Dévotes, 112.
9 Bruneau, 16.
and vanity.”¹⁰ In this way, the patriarchy of the Catholic Church characterized women in a dual fashion as either malicious or feeble and emotional. Either way, a persisting quality was their excess of emotion and lack of reason. In comparison to male monastics, women were also “poor in spirit,” almost pseudo-religious, unable to replicate the same level of devotion as their male counterparts.¹¹ Criticisms of a similar flavor had appeared in classical sources that predated Christianity, but the Catholic Church incorporated these longstanding cultural tropes into religious doctrine and gave such vitriol a new public platform.

The gendered double standard that appears above and in wider Catholic doctrine extended to ideas of sexuality too. Rapley argues in *A Social History of the Cloister* that throughout the 14th and 15th centuries, chastity as a virtue became a principle that was increasingly associated with religiosity and eventually with women. By the 16th century, it was inextricably linked with the nun’s identity, close to being her raison d’etre.¹² Evidently, female subjugation by the Catholic Church did not begin with the Council of Trent, and instead was a long and gradual process that developed from as early as Roman law.

**The Council of Trent and the Power of Bishops**

The Council of Trent still certainly had a tangible effect on the Catholic Church and by extension on the role of the religious woman. The Council of Trent was the landmark event of the Counter-Reformation; an attempt on the part of the Catholic Church itself to re-assert themselves and its religious doctrine. The discussions that took place at the Council from 1545 to 1563 encompassed sacred scripture, religious traditions, the Holy Mass, the original sin, and the

---

¹¹ Bruneau, 223.
veneration of saints. The council was headed by three different Popes and precipitated a
reshuffling of the Catholic Church towards the more conservative side. The Council clamped
down on abuses in all monastic orders, both male and female, and insisted on the three
customary vows for both sexes. It nominally protected young women from being forced into
convents but also reinforced clausura upon all religious women. For the purpose of this study,
the focus shall be on this final inclusion, added at the twenty fifth session of the Council under
Pope Pius IV in 1563. The aforementioned position on enclosure is mentioned for the first time
in Chapter Five from a Decree entitled “On Regulars and Nuns” which begins by stating,
“Provision is made for the enclosure and safety of Nuns.”\(^{13}\) It declares that the “enclosure of
nuns be carefully restored,” in a renewal of the constitution of “Boniface VIII, which begins
Periculoso.”\(^ {14}\) In stating so, it becomes clear that the position and attitude that the Council of
Trent takes towards religious women is a continuation of a past decree, made more than two
centuries ago. In short, the Council of Trent codified the enclosure of the women faithful and
extended the policy of clausura to all women religious beyond those who had taken the monastic
vows, who would have already have experienced cloistered life. The enclosure of nuns abjectly
removed any potential female heirs from civil society, and entailed that a nun forfeit any right to
her family property. The advantage that enclosure implicitly gave to nobles and other elites
should not be forgotten, and it would be wrong to say that the decree was a purely ecclesiastical
move.

The decree goes on to detail that even at a time of the election of the convent’s superior,
no one would be permitted entrance to the establishment, as this would constitute a breach of the

\(^{13}\) The Council of Trent of The Twenty-Fifth Session, 

\(^{14}\) The Council of Trent of The Twenty-Fifth Session, “Chapter 5,” 
rules of strict enclosure. Chapter Seven states that the bishop or superior should instead: “receive the votes of each, at the little window in the gates.” This minute detail added into a carefully written decree to be spread across Europe demonstrated how important it was to minimise contact between religious women and the outside world. The description of the gated monastery itself is apt. Rapley confirms that at the time convents were composed of double locked entrances, and grilles in more open spaces; no men could enter the enclosure and the convent was inhabited by younger women exclusively who were not permitted to leave. Madame de Jegou --an aristocrat who joined a Parisian convent--described the walls of the convent as a “rigid, cold barrier.” Even until the end of the Old Regime, five out of every six religious women would be enclosed within these very barriers.

In fact, Chapter Fourteen of the Decree stated that if a person who resides in the enclosure of a monastery steps outside it they would have “transgressed so notoriously as to be a scandal to the people.” The decree also strongly emphasised the importance of enclosure by stating that it should be enforced “on pain of excommunication,” thereby wielding the greatest threat that the Church could possibly present. Evidently, the segregation of religious women from the rest of society was something the Council of Trent took seriously. The emphasis on reinstating--with the use of "restored"--rather than simply instating clausura suggests that the clergy of the Catholic Church were unhappy with the newfound freedom of nuns, most likely in light of the Protestant Reformation and a perceived effervescence of female religiosity. Such a

---

17 Rapley, *The Dévotes*, 129.
decree made it almost impossible for religious women to resist the new norm of clausura: this was a Catholic doctrine that had been ordained by both papal bulls and the Council of Trent (and thereby the Pope). All faithful believed in the fundamental “immutability of Rule” and therefore could not argue against the words that emerged from Rome, especially when they were reinforced by every new superior of the convent.\textsuperscript{21}

The Council of Trent also impacted religious women in that it placed an enormous amount of power in the hands of the bishops. The language and decrees of the Council indefinitely empowered the male bishops and did so to the detriment of the women placed under their control. Chapter Five of the decree states, for example, “The holy Synod...enjoins on all bishops, by the judgement of God to which it appeals, and under pain of eternal malediction, that, by their ordinary authority, in all monasteries subject to them...they make it their special care, that the enclosure of nuns be carefully restored.” The statement denotes the installation of a new hierarchy in which the bishops become the superiors of the nuns. Indeed, the Council of Trent aimed to give bishops dominance over all non exempt female monasteries founded after 1600, for the purpose of restoring and maintaining clausura, ensuring that nuns practiced religion correctly and that their superiors were elected in a manner that pleased the clergy.\textsuperscript{22} The decree continues, “bishops and other superiors of convents of nuns, shall take particular care that the nuns be admonished in their constitutions...confess their sins, and...receive the most holy Eucharist.”\textsuperscript{23} With this statement, the decree established that the bishops were to be educators of the nuns in their faith. Bishops were to become, as Rapley states, the “ultimate arbiters of female

\textsuperscript{21} Rapley, \textit{A Social History of the Cloister}, 55.
\textsuperscript{22} Rapley, \textit{A Social History of the Cloister}, 50.
religious life.”24 Even beyond the gendered power dynamic at play here, this article marked a new era of episcopal control: bishops were to receive authority over religious houses both male and female and sought to change any orders that had Papal privileges exempting them from their jurisdiction. The power and avarice of the bishops led to a kind of tyranny that altered the hierarchy of the French Catholic Church: a change that included but was not limited to gender relations within religious life.

The Council of Trent certainly ensured that a new relationship was established between bishop and nun, one which initially inculcated a dependence and obedience amongst religious women. That is not to say that individuals did not still subvert this authority. The preclusion of Cluniac houses and the Jesuits from the bishop's' control demonstrated that their power was not unchecked. Powerful abbesses with links to nobility and royalty too felt at ease subverting the power of bishops, and would balk at being instructed or commanded by an episcopal authority. Catherine of Lorraine the abbesse of Remiremont, for instance, was the daughter of the Duke of Lorraine and the sister to his successor, who was certainly confident in her own jurisdiction. The authority of bishops was felt more over groups of women, and nuns in convents found it difficult to respond in the way abbesses could. As cloisters were constructed separately from one another, there was little kinship between nuns in separate convents, and therefore they had limited methods at their disposal to support one another. Instead, religious women became reliant on bishops as almost paternal figures, who would prevent the monasteries from going bankrupt.25 This dynamic often admittedly benefited women in convents, as bishops often allowed them to be lodged at their houses when convents neared financial ruin.26 This trend--although it saved nuns from poverty--perpetuated an unfortunate status quo where nuns existed at the will of the

26 Rapley, *A Social History of the Cloister*, 51
bishops. As mature women were rarely permitted entrance to convents, the majority of nuns were in their twenties or younger, leading to a troubling “paternal-filial” relationship between prelate and nun that often made the women susceptible to being scared into submission.\textsuperscript{27} This power play could be observed at Chapter meetings in which Madame Jegou remarks that “although the nuns...could prevent abuses, they seldom took the initiative.”\textsuperscript{28} Evidently, many nuns felt coerced and threatened by the authority of the bishops and did not feel at liberty to use their voices to discuss matters of the convent. Male religious authorities were attempting to define religious women by their docility and childishness, and a structure developed that made them helpless at the hands of bishops. Parisian religious women may not have accepted this redefinition but they had to be extraordinary careful about disobeying male authorities, especially the bishops. All of this would unfortunately come to define female spirituality to some extent in the early seventeenth century in light of the monastic revival, and in particular female obedience would come to form a cornerstone of Catholic identity.

More troubling about this redefinition of female spirituality, was the tendency of bishops to exploit their positions of power, further infringing upon the rights of religious women. The notion of rights for women in convents was laughable until the French Parlement established them in the eighteenth century following a decrease in uptake of women into convents,\textsuperscript{29} and until that point, power-grabbing on the part of the bishops was endemic. Rapley discusses instances of bishops attempting to construct a union between convents which they would preside over,\textsuperscript{30} and bishops trying to reform the nuns’ vows so that they would profess obedience not to

\textsuperscript{27} Rapley, \textit{A Social History of the Cloister}, 52.
\textsuperscript{28} Rapley, \textit{A Social History of the Cloister}, 123.
\textsuperscript{29} Rapley, \textit{A Social History of the Cloister}, 60.
\textsuperscript{30} Rapley, \textit{A Social History of the Cloister}, 52.
their formal superiors but to the bishops themselves.\textsuperscript{31} The bishop of Poitiers, for instance, reportedly attempted to make a novice at his convent officially answer to him and not to the superior as all others did by convention.\textsuperscript{32} One of the few rights that Trent granted to religious women was the right to elect a superior and their “officers”, but the Council of Trent left a loophole that if no adequate superior could be found, the King could name one.\textsuperscript{33} In 1660, Archbishop Harlay named all of the officers of the Ursulines of Rouen due to his own concerns about growing Jansenism within the monastery. This instance shows a bishop intervening in community life beyond the convent, and even going against the Rule in order to forward their own interests.\textsuperscript{34} One particular instance in 1643 saw the Bishop of the Ursulines of Perigueux—Francoise de la Beraudiere—demand that the nuns pay 5000 livres within the space of three months. When they refused he wrote to them: “Well! That is to be seen. We shall find out who is the master.”\textsuperscript{35} Although his demand was not necessarily unreasonable, his response was more damning. In reaction, one nun lamented, “all we had were words of thunder and lightning pronounced against us, to crush us..He would surely make us pay sooner or later.”\textsuperscript{36} The characterisation of the power of bishops as a force of nature is apt. To nuns like these, who had no formal rights, had no connection outside of the convent, who lived under the thumb of bishops, who were financially dependent on them, and had no understanding of the legal procedure they could use to combat such misdoings, the angry words of bishops seemed like a considerable force to be reckoned with.

\textsuperscript{31} Rapley, \textit{A Social History of the Cloister}, 58.
\textsuperscript{32} Rapley, \textit{A Social History of the Cloister}, 58.
\textsuperscript{33} Rapley, \textit{A Social History of the Cloister}, 59.
\textsuperscript{34} Rapley, \textit{A Social History of the Cloister}, 56.
It can be garnered that male and female faithful had largely disparate experiences of spirituality in the early seventeenth century. While male monasteries and religious orders had always had a collective unity, in this period, cloisters were becoming particularised, increasingly closed off and denied the same solidarity and collectivity.\footnote{Rapley, \textit{A Social History of the Cloister}, 52} Marie de l’Incarnation spoke to the isolation and oddity of the French female religious experience in her account of her visit to a New France Quebecan monastery: “they asked me why we had our heads all covered up, and why we were only seen through holes. I told him that this was the custom for virgins in our country, and that they were not seen otherwise.”\footnote{Rapley, \textit{A Social History of the Cloister}, 111} The Council of Trent did not exclusively disempower women: it also codified canon law on marriage, specifically stating that marriage required the freely given consent of both parties, a move which legally empowered young women. It also forbade the practice of forcing young girls into convents by fixing a minimum age for taking their monastic vows. But the bolstered position of bishops through the Council of Trent did negatively affect the position of religious women. Through the council, the obligations of bishops were noticeably increased, and with this augmented role, the bishops sought to enforce new rules and tighten old ones against women. The emboldening of the bishops had a dual effect on women. Firstly, it disempowered religious women by putting the bishop in the role of “master” as Francoise de la Beraudiere states. Secondly, it granted the bishops--part of the secular clergy-- further control over the so-called regular clergy. As women were denied entry to the secular clergy, this move installed a hierarchy in that the secular clergy gained increased authority and the status of religious women was again demoted. As a result of the Council of Trent, religious women were infantilized by their bishops and--critically-- they were targeted on account of their femininity.
The Transference of Conservative Inegalitarianism to Protestantism

The spiritual experience of seventeenth-century Parisian women cannot be limited to the scope of the Catholic Church, as the turn of the century also coincided with the French Protestant revival and the development of Jansenism in Paris. Both events gave religious women the opportunity to experience a different kind of faith, and to participate in religious practices that they were previously barred from. The Calvinist and other Protestant Churches were distinct from the Catholic discipline. At first, Protestantism seemed to allow for a greater female participation in sermons and Church politics, positing an altogether more egalitarian view of faith. Certain pastors even permitted mingling in Church between the sexes, and allowed women to sing Psalms with men in Church (denied by Catholicism) although they were still barred from preaching and taking the Holy Supper first.39

Although the changes to the female role within religion may have been minimal, more women became partakers in religious practices as a result of this slight loosening of principles. A new market of women partook in the Protestant movement: educated women from urban areas.40 As a result, more women began to read religious writings41 and vernacular books, and several even composed treatises.42 In general, and in light of the Protestant revival, women became more involved in theological movements and discourse. In particular, mysticism and Jansenism drew female support. Mysticism was a branch of Christianity associated with contemplative practices, a greater insight into faith and an altered state of consciousness. Historians tend to agree that the French mysticism movement in the seventeenth century was both inspired and dominated by

39 Davis, Society and Culture in Early Modern France, 87
40 Davis, Society and Culture in Early Modern France, 81
41 Davis, Society and Culture in Early Modern France, 76
42 Davis, Society and Culture in Early Modern France, 77
female figures. Mysticism gave new meaning to the importance of the female body and piety in religion, and thus allowed female mystics to gain a certain authority in their practices. Critically, mysticism had always remained outside the formal structures of the Church, and so granted greater possibilities to women without fear of the same impositions of Catholicism. Through mysticism, women came to define a religious movement, and infiltrated new strands of religious practice through Protestantism, Jansenism and mysticism. These movements had the power to embolden women: take the example of seventeenth century female mystic, Antoinette Bourignon, who began her career in the movement by fleeing her marriage in the clothes of a male hermit. Bruneau surmises the effect of these movements well when she states that they gave women “a charismatic authorization to become agents, despite the fact that dogma and theology denied them any legitimate authorization to do so…[they] provided the most intelligent and talented women with opportunities to forge extraordinary careers for themselves.”

The Catholic Church, as expected, took issue with the changed role of religious women, taking aim in particular at Protestantism and mocking its inclusion of women in its ranks by associating the entire movement with negative “feminine” qualities. It is likely that such criticisms were an attempt to discredit Protestantism. For example, the Catholic faithful conflated Protestantism with the “weak will and feeble intellect of the female.” One cleric in particular criticised the inclusion of women in religious teaching, saying, “to learn doctrine, there is no need for women… [to] read the Old and New Testament in vernacular. Then they’ll want to

---

43 Bruneau, 15.  
44 Bruneau, 15.  
45 Bruneau, 13.  
46 Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, 174  
47 Bruneau, 8.  
48 Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, 65
dispute about it and give their opinion...and they can’t help falling into error.”  

A second cleric agrees: “women must not apply their minds to curious questions of theology and the secret matters of divinity, the knowledge of which belongs to prelates, rectors and doctors.” The statement clearly delineates the worthy from the unworthy in terms of religious participation: men and women. These two clerics evidently wanted to maintain absolute control over Church doctrine, and did so by delineating which groups should be excluded from participation and why. These attempts would reach roadblocks when women became skilled in theology, Latin, Greek or literature. In short—as Davis asserts—there were only two things that Catholic men desired from religious women: tears and repentance.

Indeed, Catholic clerical writing often simply took aim at women directly and did not attempt to hide it through an attack of Protestantism. A Franciscan preacher stated on aspiring female philosophers: “why they’re half theologians, they own Bibles the way they own love stories and romances. They get carried away by questions on transubstantiation and they go running around from one...religious house to another, seeking advice and making much ado about nothing.” The preacher dismisses these women as fanciful, pseudo-intellectuals who make pale imitations of male theologians. The words of such preachers and clerics not only criticise but mock, demonstrating a mean-spirited attitude towards female attempts to participate in religious movements. These sentiments are echoed in the writings of Jean Joseph Surin, a French Jesuit mystic, preacher and writer. He published a treatise entitled the “Catechisme spirituel de la perfection chrétienne” in 1657. The treatise discussed the regulations of marriage and the expectations from husbands and wives. The treatise stated that “On the part of the

49 Davis, Society and Culture in Early Modern France, 79.
50 Davis, Society and Culture in Early Modern France, 77.
51 Davis, Society and Culture in Early Modern France, 76.
52 Davis, Society and Culture in Early Modern France, 76.
woman, in the obedience and submission which she owes to her husband, according to what is written: you will be [in] the power of your husband.\textsuperscript{53} Here, Surin states that obedience and submission to a husband are required of women in a Catholic marriage, and he quotes Genesis to prove his point: he also states that marriage is “The most perfect within all the societies amongst men.”\textsuperscript{54} In other words, marriage is the highest entity of human society and an offence against the institution would be an offence against God. Surin’s hostility towards women does not stop at this point. In a later statement, he blames women for the breakdown of all marriages, arguing that divorces occur when women are not “soumise et dependante” (submissive and dependent) and when marital problems “come from the capriciousness and the lack of submission from women.”\textsuperscript{55} He justifies the weakness of femininity by a woman’s inability to control her physicality, saying: “The woman is not mistress of her body, but the husband is master of her.” \textsuperscript{56} Here he argues - like clerics often did - that women were victim to their emotions, sexual drive, and general bodily desires, and as a result, it was the duty of the husband to control the woman’s body. It becomes clear reading such intensely disparaging comments that the inclusion of women in the Protestant revival made Protestantism an easy target for Catholic criticism.

These sorts of treatises were common and although they did not reflect the reality of marriage, (and were often written by the devout and unmarried) they were intended to be prescriptive and grant the historian an insight into how the Catholic Church wished to model wider society. Beyond attacks on Protestantism, the Catholic Church clearly regarded female

\textsuperscript{53} J J Surin, “Catéchisme spirituel de la perfection chrétienne,” ed. Thomas Bernard Fellon, (Rusand, 1824), 476; de la parte de la femme, dans l'obéissance et la soumission qu'elle doit à son mari, suivant ce qui est écrit: vous serez [dans] la puissance de votre mari.”
\textsuperscript{54} Surin, 476; “la plus parfaite de toutes les sociétés parmi les hommes.”
\textsuperscript{55} Surin, 476; “viennent du caprice et du peu de soumission des femmes”
\textsuperscript{56} Surin, 478; “la femme n’est point maîtresse de son corps, mais c’est le mari qui en est maître.”
religiosity as an impending threat that it would want to quash before it could truly develop, and presented the idea of marriage in a way that would support this agenda.  

On the Protestant side of religious discourse, there was a definite reaction to criticism. Although the Protestant revival certainly prioritised a loosening of conservative social and religious norms, including those that affected women, the writings of Protestant preachers and faithful seem to show a certain level of backpedaling in response to Catholic critiques. A pastor confided to a colleague in the early seventeenth century that, “they’ll think we’re being ruled by women,” manifesting a wider worry of being discredited by their liberalised policy towards female participants. Other Protestant faithful published treatises and works on how it would be rash for religious women to discuss scriptural matters amongst each other. Protestant men within the Church characterized women as “at best ignorant and superstitious at worst whorish and frenzied.” Although this critique was originally aimed at Catholic women, it reflected the same acrimonious words of Catholic preachers in their characterisation of women as sexually promiscuous, emotional and irrational. In fact, many Protestant practices came to mirror the same Catholic practices that had left women out in the cold, or established a clear inequality between the male and female faithful. For example, even reformed marriage still left a wife at the will of her husband as much as Catholic marriage did. A Protestant source is quoted by Zemon Davis as saying: “Let the woman be satisfied with her state of subjection, and not take it amiss that she is made inferior to the more distinguished sex,” in a statement that eerily echoes that of Surin. Even female mystics-despite being more numerous- could not equate themselves to their male counterparts, as Bruneau states that they consistently held “a social position of

---

57 Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, 78
58 Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, 84
59 Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, 82
60 Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, 82
61 Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, 91
powerlessness” with male mystics serving as their “spiritual directors, preachers or confessors.” Clearly the private views of individual Protestant preachers did not reflect the more egalitarian practices of the Revival, leaving it as a facade of female inclusion. Both faiths seemingly reflected the norms of their patriarchal societies, rather than the female-led movements within them.

So where did the Revival, the Counter Reformation and the Protestant reaction leave religious women in Paris in the seventeenth century? The identity of the Parisian religious woman was still nebulous. In particular, an educated woman could not easily establish a role for herself in Catholic France, as the clergy only officially permitted women to use the vernacular, and constantly depicted the female faithful in a unfavorable light. Even though women in urban areas learnt Latin and implicitly protested against the Catholic establishment through participation in mysticism, Protestantism and Jansenism, such revolts and attempts to change the social system in their favour left them unequal. Although historian Alice Rossi differentiates between the kind of equality that Catholicism and Protestantism steered towards--Catholicism being pluralistic and Protestantism being assimilationist--both options left women stripped of their identity, both spiritual and beyond. In addition, the changes to marriage laws in the seventeenth century restricted the freedoms of women even further as a male response to greater female independence. Patriarchal reaction to female self-empowerment had changed in nature: becoming conscious and tactical, and the character of the Parisian religious woman was still as yet unformed.

62 Bruneau, 17.
63 Davis, Society and Culture in Early Modern France, 94.
64 Davis, Society and Culture in Early Modern France, 86.
65 Davis, Society and Culture in Early Modern France, 86.
66 Davis, Society and Culture in Early Modern France, 93.
67 Davis, Society and Culture in Early Modern France, 94.
Perhaps a more damaging result of the Catholic Reformation and the Protestant revival was the doctrines that became intertwined with female religious identity. Rapley emphasizes that the only true security of faith that religious women could gain was through obedience and regularity, in other words “submission to authority…[and] faithful observance of the Rule.”68 As mentioned, the three monastic vows that came to form the basis of religious communities—both male and female—were poverty, chastity and of course, obedience.69 These dogma are reflected in the writings of religious women of the age. For example, the Catholic saint Jeanne de Chantal states in her Letter to Saint Francis de Sales in 1611 that “the gift of God…urges me to live in perfect poverty, in humble obedience, and in spotless purity.”70 When giving advice to sister Jeanne Charlotte de Brechard, in 1615, she says that she should show “infinite compassion, charity and patience.”71 These statements from Chantal imply that these virtues that were “feminized” and dedicated specifically to women. Characteristics like submission and purity, had become so entrenched in the female religious identity that they were altogether accepted, beyond any questioning. It raises questions that Chantal adds another virtue to her list when talking to a fellow sister. She lists “compassion” amongst charity and patience—more quintessential Catholic monastic values. It is possible that Chantal was adding in a quality that she saw as womanly but that was not part of the image perpetuated by the male clergy of nuns as infantilized, powerless, weak and pure. By contrast, “compassion” conjures up images of strength through emotion, benevolence and philanthropy, something closer to the male monastic vision of the time, even if it is closer to our understanding of female devotion today.

68 Rapley, A Social History of the Cloister, 49.
69 Rapley, A Social History of the Cloister, 147.
The leaders of the Protestant Revival countered the traditional Catholic conservatism towards women but this same orthodox approach was re-asserted by the leaders of the Catholic Reformation, to the extent where it appeared in the writings of religious women themselves. It seems that women found it hard to escape from the strict confines of obedience, poverty and chastity, but writings like Chantal show an attempt to broaden the scope of female religiosity beyond seventeenth century limitations.

Religious Women of the Seventeenth century: in their own words

The female voice in the writings of nuns and saints often betrayed similar sentiments. The writings of religious women from all walks of life seemed to reflect the same sense of inferiority and subordination that Chantal’s letters showed. Indeed, Chantal’s letters in the early seventeenth century often reveal feelings of inadequacy towards her faith. For instance, in a 1611 letter she wrote:

My interior state is so gravely defective that, in anguish of spirit, I see myself giving way on every side, my good Father, I am almost overwhelmed by this abyss of misery. The presence of God, which was formerly such a delight to me, now makes me tremble all over and shudder with fear. I bethink myself that the divine eye of Him whom I adore, with entire submission, pierces right through my soul looking with indignation upon all my thoughts, words and works. Death itself, it seems to me.  

Her writings seem to suggest that she is experiencing a depression, provoked by her religious practices. She likens her state to death, to being entirely derailed, with the source of her despair being “the presence of God.” With this phrase, the historian could claim that “God” is a byword for the male clergy or the unjust state that religious women found themselves in due to

---

constraints of chastity and piety, and the norm of enclosure, although this could be a modern projection. The kind of claustrophobia which Chantal describes as an “abyss,” the divine eye” that “pierces right through [her] soul”, and being “overwhelmed,” would certainly fit in with the feelings caused by clausura, and although submissive rhetoric was common amongst male believers too this specific feeling of enclosure is more fitting with the seventeenth century female experience. The kind of spiritual inadequacy that Chantal seems to be voicing can be found in the writings of mystic Marie de l’Incarnation too. In a letter from September 1641, she laments: “I haven’t done anything up to this point capable of winning God’s heart, for--think about it--it is necessary to have worked hard to be found worthy to spill one’s blood for Jesus.”73 She later in 1646 described her only regret as being her status as a “poor instrument in God’s hands.”74 In these statements, Marie de l’Incarnation echoes the thoughts of Chantal in her feeling that she can never be an adequate worshipper or believer.

Chantal also mentions her “entire submission” to God and her faith, which broaches questions on the level of devotion that was expected of women, and to whom. Was she truly (submitting to God or to the Church elders and bishops who exerted power over the convents they were in control of? In line with this submission, obedience is a common theme in Chantal’s writing. In a letter from 1616, Chantal encourages a fellow sister to ignore the hardships of religious practice: “all the repugnances of which you speak, all your feelings, aversions, difficulties, are all to my judgement for your greater good.” Surin’s “Catéchisme spirituel de la perfection chrétienne” seems to indicate what difficulties Chantal may have been talking about. As well as criticizing women’s behavior in marriage, he chastises women as being materialistic

74 Marie de l’Incarnation, From mother to son: the selected letters of Marie de l’Incarnation to Claude Martin, 77.
and vain. He states: “And for those who do not wear precious possessions, but who take too much care to adjust themselves, they must know who the affectation in cleanliness, is a worldly vanity, a vice incompatible with devotion.” With this statement, he castigates not only women who wear expensive clothes—a common criticism—but also those who even who adjust their appearance so as to seem clean, calling this habit a vice that is not compatible with devotion. Letters from Marie de l’Incarnation also highlight the hardships Chantal could have been referring to. Marie de l’Incarnation left her family to travel to New France Canada with the Ursulines in the early seventeenth century. In doing so, she abandoned her son when he was eleven, and used the letters as an attempt to forge a relationship with him. Her letters detail her loss as she claims: “I abandoned you to his holy direction” in one. It has been discussed that religion often required women to break from familial ties for the sake of their convent, requiring them to divorce themselves from any maternal instinct, in a way, cutting off the emotional connection to their potential children or family. This is certainly what is garnered from Marie de l’ Incarnation’s letter in which she claimed that when her son cried at her departure, “he caused me to feel such compassion that I felt as if my soul was being ripped out.” This statement seems to stand for a moment when the two seventeenth century female roles of mother and nun converged. At this moment, Marie was forced to feel a compassion for her son that she had otherwise ignored, and as a result she stated that she felt like her “soul,” or the part of herself that connects to religion and God, was being disfigured. Marie de l’Incarnation was, therefore,

---

75 Surin, 341; “et pour celles qui ne portent pas des habites précieux, mais qui prennent trop de soin pour s’ajuster, elles doivent savoir qui l’affectation dans la propreté, est une vanité mondaine, un vice incompatible avec la dévotion”

76 Marie de l’Incarnation, From mother to son: the selected letters of Marie de l’Incarnation to Claude Martin, 1.

77 Marie de l’Incarnation, From mother to son: the selected letters of Marie de l’Incarnation to Claude Martin, 5.
describing the enormous and almost unnatural pressure placed on a religious woman, and her 
anecdote demonstrates the level of devotion to her faith a woman could have.

Chantal’s letters betray a similar level of devotion to faith, that again seems unnatural and 
troubling to the modern day reader. In one letter, she says “Do Lord, whatever is pleasing to 
Thee, I wish it. Annihilate me, I am content. Overwhelm me, I most sincerely desire it.”\textsuperscript{78} The 
sentence implies an almost alarming level of spiritual and physical devotion. “Annihilate me,” 
“overwhelm me,” suggest that God has absolute power over Chantal’s fate. Not only this, but 
Chantal wishes for her God to do whatever he pleases to her.\textsuperscript{79} Here too, Chantal overlooks the 
blatant injustices of life in convent and nunnery for the sake of an indefinable greater good. The 
earlier statement in particular harkens back to the power dynamic between the bishops and the 
nuns, and it illuminates a troubling relationship between a religious woman and her faith. Such 
extreme statements were somewhat typical of the devout, and it is difficult for a modern reader 
to comprehend the nature of Chantal’s faith. For the modern historian, what these statements 
certainly do show the culture of religious submission could be easily used against women by the 
bishops.

Historians of the period are in concurrence that the writings of religious women from the 
seventeenth century certainly betray a certain sorrow at their position in society and the Church. 
Bruneau in particular states that piety became feminized so as to become more akin to suffering 
than to celebrating the faith. She argues that in the wake of the Protestant revival and the 
mysticism movement, religious women’s piety became largely characterized by “corporeal 
imitation of Christ in his suffering.”\textsuperscript{80} She also looks at the writings of female mystics, and states 
that there is a “melancholy hidden beneath the metaphors of loss and the refused mourning...For

\textsuperscript{80} Bruneau, 16.
women the losses were indeed specific.\textsuperscript{81} The Wars of Religion, which women like Jeanne de Chantal lived through, were a fraught and violent period, meaning that such women were familiar with extreme hardship. For a woman like Chantal whose brother was beheaded by the Catholic League, religion may have been inherently tied to suffering. It would seem in light of the letters cited here and the historiographical discussion of the period that religious devotion for a woman was a difficult and sorrowful affair that was associated more with loss and hardship than it was with passion, celebration, joy or community.

It is true that the difficulties that the female faithful were often also felt by their male counterparts. All monks, friars and nuns took a vow of obedience and rhetoric of submission seeps into male writings as much as it does female. The crucial difference is the societal context. Firstly, women were structurally inferior to men, denied a role in the non-religious realm of the clergy. Secondly, women were physically contained within the sphere of the cloister in a level of confinements monks simply did not share. Thirdly, women were repeatedly vilified in church rhetoric and treatises that treated them as malignant creatures. Although monks and friars were mocked, they were not depicted as malicious or dangerous in the way that the female faithful continued to be. Crucially, these treatises and mockeries did not appear out of thin air, they were written exclusively by male ecclesiastical authorities or religious commentators which established an implicit power dynamic between the men and women of the Catholic Church. For these reasons, the experience of French catholicism by the male religious must be distinguished from the female and the historian must recognize the complex set of challenges that Church officials imposed upon women.

This chapter has explored the relationship religion had with female emancipation in Paris in the seventeenth century. One preliminary conclusion the historian can make is that

\textsuperscript{81} Bruneau, 7.
seventeenth century Paris was often a hostile environment for women. From an economic perspective, women were expected to supply money to the government as was required but were barred from higher professions.\textsuperscript{82} In particular, seventeenth century Parisian society was hostile towards religious women. Parisian women were not permitted the same participation in confraternities as men, officially excluded from Paris’ Confraternity of the Passion\textsuperscript{83} and convents were denied the same network and sense of community that monasteries were permitted. In Paris, women and men experienced a different kind of religiosity. The male experience of religiosity was dominated by the parish clergy, and a glorified profession. The female spiritual experience was full of obstacles and limitations. Firstly, the policy of clausura as laid out in the Council of Trent (and centuries prior) segregated nuns from community, men, other women, other nuns and society altogether. Religious women, over men, also became increasingly defined by their third monastic vow to obedience. It is true that monks were victims to the same religious vows, but they were not structurally subordinated within the Catholic Church as they were permitted a role within the secular clergy, and moreover they were not defamed in clerical treatises in the way that women were. Clerics and bishops negatively characterized women in a contradictory duality between malicious and sorrowful, both being regarded as beyond rational thought or theological inquiry. Protestantism and mysticism proved to be false hopes for a more egalitarian style of worship during the Protestant and Calvinist revival, in reality, the male members of all religious faiths seemed to have an inherent bias against women in the Church. The status of women simply was not shifting, and was arguably worsening. What would be required is a redefinition of female spiritual identity in their favor, and an ability to use the structures of the women’s oppressors against them. Bruneau shows that

\textsuperscript{82} Davis, \textit{Society and Culture in Early Modern Europe}, 71

\textsuperscript{83} Davis, \textit{Society and Culture in Early Modern Europe}, 75
this is exactly what such women did: they gave their oppressor’s words a new meaning, they turned the feeble images of female saints into images of empowerment, employed mental liberation, and used silence as a form of resistance. As Bruneau states, “they went so far as to claim for themselves this negativity, in order to better reverse the values that produced it.” What can be ascertained is that on first sight, and certainly at the beginning of the seventeenth century, religion posed a significant bulwark against female emancipation, and religious women would be forced to wrestle with their identity, the power of bishops, the limitations of enclosure and the restrictive doctrines of purity and obedience for years to come.

84 Bruneau, 13.
85 Bruneau, 32.
86 Bruneau, 223.
87 Bruneau, 222.
Chapter Three: The Convent: A Place of Strict Enclosure or a Platform for a Newfound Female Religiosity? The Development of Female Spirituality in Paris in the mid Seventeenth Century

In 1631, Englishwoman Mary Ward’s Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary came under harsh critique from the male-dominated clergy community in Rome. Her acquaintance, Mr Sackville, communicated that the women of the Institute had come under fire for their so called misplaced zeal: “It is true while they are in their first fervour, but fervour will decay and when all is done, they are but women!” Upon hearing the remark, Ward composed a speech to her female companions in the congregation: “Fervour is not placed in feelings, but in a will to do well, which women may have as well as men.” Ward may have been among the more outspoken and courageous of her peers, but her words are testament to a wider phenomenon of the early seventeenth century, namely a shift in the societal role of religious women.

It is certainly true that the transition from the 16th to seventeenth century coincided with a definitive change in the religious and socio-political landscape of Paris. Paris was divided between the newly founded Huguenots and a Catholic majority who viewed this modern branch of Protestantism as heretical and had prohibited open Protestant worship after 1572. As discussed, the 1563 Council of Trent ordered for the strict enclosure of all religious women. Such reforms intensified the male surveillance of female religious communities and called for a wider “institutional homogenization and centralization” as well as an increased dependence of nuns on ecclesiastical structures in Paris. From a wider political and social standpoint, the early

---

modern period also coincided with patriarchal power receiving new impetus through the nominal
and legal strengthening of roles of father, husband, ruler and king.\textsuperscript{92} In despite of this, the
seventeenth century was also a period of female self empowerment, seen no more clearly than in
the convents of Paris. Barbara Diefendorf claims that Paris’ customary law was “fundamentally
egalitarian” in that daughters could inherit significant wealth and shared equally with their
siblings in their parents’ estate.\textsuperscript{93} In Brittany and Anjou, laws also permitted that daughters take
an equal share with sons, but Paris ‘legislation went a step further. Paris’ laws also recognized
the category of femme marchandes or female merchants, allowing them to conduct business
alone without approval from their husbands. In Paris, Diefendorf claims, “opportunities for
female initiative were indeed unparalleled.”\textsuperscript{94} Consequently, seventeenth century Paris set the
stage for increased female spirituality, a proliferation of religious congregations that were charity
and teaching focussed, and a general feminization of the Church. This chapter will study this
female influence on the Catholic Church and will also explore pious women such as Mary Ward
who rebelled against convention to redefine female religious identity, and the participation of
elite laywomen in religious culture. This chapter will conclude by considering the previous
historiographical exclusion of nuns from narratives of both female emancipation and
ecclesiastical development.

Background to the Development of Female Spirituality in the Early Seventeenth century

The early seventeenth century undoubtedly saw a flowering of female spirituality as there is
evidence that women in convents became increasingly involved in religious practices and

\textsuperscript{93} Diefendorf, \textit{From Penitence to Charity}, 17.
\textsuperscript{94} Diefendorf, \textit{From Penitence to Charity}, 250.
theological discussion. The period also coincided with a redefinition of convent culture and a rethinking of the duties of nuns. Critically, it was the nuns themselves who plotted this remodelling of female spirituality. Women in convents during the 1610s and 1620s became more active participants in the practice of their faith. As a result, women became players in a previously male-dominated institution-- the Catholic Church-- which led to a shift in the nature of French Catholicism towards a kind of penitential piety.

Such a transition began with a newfound enthusiasm on the part of religious women for both bodily commitment to their faith and the incorporation of extreme piety into their everyday lives. In her 2002 book, *From Penitence to Charity*, Diefendorf refers to the first two decades of the seventeenth century as a time in which there was a “newly ascetic and penitential religious fervour.” She refers to a growth of an “apostolic desire” on the part of nuns, leading to a renewal of French Catholicism led by “a vast grassroots effort.” She emphasises that it was pious women who were “instrumental in directing the Catholic revival towards new ends.” Such women claimed a vast knowledge of their own faith and a newfound interested in quotidien spirituality in which religion became a part of even the smallest everyday activities. This sentiment is exemplified in the statement by nun Mademoiselle Beauvilliers who stated, “the spirit of Jesus Christ...resides in a very common and ordinary life...a continual abandonment to the will of this good heavenly Father.” It would appear that women felt a newfound conviction to devote themselves entirely to their religion.

---

95 Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 7.
96 Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 8.
97 Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 251.
98 Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 251.
99 Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 76.
100 Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 97.
The inclination towards religious devotion was not without its roadblocks. A nun of the Sainte Thérèse convent, Marie Sevin, wrote at the time that she felt “such a pressing desire for the salvation of all the world...that I wished my sex did not prevent me from going to preach the Kingdom of God.”\footnote{Marie de la Trinité [Sevin du Coudray], \textit{Une glorieuse fille de Sainte Thérèse: “Mère Sainte,” fondatrice du Carmel d’Auch, 1570-1656 Vie et Ecrits}, ed. Mere d’Aignan du Sendant (Paris, France: Lethielleux, 1930), 51-2, 53.} In contrast to women of the Middle Ages, religious women like Sevin could not preach, demonstrating that opportunity for such women had significantly narrowed. Evidently, women such as Sevin felt a strong inclination towards the Church and wanted to outwardly demonstrate their commitment to their faith, but often felt inhibited by the lack of female participation in the Church ranks, and the structural schema that denied them the ability to rise through the ranks.

A more apparent problem with the upsurge and redefinition of female spirituality was the tendency towards dangerous and unpleasant practices that nuns imposed upon themselves. These practices were often inspired by techniques that medieval nuns would employ as proof of their religious devotion and bodily commitment to their faith. Such practices included self-flagellation, starvation, and extreme frugality that required a complete renunciation of will.\footnote{Diefendorf, \textit{From Penitence to Charity}, 7.} Although such techniques were not universally adopted, purgation seemed to be a key aspect of the new spirituality many convents were adopting.\footnote{Diefendorf, \textit{From Penitence to Charity}, 97.} Aristocratic noblewoman, Charlotte de Harlay de Sancy committed herself to self-mortification entirely by choice, through means that seemed to achieve little besides bodily pain. Her biography states that at the age of 22, she “donned a hair shirt, bound [herself]...with an iron-studded belt, and scourged herself with an instrument known as discipline until it was stained red with her blood.”\footnote{Diefendorf, \textit{From Penitence to Charity}, 65.} Aristocrat Antoinette
d’Orleans de Longueville abandoned elite society in 1599 to join the Feuillantine convent of Sainte-Scholastique to participate in mortifications, where she “never had her fill of hair shirts, scourges and other corporal penitences.”

Perhaps a more problematic side to these newfound spiritual imperatives was that nuns were imitating men by drawing on these medieval practices, and were reviving a bygone form of religiosity that was previously defined by male participants. The revival of penitential piety as fuelled by women in convents unfortunately victimised women, even if it allowed them to redefine their ecclesiastical roles and made them agents within the developing religious landscape of Paris. Although nuns had had the opportunity to experience spirituality on a greater scale, many of them used the chance to subordinate themselves further and drew from male rather than female initiatives.

One must acknowledge, however, that women did succeed in creating a platform for themselves to develop their spirituality and that of the Catholic Church as a whole in the early to mid seventeenth century. The effects upon said women were not as fruitful, but female spirituality at the turn of the century was not purely limited to penitential asceticism. From the 1610s to 1630s, multiple religious women founded female-led congregations. Inspired by Merici, an order of women created the famed Ursulines in 1610. Between 1604 and 1650, individual nuns established forty-eight new religious houses for women in Paris and its suburbs alone. Such congregations began by prioritising contemplative religiosity and later developed to promote active participation in the community through teaching and care for the poor and sick. The nature of such congregations, and their gradual feminization and secularisation, will be

---

105 Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 49.
106 Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 75.
explored further in this chapter. Their relevance to the original development of female religiosity is that they served as a buffer to the more extremist, devout form of physical devotion that self-mortification and purgation required. These religious orders followed on from the period of violent practices inspired by the medieval period, demonstrating a seemingly positive development in female spirituality towards worship centred around mutual support.

Congregations were community rather than individually-based, and were less in line with the clausura restrictions as ordered by the Council of Trent, as they encouraged religious women to communicate with wider Parisian society.

Although congregations certainly characterized women’s spirituality in the mid-seventeenth century, they were unfortunately short lived, declining as the 1600s progressed.109 Diefendorf emphasises that their proliferation is often overstated by historians and that there were not as many teaching orders or confraternities as historiography often suggests. Furthermore, the secular congregations-- orders that were not bound by monastic vows or rules--were a small minority of the religious houses founded, with 60% of the congregations in Paris founded in the first half of the seventeenth century being traditional and contemplative.110 As Diefendorf aptly puts it, “Mary Magdalene’s tears remained a more powerful religious idea than Martha’s humble service.”111

For the purpose of this study however, the existence of such orders is relevant as they prove that female spirituality in the seventeenth century developed on two levels, one adhering to the Council of Trent and the other vehemently opposing it. More importantly, charitable service eventually supplanted penitential asceticism as the dominant spiritual mode.112 The new

109 Diefendorf, From Penitence to Charity, 136.
110 Diefendorf, From Penitence to Charity, 135.
111 Diefendorf, From Penitence to Charity, 135.
112 Diefendorf, From Penitence to Charity, 8.
congregations and convents were also historically pertinent because those that were propelled by teaching and charity, requiring that their members to abandon any kind of filial love for the sake of the greater community, marking a departure in the traditional role of women as either nun or devoted mother and wife, redefining the role of nun as one that could be philanthropic in the public sphere -- an image that has prevailed to this day. This redefinition of the role of women of the religious woman as an honorary mother in her community marks a resolution in the dilemma Jeanne de Chantal felt, torn between the love for her son and her role as an active missionary; a dilemma so great that she claimed it ripped out her soul.

An important factor to consider in the study of the proliferation of non traditional religious orders is the economic effect they had in Paris. A specific advantage of placing a female family member in a convent of the traditional type was that it would exempt her from any right to inheritance or property and make her civilly dead as a monk or a priest would be. These new orders did not grant male elites, or indeed any male-headed families, the same economic privileges, as the women in them were not bound to the same religious vows or clausura and could still stand to inherit. From this perspective, the foundation of new congregations and orders posed an additional threat to the maintenance of patriarchal Parisian society.

Beyond congregations, female religiosity also developed as women, in particular abbesses, began to participate in religious dialogue. Before discussing the individual philosophies as developed by prominent religious women, it must be emphasised that even the adaptation from penitential asceticism to charitable and teaching congregations functioned as a form of religious dialogue. Moreover, the development of penitential religious practices from its fruition was a response to the degradation of medieval monastic life that became altogether
“softer” and also a reaction to the Protestant argument that religion could be justified solely by faith and belief.\footnote{Diefendorf, \textit{From Penitence to Charity}, 50-1.}

Kostroun, in her 2011 \textit{Feminism, Absolutism and Jansenism}, discusses the progression of religious thought on the part of the Port Royal nuns and in particular their abbess in the 1630s, Mère Angélique Arnauld. Mère Angelique, along with several other abbesses, developed their own philosophies of religion.\footnote{John J Conley, \textit{Adoration and Annihilation: The Convent Philosophy of Port-Royal}, (Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009) 237.} In conjunction with Calvin, Saint-Servan and Jansenius, they amplified a doctrine that promoted “efficacious grace” and that posited that humans were helpless in obtaining their own salvation.\footnote{Daniella Kostroun, \textit{Feminism, Absolutism and Jansenism: Louis XIV and the Port-Royal Nuns}, First Edition, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3.} The abbesses also asserted the unknowability of God. \footnote{Conley, \textit{Adoration and Annihilation}, 257.} They aimed to redefine humility and obedience so as not to oppose the two virtues but to enable them to work codependently,\footnote{Conley, \textit{Adoration and Annihilation}, 246.} and also exhibit an Augustinian view of grace and a more contextual philosophy of virtue.\footnote{Conley, \textit{Adoration and Annihilation}, 240.} Catholic nuns of the seventeenth century were evidently discussing the best way to practice religion amongst themselves and evaluating different denominations both of the past and present, but this form of religious dialogue was as yet contained within their gender. More pertinent religious dialogue occured between genders. Meère Angélique, corresponded with multiple noblewomen and men, where she exchanged ideas on published works that were creating controversy in the religious sphere at the time. For example, Mere Angelique corresponds with Madame le Foix about Descartes’ “Les Méditations,”\footnote{} arguing that “the author understands the practices of reliigon well.”\footnote{In this}
instance, Mère Angelique was appraising the work of another philosopher and responding to his thoughts confidently. Similarly, Rapley argues that other female theological thinkers of the time aimed to grant the Virgin Mary a new identity, so that she became more like a vagabond than an image of sterile purity.\footnote{Elizabeth Rapley, \textit{The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France} (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1993), 194} Clearly, certain religious women were educating themselves and developing their own conceptions of spirituality, and even conversing with men on the subject.

The most intriguing aspect of the religious dialogue was the defense of female liberty contained in the writings of abbesses like Mère Angelique. Connelly’s \textit{Adoration and Annihilation} references the writings of the Arnauld abbesses, and their suggestion that God did not necessarily have to be a gendered entity. These women repeatedly assert that God “eludes depiction and definition,”\footnote{Conley, \textit{Adoration and Annihilation}, 240.} and thereby inculcate a feminized interpretation of the Catholic faith, that eliminates the masculinity previously associated with divinity. They also make a defense of their personal freedom,\footnote{Conley, \textit{Adoration and Annihilation}, 245.} with particular emphasis on the “right of women to participate in theological controversies”\footnote{Conley, \textit{Adoration and Annihilation}, 245.} and the right to a “theological culture.”\footnote{Conley, \textit{Adoration and Annihilation}, 246.} This emphatic vindication of female liberty was not limited to the writings of individual abbesses. Rapley affirms that religious women were able to contribute to a “common fund of ideas and methods” which later became known as “accepted wisdom” for the rest of the Old Regime.\footnote{Rapley, \textit{The Dévotes}, 195.} Kostroun in particular discusses the savvy way in which the nuns of the Port Royal convent used the clergy’s own words against them to promote further female involvement in Church
practices. If women were supposed to be silent, they argued, it would require them to read the very theological text that denied them this voice, but they were denied access to the text. Kostroun asserts that the Port Royal nuns were “politically conscious” as well as being devoutly religious in their behaviour.

Port Royal itself was a centre for Jansenism and therefore of female political activism. It was for this reason that Louis XIV so forcefully shut down the Port Royal convent at the beginning of the eighteenth century, using the closure as an indication of the monarchy’s divine right to rule. His repeated failed efforts throughout the 1660s to close the convent showed the limits to kingly power that was supposed to be absolutist but clearly was not. Female religiosity and its political ramifications were evidently threatening to the monarchy, but could not be immediately stamped out.

The increased presence of women on Paris’ monastic scene in the seventeenth century was defined by three features: a revival of penitential asceticism, a growth in congregations that became increasingly charitable in outlook, and a proliferation of female-dominated and oriented religious dialogue. All three may have changed the identity of the Catholic Church to some degree, but they also redefined early modern female spirituality for the better. Asceticism, although not being without complications, represented a tension between “obedience and autonomy...will and self control,” a tension that signalled a rethinking of female obligations towards obedience. A rebellion of sorts was taking place, and the female role within the Church was beginning to be re-evaluated. By the end of the century, this rebellion and its ramifications

127 Kostroun, 5.
128 Kostroun, 7.
129 Kostroun, 2.
130 Diefendorf, From Penitence to Charity, 51.
had become interwoven into the structure of the Church, leaving an indelible mark on French Catholicism and precipitating the creation of a new form of religious life.  

The Convent as a Haven for Women

A critical element of this new form of religious life was the redefinition of convents in the mid seventeenth century. Although the Council of Trent was an attempt on the part of the male clergy to limit the convent as a space for worship, prayer and enclosure, this too was redefined by the women within it. Convents became a space where women from different societal backgrounds felt at liberty to converse and support one another, granting them their own sphere of independence, and a means of escape into a profoundly female-centred world. As convents developed and reformed they increasingly required funding, and found a source of donations from wealthy aristocratic women, who were not abbesses or in convents themselves. The donors were laywomen who were permitted entry to the convents at their leisure. Reformed convents began to act as a haven for both the donors who treated them as places of refuge, and for women from all sections of Parisian society who were struggling. Convents presented a viable option for young women trapped in loveless marriages, as they offered a new life for them where they could obtain a “small arena of personal liberty.” Such women had often been forced into a marriage that was arranged, and appreciated convents for offering a release from the pressure of wedlock. Not only wives, but widows too benefitted from the “pious retreat from secular life” that convents offered, and young girls would also visit to gain lessons in piety. It was not only aristocratic women who visited convents, but increasingly in the mid

132 Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 18.
133 Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 18.
134 Diefendorf, “Contradictions of the Century of Saints” 485.
135 Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 18.
seventeenth century, choir nuns tended to enter, from the expanding bourgeoisie.¹³⁶ Other women entered the convent because they were inflicted with a serious illness and had made a bargain with God, others did so because of financial difficulties and some simply wanted to bring their talents to a monastery.¹³⁷ Evidently, convents were not viewed as places of strict frugality and subordination, and if the cloisters segregation from Parisian society was a reality, this quality was attractive rather than repugnant to laywomen.

Not only was the convent an arena for dialogue between women from different Parisian communities and a refuge from the pressures of secular life, the monastic life contained within the walls of a convent also became romanticised to great extremes. Rapley argues in her article, “Women and the Religious Vocation in seventeenth century France” that many women simply expressed an “attrait pour la vie cachée” (an attraction to the hidden life).¹³⁸ For others, it was the ceremony and wealth of the monastic life that offered a “noble challenge and something akin to romance.”¹³⁹ Such a sentiment is exemplified by Madame de Maintenon’s statement of devotion to the Ursulines in a monastery of Niort: “I remember that I loved one of my mistresses - at a point which I can not say; I had no greater pleasure than to sacrifice myself to his service. I thought I would die of sorrow when I left this convent.”¹⁴⁰¹⁴¹ For women like Maintenon, and others women religious who will be examined later, the monastery was a place of contentment and fulfillment. In the case of Madame de Maintenon, a lettre de cachet had taken her from her Protestant aunt to the convent, her later life outside the convent led to a marriage with a severely

¹⁴⁰ Rapley, “Women and the Religious Vocation,” 628; Je me souviens que j’ai aimé une de mes maîtresses...à un point que je ne puis dire; je n’avais a de plus grand plaisir que de me sacrifier pour son service...Je pensais mourir de chagrin quand je sortis de ce couvent -
handicapped man of age 41 when she was just 16. For her, the convent again provided a hidden life from the harsh realities of aristocratic marriages. Convents could be havens and also provide women an opportunity to prove their devotion to the most worthy of causes. It permitted convents permitted female religious communities to function autonomously from the rest of society as the walls and the private nature of the religious profession sheltered them from close scrutiny. In this way it was ironic that the Council of Trent and Catholic Reformation had enlarged the sphere of autonomy of women, installed a state of clausura and encouraged devout women to develop their interior life\(^{142}\) -- changes that permitted women to mix privately with contemporaries and thereby widen the scope of their liberty.

The Feminization of the Church through Religious Congregations

The convent may have offered a private space for exclusively female interaction, but religious congregations went a step further in their reformation of female spirituality. As has been briefly discussed in this chapter, there was a proliferation of new religious houses founded in Paris in the first half of the seventeenth century. Although at the beginning of the seventeenth century, many of these houses were traditional and contemplative in spiritual imperative, after the 1630s, Kostroun asserts that more active religious orders, including those involved in teaching greatly increased.\(^{143}\) There was a definitive growth in reformed convents during this period: multiple institutions that were more modernist in their perspective were founded, including the house of Capuchin nuns under the sponsorship of Marie de Luxembourg, the Carmelite’s convent and the French order of the Ursuline nuns.\(^{144}\) Indeed, many of the religious orders and congregations founded in the mid seventeenth century aimed to aid young girls who had been seduced and


\(^{143}\) Kostroun, 474.

\(^{144}\) Diefendorf, From Penitence to Charity, 99
Some nuns who were members of these orders would even approach prostitutes and attempt to persuade them to reform their lives. These reformed convents evidently were not as restrictive as their predecessors in their requirements for the women who could enter them.

At first, these convents seemed to play a dual role in spiritual imperative, by bringing active life to the cloisters whilst still exercising strict clausura, one such example is the Filles de Visitation in the mid seventeenth century which provided a place for lay women on religious retreats but did not venture much into the wider community. At this point, in the late 1630s, it was laywomen--and often elite laywomen--who steered the work of these congregations towards charity, as the work of secular women was deemed less threatening. By the 1650s, nuns began to volunteer to participate in morally good works for the community. Eventually by the 1660s, female-led religious congregations became more transparent in their charitable impulse: the Filles de Madeleine offered a place of retreat for repenting prostitutes and the Hôpital de la Charité de Notre Dame provided nursing care for women. Mary Ward herself reveals a tendency towards charity in her letters, stating that one should “let charity go before human prudence,” suggesting a reorientation of the values that the Church expected its followers to exhibit, and a revival of the charitable practices of the Church in the Middle Ages. She also reveals her impulse towards helping others in earlier letters, saying “I will turn my hands to the little ones.” In general, an expansion of the activity of the Church took place, namely into fields of charity, hospital care and education, where religious women in conjunction with

---

146 Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 67.
147 Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 173.
149 Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 174.
151 Mother Salome, 88-9.
152 Rapley, *The Dévotes*, 193,
laywomen played an increased role in the broadening of these three areas. The Beguines were pivotal agents of this change. The Beguines were a Christian lay religious order throughout the 13th to 16th centuries that prioritised care of the poor and sick, as well as worship throughout northern Europe. They certainly had activity in France too and women within their order, making them an indispensable part of the movement towards charity through religion. Thus the character of French Catholicism as well as the spiritual and physical geography of Paris was permanently changed. Not only did the Church gain a new impetus towards “caritas” but it also gained the personnel to implement this change. In doing so, the women who created these houses and congregations were able to break from the assigned state that scripture and tradition had assigned to them and, as Rapley argues, “establish a new identity for themselves.”

The new congregations also established a novel status quo wherein religious women became profoundly more connected with the community around them and gained recognition from their male peers. As Walker argues in Gender and Politics in Early Modern Europe, by the end of the seventeenth century, commentators expected European religious establishments to be “intimately linked to their sustaining community both physically via kinship connections...and psychologically through shared religious, dynastic and civic ideologies.” The establishment of indigenous connections also led to a newfound recognition of women within the Church. The charitable community work led to the Gallican church admitting women into its professional ranks, nuns also eventually became respected as educators within the Church, and in 1688

---

154 Rapley, The Dévotes, 193
155 Rapley, “Women and the Religious Vocation,” 196
157 Rapley, The Dévotes, 193.
the Daughters of Charity gained papal recognition as a confraternity.\textsuperscript{159} The female religious community of Paris was also able to demonstrate that the instruction of girls was a worthwhile religious vocation, and such recognition was fully entrenched in their fourth vow.\textsuperscript{160} Such orders clearly had received monastic approval through increasingly charitable acts that permitted them to branch out beyond the walls of the convent in Paris and beyond.

It was inevitable that actions like these would lead to an increasing secularisation of not only congregations but the Catholic Church as a whole. The historian of the seventeenth century can easily trace a change from spirituality that was fundamentally penitential to charitable.\textsuperscript{161} In France alone, women had originally formed societies and confraternities such as “Les Filles Seculaires” so that they could evade the religious order altogether.\textsuperscript{162} Their practices began to bleed into the work of women in convents, leading to a growing tension between the religious and secular spheres in Paris.\textsuperscript{163} Nuns began to effectively conducting social work under the pretense of religious vocation. Beyond secularisation, the flowering of congregations also precipitated a certain democratisation of the Church. As more and more women became involved in charitable acts through such organisations, the Church inadvertently began to involve more women from different parts of the Parisian community. In the eyes of the wider community, Church personnel were lower class women who were “without veil or wimple” and who were previously more excluded from the same level of religious devotion.\textsuperscript{164} The character of the individuals who were entering these orders changed, and this shift inevitably altered the composition of the Catholic Church and its status in the Parisian community. The steady increase

\textsuperscript{159} Strasser, "Early Modern Nuns and the Feminist Politics of Religion," 544.
\textsuperscript{161} Diefendorf, \textit{From Penitence to Charity}, 13.
\textsuperscript{162} Diefendorf, \textit{From Penitence to Charity}, 14.
\textsuperscript{163} Diefendorf, \textit{From Penitence to Charity}, 171.
of female membership naturally caused women to outnumber men in both contemplative and 
active religious life. Both in membership and imperative, the Church became defined by 
femininity. Rapley’s *The Devotes* encapsulates the proliferation of congregations aptly, stating 
that although the women who led the shift in Catholicism had male allies, “the troops in this 
particular campaign were women” and by number and conviction they were successful.

**Rebellion Within the Convent**

Although the Catholic Reformation is often associated with a tightening of restrictions upon 
religious women the Reformation offered women such as Mary Ward and multiple abbesses and 
prioresses the opportunity to rebel against convention. She claims that the Counter Reformation 
was “more open to individual initiative...than we usually imagine.” Indeed, accounts from 
Ward and abbesses demonstrate that women frequently counteracted the contemplative 
religiosity, expectations of chastity and lack of mobility, not to mention enclosure. Such actions 
were testament to the power of the prioress, and the strength of character of individual women 
who were able to supercede the power of any male superior or bishop when it came to the 
upkeep of the religious house or convent. One archival source discusses the practices of Mere 
Hilaire de Sainte Therese, a prioress who cleverly used her power to subvert other male 
authorities. The source claims she “installed an underling to carry out her usual 
functions...eating, drinking and carrying on with secular visitors in a secret grille in her 
chamber.” The source continues that after feasting with her guests, Sainte-Therese would play 
cards with them into the night, and even allowed men to use the secret entrance to her private

---

166 Diefendorf, *Contradictions of the Century of Saints,* 471.  
167 Diefendorf, “Contradictions of the Century of Saints,” 486  
168 Diefendorf, “Contradictions of the Century of Saints,” 487
chambers. These actions clearly broke with the terms of the Council of Trent which put
particular a newfound emphasis on virginal purity, and forbade the interaction of nuns with the
outside world and discouraged frivolity. Prioresses like Mère Hilaire were subverting religion
altogether in a clear mark of rebellion. What such accounts demonstrate is that the expectations
that accompanied the Reformation were not strictly held by religious women, and many
knowingly and gladly thwarted them.

The power of the individual is also clearly demonstrated by singular proponents of an
active rather than contemplative religious life, and on this individual scale was were women
could supercede men, as structurally they could scarcely hope to. Single congregations such as
the Visitandines had the strength of conviction to speak out against the Reformation, with the
members claiming that claustration itself was not necessary.\footnote{Diefendorf, From Penitence to Charity, 177} An obvious example of an
individual who posed a threat to the contemplative life was Mary Ward who this chapter opened
with. Ward initially attempted the contemplative life by founding the English Poor Clares
convent.\footnote{Walker, 3} However, she quickly became more interested in educative and missionary work and
established a secular teaching community instead. She also opened a school with six English
nuns in Saint Omer with the intention to read, write and sew for the honor of God.\footnote{Rapley, The Dévotes, 28} This
intention was more similar to the missionary style of organisations like the Jesuits, and Ward
openly took inspiration from them, regarding her group as an equal counterpart to this male
Society.\footnote{Rapley, The Dévotes, 28} In doing so, Ward was participating in what Davis calls “sexual inversion,”\footnote{Davis, “Women on Top,” 174} which
will be explored further in the following chapters. Naturally, Ward’s waiver of clausura and open
intention to teach, be mobile, and take inspiration from a male organization was met with
criticism. Members of the clergy claimed that Ward and her contemporaries were discouraging other women from entering monasteries, masquerading as true nuns and--critically--“invading a masculine reserve.” Church officials closed Ward’s schools as a result and arrested her in Munich in 1630 as a heretic and schismatic. Throughout the process, Ward showed admirable strength of character, apparently unaffected by the limits that her sex placed on her. She refused to compromise on the style of her religiosity and appealed to Pope Gregory XV instead, she even travelled to Bavaria to set up new communities when her original schools were closed. Ward was even more direct and outspoken against the unfair characterisation of women by the clergy in her writings. Her reactions to suggestions that women may be intellectually inferior to men are bold and resolute:

There is no such difference between men and women that women may not do great things...And I hope to God that it will be seen that women in time to come will do much...I confess wives are to be subject to their husbands, men are head of the Church...but in all other things, wherein are we so inferior to other creatures that they should term us “but women?”

Some thinking we are women, and aiming at great matters than was ever thought were capable of, expect perhaps to see us fall, or come short in many things….Now sisters, since God has particularly looked upon you, calling you to this state of life, and giving you this vocation, I doubt not but some of you thirst greatly after effecting of His will, and have no patience that you have profited no more...women may be perfect and that fervour must not necessarily decay because we are women.

Mary Ward’s story served both to instruct and to caution other like-minded religious women. With her actions, she was able to support the development of Catholicism for women and by women, and was able to vehemently defend the female role within the monastic sphere. As this thesis will later demonstrate, her words manifest a greater degree of freedom to speak her mind than many aristocratic women of the age. The paternalistic and harsh reaction of the Holy

\[174\] Rapley, The Dévotes, 30
\[175\] Rapley, The Dévotes, 32
\[176\] Rapley, The Dévotes, 30
\[177\] Mother Salome, 124-5
See to Ward’s Institute also demonstrated that it held a worryingly conservative position towards the female religious, a position that Rapley says “envisaged nothing but a return to the strict monasticism of the high Middle Ages.”\(^{178}\) Future uncloistered communities of women would evidently be forced to seek secularism if they wished to pursue charity in the future, or at least operate under the pretense of being outside the religious community. In this way, Mary Ward paved the way for other religious women to emulate her whilst avoiding the political scorn she so openly received and pursuing more circuitous routes to liberty.\(^{179}\) Ward amongst others demonstrated the power of the individual to subvert the more restrictive norms that the Catholic Reformation imposed, and the authority that religious women inherently possessed to stand up to their male superiors.

Ward’s attempts to establish an Institute for women with longevity may have failed but her actions illuminated a reality about the ecclesiastical male elites and the Church. The Catholic Church was by no means a monolith, it had definite cracks in the male hierarchy that composed it. Male orders, such as the Dominicans, at times sided with their female counterparts with some even siding with Ward. The reasons for this support may have been disparate: occasionally it was an implicit opposition to the power of bishops. In any case, the Catholic Church in and of itself did not form a unified patriarchy against women by any means. For this reason, splits appeared that women like Mary Ward could take advantage of, granting them further opportunity to subvert restrictions that came with the Catholic Reformation.

\(^{178}\) Rapley, *The Dévotes*, 34
\(^{179}\) Rapley, *The Dévotes*, 34
Rebellion amongst Laywomen

It would be untrue to say that dissent aimed towards the Catholic clergy, and in particular the male clergy, was limited to religious women like Ward. Laywomen became indirectly involved with the growth of charitable organisations through donations. Aristocratic widows could be key donors to charitable causes as their husbands often died early in duels, leaving them a large estate that they could spend as they pleased. Nuns’ dowries were the top expenses for convents, and with funding like this, institutions like the Notre Dame de la Misericorde permitted well-born women to enter who were typically unable to pay the dowry required. Mère Angelique of the Port Royal convent was granted 24,000 livres from noblewoman Marie le Prevost de Saint Germain. Such amounts were common, and the Princess de Condé also granted a grand total of 120,000 livres to the Incarnation. This money supply also allowed for new convents to be built, and in doing so, wealthy aristocrats became benefactors and patrons who were able to benefit from the culture of the convent they were funding.

The elite women who gave donations to convents and congregations contributed funds for a variety of different reasons, some to gain access to a new feminine community and others to have a closer relationship with God. In general, the women who donated expected to enjoy “privileged access to the convent’s life.” Through such access, aristocratic women were able to publicize their wealth and status, whilst also basking in a “reflected godliness.” From a social perspective, these visits --particularly, from aristocratic women-- benefitted both the nuns

---

180 Diefendorf, From Penitence to Charity, 18
181 Diefendorf, From Penitence to Charity, 193
182 Diefendorf, From Penitence to Charity, 174
183 Diefendorf, “Contradiction of the Century of Saints,” 483
184 Diefendorf, “Contradictions of the Century of Saints,” 482
185 Diefendorf, “Contradictions of the Century of Saints,” 478
186 Diefendorf, “Contradictions of the Century of Saints,” 478
187 Diefendorf, From Penitence to Charity, 19
and the laywomen themselves, serving both social and spiritual functions. By the mid-
seventeenth century, it had become the norm for such visits to be used for the laywomen to
participate in religious practices and for the nuns to have a period of relaxation through
interaction with outsiders. Women of the court began to enter the convents for as much as a
week at a time, and even the ladies of the royal family acquired apartments in individual
convents. In her letters, Mère Angelique corresponds with Marie Bussy de Chantal, the
Marquise of Sévigné, preparing for her visit to Port Royal and corresponds with la Marquise
of Sable in preparation for the arrival of the “Fils de Dieu.” Clearly, the wealthy donors felt
that they were entitled to visit at their leisure, and these activities could not be blocked by rules
or regulations.

Such clandestine and rebellious enterprises did not go unnoticed. They led the Capuchin
Père Joseph to exclaim in a letter that there was “not a single house so reformed that the ladies of
the court didn’t have permission to enter...just imagine what becomes of the silence, the retreat,
the good order, and mortification of the house. They laugh, confide secrets to their friends, and
gossip about whomever’s behavior displeases them.” Evidently, the restrictions of the Council
of Trent were being broken, cloistering had ultimately failed in being both upheld and monitored,
and the convent had become a place for cross societal female exchanges, as well as a place for
aristocratic women to experience the monastic life close at hand. As a response, male observers

188 Diefendorf, “Contradictions of the Century of Saints,” 485
189 Diefendorf, “Contradictions of the Century of Saints,” 481
190 Diefendorf, “Contradictions of the Century of Saints,” 480
191 Mère Marie Angélique Arnauld, “Lettres de la Reverend Mere Marie Angelique Arnauld”
https://archive.org/stream/lettresdelareve00arnagoog#page/n9/mode/2up, (accessed April 2nd
2018), 100; “l’auteur entend bien les pratiques de la religion.” 103
192 Mère Marie Angélique Arnauld, “Lettres de la Reverend Mere Marie Angelique Arnauld”
https://archive.org/stream/lettresdelareve00arnagoog#page/n9/mode/2up, (accessed April 2nd
2018), 100; “l’auteur entend bien les pratiques de la religion.” 125
193 Diefendorf, “Contradictions of the Century of Saints,” 484
194 Diefendorf, “Contradictions of the Century of Saints,” 479
feared the social power of women and its potential impact on their marriage prospects. The convent had become a place where female social power was being cultivated, and was an implicit means for aristocratic and religious women alike to dissent against the Catholic clergy.

Many aristocratic women also joined convents, and moved beyond simple donations or visits. Elite women joined one of four religious houses just outside of Paris: Montmartre, Saint-Antoine-des-Champs, the Cordelières of Saint Marcel or Longchamps. Convent boarding school also became à la mode among the elites, and many children were sent at an early age to be educated by nuns. In fact, daughters were sent to convents at a younger age on average amongst the elite--the average age was 18--as their dowries lessened in expense as a result. Port Royal, in particular, ran an elementary school in Paris in the 1630s, and the male pupils later became some of the most powerful royal officials in Paris in later life. This participation of Paris’ elite--whether it was full committal to the convent, funding, education or regular visits--demonstrated a strong need on the part of the nobility to participate in religious life, and as a result the character of the Catholic revival was altered further. There was of course a tension between the often materialistic, secularised lives of aristocratic women and convent life, and the wave of enthusiasm for spirituality amongst lay elites steered the character of Catholicism towards an ironically secularised form of religiosity.

Beyond providing an opportunity from women who would previously be denied access to one another to interact, the participation of noblewomen in the Catholic Reformation granted laywomen a spiritual authority that would normally be reserved only for those in the monastic community. One such example is that of Barbe Acarie. Acarie, as well as her contemporaries, set

---

195 Diefendorf, Contradictions of the Century of Saints p. 472
197 Rapley, “Women and the Religious Vocation,” 618
198 Diefendorf, From Penitence to Charity, 132
up “hotels” similar to salons where sermons could be hosted for those involved in the Parisian Catholic Reformation. Such arrangements combined the power of outspoken women in both religious and secular spheres, forming a dual offensive towards female emancipation. Acarie created a circle around herself, a circle that attempted to discuss the new wave of spirituality, encourage the spiritual development of abbesses, and to reform convents in the Paris area around them. These actions showcased laywomen supporting religious women as Acarie and others corresponded and met with prioresses, abbesses and nuns in convents all around Paris to encourage them in their devotion. Acarie in particular never took any religious vows, and any spiritual authority she garnered was testament to her strength of character. Acarie, like Ward, subverted trends expected of women from her community to involve herself in religious dialogue and encourage others to do the same.

How much freedom and authority did nuns truly have?

It is important to ground the achievements of such women in reality, and to remember to situate it in the correct cultural context. Despite the various achievements of individuals like Ward and Acarie, male figures in positions of authority continually made thinly-veiled attempts to subvert growing power that religious women obtained. As has been discussed, King Louis XIV took a particular interest in shutting down the Port Royal convent-- headed by the obstinate Mère Angelique and a stronghold for Jansenism--in despite of pressing national matters. Similarly, the Holy See published a Bull of Suppression in light of Ward’s actions that declared English ladies

---

199 Diefendorf, From Penitence to Charity, 79
200 Diefendorf, From Penitence to Charity, 96
201 Diefendorf, “Contradictions of the Century of Saints,” 490
to be “noxious weeds.” Specifically, the authorities took issue with the way that Ward’s institute went beyond the bounds of their sex:

they went freely everywhere, without submitting to the laws of clausura, under the pretext of working for the salvation of souls; they undertook and exercised many other works unsuitable to their sex and their capacity, their feminine modesty, and, above all, their virginal shame, works which men distinguished by their knowledge of the scriptures, their experience and the innocence of their lives, undertake only with reluctance and extreme circumspection.

This particular author is defending the privileges of male elites, by making reference to their superiority over other less knowledgeable or distinguished men, and naturally over women too. These accusations made it clear that women did not have the freedom to migrate on their terms, to express their sexuality or to preach and educate others on religious matters. Part of this criticism mentions the risk of “virginal shame” and this addition was based on a misunderstanding of chastity and virginity. Men, like those speaking in the Bull, regarded chastity as a means of complete sexual devotion to God, whereas women associated it more with purity in body and mind. Others regarded female chastity more strategically: as a means of preventing women from marrying and a way to grant more of the inheritance to the male heirs as a result. In elite ecclesiastical circles, female chastity was undoubtedly regarded as a potential tool to further deprive women of their rights to financial, social, and sexual liberation.

Perhaps a bigger obstacle to liberty amongst religious women was the trend of women adopting a narrative of submission for themselves, as explored in the previous chapter.

Diefendorf again claims that even the most subversive of nuns, “maintained a rhetoric of female submission” to an entity that is unclear. Similarly, author of Adoration and Annihilation, Conley concedes that all of the writings and observations of the Arnauld abbesses are “glimpsed

---

202 Rapley, “The Dévotes,” 32-3
203 Rapley, “The Dévotes,” 33
204 Diefendorf, From Penitence to Charity, 21
205 Diefendorf, From Penitence to Charity, 8
through a prism of victimhood,” in despite of their astute philosophical inquiries. Rapley attributes this rhetoric to the unavoidable predicament that religious women found themselves in repeatedly: “any freedom of choice that they enjoyed was profoundly affected...by the conditioning to which they were so often subject.” In the same way that this thesis will show that the societal limitations of aristocratic women fed into their letters, the nuns’ perception of themselves as belittled appeared in their writings. It is likely that nuns consciously employed this rhetoric so as to write within the social norms of the patriarchal society in which they lived, but the conscious use of “victimhood” in writing does not change the fact that this narrative perpetuated their position of submission, even if it was tactical.

Historiography of Sexuality of the Women Religious

Scholars of sexuality such as Strasser even asserted that nuns restricted themselves and contributed to the establishment of state patriarchy through the maintenance of their chastities. Strasser references scholar Susan Dinan who argues that the institutional network established by charitable religious women to aid and discipline the poor served the state’s interest by battling mass impoverishment. Strasser states that these organizations served the government as a cheap corps of social workers, and by supplying “credit for the local economy.” Such charitable work also installed an ethic of work in the populace, that could be linked to the development of modern Western Protestantism. Convents themselves, Strasser continues, became part of the “institutional streamlining” that aided in the formation of modern

---

206 Rapley, “Women and the Religious Vocation,” 630
207 Strasser, "Early Modern Nuns and the Feminist Politics of Religion," 544
The power that the state exercised by controlling the reproductive rights of nuns granted it with a kind of sacred aura, and gave state representatives a “magical power” that legitimated their policies of expansion both domestic and foreign. For this reason, Strasser makes the bold claim, from a Weberian standpoint, that virginal religious women advanced the “Western European modernizing project of political centralization and colonial expansion.” Strasser goes as far as to say that virginity was part of the development of a modernist, centralized government and the public sphere, specifically in Germany but also elsewhere.

This Weberian argument can certainly be interrogated. Firstly, the application of a German conception of state to a French cannot be seamlessly done, and in neither state did women in convents make up a significant portion of the population, estimated at around 80,000 in the late seventeenth century out of a population of approximately 20 million in France. Charitable ventures from these women religious occurred largely outside of state control in private circles and therefore had little association with the national, state level public sphere. By the eighteenth century, when state building was booming in Europe, male and female religious orders were faltering, especially in France. For this reason, convents cannot be said to have played such a major role in state formation, nor can the notion of female virginity. In response to Strasser, one can say that chastity and virginity did indeed have political meaning, but perhaps not to the extent she argues. It is true that lites at state level wished for religious women and their female relatives to be chaste. This move would preserve the integrity of the elites’ landed property and would keep property on a wider scale in the hands of males, undivided. Yet this

---

tendency to use convents to control female family members in France occurred more effectively in the 19th century. What can be said is that chastity was used as a means of merging the public and private realm of the female experience, even if male aristocratic and ecclesiastical elites did not use the threat of the convent for state building reasons of on as wide a scale as Strasser implies. Chastity was certainly a politicised issue, a vital component of family economics, and certainly a means of control.

A byproduct of the politicisation of virginity was that women became increasingly defined by their sexuality or lack thereof over anything of more significance. The virginity of laywomen and religious women came to matter greatly to the development of state, and women as a social group became a regulated and privileged object used for state and church control.\(^\text{215}\) Virginity became a coveted entity and men had the power to guard and protect female honor from public exposure through cloistering,\(^\text{216}\) an action that only increased the importance of chastity. A hierarchy of sexual purity inevitably developed wherein the prostitute of lower class represented a “social and sexual pollutant” and the nun was defined by her purity over the laywomen.\(^\text{217}\) Perhaps most importantly, the subject of virginity provided an opportunity for state and Church to work in parallel to limit female liberty: the campaign against profligate women occurred at the same time that the state sponsored the Church’s initiate to preserve female virginity by subjecting women to strict cloister.\(^\text{218}\) At this early stage in political development,

\(^{215}\) Strasser, *State of Virginity: Gender, Religion and Politics In An Early Modern Catholic State*, 12
\(^{216}\) Strasser, *State of Virginity: Gender, Religion and Politics In An Early Modern Catholic State*, 23
\(^{217}\) Strasser, *State of Virginity: Gender, Religion and Politics In An Early Modern Catholic State*, 21
convent and court overlapped in their spheres of religious, social and political governance.\textsuperscript{219} There was a parallel between marriage and monastic reform that put new emphasis on female purity and inevitably connected women with the formation of the modern state. Elite men from different sections of Parisian society were responding with these largely futile efforts to restrict women who had made efforts to increase their liberty and gain greater economic success.

This chapter has touched on a wide variety of subjects related to the female role in the Catholic Reformation in Paris in the seventeenth century including: the participation of women in the Reformation movement, the development of charity and teaching from penitential asceticism, the growth of “feminism,” the role of Paris in the Reformation and the influence that women- both secular and religious- had over Church authorities. It is difficult to determine exactly if Paris’ Catholic Reformation helped or hindered the position of religious women. One school of historians argues that both women of lower and upper classes were still restricted to their own domains within the Church by the end of the Reformation, however there is a second that argues that both their prestige and influence did indeed increase. Most modern historians argue for the second school, although there is evidence for both phenomena, saying that rather than being victims of pre-established gender roles, women were leaders of the spiritual revival that was the crux of the Catholic Reformation movement.

Religious women were agents of change, both of their role in the Church and of Catholic doctrines themselves. They were searching for a tangible identity in a time when they were legally scorned and socially mocked, and attempted to mold one through the incorporation of spirituality. As an explanation for the uptake of Paris’ women in the religious vocation, this functions best. These women widened their sphere of liberty by using the convent as a place of interaction between women from different classes, and by expanding their spiritual practices.

beyond prayer and worship to first penitential asceticism and then charitable pursuits and education. When the historian considers that religious women did so when they were originally told that their only veritable domain was the cloister, this achievement becomes altogether greater. The feat must also be attributed in part to the geographical context: Paris, where a proliferation of convents was possible, where the legal system made female independent action more tenable, and where mass impoverishment gave nuns an outlet beyond the convent. Can women like Barbe Acarie, who pioneered the discussion of religion in salons around Paris, and Mary Ward, who defied Church authorities for the sake of female congregations, be defined as feminists? Again, on this subject, historians are divided. Some say that the term “feminism” cannot be applied to this period whatsoever, whilst others point to the actions of such women as precursors to true feminism. In my opinion, nuns like Mary Ward and the Arnauld abbesses clearly defended the female capacity for reason, asked for equal rights to men in the eyes of the Church, and conducted themselves in a way that men were expected to act, clearly likening themselves and their female peers with male “superiors” of the age. Surely these accomplishments (especially in the face of such scorn and discouragement) must be applauded if not deemed feminist in some respect. What can certainly be ascertained is that religious women of the seventeenth century discernibly increased the liberty and social standing of Parisian women, by expanding their capacity to express their religious conviction, interact with wider Parisian society, spread their theological ideas, and mold the identity of the Catholic Church in their favour.
Chapter Four: The Nobility as an Obstacle to Female Liberty

This thesis has established that the seventeenth century Catholic Church seemed to pose as an obstacle to female liberty. It has also established that in despite of growing hostility from the male clergy and religious commentators, Paris’ women faithful were still able to shape the identity of the Catholic Church in their favour. As I explored in the Chapter Two, Church doctrine may have posed a threat to emancipation but it was not an insurmountable one. A more obvious threat to female emancipation was more difficult to discern, and found in the upper echelons of Parisian society.

The nobility and the salon culture of upper class Paris were far more restrictive than life in the cloister in a way that was not as codified or obvious. The seventeenth century was a period that coincided with a worsening in the position of elite women. From the 16th to eighteenth centuries, general female subjection deepened. Zemon Davis attributes this change to the fact that the “patriarchal family streamlined itself for more efficient property acquisition, social mobility, and preservation of the line.”220 This article predates modern research about the power of women in social groups but still applies to elite families and in particular the legal elite. The seventeenth century Parisian nobility provided a climate where the maintenance of property, inheritance, and, most importantly, social norms were deeply valued. Additionally, any benefits that women reaped from the Council of Trent did not apply to elite women: even though the council asked for consensual marriage and codified a minimum age for religious vows, the Church hierarchy inevitably sided with elite families and aristocratic women still largely married at the will of their parents.

Just as men and women divided themselves between monasteries and convents, upper class men and women also socially segregated themselves along gender lines. The culture of “politesse” created an existence for both men and women based on artifice and lofty social standards. These standards were often more demanding and more rigorously applied to noblewomen but Paris’ elite women nevertheless found ways to demonstrate their capabilities. Women such as Madame d’Aulnoy and Madame de Sévigné have been lauded by historians for their academic contributions both in publication and in correspondence. This chapter will explore the historiographical shift from condemnation of the Church to a more updated approach that sees the Church as increasingly nuanced in its attitude towards women. It will also explore the extent to which the nobility imposed limitations on upper class women in seventeenth century Parisian society. In addition to this, the “feminine potential” of upper class women will be discussed, with a particular focus on the intellectual circles and salons of the period that were run and sustained by women.

Marriage amongst the elites

For historians, a hallmark indicator of female emancipation is the extent of choice women are granted in marriage, and when it came to the French nobility spouses to be had little say in this regard. The Church itself was not as draconian on the subject of marriage as one might believe; as mentioned, the Catholic Church, at Trent, mandated the freely given consent of both parties to legitimize a marriage. This legal convention did not hold in practice for aristocratic families. In fact, often marriage became a family pact amongst the ruling classes, and women (and often their male spouses) were often forced into arranged marriages by their parents. Convention required that upper class women in particular marry at extraordinarily young ages, so
as to secure a beneficial family alliance at an early stage, and by the age of twenty, elite circles would regard an aristocratic woman as an old maid. Dowries were the norm, and although they would be matched by the financial contribution from the groom’s family, they added to the commodification of upper class women as they became associated with a monetary value. Arranged marriages gave husbands-to-be limited agency too, but compared to women, aristocratic men had considerably more choice in selecting a spouse, as they were permitted to marry a woman from the middle classes, thereby elevating her social status through matrimony. Although such a convention may seem that it granted women more social mobility, it meant that were more inclined to use marriage as a bargaining chip for their own status.

Romance and marriage in the seventeenth century were very much divorced for the nobility. Amongst the upper classes, marriage was understood as loveless and passionless. The historian sees such a phenomenon in the correspondence of Madame de Sévigné. In her letters, the focus of Madame de Sévigné’s attention is on her children, rather than the memory of her husband. Henri de Sévigné was known as a “philanderer, a spendthrift and an incorrigible duelist” and indeed died in a duel over his mistress. Italian writer Jean Benedicti’s manual on the sins of marriage published in France at the turn of the century reveals a closer look at

222 Rapley, *The Dévotes*, 14
224 Rapley, *The Dévotes*, 14
226 Ojala & Ojala, 34
what a cleric thought was acceptable for women and men\textsuperscript{227} in matrimony. According to Benedict, the potential sins of a woman against her husband were “much more numerous.”\textsuperscript{228} It would be regarded as a sin if a wife disobeyed her husband over the governance of the home and family, and if she was seen to provoke him she would be perceived as “quarrelsome, unruly and impatient.”\textsuperscript{229} Most interestingly, a wife’s refusal to submit to her husband was also a refusal to submit to divine law.\textsuperscript{230} Ultimately, female obedience was required to the patriarchal trinity of God, king and husband.

The validity of Benedicti’s treatise as a source may be interrogated. Firstly, Benedicti himself was a cleric who was never married. Secondly, and more importantly, these manuals were designed to broaden the Church’s scope of control beyond religious women to elite women too. Benedicti’s description of seventeenth-century marriage was far from accurate, nor were these norms rigorously upheld during wedlock. Such statements were not codifications but projections. They were reflections of what certain members of the Catholic Church wished for marriage to look like throughout Parisian and indeed wider French society. What the source can inform the historian is what direction social norms were being shaped in. Benedicti’s pamphlet demonstrates that members of the Catholic Church wanted the stringent gender norms of religion to be extended to all women. Even in a time when their approach to marriage seemed more mitigated, perhaps the Catholic Church’s approach to women remained just as virulent from certain commentators like Benedicti. Treatises like these do not necessarily mean that religiosity was employed by the male elites as a bulwark to female emancipation, only that the Church

\textsuperscript{228} Anderson, 69.
\textsuperscript{229} Anderson, 69.
\textsuperscript{230} Anderson, 69.
hoped that it would be. What can be gathered it that social norms of elite marriage frequently worked in the favor of men and to a woman’s detriment, and this effect was exacerbated by Church doctrine.

From this perspective, treatises like Benedicti’s that were published and circulated in elite circles were not as dangerous to female liberty as they may have first seemed. Their content, however, was potentially not as dangerous as the ways in which they were used. Although these manuals for behavior within marriage were not used as guidelines for most upper-class marriages, that did not mean that they could not be used as justification for misogynist behavior within the sphere of wedlock. Any doctrine that derived from the Catholic Church wielded a certain power that could be used to an individual’s advantage. Husbands could and would cite literature such as Benedicti’s to legitimise their power within marriage or their draconian behavior towards their wives, and in this sense such manuals could be prescriptive. Therefore, the Church itself may not have been the one to enforce limiting marital norms on women, it only dispelled literature that could be used for malicious means. Although these ideas were never codified, they became entrenched in the values of the upper classes and part of noble identity in the seventeenth century in despite of the growth of salon culture that was bolstered by elite female participants.

Gender Segregation

The “gentilhommes” -- or gentlemen-- of the nobility undoubtedly possessed the social, political and economic power in seventeenth century French society, which was exacerbated by the stark social division between the genders during the period. In her analysis of gender norms of the seventeenth century--Chain Her By One Foot-- Anderson argues that the social world of
the nobility was “divided into men and women,”\textsuperscript{231} within a society and culture that required both sexes. Upper class women often turned to the Bible as a means of escapism from male domination,\textsuperscript{232} trapped in the domestic sphere and by the prescriptive social norms of the era.\textsuperscript{233}

The rigidity of social standards still left some room for hedonism amongst the elite. In fact, the division in the social lives of men and women was exemplified by the ability of men to engage in debauched activities, such as gambling, extra-marital affairs and excessive drinking. Women certainly partook in extra-marital affairs-- in particular aristocratic women and widows-- and the Duchess of Longueville, for instance, conducted multiple affairs. But women were usually much more covert out of fear of societal scorn, and public furore would usually accompany open female promiscuity. Ojala and Ojala claim in their biography of Madame de Sévigné, that noble men were immune to scorn from their peers when it came to their pursuit of hedonism: “The pursuit of pleasure was a full time occupation among many of the monied, titled leisured class, and a man had to transgress outrageously to incur censure in this morally relaxed society.”\textsuperscript{234} Louis XIV --arguably the moral compass of the entire nation-- conducted multiple extra marital affairs with several aristocratic women. Reading the letters of Madame de Sévigné, it becomes apparent that elite women would go to great lengths to hide such affairs, whereas men could openly flaunt them. Her letter to her daughter from April 1672, mentions an acquaintance who she names Fiennes who laments at the infidelity of her husband the Chevalier de Lorraine, an additional insult in that he was a homosexual lover to Louis XIV’s brother Philippe d’Orleans. Sévigné comments that Fiennes was ‘acting the forsaken maiden” and that the Chevalier commented, “‘We have loved each other and now we don’t, fidelity is not a virtue in people of

\textsuperscript{231} Anderson, 5.
\textsuperscript{232} Rapley, \textit{The Dévotes}, 16.
\textsuperscript{233} Rapley, \textit{The Dévotes}, 34.
\textsuperscript{234} Ojala & Ojala, 21
Such a comment displays the openness with which male aristocrats conducted extramarital affairs. The relaxation of moral standards were reserved for men who were free to engage in adultery, heavy drinking, and over expenditure; women and men conformed to a radically different set of social standards.

Farrell argues in *Performing Motherhood* that Madame de Sévigné cultivated a public “maternal identity” in order to be revered by her peers. Farrell adds that such an image was prescribed for women like Sévigné by the male authorities in their social circles who wrote manuals on the correct “feminine comportment” at the time. Looking further at Madame de Sévigné, the historian indeed witnesses the gender division that was so prevalent in the seventeenth century. Although men and women frequently corresponded with one another -- for instance, Madame de Sévigné and her friend, Pomponne wrote to each other at great length-- female to female correspondence seemed to differ from letter writing between the sexes. Whilst the epistolary style of French women was more creative and authentic, historians note that more intimate and candid correspondence rarely breached gender barriers, further emphasizing the extent of the social division between men and women amongst the seventeenth century Parisian elite. For example, Madame de Sévigné confides to her daughter about topics that she is clearly less at ease bringing into conversation with men: marital woes, her existential worries, and even pregnancy. She is certainly more at liberty to talk about her daily activities with other women and even more introspective musings are usually limited to conversations with female correspondents. For example, in a letter to Madame de Grignan from June 1675 she confides in her daughter about her sadness from being distanced from her family and says she is comforted

---

236 Farrell, 6.
237 Farrell, 9
that “you also feel you have a little human weakness,”\textsuperscript{238} in a statement of vulnerability she would scarcely mention to a male correspondent. What this evidences is a gender division in elite social circles that was even present in language and written content.

The convergence of genders through salon culture

This is not to say, however, that upper class men and women did not interact in some respects, and the arena that most discourse occurred was the seventeenth century intellectual salons. Salon culture typifies seventeenth century France, the upper classes, and the intelligentsia of Paris. In such salons, men and women from the nobility met to discuss language, science, music and literature, and were forced to conform to strict codes of speech and conduct.\textsuperscript{239} These salons had many male participants but were almost always run by women. One of the most famed salons was indeed administered by an upper class woman, Madame de Rambouillet, and was known as the “salon bleu” due to the blue room in which it was conducted.\textsuperscript{240} Over the course of the seventeenth century, aristocratic women began to appear at the head of academies and salons more and more frequently. Perhaps the most successful feat was the widespread participation of upper class women in salon culture. Madame de Sévigné, too, participated in the salon discourse, with her letters acting as a reflection of the art of conversation, discussing every subject from the theatre, to court politics to gossip.\textsuperscript{241} Molière and other revered playwrights would frequent these salons, presenting early versions of their scenes to Sévigné and her friends. Such salons were, in some cases, extremely effective in elevating the standing of women in the

\textsuperscript{238} Sévigné, Selected Letters, 159.
\textsuperscript{239} Ojala & Ojala, 31.
\textsuperscript{240} Ojala & Ojala, 31.
\textsuperscript{241} Farrell, 12.
eyes of noble men. Through “frequent and intimate social contact with men,” a new kind of intelligentsia formed that finally included both sexes. This modernist intelligentsia worked to clarify and define the French language, increase respect for learning and literature, and reimagined French culture altogether.\(^{243}\)

The salons also permitted women to circulate their own ideas and writings. It was in the Parisian salons, for example, that Madame d’Aulnoy showcased her celebrated fairytales, and that Madame de l’Aubespine presented her translations of Ovid, as well as her erotic poetry. And that Madame Dacier’s translation of Homer was first shown, which would later become the standard version of translation in France throughout the eighteenth century. Aristocratic women presented their writings in the salons, often commenting on the society around them and frequently producing treatises on piety. Evidently, the aristocratic women were able to observe and comment on the social, political, literary and religious norms around them. The salons gave a platform, however small, to the female voice and permitted women to finally engage with men on an academic level, and more importantly left an enduring “feminine imprint”\(^{244}\) on French culture.

The limits of salon culture

Having said this, it was this same salon society that came to inhibit female emancipation due to the increasing falsity, superficiality of the upper class culture encapsulated in these salons. Ojala and Ojela make the claim that the nature of the salons gradually became corrupted, coming to represent “an excess of refinement, a preciousness”\(^{245}\) rather than intellectual discussion. The

\(^{244}\) Ojala & Ojala, 31.
upper class women who frequented these establishments became characterised as superficial and pretentious. Famed seventeenth century writer, Moliere, ridiculed bourgeoisie who aspired to be like the aristocracy, referring to elite women themselves as being “precieuses,” and pseudo-savantes. That is not to say that there were not substantial academic attainments on the part of women. Elite women who were educated and self-assured enough, could be recognized on the same stage as men, but these were individual cases and too few and far between to draw any true conclusions from. A more common occurrence was for the intellectual achievements upper class women may have won to become debased and regarded by their male peers as insubstantial and superficial in an effort to devalue their intelligence.

In addition to this, historians of French salon culture claim that the female portion of the nobility were greatly limited by the conventions of the upper classes that were restated through salon culture. Craveri argues in The Art of Conversation that elite men and religious treatises circulated in salons forced noble women and men to conform to ideals of behaviour, essentially entrapping them in the falsity of these societal norms. The difference between male and female entrapment was the rigidity of the norms and the pressure to adhere to them. Lougee’s Le Paradis des Femmes similarly argues that noble salon culture often created a self-perpetuating cycle powered by the very women that it disempowered. She states that women “functioned publicly as the promoters of the social life which integrated new sources of status into the culture of the traditional social elite.” Aristocratic women, in other words, passed on the societal norms of the upper classes to future generations and ensured that the social hierarchy and gender

---

restrictions continued. In doing so, these women were bolstering the supremacy of the aristocracy but also inadvertently limiting their own potential as citizens and academics. Anderson underscores the same assertion, stating that women consciously “took on the status of dependents...subjugated.” Anderson even goes so far as to say that with this unconscious self-subjugation that continued to occur, women became less exposed to men and thereby less “experienced by men.” With this gender segregation, women were no longer understood, she argues, as true humans. As a result, “the less human [women] became [and] the more easy it was to justify their subjugation.” The subordination of women occurred in a self-perpetuating cycle for which both sides were somewhat responsible for.

Anderson and Lougee’s arguments have merit in that they recognize the prejudice against aristocratic women and the way in which discrimination was implicitly although not explicitly codified within elite social norms. Having said this, Anderson wrote in the 1990s and Lougee in the late 70s and based their work on little empirical evidence. If they did, they based their arguments around treatises like or manuals that were, as established, rarely upheld in reality. It is important to recognize that men too were victims to the standards of behavior, and that women were not wholly imprisoned by social norms and the culture of politesse. An assumption that women were completely disempowered and not recognized for their academic or social achievements would be in ignorance of the primary sources from multiple aristocratic women that state the contrary. It is also untrue that all aristocratic men wished to subordinate their female peers. The leading figure of the Enlightenment, Condorcet, supported the right for women to vote in his draft of a constitution in 1793, demonstrating that elite men were hardly on a

250 Anderson, 228
251 Anderson, 228
mission to eradicate the civic rights of women. The struggle for female emancipation was not starkly divided with men and one side and women on the other. Any further analysis of such historians from the latter part of the 20th century must take these factors into consideration.

Despite the limitations of Anderson and Lougee’s research, most modern historians alike concur that feminine impact on salon culture never truly extended beyond a social effect. Men and women were permitted to interact socially through the means of salons, but the work that women presented there was—for the most part—never widely circulated. Naturally there were individuals who bucked this trend: the translations of Madame Dacier and Madame de l’Aubespine have already been mentioned, Madame de Sévigné wrote letters that would become the epistolary model for Francophones for centuries to come, and Madame de Lafayette wrote what is generally considered as the first modern French novel. On a collective scale, the female voice— in particular, the voice of upper class women—remained mute in the wider Parisian community. After all, a translation of the Odyssey or the Iliad did not reflect the thoughts of elite women, and did not allow them to engage in academic discourse or argumentation. The wider standing of upper class women was hardly altered despite the prevalence of salons and of upper class women in them. Salon culture did little to benefit female emancipation, and more than anything, highlighted the different obstacles that aristocratic women had to overcome in comparison to their middle class peers. Throughout wider Parisian society, there had been a move towards female emancipation. The material condition of most French women was far improving in the seventeenth century and as a result more Parisian women participated in the workplace. Merchant, artisan and peasant women all had a growing place in the public economy. An increasing number of elite women had access to a higher level of education but disregarding
this, they were left behind by the proliferation of women in the workforce. Aristocratic women were largely left behind the developments in female emancipation across Parisian society.

**Standards of behavior**

What exactly was impeding the development of emancipation amongst female elites? The answer lay in the intangible and yet omnipresent social norms which predicated the aristocratic lifestyle in the seventeenth century. The standards of behaviour for noble women were well known, to the extent where they were often collected in manuals and treatises. These lofty and particularised standards were imposed on women by male commentators, creating guidelines for the the ideal woman of the nobility. Upper class women seemingly imposed them on each other too, as noblewomen such as Madame de Lambert would host Parisian salons that often preached the importance of “belle galanterie,” which translates as beautiful or elegant comportment. Madame de Lambert and Mademoiselle de Scudery—both noble women of the period—maintained that as part of the classic rules of aristocratic society, the specifically female virtues were modesty, decency and purity. Such values were a far cry from the drunkenness, card-playing and philandering that husbands of aristocratic women such as Marquis de Sévigné often engaged in.

A subject often discussed was the idea of the “honnete femme”, otherwise known as the honest women, a notion that applied to bourgeoisies but was extended to the upper classes. On this subject, aristocratic social norms could be at their most misogynistic. Rather than acknowledging that a woman had innate qualities of her own that distinguished her from her male counterparts, the doctrine of the “honnete femme” aimed to model aristocratic women exclusively on gentlemen: an unexpected trend in a time when social norms for elite men and

---

252 Craveri, 269.
253 Craveri, 269.
women were so divergent. In his writings on “Des Femmes” in the published “Les Caracteres,” the seventeenth century French philosopher Jean de la Bruyere claimed that gentlewomen most model themselves on the “honnete homme.” The authors of treatises like these expected women to cultivate mannerisms that included “politesse”, “socialabilité”, virtue and pride of appearance. Interestingly, these mannerisms seem to the modern reader more feminine than overtly masculine and there may be some significance behind this. It is possible that men initially modelled “l’honnete homme” on the image of an honest aristocratic women but then later re-claimed these values as male and gentlemanly, expecting women to follow them as their natural inferiors. Unfortunately, again the historian sees a general trend of aristocratic women perpetuating such standards. Famed courtesan Ninon de Lenclos--who rather ironically was having an affair with the Marquis de Sévigné and was a member of the Parisian elite-- claimed that a women had to “make a man of herself” in order to survive. Elite Parisian women were therefore beholden to social norms of behavior that denied them a separate identity to men and held them to rigorous norms, despite the tendency towards gender segregation amongst the nobility.

The internal enforcement of these limits suggests that consciousness of their own subordination was an asset that many aristocratic women still lacked. More widely, the tendency to echo stringent social norms showed that elite society was inherently patriarchal and male, to the extent that aristocratic women struggled to break from the mindset and views that their male peers possessed and promulgated. Although women could clearly achieve as much as their male peers, the barriers that they had to surmount in order to express themselves on the same level were vastly more significant.

254 La Bruyere, Jean de “Des Femmes,” Les Caracteres, 174
255 Craveri, 269
256 Craveri, 269
Resistance from upper class women

This chapter has established that the cultural norms of the seventeenth century often worked against emancipation for aristocratic women. Many noblewomen certainly still resisted such subordination and exhibited their potential as intellectuals and academics. As has been mentioned, many aristocratic women began, coordinated and participated in the most famous intellectual circles of the time period. Although their lives were often confined to their children, households and relationships with other women, upper class gentlewomen often expressed frustration at their predicaments.

As will later be explored further, La Grande Mademoiselle was one of the most politically powerful women in France in the early seventeenth century. She was otherwise known as Anne Marie Louise d’Orleans, Duchesse de Montpensier, and was the wealthiest woman in Europe. In her writings, the Grande Mademoiselle states that she envisions a utopian society where women are free from male subjugation: "a corner of the world in which . . . women are their own mistresses."\(^{257}\) In her vision of utopia she posits that there would be no marriage whatsoever, or even courtship. Furthermore, she advocates for women being able to explore intellectual pursuits and academic endeavours, with each home containing a library and study where a woman could have a room of one’s own to learn. Her language is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, she acknowledges the limitations placed on women, that they are often restricted to the domestic sphere: their own residences. She postulates that libraries should be placed within the homes of women, thereby recognizing that women are rarely permitted to renounce domesticity and pursue academia, academia must instead come to them. Secondly, she talks in language that is reminiscent of modern feminist literature. Although it would be a step too far to

declare the Duchess of Montpensier a modern feminist, in her writing she uses the phrase “a room of one’s own,” predating Virginia Woolf’s famous statements commonly regarded as the advent of modern 20th century feminism. These words, historians acknowledge, may have been precipitated by personal issues: her bitter disappointment in failing to marry her cousin, Louis XIV.

This fact does not deligitimate the power of la Grande Mademoiselle statements in a time when few would speak out against the status of women. Her words are reflected in the correspondence of Madame de Sévigné with her cousin Bussy. In her letters, at the age of fifty-seven, Sévigné remarks (translated): “men are constantly told that they are worthy only insofar as they love glory, they focus all of their ambitions there.”\(^2^{258}\) She also muses, “mais si j’avais été un homme,”\(^2^{259}\) wondering aloud how her life would be different if she were male. This particular quotation reflects multiple characteristics of the aristocratic female experience of the seventeenth century. First and foremost, it demonstrates the distance between men and women. With that statement, Madame de Sévigné muses on the abject difference of her life if she were to not be a woman: a reality that seems to her far from her current state. Secondly, the quotation shows the potential with “si” that manhood offered women— a potential they felt that they would never grasp. Sévigné was a woman who had achieved remarkable feats in her life: her letters became models for literature, she had restored the damage her husband had wrecked on her family finances, she had negotiated favorable marriages for both her children without losing a penny on their dowries. Yet she still wondered aloud what benefits she might have as a male, hinting at a certain jealousy or surely a sense of dissatisfaction, if not just a wonder at her possibilities as a male. Aristocratic women of the time clearly had the ability to abstract their thinking from the

\(^{258}\) Farrell, 156.  
\(^{259}\) Farrell, 156.
confines of their reality and recognize both the inequality of their age and the cerebral abilities of their sex.

The intellectual reach of aristocratic women

Beyond protest at the injustice of the gender equality that their culture and class perpetuated, aristocratic women also frequently demonstrated laudable intellectual capabilities. Historian Farrell dedicated a book to the correspondence between Madame de Sévigné and her female friends, one of whom was Madame Arnauld Angélique. In this work, Farrell affirms that Sévigné’s intellect goes far beyond the perceived scope of her gender. Indeed, Sévigné certainly does not limit herself to discussing motherhood: in one of her most memorable letters from 1680, she pays homage to her study and her books, saying, (translated) “I brought a great quantity of carefully selected books...I cannot put my hand on one that I do not want to read all the way through...Whenever I go into my study, I cannot understand why I should ever leave it.” She displays an extreme devotion to studying purely for pleasurable purposes. With regard to other aristocratic women, the writings and fairy tales of Madame d’Aulnoy were as respected for their entertainment value just as much as they were for their poignancy and significance. The plots of her stories are particularly intriguing as the themes of segregation and of arranged marriage may seem to play out in a fantasy world but were very much the reality for many aristocratic women (and men) including readers like Sévigné and her daughter Grignan. Women like Madame de Sévigné and d’Aulnoy were clearly equally as accomplished as many of their male counterparts of the time both in their writing and creative pursuits. In short, noble women of the seventeenth century were hugely restricted when it came to their academic and creative pursuits.

---

260 Farrell, 156.
261 Ojala & Ojala, 139.
pursuits, yet still managed to display glimpses of superior intellect within these severe limitations.

**Madame de Sévigné as a matriarch**

In fact, aristocratic women often displayed formidable talent at affecting the decisions of those around them, and exerting control over their social circle as will be explored further in the following chapter. Although elite women usually only had extended correspondence and a say in the social matters of their children, those like Madame de Sévigné would often manage their social clout so as to broaden their authority over not only familial matters, but political and economic matters of their friends, relations and even -- in the case of Sévigné-- matters of the state. For example, Madame de Sévigné excelled at her management of the family business, doing a far superior job of running it than her husband, who had left them with significant debts. One particular letter grants the historian an insight into her control over the affairs of those around her. Take, for instance, Sévigné’s letter of December 28th of 1673. On this date, Madame de Sévigné wrote to her daughter, Madame de Grignan. She wrote the letter in the wake of the Siege of Orange, a battle which she had expressed concern about in previous letters. The letter of the 28th should have expressed joy that her daughter’s husband and her son-in-law, Count de Grignan, would be able to abandon his position and return to Paris and to her. However, Madame de Grignan had instead informed her mother that the couple could not afford the trip. Madame de Sévigné was upset at her daughter’s decision as she saw little of her following her relocation to Provence. As a result, Sévigné chose to use her letter in response as an opportunity to persuade her daughter to change her mind.
The letter grants the historian an insight into the inner workings of the relationship between two seventeenth century Parisian noblewomen, and also between a mother and a daughter. In her rhetoric, Madame de Sévigné is able to artfully balance a tone of respect and also of authority. She appears to the reader both as a matriarch and a friend, a confidante and a figure to be revered.

At the outset of the letter, Madame de Sévigné begins by praising her daughter, presumably in an attempt to engage her and catch her attention. She states, “your reasoning on the subject is so forceful,” “I know the tone you take, my daughter, and I cannot counter it.” From such flattery she gradually transitions to an assertion of her authority, albeit subtly. She restates her daughter’s own words back to her, in order to best display how unreasonable she is being. She writes, “when you ask “whether it is possible that I- I “who should give more thought than any other” to the ruinous effect on your financial future.” Sévigné repeats “I” in order to demonstrate to her daughter just how ridiculous it would be that her own mother would disregard her financial woes. Her tone then develops to one of slight condescension: “since you present yours as the voice of reason, wisdom, even philosophy…” The letter’s reader is left with the impression that Madame de Sévigné is reminding her daughter that she may not be as learned as she thinks, and is cautioning her audacity. The historian sees a transition in tone of the writer from one of polite and attentive fawning to one of warning presumably with the aim of reminding Madame de Grignon of her place.

Towards the middle of the letter, Madame de Sévigné’s language switches yet again. Instead of displaying condescension, she seems to be attempting to induce guilt in her daughter. She begins with a sharp statement: “I never want to be accused of being a reckless, an unjust or frivolous mother.” With this statement, Sévigné scolds her daughter for what was perhaps
implicitly an unfavorable characterization of her mother. She continues, subtly emphasizing her daughter’s own wrongdoings. For instance, she states: “when I think of what you spend…on your Carnival festivities, your banquets and galas, your troupes of actors, I still think it would cost you less to come here.” Here, Sévigné lists the ostentatious expenses that her daughter has been making in Aix-en-Provence with the aim of forcing her daughter to regret her previous frivolities, and recognize the irony in her stating that it would be cheaper for her to remain in Aix. Madame de Sévigné uses this subtle manipulation in order to encourage her daughter to rethink her previous statements and reconsider her decision to stay.

At the end of the letter, Madame de Sévigné turns the focus upon herself. She hypothesizes how deeply sad it would be for her in the event that her daughter ignored her advice and did not join her in Paris. She depicts herself, not inaccurately, as a devoted mother who would be entirely fulfilled only if her daughter joined her at her home. She exclaims, “my heart abandons itself to the hope that you are not pregnant.” The hyperbolic statement is designed to show how deeply she cares for her daughter’s wellbeing. A few lines later, she confesses her mistaken desire that she would be able to spend time with her daughter in the near future: “I had even allowed myself to hope that Mons. De Grignan would leave you here with me, this summer…” Such a statement of self-pity invites her daughter to immediately assuage her supposed fears that they would not see each other during the summer. Sévigné’s tone of melancholy continues: “I yield to this necessity and will take this sorrow—which is not negligible—….I must make a total sacrifice and resolve to spend the rest of my life separated from the one person in the world who is dearest to me” Here, in a manner that is almost comic to the reader, Sévigné paints herself as an exceptionally sorry figure, even adding in a line that states just how serious her sorrow is (“-which is not negligible-”). Her letters, upon an analytical
reading, reveal careful tactics of persuasion positioned to convince her daughter to follow her initial instructions.

Beyond the rhetorical techniques employed by Madame de Sévigné, this particular letter also reveals ideas of femininity and piety that are relevant to a wider historical study of the period. At one point, for instance, she adds that a worse accusation for her would be to be accused of being “reckless…unjust…frivolous” for virtue of “feminine weakness.” Such a statement suggests to the historian that Madame de Sévigné would regard a negative characterization as particularly disparaging if it was on account of her sex. It seems that Madame de Sévigné resents the association of femininity with overt emotion and stupidity and is reminding her daughter of this. The statement would, therefore, suggest that seventeenth century women such as Sévigné were conscious of the negative connotations of femininity and were aggrieved by them. In addition to this, Sévigné brings up notions of religiosity and piety. The end of her letter, in particular, makes several references to God and penitence. Interestingly, Madame de Sévigné seems to question notions of godly faith at this point in the letter, even going as far as to say, “I marvel at Providence which decrees…I shall make the sacrifice for the sake of my salvation.” Although she resolves to follow the path that God seems to have placed her on, it is remarkable that she displays the audacity and confidence to question it, albeit briefly, in a letter that would have been reviewed by the King’s Postal Service. Her statements reveal that aristocratic women were not necessarily bound or confined by the limitations of their faith, and were able to speak out against it without ramifications.

The 1673 letter by Madame de Sévigné is significant in that it demonstrates its author’s intelligent use of language. Over the course of the letter, Sévigné is able to artfully transition from different techniques all crafted to persuade her daughter to take the journey to Paris, and all
in the interest of Sévigné and not Grignon. The letter is demonstrative of the grasp on rhetoric that educated women such as Madame de Sévigné possessed. It also reveals the nuanced power dynamic between a noblewoman and her daughter: Sévigné maintains the upper hand throughout despite immediate appearances and clearly maintains a position of authority. Indeed, the Grignons did return to Paris in accordance with Sévigné’s wishes, thereby showing that Madame de Sévigné’s subtle yet significant matriarchal control extended not only to her daughter but also to her son-in-law’s entire family. Madame de Sévigné’s letter speaks to a wider phenomenon amongst aristocratic women: using the limited sphere of control they were granted within society in their favor.

Sévigné’s letter displays consciousness of the existing gender hierarchy amongst the elite and an aggrievement towards it that was commonplace in the writings of aristocratic women. Upper class women were evidently and undoubtedly subject to the will of the French patriarchal structure during the seventeenth century. A potentially insurmountable obstacle to emancipation amongst the nobility was the social segregation between men and women and the divergence in what elite society perceived as socially acceptable for each sex. The most extreme division was found in the differing behavior between men and women, and the elite’s reaction to it: Parisian noblemen were afforded the right by their peers to gallivant and behave recklessly without consequence. The behavior of aristocratic women, by contrast, was outlined in manuals that were fed from the more malignant of Catholic doctrine, and any straying from this implicit though intangible codification of behavior was strictly critiqued by commentators such as Benedicti.

In many respects, aristocratic women experienced seventeenth century Parisian society in a vacuum. The Parisian noblewoman may have been granted an education but had no place in Paris’ public economy and no consent in marriage, meaning that they did not experience the
same rights as their bourgeoisie and even lower class peers. The upper classes forcefully upheld stringent marriage conventions that strayed from Catholic convention, meaning consensual or romantic marriage was a rarity within the elite class. On top of this, doctrines on female comportment were frequently circulated around salons, which contributed to the inferior status of women amongst the nobility and placed aristocratic women in a more vulnerable position to their male peers although they too may have been held to strict standards.

For a Parisian noblewoman, her greatest weapon was her education and multiple noblewomen contributed significantly to the intelligentsia of salon culture, but even this tool proved to be blunt. The academic contributions of elite women are thoroughly impressive to the modern day reader, however, their intellectual capacity was so frequently discredited that these works had little impact on their overall political status or social status. The rigorously held social standards of the upper classes could not be defeated by a plucky few, even if that few included la Grande Mademoiselle.

Although scholars such as Bruneau widely consider religion to have been a potential source of liberation to Parisian women, many modern historians claim that this emancipation simply did not extend to the upper echelons of French society. Similarly, historians of French salon culture claim that the conventions of the upper classes greatly limited the nobility. Aristocratic women often resisted and spoke out against their own subjugation, but they also often perpetuated it by passing on the same societal trends to younger generations, namely the culture of “politesse” that elite women reinstated through the very salons they presided over.

Unlike the cloistered nuns who became agents of change in their establishments, shifting the position of women in the Church, aristocratic women were unable to exact such an improvement in status. There was clearly a disparity between the emancipation of middle class
and upper class women. As a result, the nobility posed a sizeable obstacle to female liberty and unlike the Church, did not leave room for individual women to make true societal impact. From a historical perspective, the limited liberty for women in seventeenth century Paris amongst the upper echelons of society demonstrates that female emancipation was a gradual and partial rather than wholesale process.
Chapter Five: The Parisian Noblewoman’s Response to Inequality: Contempt, Disconformity, Combat and Reinforcement

The previous chapters have established and examined the limitations imposed on aristocratic Parisian women by the patriarchal structures of seventeenth century French nobility. This chapter will examine the female responses to such structures including marriage, political exclusion and legal inequality, as well as the reaction to the general perception of female intellectual inferiority. This chapter will take the mid to late seventeenth century as its period of study, as these years up to and including the beginning of the eighteenth century were the highpoint of noble salon culture. The responses were wide-ran ging amongst the upper classes and therefore have been divided into several categories: contempt, disconformity and combat. In addition, this chapter will also consider a fourth response to the oppression and misrepresentation of the female voice, which is reinforcement. Although a natural response for many educated upper class French women was to oppose the legal, political and social restrictions of the time, multiple figures also seemingly bolstered the same restrictive norms upon themselves. In particular, this chapter will explore the poems and stories of Madame d’Aulnoy further and will look to the writings of the Rohan sisters as well as those of la Grande Mademoiselle, and will question why at times these women seemingly advocate for further limitations on the female sex, despite their pioneering efforts to overcome them.

Expressing Contempt: Direct and Indirect

Tacit contempt for social, political and legal restriction was a response that was commonplace and easily recognizable in the writings of several aristocratic women. It is a sentiment often expressed in the writings of Madame de Sévigné in the letters she exchanged with her daughter, Madame de Grignan. At one point in their exchanged correspondence, Sévigné expresses distaste
at being treated differently by those around her on account of her “feminine weakness.” She explains that she is being accused of female inadequacy on account of behavior that may be “reckless…unjust…frivolous.”\textsuperscript{262} The assumption is that femininity is associated with such characteristics: negative characteristics that are bywords for excessive emotion and thoughtlessness. In the letter, Madame de Sévigné expresses her distaste for being associated with these qualities, but the critical point is that she dislikes being stereotyped due to her sex. Elsewhere in her writings she more indirectly voices dislike for the gendered bias that she and her fellow noblewomen experienced. She points out the intelligence of her daughter and quality of her writing, distinguishing it from that of her male counterparts: “you write extremely well, no one writes better.”\textsuperscript{263} She later expresses frustration at the mundaneness of her daughter’s life in the South of France, voicing her “suspicion of boredom.”\textsuperscript{264} She seems to point the finger at her daughter’s husband for such a predicament, if playfully: “it is Monsieur de Grignon whom I blame.”\textsuperscript{265} Sévigné even suggests that it is her son-in-law who has impacted her daughter’s freedom to fully express herself, and she encourages her to be open in her thoughts and writing: “nothing should be banished from conversation.”\textsuperscript{266} Sévigné’s letters echo a quiet distaste for the position of French noblewomen, specifically making reference to the misrepresentation of the female sex and the tedium of the lives of many aristocratic women in despite of their intelligence.

\textsuperscript{264} Chantal, \textit{Madame de Sévigné: Selected Letters}, 79.
\textsuperscript{265} Chantal, \textit{Madame de Sévigné: Selected Letters}, 79.
\textsuperscript{266} Chantal, \textit{Madame de Sévigné: Selected Letters}, 76.
Such sentiments are reflected in the writings of the women of the Rohan family. Henri de Rohan was a wealthy duke from Brittany, who often travelled across France as a soldier and leader of the Huguenots. By consequence, the business affairs of the Rohan family were left in the hands of his wife and daughters. The daughters—Henriette, Anne and Catherine—assisted their mother, Marguerite, in the book-keeping of the family business and also traced the Rohan genealogy back generations to ensure the validity of their noble ancestry and their royal connection that had been sustained from the 15th century and onwards. The daughters certainly seemed to feel limited by the constraints placed on aristocratic women, primarily their exclusion from institutions of higher learning. Their education, unlike that of their brothers, had been limited to tutelage by a male relative or scholar that was willing to assist them. In response, they educated themselves, becoming literary patrons, poets, and art collectors alike. Their writings in particular suggest contempt for the education they were denied. For example, Anne de Rohan wrote a poem dedicated to her mother on a series of eminent women from the past to the present, essentially creating a “feminist” vision of history.267 Marguerite, too, collected art and portraits of her ancestors but arranged them in galleries that only included female members of the Rohan lineage. Her sister, Henriette, also demonstrated a female bias, leaving all possessions to the other women in her family upon her death.268 Her brothers and nephews were left with nothing, showing that the interests of the women around her greatly superseded those of the men, even though it was the male members of the family that represented the Rohan dynasty in the public sphere, despite the male line dying out in the 16th century. From these actions, the historian can conclude that these women felt that their intelligence was left undervalued and that they took

268 Dewald, 118.
umbrage with how feminine contribution was often ignored both within their family and within wider French education.

Similarly, the letters of la Grande Mademoiselle express contempt towards the injustice that women faced having been denied any political role in a modernizing French society. One particular statement from the 1650s demonstrates her frustration that women could not formally occupy any roles of influence at all “daughters are good for nothing in France.”

Her language is much stronger than that of Sévigné, and at times borders on extreme, particularly when it comes to her views on male intent. At her most benign, she criticizes the attitudes of men at court, which she believes are uncouth and oppressive: “[men show] no civility towards women...their tyranny has no just basis.” At her most controversial, she casts men against women, arguing that all men are opposed to the betterment of the female sex: “men are our most cruel enemies...[they] bring shame to our sex.” She vilifies the entire male gender, claiming that any upper hand they may have gained was done so unfairly: “the authority men have appropriated for themselves by unjust usurpation.” Such statements are hyperbolic and exclusive to the larger than life persona of the Grande Mademoiselle. They also potentially led from her aggrievement at being denied the right to inherit the throne, in favor of her cousins Louis and Philippe. However, when examined in context with the Rohan sisters and Madame de Sévigné’s comments to her daughter it becomes apparent that many aristocratic women—both young and old—recognized and resented their political marginalization and their depiction as either weak or unimportant.

270 Anne-Marie-Louise D’Orleans, 47.
271 Anne-Marie-Louise D’Orleans, 51.
272 Anne-Marie-Louise D’Orleans, 63.
Refusing to conform: the Rohan sisters and la Grande Mademoiselle

Naturally, certain aristocratic women reacted more forcefully to societal impositions, not only voicing annoyance, but choosing to abandon contemporary gender roles. In a time when gender roles were so clearly defined, their condemnations of the status quo through words and actions were bold and radical to say the least. In particular, la Grande Mademoiselle spoke out against the restrictions of upper class marriage, as explored in the previous chapter. As a woman of notorious wealth, la Grande Mademoiselle had significantly more freedom in the marital system whilst being a highly desired commodity to potential suitors. La Grande Mademoiselle’s correspondence discusses her personal prospects of marriage, but also mediates on all marriage and indeed the potential benefits of female control over society. La Grande Mademoiselle suggested an alternative lifestyle for her contemporaries and attacked the institution of marriage in her correspondence with Francoise Bertaut de Motteville. So strong was her aversion to marriage that she refers to it in a May 1660 letter as an “unfortunate undertaking,” which is not “necessary.” She blames the institution of marriage for the male “puissance” (power) saying that it is a dependence that “custom subjects us, often against our will and because of family obligations.” She was not alone in her sentiments, and likely inspired by Madeleine de Sculdery’s “Artemène” which declared marriage to be a “long slavery” for women.

This kind of disconformity was not limited to individual characters like la Grande Mademoiselle and Lougee shows that during the latter part of the seventeenth century, multiple aristocratic women chose men who were socially inferior to them to marry out of romantic love rather than financial concern, in a trend she refers to as a “formal celebration of

---

273 Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 93.
274 Anne-Marie-Louise D’Orleans, 29, 41.
275 Anne-Marie-Louise D’Orleans, 49.
...misalliances."\(^{276}\) This was in itself a significant departure from the so-called "commercial marriages" of the upper classes, that used marital alliances to enhance prestige, wealth and influence.\(^{277}\) In this way, the words of la Grande Mademoiselle reflected a growing urgency on the part of women in seventeenth century France to take control over their agency in marriage.

Beyond marriage, La Grande Mademoiselle also attacked the constrictions of chastity. In her criticism of noble society she questions the validity of upholding values of purity: "chastity is for us a necessary virtue, without it all the others lose their lustre: that is why it is unfair to limit us this virtue alone."\(^{278}\) La Grande Mademoiselle was clearly cognizant of the unfair standards that noble women had to conform to, and felt at liberty to speak out against them and suggest that her peers abandon them to pursue a happier existence.

Nevertheless, for the most part the words of la Grande Mademoiselle remained exactly that: words. Her actions did not reflect her intentions and her disgust for the conventions of upper class marriage remained theoretical, as even she herself elected to marry a nobleman: the Duc de Lauzun, and her letters suggest that she would even have married her cousin, Louis XIV.\(^{279}\) Although she chose to marry Lauzan out of love, he was still an aristocrat from Guyenne whom she had met at the Château de Fontainebleau—amongst the very elite circles that she had so vehemently criticised. Moreover, her writings were hardly combative towards Paris’ upper echelons, in reality she was writing to a female friend who shared her opinions as a widow who had previously been married to a ninety-year old gentleman at age eighteen.\(^{280}\) La Grande

\(^{278}\) Anne-Marie-Louise D’Orléans, 53
\(^{279}\) Anne-Marie-Louise D’Orléans, 14
\(^{280}\) Anne-Marie-Louise D’Orléans, 16
Mademoiselle also had the benefit of a superior education to many of her peers and the security of social status to feel comfortable making inflammatory remarks.

A better instance of female disconformity from the patriarchal norm comes again from the Rohan sisters. Although many noblewomen appropriated the traditionally male roles of the family when their husbands were not present, the Rohan sisters exceeded any expectations of upper class women and what their behaviour should constitute in the running of the “maison” (house or estate). Rather than limiting themselves to a “behind the scenes” role in family and business management, the Rohan women took the forefront. In his book on the Rohan family identity: *Status, Power, and Identity in Early Modern France: The Rohan Family, 1550–1715* Dewald asserts that the Rohan women were distinctive in the “contradictions between their lived experiences and contemporary ideas about gender roles.” He argues that they were able to find opportunities for individual choice and action, in which they could demonstrate superior abilities to their male counterparts. For example, Henri de Rohan’s daughter-Henriette- was instructed by her father alone to research potential buyers of Rohan properties and find a suitable purchaser. His wife—Marguerite—would at times leave her infant children behind in order to travel to negotiate with the queen mother on diplomatic relations.

The fortitude in diplomacy that the Rohan sisters exhibited is comparable to that of Marie de Maupeou who orchestrated political relations through her savvy organization of social events in the latter part of the seventeenth century. Maupeou was the wife of the royal minister Louis Phelypeaux de Pontchartrain. In Sara Chapman’s 2001 article on “Patronage as Family Economy,” she argues that Maupeou alone oversaw the machinations of court politics in relation

---

281 Dewald, 12-13.
282 Dewald, 119.
283 Dewald, 104.
284 Dewald, 105.
to the de Pontchartrain family, much like Marguerite de Rohan. Chapman references historian Sarah Hanley, who claimed that by the end of the seventeenth century, French women had been excluded from formal state institutions and gradually lost control over “property, inheritance, and basic civil rights to the twin patriarchal powers of the heads of households.” Therefore, to assert authority over their rights to wealth and property, as Maupeou and Marguerite did, was an example of extreme disconformity. Chapman mentions in particular several “fetes” that Maupeou organized in order to “showcase the Pontchartrain family and its political clients.”

The importance of Maupeou’s actions were immense. Chapman stresses that at this stage in early modern France, government institutions were only emerging, and it was patron-client relations that formed networks for the transmission of political power, power that was equal to formal state institutions. Women like Maupeou were able to mediate discussions for their husbands, as well as providing new potential “clients” in the diplomatic network through the link between their birth family and their husband’s family. Such women even advised their male relatives in their official roles, taking on the position of royal ministers and thereby maintaining the “power of the patron-client network.” Evidently, it was common practice among some aristocratic women to take on an equal status to their husbands and male relatives in the diplomatic handling of clients, even if it meant overstepping their roles as wives and mothers. Here, it was not the power of the individual that these particular women were appropriating but the power of the family that could be used to advance female authority. Pontchartain worked with Maupeou for the betterment of her extended family, as did the Rohan sisters. Marriage—

---


286 Chapman, 12.

287 Chapman, 12.

288 Chapman, 13.
intermarriage and second marriages--was a tool for familial success that could be wielded by the woman who chose to use it, for increased agency.

The power of female diplomacy extended beyond the maintenance of client relations, and Marguerite de Rohan’s greatest feat came when she single handedly revived the prestige of the Soubise “maison” in 1662. In order to do so, Marguerite ensured her son’s advantageous marriage so as to associate the Rohan name with the more prestigious Guemène name, which traced the Rohans back to their noble family lineage of a different branch. With this political move, Marguerite demonstrated an astute knowledge of inheritance laws. Her son even bemoans the transparency of her tactics in a letter, claiming that his mother “divided up her goods in such a way…she gave the petitioner only what the laws forbade her from taking from him.”

Marguerite’s actions also demonstrated a high understanding of the importance of not only monetary but symbolic capital. It was owed to Marguerite’s leadership that, Dewald claims, “the Rohan family continued their march towards greater prominence and prosperity.” The Rohan women’s agency shows the capability of women to act autonomously, a skill that the historian Lanza praises: “independent women could threaten the orderly, patriarchal structure of society, particularly if…they had access to wealth, expertise, or community ties.” As Dewald affirms, that the Rohan women were demonstrative of a “blurring of gender difference.”

The determination of the Rohan women to assert their agency beyond the perceived bounds of their gender would lead to more than female diplomacy. In fact, Dewald argues that the emboldening of these women guaranteed that a degree of “sexual freedom was almost

---

289 Dewald, 98.
290 Dewald, 98.
291 Dewald, 100.
292 Dewald, Status, Power, and Identity in Early Modern France, 112.
inevitable.” ²⁹⁴ Indeed, the actions of the Rohan women became increasingly controversial, changing from stretching gender norms to fully reversing them. Their disconformity was most evident when it came to romance. In order for an aristocratic family to function in the early seventeenth century, the romantic aspirations of women needed to be strictly controlled and monitored. A noble family’s identity was paramount and illegitimate marriages and infidelity risked the family’s ability to uphold its distinctive qualities that it shared with its members. It also jeopardized the recognition of the family within noble circles. Simply put, “sexual honour was a precondition of the dynasty’s collective health,” and hence the sexual purity of the noblewomen within the Rohan family was of great importance. ²⁹⁵ Therefore, it came as a shock to Brittany’s high society that many of the Rohan women engaged in extra marital affairs and the daughters became somewhat notorious for their tendency towards infidelities. ²⁹⁶ In particular, Catherine de Rohan was adulterous, which historians attribute to her husband's impotence. ²⁹⁷ The Rohan’s sister-in-law Marguerite de Bethune also engaged in multiple extra marital relationships. ²⁹⁸ Marguerite’s infidelity is reminiscent of Ninon de l’Enclos, who has become entrenched in modern French pop culture. Ninon clearly broke from gender norms of feminine purity by making a name for herself as the mistress of several noblemen: the Great Condé, Gaston de Coligny and the Duke de la Rochefoucauld, and Charles de Sévigné (Madame de Sevigne’s husband). Ninon’s prominence and the widespread respect for her in social circles meant that she was not criticized for straying from the ideal of the honorable noble woman, even if the Rohan women were for their lack of conformity.

²⁹⁴ Dewald, 117.
²⁹⁵ Dewald, 102.
²⁹⁶ Dewald, 112.
²⁹⁷ Dewald, 103.
²⁹⁸ Dewald, 109.
This conscious disruption of gender norms should not be limited to individuals, and in fact, there were groupings of women who were more prone to break from tradition. Historian Lanza, for instance, has studied the practices of 17 century widows, in her book *From Wives to Widows in Early Modern Paris*. Although she specializes in the widows of artisans, her book also discusses how upper class widows, like Francoise Bertaut de Motteville, assumed the roles of men. She argues that widows in general, played a unusual—and often threatening—role in French society, occupying “a liminal space, by acting as men could in some situations, but constrained as women were in other circumstances.”

Lanza argues that widows took on the roles of heads of households or owners of businesses, subsequently becoming authority figures both in their homes and wider communities. Lanza emphasizes that it was a great feat for widows to be accepted in their communities in the first place, as they were widely regarded as encompassing “all of the worst aspects of the female sex.”

Widows were often vilified in literature of the time, especially in popular “contes de fées” (fairy tales), which posed a second obstacle to their societal ascension. Despite this, Lanza argues that Parisian widows in particular were able to reimagine gender norms so that they served their own needs and departed from traditional roles, leading to a newfound ability for them to “occupy a spectrum of acceptable gender roles.”

Wider study shows that widows who ran businesses or farms indeed tended to reverse gender norms, giving orders to men and engaging in several romantic affairs at a time. In particular, Lanza’s study proves again that the policy of disconformity was adopted by a wide range of women, and was not purely limited to the more intrepid of aristocratic women.

---

299 Lanza, 9.
300 Lanza, 9.
301 Lanza, 5.
302 Lanza, 9.
Responding through combat: Les Frondeuses

Disconformity must be distinguished from the third kind of reaction from noblewomen of the seventeenth century, which was direct and conscious resistance, or “combat.” Although Marguerite de Rohan clearly refused to conform to established gender norms, at times she openly opposed expectations of her as a woman. A pertinent example of such a reaction was Marguerite’s choice to practice religion independently from the wishes of her family and even the King. Although Protestantism was banned by Louis XIV through the 1685 Edict of Fontainebleau, Marguerite maintained that she wanted to “die in the religion in which I was born, baptized, and instructed”\(^{303}\) which was Protestantism. This choice led her to be buried separately from her children and husband, and also marked a direct departure from the will of the court and the monarchy.

Resistance to state and patriarchal expectations of women has never, however, been more apparent than the case of “Les Frondeuses.” The phrase describes a group of women who participated in the civil war of 1653. These women included several aristocrats, such as the duchesse de Chevreuse, the duchesse de Longueville and la Grand Mademoiselle herself. The “frondeuses” would strategize as military commanders would and even ride with the armies into battle.\(^{304}\) The female involvement in the conflict demonstrated the ability of aristocratic women to take on the most traditional of male roles and to renounce all conceptions of womanhood for the sake of a religious and political cause. This move was a clear rebuttal of patriarchal norms and an assertion of women’s physical and military prowess, one that was distinct from simply refusing to conform to given expectations. Historian Vergnes argues that the regency of Anne d’Autriche from 1643 to 1651 gave a precedent for these aristocratic women to move into the

\(^{303}\) Dewald, 101.

\(^{304}\) Anne-Marie-Louise D’Orleans, 7.
political sphere and assert themselves in the role of soldier as Anne had done in the role of king.  

Even though Anne herself opposed the Fronde and overcame the aristocratic revolt. As Vergnes puts it, the regency led to a “franchissement des barrières qui les tiennent habituellement à l’écart des affaires publiques.” The discussion of women consciously taking the place of men is explored in detail by Zemon Davis. Davis argues in “Women on Top” that sexual inversion was used by men often in festivities: they would feature women in positions of power so as to subvert the reality of social hierarchy, implicitly creating order and stability in the established system without ever questioning it. The Frondeuses were participating in this inversion, incorporating the image of the stereotypical disorderly woman to the widen the scope of their behavioural options and using the idea of a “woman on top” as a “resource for domestic and public life.” The subversive approach these women took to established social norms was the most dramatic and direct response to the limitations of patriarchal structures, and occurred on the most public of stages.

The final response: tacit reinforcement

One must acknowledge, however, that there were upper class women who often made efforts (seemingly unconsciously, unlike D’Aulnoy) to strengthen the very confines that others tried to break free from. The tendency to criticize their own sex, casting women as weak, uneducated and superficial, was even common practice amongst the very women who were

---

305 Sophie Vergnes, *Les Frondeuses : Une révolte au féminin* (1643-1661), (Champ Vallon Editions, 2013), 31 ; “crossing of barriers which usually held a gap in public affairs”


309 Davis, “Women on Top”, 182.
eschewing contemporary expectations of upper class women. Women like Marguerite de Bethiune, the Rohan sisters, and la Grande Mademoiselle often condemned the failings of the female sex, whilst others like Madame d’Aulnoy immortalized these failings in fiction and writings.

Marguerite de Bethune and the Rohan sisters often prefaced their work with an apology for their sex and a warning that their writing may not be of high quality. For example, Marguerite frequently employed, the language of female submissiveness, similarly to that employed by religious women. Marguerite’s writings apologizes that “it is not appropriate either to my sex or my ability to write history” and laments her “incapacity” as a writer.310 Similarly, Anne confesses that her poems that she wrote for the death of her mother “do not conform to the polish of this era.”311 Their rhetoric collectively emphasizes women’s intellectual weaknesses. Although historians have suggested that this rhetoric was tactical, used to emphasize their modesty and honesty, it is true that mid-seventeenth century women did not feel altogether comfortable with the publication and reading of their literary work. For example, Madame de Sévigné refused to publish a novel, despite pressure from several Parisian printer-publishers, showing a certain degree of embarrassment or self-deprecation when it came to her writing. It was not altogether true that all women authors felt unworthy of publishing, indeed the statements from Marguerite were almost standard disclaimers in female literary circles. These statements did show insecurity and demonstrated an acknowledgement that it was not the norm for women to be openly expressing their views, but more clearly, such statements of unworthiness showed an ability to manipulate the social expectation of women to be exceedingly modest so that they would not transgress gender norms whilst still being able to write. It must also be acknowledged

310 Dewald, 113
311 Dewald, 94
that although women turned the system on its head in this way, they also evidently felt the strain of transgressing social norms and felt obliged to pander to them to some degree.

La Grande Mademoiselle goes a step further in her memoirs, calling attention to the faults of the entire female sex rather than her own failings. Following an engaging argument for a society ruled by women, she confesses that, “in general, vanity and pride are women’s most common faults and…inevitable idleness.”

Why did women feel the need to qualify their achievements, and discuss the flaws that had been recognized as innately “female” even if they were largely unfounded? One could argue that it was a result of outside societal pressure to censor their own rhetoric, or that it was still ingrained in the minds of many mid-seventeenth century aristocratic Parisian women that they were inferior on account of their sex.

The fairytales of countess and celebrated writer Madame d’Aulnoy seem to confirm this second suspicion. Historian DeGraff studies the original translations of D’Aulnoy’s poems in her book, *The Tower and the Well: A Psychological Interpretation of the Fairy Tales of Madame D'Aulnoy* and concludes that many of her stories support ideas of self-control and piety amongst women. In these stories, D’Aulnoy repeatedly emphasizes- albeit implicitly-- that sexual promiscuity is degrading and frequently employs symbols of Christianity in order to illustrate her point. Take, for instance, her story “La Princesse Printaniere.” This fairy tale revolves around a princess who is enclosed in a windowless tower for twenty years; upon her release she will marry the son of King Merlin. Before this point, the princess accidentally reveals herself to the world and subsequently is given to a different suitor as a punishment. The overarching message seems to be that noblewomen should not overstep their boundaries and should accept the romantic

---

312 Anne-Marie-Louise D’Orleans, 53
313 Amy Vanderlyn DeGraff, *The Tower and the Well: A Psychological Interpretation of the Fairy Tales of Madame d’Aulnoy*, (Birmingham, AL, Summa Publications Inc, 1984), 17
matches that are given to them. DeGraff interprets the story—although speculatively—as an abstinence narrative, demonstrating the “gravity of betraying your social obligations” and morals.\textsuperscript{314} In fact, the majority of D’Aulny’s stories culminates with a marriage between prince and princess, and rarely strays from this convention.\textsuperscript{315} Perhaps a more grave aspect of D’Aulnoy’s stories is the idea of a duality of women that she betrays. Women often appear underdeveloped in her stories, either cast as the evil fairy or witch or the princess and there is seemingly no in-between.\textsuperscript{316} Such a dichotomy inevitably reminds the reader of the duality that was implied between chaste young women or obedient wives and unfaithful spouses, courtesans and widows. In this way, D’Aulnoy was certainly an enigma: she was one of the most celebrated female writers of her time, yet her stories themselves reinforced the very constraints that she had worked to forswear, and seemingly did so without her consciously choosing to.

Before any conclusions can be made from the prior material, the concept of seventeenth century marriage should be adequately explored. In particular, the twenty-first century historian should abstract any understanding of marriage from their conception of marriage in pre-revolutionary France. In the seventeenth century, marriage was never viewed by women as a personal choice. Although notions of romance and love seeped into marriage as the seventeenth century drew to a close, marriage was first and foremost a familial, contractual and financial arrangement that the spouses (both male and female) rarely had a say in. There were indeed individuals who had more agency when it came to their chosen husband or wife -- like la Grande Mademoiselle-- but in general, as you climbed the social ladder, this agency rapidly diminished. At the very upper echelons-- the royal family-- individuals would have no say in their husbands or wives to be whatsoever. Herein lies two conclusions before anything can be ascertained about

\textsuperscript{314} DeGraff, 28  
\textsuperscript{315} DeGraff, 91  
\textsuperscript{316} DeGraff, 19
the material presented. Firstly, Parisian noble women were distinguished from other women in Parisian society in that they had significantly less agency when it came to marriage. Secondly, personal inclination was almost incompatible with the idea of marriage which distinguishes marital norms from modern day society. Romance usually played out in an extra-marital sphere, as adultery and affairs were ubiquitous in the seventeenth century. This societal context makes the statements (but perhaps not the actions) of la Grande Mademoiselle evermore groundbreaking, but also justifies the way that countless aristocratic women seemingly accepted the unhappiness their spouses brought them or their diminished agency when it came to marriage.

It can certainly be established that aristocratic women were conscious of their inequality. Throughout this study of female responses to their inequality in this chapter and the last, individual women have touched on a variety of structures that they found to be limiting: the commercial nature of marriage, the intellectual bias towards men in the world of academia, the inferior rights of women to own property and run businesses, the constrictions of purity and piety, and the misrepresentation of the female sex amongst the upper classes. The collective response to these structures is more difficult to establish. But what can be ascertained is that women did refuse to conform to these political, social, and economic norms. Although certain noblewomen, for example Madame de Sévigné, felt more comfortable tacitly condemning the conceptions of feminine weakness, others like la Grande Mademoiselle could openly denounce marriage as a viable route for women. There were even aristocratic women who wholly assumed the roles of men, such as “Les Frondeuses,” who assumed the role of soldiers and military leaders on the public stage. Although these reactions were varied, they all exhibit awareness and agency. More importantly, they demonstrate that aristocratic women were able to find a way to
informally access power. Although it must be stated that many of these same women critiqued themselves and suppressed their own intellectual abilities on account of their gender, these women were also employing agency. D’Aulnoy was asserting a vision of womanhood that she felt was pertinent and authentic. Although her female characters were flawed, they were protagonists who were being read about and studied. In this way, D’Aulnoy’s agency to disempower may be as relevant to this study as La Grande Mademoiselle’s agency to empower, both equally exercising their power beyond the limitations of their gender roles. As the ultimate beneficiaries of the overall social system, these aristocratic women were ironically also its primary victims owing to their gender. The Revolution, a century later, would introduce a new more codified patriarchy, one that continued to subordinate them but would no longer give them the social benefit of aristocracy, and would lead to a threat on their livelihood and indeed lives.
Chapter Six: Conclusion

This thesis has compared the relative emancipation of two very different social groups: aristocratic women and religious women in convents. The study focused on a specific temporal and geographical space: Paris in the 1600s. This thesis can surmise that seventeenth-century Paris, like much of early modern France as a whole, constituted an inhospitable and often antagonistic environment for its female inhabitants. Restrictive social norms from the elite, the legal system that mentioned the “incapacity” of women to act without thought to their sexual urges, and often misogynist Catholic doctrine all seemed to be stacked against Parisian women as stalwart obstacles to emancipation of any means. At the outset of the seventeenth century, following the inclusion of female enclosure in the Council of Trent, the political, religious, social and economic character of the French woman was in disarray.

Paris was a more liberal environment than other French cities, recognizing “femmes marchandes” when other cities did not and permitting equal female inheritance. Burgeoning religious movements within the city included women within their ranks and allowed them to color the development seventeenth century spirituality. The requirement within canon law for the consent of both marital parties and the regencies of several astute queens worked to the advantage of Parisian women in particular. All of this functioned as an immediate jumping off point, as an opportunity for women to expand on the limited space they were granted to use to their advantage.

The obstacles that aristocratic women and women in convents faced often converged. Both were often excluded from the social ranking they were a part of: a noblewoman could not hold formal political positions of rank, and could not widely circulate their ideas in writing, or control a great amount of wealth. Similarly, religious women could not preach, publish religious
treatises, use the vernacular to engage in formal religious dialogue with members of the male clergy, or have the right to be mobile so as to persuade others to convert. Both classes of women were also misrepresented by their male peers, suffering from the same belittling and degrading stereotypes. Women could, purportedly, be malicious, manipulative, sexually deviant and evil as Eve was or they could be irrational, emotional and weak on account of their physiology and their nurture. Both classes were held to rigorous social standards, with aristocratic women expected to be pious, educated, and maternal, and religious women assumed to be pure, obedient and frugal in all of their quotidian habits.

Similarly, both groupings of women were conspired against by those closest to them: their husbands and brothers. Landed male elites supported the cloistering of women both noble and not, for the purpose of precluding them from inheritance. Male elites from the nobility and the Church therefore both forfeited the prospective marriages of other relations for the sake of keeping their material possessions and property in the hands of other male relatives. The discriminatory rhetoric mentioned above also reinforced the relationship between male elites from the nobility and ecclesiastical authorities. Treatises from clerics or church authorities on marriage could be used to legitimize a husband’s negative treatment towards his wife, and a negative characterisation of a nun could equally be applied to a noblewoman. Inequality was enforced by a patriarchy that appeared united, and one that was fuelled by economic concerns as well as a misogynist agenda.

Before Parisian women were fully conscious of their inequality and how it could be enforced, both classes of women made misguided moves that only reinforced their inferior position. Religious women made efforts to revive penitential asceticism from the medieval era which made them unfortunate victims to their own faith. Similarly, aristocratic women such as
D’Aulnoy often perpetuated the culture of “politesse” through salons and writings which invoked a patriarchally-guided view of marriage, chastity and female obedience. With this reinforcement of their own subordination, noblewomen in particular made it increasingly difficult to overthrow the specific branch of patriarchy oppressing them on account of their sex.

So how were such restrictive and norms overcome? The first step was recognition and consciousness, which the historian can mark out in the writings of religious women and aristocratic women alike, such as sister Marie Sevin and Madame de Sévigné. As a second step, women became societal and community leaders whenever possible, with aristocratic women coming to control intellectual salons and publishing their own literature, and nuns becoming spiritual leaders of newfound religious movements like the move towards charity, or the rise of mysticism and Jansenism. Women also began to participate in “sexual inversion,” occupying the roles of men and turning social hierarchy on its head, becoming “women on top.” An example of such a subversion of gender roles was the participation of aristocratic women in the Fronde conflict, which saw them take on military roles.

An immediate obstacle to this second stepping stone was that it was only executed by a minority of women, seemingly powered by individuals rather than communities. It is easy to forget when reading about figures like la Grande Mademoiselle and Mary Ward that the majority of Parisian women in both the nobility and the cloister did not have the courage, education or the will to speak out even if they could. Unfortunately, the emancipation movement was spearheaded by only a few individuals but fortunately it was these same individuals who paved the way for others. The first religious order that prioritised charity and education in the early 1600s may have come under fire for doing so but made the formation of several others in the mid-seventeenth century infinitely easier. Of course, another obstacle to this movement was
exclusion. When aristocratic women attempted to circulate their academic writings they were mostly ignored by the wider Parisian society, with the exception of a handful, and when they spoke out against the stringent requirements of marriage, it was to no avail and often to contempt from the men around them. In the same way, when religious women attempted to combat the bishops that controlled their convents or attempted to participate in the Protestant Reformation they were mostly ignored, and they definitely failed in modifying religious doctrine or the policy of clausura in their favour.

Yet religious women triumphed where aristocratic women were unsuccessful in that they were able to change the very system that subordinated them from within. The feminization of the Church to favor children, the sick and the poor through charity and education was a deliberate move that carved out a new identity for religious women in Parisian society, that went beyond a spiritual existence. Not only this, but these women were able to change the face of the Catholic Church as a whole, and transform the convent from a place of segregation to one of female integration. To adequately compare the two camps of women, this study will refer back to the three measures of emancipation: their participation in society at large, to what extent discrimination played a role in their quotidiem experience and societal attitude towards them. Regarding these measures, Paris’ women faithful had succeeded in two: they had changed the quotidiem experience of the religious woman so that it was not dominated by enclosure and the will of the Catholic bishops, and had overcome exclusion to allow women to participate more in wider society beyond the walls of the convent. Although the third measure--societal attitude towards the social ranking of women-- could not as easily be modified, by any measure, women in convents had succeeded in becoming more free and had gained recognition from the Church as educators and through their confraternities.
Aristocratic women, too, could be said to have combated exclusion to some extent, but they were not as able to define themselves when it came to their identity within the Parisian community. Even when they were able to take on a role as a community leader, they were more likely to emulate men than to create a new representation of themselves. When noblewomen participated in the Fronde conflict it was in the role of male commanders, dressed up as men in the military. When royal women claimed the Regencies, it was through emulation of a male king and in a place that would always fall back into the hands of a male superior. Noble women therefore increased their participation in society at large and in doing so experienced less discrimination in their daily lives through some academic recognition, but societal attitude towards them was hardly modified and they still remained largely mute beyond elite circles.

In accordance with this thesis’ definition of liberty, aristocratic women again lack the same freedoms that religious women created for themselves. Female congregations procured the ability to be mobile and religious women divined a role for themselves through spirituality. Spiritual leaders from lay and religious communities like Acarie and Ward displayed considerable freedom of speech. Aristocratic women lacked the same agency to speak out freely. The fourth prerequisite for liberty was defined as being sexually liberal and in this regard, aristocratic women were naturally more successful than religious women but in sum, using the four measures established in the introduction, religious women were profoundly more free.

The true feminists- if that word can be tentatively used- of the time period were undoubtedly these women in convents who used spirituality and the hold that it had on French society to their advantage and who made their voice heard through actions that aided the early modern Parisian community in a way that the Catholic cardinals or male clergy had never attempted to do.
By the 1670s the status and role of women in Parisian society had undoubtedly changed, and in many ways for the better. Through religious orders and congregations, and intellectual publishings from salons, women finally had a place on the city’s stage. Although female emancipation was powered by individuals, the historian would assume that their actions embolden the female community of Paris, leading to protest their subordinate role in society. A proof of this improved-- if albeit, briefly improved--position of women is perhaps the reaction of male elites. By the eighteenth century, the governmental and legislative authorities of Paris had reacted to the new status of Parisian women: French women lost almost all independent legal personality and property owning women were significant less involved in local and regional assemblies.\footnote{By the point of Revolution, at the end of the eighteenth century, the Napoleonic code established unprecedented new methods of patriarchal control as a response to the increased liberty of women. Female emancipation, evidently, was not linear nor was it necessarily a widespread movement. It was nuanced: relying on the ability of individuals to manipulate the status quo, to turn the system on its head to their advantage and inspire others to do the same. The position of both aristocratic and religious women had undoubtedly improved by the 1670s, even if it was not a permanent improvement. More importantly, seventeenth century Parisian women had begun to define themselves independently from men, had exhibited trademarks of early feminism, and had made an indelible mark on the character of a pioneering city in early modern Europe.\footnote{Davis, “Women on Top,” 149}}
Bibliography:

Primary Sources


Angelique Arnaud, Mére Marie, Lettres de la Reverend Mère Marie Angélique Arnauld, Oxford: Oxford University, 1744. Also accessed at this web address: https://archive.org/stream/lettresdelareve00arnagoog#page/n9/mode/2up.


Campas, Charles, Lettres Inédites de Madame de Sévigné et Madame de Grignan sa fille, Paris: Librairie Hachette,1876.


La Bruyere, Jean de, Les Caracteres, 1688


**Secondary Sources**


Haase-Dubosc, Danielle et Viennot, Eliane, Femmes et Pouvoirs sous l’Ancien Régime, University of California: Rivages, 1991


