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Luther and his Catholic Readers: the Question of the Nuns

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Luther and his Catholic Readers: the Question of the Nuns

Eléna Guillemard *

Catholic polemicists answered the Lutheran innovation of clerical marriage and especially the marriage of nuns with harsh criticism. In the process of these ab hominem *attacks against Luther and his wife, Katherina von Bora, they elaborated a literary type that they used to keep condemning Luther and the runaway nuns during the whole Early Modern period. The* topos *thus established depicts their marriage as the depraved union of two equally depraved and incestuous ex-members of the monastic orders. Looking at the recurrence of these evocations in French discourses in the 16th Century, we shall question the reality of the theoretical innovation hidden behind the palimpsest of insults. Why were the Catholics' fears focused so much on nuns? And did Luther even mean to target specifically nuns and organise the break-down of convents? Although our aim is not to try to assess the positive and negative aspects of this change of paradigm on women, confronting the Catholic interpretations of Luther with his original texts on nuns shall give us, through the small window of the discourses on a specific group—religious women—an outline of what the Reformation actually changed for them.*

In 1555, Marie le Dannoys, a former French nun from the Augustinian order appeared before the Genevan Consistory to confirm that she had renounced her Catholic beliefs in favour of the Protestant faith. When she was in France, she had indeed married an ex Augustinian monk, Antoine Avis, but before they had the time to reach Calvinist Switzerland, they were caught by the Catholics. In order to avoid further persecution, these two French apostates abjured Protestantism. As we can read in her testimony to the Genevan magistrates: "she says she has been flogged, and she does not know why, except that they say she had

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pronounced words against the faith and that she was concubine to her said husband[1]" (Watt and Watt 2016, 110). When they eventually managed to escape to Geneva, they had to prove that they were trustworthy members of the Protestant community: they were required to provide their marriage certificate and to make amends for their previous failure. Their offense was forgiven and they were integrated in the Genevan society (110, 113, 184).

To the Catholics, Marie le Dannoys's story might be seen as a re-enactment, thirty years later, of that of Luther and his wife, Katherina von Bora, which embodies their worst fears: two former clerics whose faith had been perverted and whose marriage could only be seen as debauchery and incest… What a dangerous example indeed!

Although there are only a few cases like that of Marie le Dannoys—about 150 in France between 1530 and 1600—such instances of nuns leaving their convents to convert to the new faith became, in the second half of the 16th century, a major topic in the printings and speeches of polemists denouncing Protestantism. In these documents, it appears that the harshest blow that Protestantism had dealt to Catholicism was the perversion of its most protected—by means of walls and gates, rules and veils—servants, the brides of Christ. Women were thought to be weak and easily seduced by cunning speeches. Therefore, preserving convents against the propagation of Protestant ideas was a main concern for their surveyors, priests and preachers, which explains the violence of their attacks against Luther as a corrupter of nuns.

To the 21st-century observer, it might seem that these nuns achieved emancipation by escaping the oppressive and secluded way of life of monasteries. The very fact that these women's alleged perversion and debauchery epitomized the Catholics' fears might even lead us to think that they attained some kind of emotional and sexual agency, or even freedom. But although it might be tempting to see these women as feminist pioneers, one must remember that whether they lived in France or in Switzerland, in a convent or in their husband's or father's household, whether they were Catholic or not, they had to abide by the rules of a patriarchal society. Bearing that in mind, one should not see Luther's attempts to open the gates of convents as a means to liberate women: his pur-

[1] My translation. "Dictz qu'elle futz fuettee par les carrrefourt de Paris, et ne sçayt la cause, sinon qu'il disient qu'elle avoit prononcés parrolles contre la foy et qu'elle estoit concubine de sond. mari".

pose was to save the souls of those who were enclosed in male monasteries and female cloisters from the damnation that this "hypocritical" lifestyle would bring upon them. In this sense, there is a clear discrepancy between what the Catholics read in Luther's writings—the promotion of sexual freedom and moral perversion—and the actual content of his texts addressed to monks and nuns.

Our study will proceed backwards—almost in an exegetic movement – starting twenty years after Luther's death, to focus on Catholic responses to his writings about nuns, and ending in the 1520s with an analysis of Luther's actual conception of female convents. There is no need to repeat the great historiographical discoveries that shed light, over the past twenty years, on the contradictions within the Lutheran discourse on women. One can indeed underline several dichotomies within the reformer's thought on women; they were seen as essential to men, but were still identified as bearers of the original sin; their absence of education was lamented but they were kept silent in the public sphere due to the Paulinian interdictions and although Protestantism did insist on the notion of complementarity between women and men, this complementarity was nonetheless ruled by a principle of conjugal domination.

Yet, a new vision of women appeared in the 16th century, and Luther contributed to this new set of ideas, but he cannot be seen as a proto-feminist: this would be both anachronistic and false. His fight was not a political one for the emancipation of women.

Some sources allow us to highlight and question this strong link between women and the Reformation. The Catholic reception of Luther, as shown by a wide range of texts written in the second half of the 16th century, underlines the scandalous nature of this new paradigm regarding the situation of women. Among the many criticisms that were made against Luther, it is particularly striking to see that those that seem the harshest were made on this specific point: the escape of nuns who had fallen under the spell of Protestant speeches.

The Catholics took a radical stance on this question, which is particularly noticeable in the large amount of *ab hominem* attacks against the Lutheran marriage. He was a devil, a sexual pervert, a bad example because his wife was an ex-nun. Luther's adversaries painted, through a constellation of insults, a distorted image of the Reformer. Such criticism should not be taken at face value: these caricatures do not help us to draw an accurate portrait of the man and his ideas. Seeing Luther through the eyes of his Catholic opponents could indeed almost lead us to consider him as a pioneer of the sexual revolution but, obviously, he was not.

On the one hand there are the Catholics' discourses, whose aim was to destroy Luther's legacy and to convince their flock that there was only one true faith, the Catholic one, but, on the other hand, a careful reading of Luther's texts about nuns does not disclose the revolutionary view on women one would expect. Therefore, these battles of words (which took place on a rhetorical stage) allow us to witness the change of paradigm on the question of women, which was not as radical as one could think. There was indeed a huge change but it cannot be seen as a reversal of the constant oscillation, in women's lives, between alienation and domination. This change, allowed by Protestantism, would therefore be more like a sidestep: for instance, it gave women the possibility to reach a new level of dignity through motherhood (see for instance: Hendrix 2000; Karant-Nunn et Wiesner-Hanks 2003).

In order to explore the confrontation between these points of view I will study Luther's writings on nuns and the Catholic responses to his innovations. There are several reasons to this choice of methodology and to my decision to focus only on texts that addressed the issue of nuns within the wide corpus of Lutheran texts on women. Nuns raised a number of concerns: they were at the crossroads between chastity and sexuality and, when they left the convents, their choice was one of the most striking examples of the confessional rupture. Their departure from the convent was spectacular because of the radical change of lifestyle and of life goals it implied. Moreover, from a historiographical point of view, these ex-nuns are often taken as an example of the possibility of a freer life for women within the Protestant community rather than in a Catholic conventual institution. But such theories rely on an analysis that only sees convents as prisons or as places that allowed families to get rid of a lastborn child, and is often inherited from a 19th-century historical perspective on the lives

of nuns. Of course, several works undermine the hypothesis that women were more able to obtain a certain degree of agency in the secular world, as wives and daughters, than in the clerical sphere, as nuns and abbesses. For instance, a large number of historical biographies and monographs on nuns and their influence highlight that religious women were allowed to take a wide range of initiatives in the early modern period (although one must of course keep in mind the various sociological biases that made it possible for a woman to attain agency such as their lineage or the extension of their families' networks) (see for example: Carr 2006; Birberick, Carr, et Ganim 2007; Olivia 1998; Blair et Golding 1996). Nuns therefore offer a good case study of the contentions between Catholics and Protestants. Being either ideals of femininity or anti-models, they crystallized the ideological antagonism on the question: how do you live Christianly as a woman? The question of emancipation being irrelevant and anachronistic, we have to study the renewal of the representational framework through which women's bodies were perceived through the confessional fights around the issue of nuns.

1. Reading the Catholics: Luther as a perverted emancipator

Unsurprisingly, the Lutheran praise of clerical marriage was violently condemned. But it is especially when relating to women that it was the most despised and fought. Indeed, monks or priests who converted and married were vilified as renegades and apostates. On the other hand, nuns were seen as failed women who had been seduced by the Protestant sirens and as slaves to their sensuous nature. Nuns were more stigmatized because of the social representations built around them. Their marriage—their failure—was worse because they were women. Moreover, the nun's ambiguous sexual status reinforced this rhetorical and ideological indictment: Lyndal Roper (1989) explains that the nun, as a virgin and a woman married to Christ, was at the centre of sexualized perceptions. From an anthropological point of view the convent itself

explains the focalization on nuns as possible sexual debauchers, because its very function was to bring and keep women together: it blurred the lines between marriage, sorority and filiality, which made nuns the choice targets of sexual *innuendos*.

In addition, the Catholic attacks on renegade nuns found a strong echo in society, maybe stronger than the one against the Protestant interpretation of the Eucharist or of the status of relics. Anticlericalism was not something new and one can think of various attacks against the clergy that originated from the question of sexuality. Within society, before and after the Reformation, the nun has remained an almost a folkloric figure, and was caricatured as a ridiculous or lewd or funny figure. Frances E. Dolan elaborates on this question through the specific case of nuns in England in her aptly-titled article "Why are Nuns Funny?" (2007). Therefore, one can assume that the *topos* of the debauched nun was both easy to handle for a polemicist and easy to grasp for the public.

René Benoist, a Paris priest in the second half of the 16th century, gave a response to the Lutheran opuscule *De votis monasticis* (WA 8, 564-669). While the title of this text (Benoist 1567) indicates that his readership is made of monks, priests and nuns who had committed incest through what they thought was marriage, it is in fact exclusively addressed to one group of people: the women living in a nearby convent. He published three *Remontrances* (Benoist 1565, 1567) addressed to nuns in the wake of the royal condemnations of clerical marriage, in 1563 and 1564 (Pasquier 1913, 61-64). Different points are raised to oppose the marriage of nuns, and are closely linked to practical solutions whose purpose is to prevent nuns' defections from convents. From a moral point of view, apostasy is only seen as an easy way to meet one's corrupted sexual desires.

Benoist makes the following diagnosis: the seductive Protestant discourse is efficient because nuns are under-educated. The solution therefore lies in stressing the importance of education. What is particularly striking is that both René Benoist and Luther make the same analysis of the deregulation of convent life: they both insist on the preeminent role of the superior, in this case, the abbesses. Luther, in his well-known address *To the Christian nobility* (WA 6, 381-469), explains that one of the reasons for the presence of the Devil within these institutions is the bad behaviour of their superiors. Benoist corroborates completely this point of view:

and the most guilty [of this state of moral dereliction in monasteries] who will answer for it before God, are the indiscreet and worldly Abbesses, who do not fulfil their mission to educate their daughters, but who are crazy, lustful, do not abide by the rule of the closure, are scandalous in their own behaviour, instead of presenting a good example to their nuns[1].

The emphasis put on the head of the convent as a role-model inscribes these remarks in a long Christian tradition that stressed the pedagogical impact of the flawless life of a superior on those following their leadership. Hence the Christian literary genre of the Lives of the Saints, enhancing the perfect existence of a few chosen ones. One can also refer to the original monastic rules, such as the Benedictine rule, that underline the importance of monastic leadership, including in female communities (Crean 1993). Teaching by example became the basis for feminine religious education: indeed, according to the Paulinian interdictions, abbesses were not allowed either to preach or to confess their nuns. Thus, the only way to teach how to live a good Christian life was to practice it for everyone to see.

Besides, both Luther and Benoist insist on the necessity of being educated in order to strengthen one's judgment, even for women: a long historiographical tradition stresses the significance of Lutheranism as an early attempt to suppress illiteracy (Cabanel et Encrevé 2006). Luther himself advocates the institution of schools, even for girls:

> Above all, in schools of all kinds the chief and most common lesson should be the Scriptures, and for young boys the Gospel; and would to God each town had also a girls' school, in which girls might be taught the Gospel for an hour daily, either in German or Latin! In truth, schools, monasteries, and convents were founded for this purpose, and with good Christian intentions[2].

Benoist, for his part, underlines the need for education within the walls of

[1] My translation. "Et principallement en sont coulpables & seront contables devant Dieu, les Abbesses indiscretes & mondaines, lesquelles ne font leur devoir de reugler leurs filles; ains sont folles, charnelles, trotineresses, & scandaleuses elles-memes, au lieu de les bien edifier". (Benoist 1567, 7).

[2] *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation* (WA 6, 461, 11-16). Translated as Martin Luther: *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Respecting the Reformation of the Christian Estate*, by C. A. Buchheim (Luther 1909).

convents to achieve an efficient Catholic reform and to fight the spreading of the new ideas. He highlights the complementarity between the good examples set by the abbesses, and an advanced learning of the Bible and the Catholic dogmas:

I know that the exemplarity of an irreprehensible life lead by several abbesses has been the reason why a lot of girls and nuns have remained in convents. But had one added to this a solid instruction, it would have made this work more perfect and the *consequences* of this would have been that the Heretics seducing the nuns would have been confused as it is said to have happened often in the case of the nuns of Poissy who were well-taught in the Christian Religion[1].

In spite of these theoretical convergences between the two reformers, one has to note the Catholic specificity of the rhetorical depiction of Luther as the absolute anti-model. Two kinds of attacks against the former-monk can be identified in the second half of the 16th century. The wide-spread nature of these written accusations, in pamphlets, *remontrances*, recommendations given to monastic people and Catholics, makes us think of the constitution of a literary *topos*, beginning during Luther's lifetime and, it seems, at the time of his marriage. Little by little, the references to Luther and Katherina von Bora built a social type: married clerics whose choices should be forbidden. Progressively, the various denunciations of married nuns were linked to this original marriage in discourses, and the new marriages were not only seen as reminiscent of this first one—even if Luther was not the first Reformer to marry—, but were also interpreted as mere reproductions of this example.

Let's now study the various steps taken by the constitution of Luther and Bora's marriage as an *anti-ideal type*. First of all, Luther was a corrupter of nuns, and he had succeeded in seducing them because they were not properly taught the Christian doctrines. Therefore, he had turned this general ignorance to his own advantage. Benoist warned the nuns against this manipulation:

[1] My translation. «Car iaçoit que l'exemplarité de vie irreprehensible de plusieurs abbesses ait beaucoup faict retenir leurs filles & religieuses, si est ce que la doctine et instruction jointe avec cela eust peu rendre l'œuvre plus parfaict & faire que les heretiques s'addressans aux religieuse pour les seduire eussent esté rendus confus comme ont dict qu'ils ont esté souvent à l'endroit des religieuses de Poissy bien instruictes en la religion Chrestienne» (Benoist 1567, 18v).

here are the speeches and healthy and chaſte doctrines (so it seems to you) of your good Doctor, who does not only want to teach you with speeches, but also with facts (that are more efficient than speeches), as he led a nun to apoſtatize […] with whom he committed inceſt and sacrilege[1].

The fact that Luther acted in the same ways as the debauched superiors of convents, according to the Catholic prieſt's speech, corroborates the centrality, in people's representations, of a role-model in the fulfilment of one's religious life. Simon Fontaine made the same denunciations in 1558 when mentioning the Lutheran marriage: he ſtated that Luther "[had] wanted to take a slut as his wife (*pourtant il ait voulu prendre une putain pour femme*)" (Fontaine 1558, 83). At the end of the 16th century, Benedicti ſuſtained this *topos*:

That is the good doctrine that Luther and Œcolampade have taught to them: they were the firſt who, after flinging aside their monaſtic frock, married nuns in order to produce children by fornicating[2].

This biographical attack was violent, not only because Luther had committed apoſtasy but also because, in this context where role-models were highly valued, the example he set might endanger the lives—and souls—of cloiſtered women. Besides, Benedicti and Simon were both Franciscans, and this point might explain their inſiſtence on apoſtasy and on the inceſtuous nature of clerical marriage[3], which are typical clerical issues. Florimond de Remond (c. 1540-1601) (Larroque 1867) clearly underlined how dangerous this example was when he mentioned the Lutheran marriage: "this famous wedding which, by the example it set, made one thousand apoſtates, in body and in soul, was con-

[1] "Voyla les paroles & doctrines saines et pudiques (ce vous semble) de voſtre bon docteur, lequel ne voulant seulement vous enseigner de parole, mais aussi de faict (lequel mouve plus que les paroles) il a faict apoſtater une religieuse […] avec laquelle soubs le pretexte de mariage, il a commis inceſte & sacrilege" (Benoiſt 1567, 4v).

[2] "C'eſt la belle doctrine que leur a monſtré Luther & Oecolampade, qui ont eſté les premiers, qui après avoir ietté le froc és orties, espouserent des nonnains pour engendrer des enfans de fornication" (Benedicti 1584, 276).

[3] The "revenge of the monks", underſtood as the responses that members of monaſtic orders made to Luther's marriage, after being mocked by him, is a phenomenon underlined by 19th-century hiſtorians, like Audin (1846).

summated after duke Frederik's death" (Remond 1610, 299)[1]. And Luther was a public figure, whose ideas were spread through books, pamphlets and *feuilles volantes* that easily found their way into not-so-cloistered convents.

The circulation of new ideas even within the convents explains why the bibliographical attack was such a widely used rhetorical *topos*. Luther seduced by his example, but also by his texts which managed to reach the inhabitants of convents. Florimond de Remond analysed some of the methods used to introduce forbidden texts within the walls of monasteries:

> Small papers and books fit for the purpose of seducing them [the nuns], were thrown over the walls of their cloisters, or, with the help of hawkers, things that were deemed appropriate to seduce were being dropped into their hands. Some female matchmakers and second-hand sellers of love would sneak in to tell them news from the world, and to blow on the embers of their hiddenas if sleeping under the ashes of their rule—sensuality[2]

Even if this passage can be read as a good example of anti-Protestant rhetoric from a Catholic counsellor of the Bordeaux parliament, displaying a strong sense of paranoia and resorting to insults, it nonetheless encourages us to acknowledge the permeability—to news, books, and people—of monastic doors, which was a common truth before the Trent Council and its Reform and has been the subject of an important historiographical renewal in the past twenty years[3]. Therefore, the line set by the walls of the convent is not a fence. And Luther was able to cross it.

[1] "Ce celebre mariage qui par son exemple rendit mille Apostats du cors & de l'ame fut consommé après la mort du Duc Federic".

[2] "On jettoit des petits buletins, & des livrets propres pour les seduire par-dessus les murailles de leur Cloitres, ou par le moyen des contreporteurs on leur faisoit tomber en main ce qu'on jugea propre à telles amorces. Quelques dariolettes trafiqueuses et regratieres d'amours, se glissoient au dedant pour leur conter des nouvelles du monde, & soufler les bluettes de la sensualité cachées, & comme assoupies sous les cendres de leurs regles" (Remond 1610, 917).

[3] For example with the research of Elizabeth A. Lehfeldt, published in 2005: *Religious Women in Golden Age Spain: The Permeable Cloister*.

2. Uncovering the palimpsest: Catholic interpretations confronted to Luther's words

To René Benoist the escape of religious women was mainly due to the Lutheran works, especially the *De Votis Monasticis* (WA 8, 564-669). In his opinion, it directly encouraged the nuns to flee. In order to make his audience give this problem some serious thought, and to make his argument powerful, he did not hesitate to caricature the meaning of Luther's words, and to put a strong emphasis on the scandalous nature of his essay. Benoist, according to Pasquier (1913, 41), kept his written pieces very clear, as a stylistic device to prove his point to illiterate people. And in this *remontrance*, to nuns: "here are the words of Luther, taken from the book he wrote about monastic vows: celibacy, virginity, aureoles are vain and obvious lies of Satan[1] The cure to this book was to be found in another one: the Catholic priest's prescription to convents in order to thwart such doctrines was the reading of saint books. Talking to the nuns, he gave them this piece of advice:

To help you break and escape from Satan's lakes, in which he has bound you through the babbling and the jargon of the ministers of his impiety, and seduced you and caught you with a bird call like the bird-catcher catches birds, I will show you texts from the Scriptures in which it is clearly showed that virginity and chastity are not impossible to men and women helped by the Grace of God[2].

But other works were fiercely condemned, and especially a pamphlet, written by an apostate nun, Florentina von Oberweimar, pointing out the reasons

[1] "Voyla les paroles de Luther, prinses du livre qu'il a escrit des voeuz monastiques: le coelibat, la virginité, les aureoles sont choses vaines & clairs mensonges de Satan" (Benoist 1567, 4).

[2] "Mais pour vous ayder à rompre & eschapper les lacs de Satan, esquels il vous a enlassées par le babil & iargon des ministres de son impiété, & vous a amorsées & prinses à la pippée, comme l'oyseleur les oyseaux, ie vous produiray textes expres de l'escriture saincte par lesquels il est monstré clairement que virginité & chasteté n'est pas impossible aux hommes ou femmes aydées de la grace de Dieu" (Benoist 1567, 8v).

why she had left the convent. Luther had prefaced this passage with an open letter. Taking the counterpoint of the Catholic literary genre of lives of great abbesses or nuns, Luther compared this exit to a miracle (Hendrix 2015, 202-3). And this scandalous inversion—the true religious person was the one who had dared to leave the cloister—, in association with the monastic pedagogy of the example, provoked a virulent Catholic charge against this book: Fontaine denounced the fact that, contrary to the abbess of the former nun's convent, who kept expressing her distress in regard of such an apostasy and breach of oath, "Luther [had] composed a book in which he praised what Florentine did as great virtue, asserting that it was a great miracle that by her own doing she was saved from hell[1]" (Fontaine 1558, 95). The ironic undertone was also omnipresent in Remond's acerbic interpretation of the escape from the cloister:

> [Luther] had composed the *Apologia* in favour of the nun Florentina from Islebe [Eisleben], who, once she had escaped from her convent, went to find refuge into Luther's arms, as a father and protector of chastity. The whole Christendom found this act bizarre and prodigious, and saw it as an omen for some monstrous event[2].

The Catholic polemicists disparagingly presented Luther as a "father of Freedom (*un tel Père de la Liberté*)" and his followers as "preachers of Freedom (*précheurs de Liberté*)" (Remond 1610, 302-3). But the contemporary reader has to be careful: Luther's thinking cannot be understood simply by reversing these criticisms. The novelty of voicing the necessity for monks and nuns to leave their cloisters cannot be read as the beginning of an emancipatory project that would have been enunciated as such by the Reformer. In a regressive methodology, let's see what Luther actually says about nuns.

Five texts can help us understand the Lutheran outlook on nuns and their marriage. Chronologically, it started with the appeal "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate (1520)" (WA 6, 381-469). Then, his "Judgment on Monastic Vows" in 1521 (WA 8, 564-

[1] «Luther composa un livre au contraire, par lequel il recommandoit le faict de Florentine comme grande vertu, affermant estre grand miracle que par son faict elle avoit esté retirée d'enfer».

[2] "Il avoit composé l'Apologie en faveur de la Florentine Religieuse d'Islebe, laquelle eschappee de son convent, s'estoit venuë rendre à sauveté, entre les bras de Luther, comme père & protecteur de la chasteté. Toute la Chrestienté trouva estrange & prodigieux cet acte, & comme un presage de quelque monstrueux evenement" (Remond 1610, 299).

669), and "On Marriage Matters" in 1522 (WA 10, 267-304) gave the theological basis for his thoughts on the matter. Finally, two letters can help us circumscribe his opinions on the specific group of religious women: an open letter to Koppe, written in 1523, "Why Virgins Are Allowed to Leave the Convent in a Godly Way" (WA 11, 398-99) and a letter to three nuns, dated from 1524[1] (WA BR 3, n. 766, 326-28).

First of all, if the Catholic thinkers, while reading Luther, aimed their attention at his supposedly strong vehemence on the subject of nuns, it appears that this focus was not so obvious in the texts they quoted. Luther did not advocate sexual liberation: his vision of the world was that of a 16th century man. These five texts encapsulate, over a five years period, the Lutheran points risen to encourage the leaving of convents. But, contrary to what the Catholics highlighted in their accusations, nuns were not specifically —or primarily—targeted. In the long treaty *De votis monasticis*, Luther addressed his recommendations to the "people of convents", without any gendered distinction. Only one passage specifically mentioned nuns when he advised them not to be proud of their virginity. Indeed, the Reformer remarked: "if a virgin makes herself superior to others or even equal to others before God because of her virginity, she is a Virgin of Satan[2]" (WA 8, 611, 33-34). Of course, in addition to the disapproval of feminine pride, Luther insisted on the impossibility of said virginity. These underlying themes run throughout the Lutheran thinking: in *On marriage matters*, he expressed exactly the same idea, noting that "there can't be anything in common between a married woman and a nun" (WA 10, 298, 1-4) when the former had accepted her state and lives by her faith while the latter arrogantly took pride in her spiritual state. The distinction was set: marriage, as a less hypocritical way of life than chastity, was a more suitable way for women to live in conformity with their faith. Therefore, by resorting to the stereotype of the overly proud woman, Luther abided by the representations of his time: this representational pattern corroborates the absence of a proto-emancipatory process for women in Luther's works.

[1] Regarding the English translation of these two letters, we are indebted to the very interesting (and useful) sourcebook published under the title *Luther on Women* (Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks 2003, 140-141).

[2] Translation from LW 44, 307.

In Luther's theoretical works, it appears that, contrary to what the Catholic thinkers underlined, and except for these small paragraphs addressed to nuns only, Luther wrote for all those who were living in convents, men and women indiscriminately; for example, in the address *to the Christian nobility*, he identified issues shared by "some abbots, abbesses and prelates[1]" (WA 6, 443, 27). But Benoist chose to focus only on nuns: when dealing with the same subject—the responsibility of superiors in the dereliction of convents—the condemnation is centred on the "indiscreet and worldly Abbesses" (Benoist 1567, 7). The monastic anxiety, shared by Catholics and Protestants, thus seems to take on an exclusively feminine turn in Catholic texts. It can easily be explained: the corruption of nuns, who were seen as frail women, was dramatic because their gender made it particularly scandalous. However, one must note the strict inter-confessional continuity between Protestants and Catholics thoughts on the question of nuns. Indeed, whether Luther was writing about nuns (as in his letter to Koppe) or directly to them, for example in 1524, he underlined the difficulty – or impossibility— for them to completely renounce sensuality, hence the necessity to have them enter wedlock. The attention paid to the sexuality of monastic persons was therefore gendered, and nuns crystalized these bi-confessional concerns. According to Lyndal Roper (1989, 232), "Luther's immediate preoccupation was to find husbands to them [the nuns who fled convents], a concern he did not have when monks began to leave monasteries".

The Reformer made indeed a clear distinction between feminine and masculine reasons to leave convents. The issues at stake were not the same; some were specific to women, such as the call of the flesh. For instance, when explaining to three nuns the many reasons why they should leave their convent, he stated:

> The other reason is the flesh. Although women are ashamed to admit such things, both Scripture and experience teach that among many thousands there is not one to whom God gives the grace to maintain pure chastity. A woman does not have the power [to do this] herself[2]

Before he explained this point directly to cloistered women, he had elaborated it in an open letter some time before:

[1] Translation by C. A. Buchheim (Luther 1909).
[2] Translation from Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks (2003, p.140).

the fourth reason for leaving the convent and the veil is probably the most important, although one must almost be ashamed of it: that is, that it is impossible that the gift of chastity is as common as the convent. A woman is not created to be a virgin, but to bear children[1].

We can make the hypothesis that Luther carefully adapted his choice of words when writing to the nuns: while the open letter directly addressed the question of the suitability of married life to the feminine sex organs, in an almost biological attempt to prove his point, the explanations given to the nuns remained more implicit, only mentioning the necessity of bearing children. And, here again, we find this process of a kind of feminisation of the rhetoric on convents and of the necessary management of sensuality. For the followers of the old faith or the advocates of the new one, women remained the screen on which social representations of them were staged.

Of course, the Protestant solution was original: marriage as an answer to a hypothetic intrinsic carnality. This new idea illustrated the change of paradigm that was happening regarding the perception of women at the time. This phenomenon—women leaving the convent—was not a form of emancipation that would have been triggered by Luther and the new faith allowing women to reach some sort of freedom. But with the intellectual and theological rehabilitation of marriage as a godly design, Luther and the Protestants gave a new dignity to wives and mothers. He offered an alternative to the diagnostic established by the Catholics about the problem of nuns and their sexuality. Thus, he helped renegotiate the opposition between virginity and marriage, and, in that sense, can be seen as an actor of the change in the representations of women in the 16th century.

[1] *Ibid.*" (WA 11, p. 398-99).

This confrontation, spanned over a fifty-year-period, between Luther and his French detractors from the second half of the 16th century, proved to be of a very literary nature. Confronting texts with texts, dissecting the relationship between intertextuality—Luther in the Catholic texts –and Luther's original works, allowed us to understand the change in the representations of a specific population, the nuns, and to identify the political and religious treatment of this issue as a major stake of the Reformation even if it targeted a minority group. Knowing that, there is no point in trying to assess the positive or negative aspects of what the Reformation changed for women. From a historiographical perspective, the question has already been raised and answered by many, offering as many possible explanations as there are works on the question.

But what about actual experiences? Beyond this theoretical *aporia*, the trajectories of women leaving the convent allow us to nuance the visions of both Catholics and Protestants. Far from being a complete prison, the nun cell can indeed be experienced as something positive, even encouraging a kind of agency; and leaving the convent can also be interpreted as a difficult choice, even endangering one's life. Indeed, often deprived of familial help, these former nuns who had married did not live perfect lives: experimenting poverty, multiple pregnancies, they lived shorter lives than their cloistered ex-sisters and were confronted with a wide range of material difficulties (Plummer 2014). On the other hand, especially when confronted with an imposed taking of the veil, some women wished to quit the monastery. The range of possibilities is therefore as broad as the number of experiences. Charlotte de Bourbon, the famous abbess of Jouarre, left her convent claiming that her taking of vows had been forced on her. She became the Princess of Orange by marriage (see *e.g.* Broomhall 2006, 28-38). For others, such a renunciation to one's family, one's place of birth and home, one's parents' religion, one's own faith, was unthinkable. For instance, the life of another head of convent, Jeanne de Jussie, reveals all the difficulties of that choice: convinced of her Catholic faith, she had to flee Switzerland and took all the members of her convent with her on the road.

Between these two extreme attitudes, between the hatred of the conventual institution and the impossible acceptation of the Protestant vision, the complete variety of behaviours including adaptations, circumvolutions, hesitations, abjurations and volte-faces existed. The clear-cut theological opposition is there-

fore overtaken by reality: neither completely debauched, nor perfectly saint, the lives of nuns who were confronted with the Reformation exceeded the simplifying vision of the discursive confrontation.

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Abbreviations

WA: Luther, *Werke*, Weimar edition (WA tome number, page number, line-s quoted).
WA: BR Luther, *Briefe*, Weimar edition.
LW: Luther, *Luther's Works*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Predella of the Reformation altarpiece by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553) in the Stadtkirche St. Marien, Wittenberg (part.). The woman in the front row is thought to be Katharina von Bora. Photo by N. Thompson, 2009 (`https://www.flickr.com/photos/pelegrino/4268647048`).