Defenders of the Cloister: 
*Catholic Nuns’ Agency & Resistance in Reformation Germany*

I. Introduction

One of the most fascinating and, until recently, unexplored aspects of the Protestant Reformation’s attacks on monasticism is gender. When one looks for it, however, it becomes apparent. Across Europe, a much higher proportion of monasteries closed than did convents; in two German bishoprics, for example, half the convents survived the Reformation, in contrast to only one-fifth of the monasteries. When ordered to close, monks and friars were much more likely to comply directly; nuns rarely did.1 The stark gender difference between the reaction of the monasteries and convents suggests that they were playing for different stakes: they were fighting over two different things. So what, then, was the intersection of gender with the battle over convents? What was the interplay between theological conflict in the Reformation and the lived experiences of nuns?

In this paper, I will argue that the Protestant reformers experienced the convent as socially ambiguous space, as it was outside the established and celebrated norm of patriarchal, hierarchical nuclear households. Because of this, the battle over convents took place over the legitimacy of the space that could no longer be neatly categorized. The nuns who resisted fought for the legitimacy of that space as a place in society, rooting their actions fundamentally in an argument for an empowered vision of women’s role in society. I will focus on specific convents in three German cities: St.

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Katherine’s of Augsburg, St. Nicholas-in-Undis of Strasbourg, and the Poor Clares convent in Nuremberg. First, I will set the stage by exploring the condition of convents in the three focus cities on the eve of the Reformation and how they resisted. I will then explore the Protestants’ new theology of women’s roles and how that spurred attacks on the convents. Finally, I will analyze the nuns’ resistance to the Reformation, their notions of self-identity, and the model of empowerment for which they were fighting.

II. Setting the Stage

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, Germany was theoretically an amalgamation under the Holy Roman Emperor. In practice, however, Germany was simply many disparate, decentralized principalities with little common oversight. One historian speculates that the Protestant Reformation would probably have been thoroughly suppressed at its beginning had it started in a centralized country like France or Spain instead of Germany. In any case, both Catholics and newly converted Protestants had more room to maneuver while pressing their case locally than their foreign counterparts did, because power was less concentrated and confessionalization was more confused. Any talk of German reformation history is thus, by necessity, a local history.

And yet there were many social and ideological commonalities among the cities, governmental decentralization notwithstanding. One was the presence and high social status of German nuns. On the eve of the Protestant Reformation, the female religious life was accepted as a legitimate social and sexual role in society. Nuns, called “brides of Christ,” were respected members of the community accorded a certain status as holy women who were, rather paradoxically, “simultaneously wedded and

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virginal. They played a major role in the life of the community: the nuns’ spiritual life of singing, contemplation, and prayers reflected well on their home city, and their ascetic life of good works somehow earned heavenly credit for the rest of their city’s souls as well. Often the daughters of elite members of the community, they entered into the convent for both religious and secular reasons—often because even a wealthy family could only afford a full dowry for one daughter. Convent dowries were cheaper, though still elite. Before the Reformation, the average convent dowry in Strasbourg was between one hundred and two hundred florins, paid in cash; a master artisan’s yearly salary was only approximately fifty florins. Because of the expense, convents tended to be more homogeneous than men’s establishments, which did not require the same kind of entrance fee.

Cloistered nuns did not simply sing and pray all day, however. Convents were places of relative empowerment, in part because of the administrative control their inhabitants enjoyed. Any large, active organization obviously takes effort to function, and most of the economic management of convents was in their residents’ hands. This included making loans, buying goods, and employing local artisans and workers for any necessary jobs. In addition, all administrative work and spiritual counseling was done by the women for the women, except for confession and other sacraments that could only be administered by a male clergy member. Despite being part of the very patriarchal Catholic Church, the three I will be discussing did exercise a large amount of self-determination. They were strongly communal environments, but they still had a strong hierarchy, with the prioress at the top. Generally, a prioress was elected democratically for life by the nuns, and it was her duty to care for the physical and spiritual needs of her house. Obedience to one’s prioress was very important.

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8 Wiesner-Hanks, *Convents Confront, op. cit.*, 14.
confessors were not even allowed to absolve anyone who defied her. Despite these similarities and their parallel struggles, however, the three convents I will focus on took different paths during the course of the Reformation.

Convent life had a strong presence in Strasbourg before and during the Reformation. Between 1470 and 1525, the city of twenty thousand contained over 250 nuns. When the Reformation was institutionalized in the city in 1525, my convent of focus—St. Nicholas-in-Undis—had 33 sworn sisters. The first Lutheran ideas arrived in the city in 1519. Protestant preachers preached and residents converted, and as early as 1524, the majority of city magistrates elected were sympathetic to the reform. Ant clericalism and zealous reforming preachers became common. German Mass was sung for the first time in February of 1524, and Latin Mass was abolished almost exactly five years later.

The vast majority of nuns in Strasbourg did leave their houses; ten out of sixteen convents were dissolved by 1538 because of the departure of residents. Three Dominican convents in Strasbourg refused to close, however; I will be focusing primarily on the efforts of one of the three, St. Nicholas-in-Undis. The nuns of St. Nicholas-in-Undis capitalized on the many family ties they had to the Strasbourg city Council. They also used to their advantage elite families’ fears of not having a safe place to send their unwed daughters to be educated. The nuns essentially turned their convent into a finishing school, welcoming elites’ daughters (as the city magistrates wanted) while allowing the girls to stay as novices if they wished. They shrewdly made themselves useful to the Protestant elite, so they would have leveraging power and be allowed to continue. Even after the Council banned new novices from entering the convents, they kept accepting them, and subtly proselytizing the Protestant

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9 Leonard, Nails, op. cit., 22.
10 Ibid., viii. 16, 59.
girls they were schooling. The houses continued to oppose the Protestant city Council until they were finally shut down in 1592. Most notable and extreme was when they were caught stockpiling weapons for the Catholic cause in 1570—and were not disciplined.12

The religious life also thrived in pre-Reformation Augsburg, with seven convents, one religious foundation, and up to 200 nuns. As I mentioned before, convents drew from a much more homogenous social background than did monasteries. St. Katherine’s, the Dominican convent on which I will be primarily focusing, was a veritable microcosm of the city’s elite; almost all of the leading families were represented at any given time.13

Martin Luther visited Augsburg briefly in 1518, and from then on, evangelical preaching gradually gained ground. The first major sign of this was a series of disturbances in 1524 and 1525, in which iconoclasts attacked holy objects to prove they had no sacral power, sparking distress and discord throughout the city. During the 1520s, the city’s Council tried to stay on the fence, in order to pacify the growing number of Protestants and retain imperial favor at the same time. The Reformation was finally institutionally introduced in the 1530s, when the Council began trying to shut Catholic churches, convents, and monasteries. The nuns of St. Katherine’s survived in various ways: they secured a papal confirmation in 1526 and a letter of protection from the Holy Roman Emperor in 1530, and threatened to exchange their position under the Council for imperial protection.14 They also made a few compromises: they acquiesced when the Council imposed evangelical preaching on them. Protestant sermons were preached for over a decade, but some sisters merely avoided them. There were even two evangelical prioresses in the 1530s. St. Katherine’s existence as a partially Protestantized convent suggests that confessional allegiance may have been less important than the

13 Roper, op. cit., 209.
14 Ibid., 215.
maintenance of a collective, devotional possibility for women. In any case, it was one of two convents in Augsburg to last continuously until the reintroduction of Catholicism to the city later in the century. In contrast, not a single monastery had survived.\textsuperscript{15}

The Reformation began quickly in Nuremberg with academic exchanges among elite humanists and Luther, and the rise of affective piety. In 1524, reform already moving ahead, the city Council began working against monasteries and convents. The Council effectively usurped the abbess’s powers as spiritual leader of the community by banning the enforcement of regular prayer, habits, and enclosure. Caritas Pirckheimer, the abbess of the Poor Clares convent in Nuremberg, was a brilliant and educated humanist who, along with her nuns, waged an intellectual and political war against the Council. She wrote various treatises, and later wrote one famous memoir of the period. At the end of 1525, she was visited by Philip Melanchthon; he managed to convince the Council to leave the nuns in peace. After that, the Poor Clares convent—and the other convents still open—were allowed to remain, as long as they did not admit any other novices. The Poor Clares convent finally died out in 1592.\textsuperscript{16}

In each of the three cities, the Reformation fundamentally challenged the nuns’ way of life and right to exist. The nuns who did not leave the convents of their own free will—whose numbers varied—found themselves in a fight to save their way of life. Now we will explore why they were so threatened, before finally discussing the conflicting gender ideology of the nuns.

III. The Convent as a Socially Ambiguous Space

When a woman made her formal vows to join a convent, she renounced secular affiliations and classifications, theoretically giving her loyalty to the Church alone. As a symbol of this, she left

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 17-22, 234, 244.
behind her secular clothing and donned instead the full habit of her order. (For the Dominicans, for example, the habit was full-length, black-and-white, and made of unfinished and undyed wool.) This uniform would be the only garb she would ever wear again: she lived, slept, and was buried in it.\textsuperscript{17} The habit provided nuns with an obvious symbol of their vows and their order that both set them apart from secular society and demonstrated their membership in a larger community. Lyndal Roper claims it “desexualized the women in a society in which marital and social status were coded in clothing,” effectively removing them from secular systems of categorizing women.\textsuperscript{18} It was that separation of nuns from secular society that discomfited the newly converted Protestants. There was simply no room for women to make any choice other than marriage in the new Protestant theological framework for society. Convents became what I am calling a “socially ambiguous space”—a social construct that failed to fit the prevailing worldview and, thus, came under attack.

From the beginning, Protestant reformers were highly skeptical of vows of celibacy and monasticism. Instead of the superior spiritual choice it was in the pre-Reformation Church, celibacy was seen as a rare gift from God—something one should not attempt to have unless one is gifted with it. The consequent belief that sexual temptation and sin was avoidable only through marriage led reformers to base their new social order on the biblical maxim “be fruitful and multiply.”\textsuperscript{19} The best Christian life was that of marriage and procreation, and those who were deluded enough to attempt monasticism and celibacy should give up and marry. The archetypal couple for this turnabout, of course, was Martin Luther and his wife Katherina von Bora, both former monastics themselves.\textsuperscript{20} In the early 1520s, reformers argued that celibacy was scripturally unfounded, unnatural, and not to be

\textsuperscript{17} Leonard, op. cit., 23.
\textsuperscript{18} Roper, op. cit., 240.
\textsuperscript{19} Leonard, Nails, op. cit., 2.
\textsuperscript{20} Merry Wiesner-Hanks, Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World: Regulating Desire, Reforming Practice (London: Routledge, 1999), 76–78.
attempted until one was gifted by God. In the mid-1520s, rhetoric turned harsher, and warned of the dangers of “celibate” clergy’s sexual misconduct.\footnote{Marjorie Elizabeth Plummer, “‘Partner in His Calamities’: Pastors’ Wives, Married Nuns and the Experience of Clerical Marriage in the Early German Reformation,” \textit{Gender and History} 20 (2008): 209.}

The celebration of marriage in the Protestant Reformation was not new; Catholic theologians also praised it. The new element was the elimination of the ideal of celibacy, which left marriage as the only religiously and socially valid choice.\footnote{Joel Harrington, \textit{Reordering Marriage and Society in Reformation Germany} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 73.} Of course, the attack on monasticism did not just affect women, but men still had the opportunity to devote their lives to the Church as a member of the clergy; women did not. Also, as Merry Wiesner-Hanks points out, motherhood was the \textit{only} acceptable vocation for women within this new religious imperative, while fatherhood—though important—was just one of many vocations for men.\footnote{Merry Wiesner-Hanks, \textit{Christianity and Sexuality}, \textit{op. cit.}, 78.}

In short, the Catholic Church had assured a special spiritual status to women who chose celibate monasticism. Protestant theology rendered that spiritual status invalid by disassociating sexual purity and spiritual virtuosity and questioning the monastic vocation altogether.\footnote{Leonard, \textit{Companion}, \textit{op. cit.}, 244.} While the new Protestant worldview could be seen as liberating for women in its seemingly egalitarian, non-hierarchical structure, many women fought against it vehemently.\footnote{Albrecht Classen and Tanya Amber Settle, “Women in Martin Luther’s Life and Theology,” \textit{German Studies Review} 14.2 (1991), 232.} In fact, the severing of that connection between virginity and holiness did away with the particular devotional space that women had been allowed prior to the Reformation.\footnote{Roper, \textit{op. cit.}, 235.}

The problem became when the Protestant theology came into contact with Catholic convents, as in the three cities under examination. The Protestant emphasis on marriage made unmarried people automatically suspect, because they did not belong to “the type of household regarded as the
cornerstone of a proper, godly society." Just as unmarried individuals did not fit into the new Protestant social framework, convents did not fit into their city-wide ideal of the reformed Christian life.\(^28\)

In the Protestant reformers’ view, however, monasticism was not just theologically unfounded or corrupt; it was useless. The Reformation denied altogether the usefulness of intercessory prayers, singing, religious contemplation, and good works in the quest for salvation, which by extension denied the usefulness of the nuns’ activities for the community. The reformed laity "objected to the nuns’ supposed separation from the rest of the world. ... ‘God wants us to help bear each other’s burdens,’” they argued, and nuns did not serve society by sequestering themselves outside its borders.\(^29\) As discussed previously, it was only through the nuns’ strategic focus on the safekeeping of young girls, orphans, and widows that city council members began to admit again that convents could have a use.\(^30\)

One illustration of the odd social ambiguity of Catholic monasticism in a Protestant city is the association of convents with brothels. Lyndal Roper points out in *The Holy Household* that nuns, even if persuaded to leave the convent, still presented a social problem as a group of unmarried women who were not quite citizens and not part of a household at all: the only comparable unit was the town brothel, which had been closed in the early stages of the Reformation.\(^31\) Some Protestant reformers, inspired by the belief that celibacy was unfeasible, even speculated that the level of morality in convents was probably comparable to that of brothels.\(^32\) Notably, the Augsburg nun Katharine Rem admonished her brother Bernhard, a staunch Protestant, for making that same comparison: “I certainly know that you have said that your daughter [also a nun] and I are to you more as if we were

\(^{27}\) Evangelisti, *op. cit.*, 91.

\(^{28}\) Roper, *op. cit.*, 216.


\(^{31}\) Ibid., 225.

in a brothel than in a convent. You should shame yourself in your heart to think such a thing, to say nothing of saying this.”33 Clearly, the nuns took umbrage at this comparison, but the cognitive leap that the Protestants repeatedly made from vows of celibacy to prostitution is interesting—and telling, in terms of how they tried to make sense of the ambiguity of monasticism in Protestantism.

If the cities didn’t know what to think about the nuns in their new theologies, there was little confusion about what, exactly, they wanted the nuns to do: obviously, they should leave the convent and marry. In Augsburg, for example, single women were forbidden by law to have eigen Rauch—their own independent households—unless they became citizens, which cost a great deal of money. If a woman did not have the means, she had to take a position as a servant in a household, lodge in a household, marry, or leave town.34 To encourage marriage, many cities gave out pensions to the nuns who quit their convents willingly. In Strasbourg, the pensions were contingent on the good behavior of the former nuns—a detail that illustrates how anxious the city Council was to make the women fit somewhere they deemed religiously proper. Possibly it demonstrated the council’s fear that some of the newly employed, single women might become prostitutes, but in any case, friars and monks in the city who left their houses were not similarly warned.35

As the previous paragraph demonstrates, the attacks on nuns during this period were colored by a sexism that, while to be expected in that time, is not explicitly discussed often. For the Protestant reformers (and Catholic reformers as well after the Council of Trent), the best way to handle the socially ambiguous female space was to bring the houses under complete male control. The convent’s quasi-gynarchy was antithetical to the Lutheran patriarchal household, as well as the Catholic

33 Wiesner-Hanks, Convents Confront, op. cit., 29.
34 Roper, op. cit., 225.
hierarchy that was supposedly in place. It also went against fundamental beliefs about women’s nature: in the words of one Protestant reformer on the Augsburg city Council, “How should it come to any good, when women join themselves in a separate life, so that, contrary to the ordinance of God ... they give themselves into obedience to a woman, who has neither the reason nor the understanding to govern whether in spiritual or temporal matters, who ought not to govern, but to be governed?”

Measures were therefore taken to curtail the authority of the convents that cities could not shut down. In Augsburg, for example, the city Council reserved the right to approve the prioress elections at all convents, including St. Katherine’s, though the nuns had been electing prioresses on their own for centuries.

Because of the new Protestant theology of an ideal society, there was simply no room for women to make any choice other than marriage. It was this restrictive worldview that nuns fundamentally resisted when protecting their way of life.

IV. Nuns’ Agency and Resistance

In high contrast from the Protestant outsiders’ perspective, the nuns who resisted convent closure saw nothing ambiguous about their social space. The lived experience and reality of conventual life taught them of its usefulness and importance, and they were very sure of their Catholic identity and what it entailed. As Lyndal Roper argues, “When the Reformation accused them of taking empty vows and leading useless lives, the nuns knew the charges were false; their spiritual commitment had never been stronger.” Secondary sources that discuss nuns’ resistance suggest various reasons for their actions: religious conviction, financial situations, the prospect of

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37 Roper, *op. cit.*, 221-2.
marrying outside of their social class. While those were certainly valid concerns and factors, I argue that the nuns were fighting to support a fundamentally different and less restrictive concept of what it meant to be a woman that was less restrictive.

Convent life did afford women a great number of opportunities. These advantages were many: nuns enjoyed the freedom to act in leadership roles, have a thorough education, work at creative and intellectual pursuits, and write. Primary among them was the opportunity to live the religiously focused life of a mystic or religious writer. Virtually all female mystics before the early modern period were affiliated with convents, including Hildegarde von Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena, and Birgitta of Sweden, because that is where individual women had the time and space to create and excel. As Kirsí Stjerna notes, the fact that the majority of the texts published by women at the time came from the convent “proves the importance of the monastic tradition in providing manuscripts, skills for literary activity, and a nurturing environment for the theological reflection.” Intellectual and artistic pursuits were usually rich inside convents. Nuns copied and illustrated manuscripts, translated Latin texts, composed choral works for their communities to sing, wrote plays, wove tapestries, and studied Christian texts, especially mystical works. Separation from lay society didn’t mean dull enclosure, but rather an active and vibrant world within the cloister. Many nuns were serious scholars; in Strasbourg, for example, they studied theology, philosophy, history, geometry, astronomy, and geography.

Caritas Pirckheimer, the prioress of the Poor Clares convent in Nuremberg, kept up correspondence with many of the contemporary luminaries of the time, including her brother

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40 See Silvia Evangelisti’s Nuns, Jo Ann Kay McNamara’s Sisters in Arms, Marjorie Elizabeth Plummer’s Partner in His Calamities, Merry Wiesner-Hanks’s Christianity and Sexuality in the Modern World, Amy Leonard’s Nails in the Wall, and Lyndal Roper’s Holy Household in the bibliography.
42 Ibid., 30.
Willibald Pirckheimer, Sixtus Tucher, and Conrad Celtis, who at one point composed an epistle and ode for her. However brilliant and educated, she never could have corresponded with any of these men except her brother had she not the safety and status of an enclosed nun. Being part of a monastic community was thus an advantage to these women; they gained a spiritual identity and a strong community feel, and while most of their written works were not published, their existence is “an extraordinary testimony of [the nuns’] inner and social world, as well as a tangible sign of their intellectual aspirations and familiarity with written culture.”

It is telling to contrast this picture of vibrant and rewarding life with a picture of what faced nuns who had to leave the convent on account of the Reformation. Unlike monks and friars, nuns could not easily move to a more Catholic-friendly area; the women were typically closer in miles and sentiment to their families, and many did not have the freedom of wealth or movement to relocate. Again, unlike male monastics, those who left religious houses to convert could not take on a devotional or ministerial role in Protestantism. Because of the new conceptions of what was acceptable for women, the options were to stay on the fringes of society living communally or marry. Those who did marry were likely to end up with Protestant husbands of a lower social class, because of the tiny stipend the city Council allotted them as a dowry. Nuns who left the convent also lost control over their finances. They were assigned financial guardians or had to give up economic control to their new husbands. None of the former nuns who received pensions from the Strasbourg city Council, for instance, could sign their name as a financially independent woman; the funds had to

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44 Barker, op. cit., 259-263, 266.
45 Evangelisti, op. cit., 70.
46 Wiesner-Hanks, Christianity and Sexuality, op. cit., 180.
47 Plummer, op. cit., 218.
be picked up by their guardian or a male family member. This would be especially absurd after having been heavily involved in economic transactions and administration within the convent.48

There are many more reasons why conventual life may have been preferable to life as a laywoman. The life expectancy for nuns was five years longer than for women outside the convent, because they avoided childbirth and many common diseases.49 Many nuns who had been forced to evacuate their convents during the Peasants’ War in 1524 and 1525 and lived outside the cloister for a time decided to come back because of the difficulty reintegrating into lay society. 68 nuns were known to have left the convents before or during 1525; at least 27 (40%) returned after the Peasants’ War. Others who had left of their own accord returned as well; some families who had converted and pressured their daughters to leave wrote to the [Strasbourg] magistrates complaining that their daughters spent the days praying and crying, longing for their former lives. The families eventually sent the daughters back. Jacob Spender, an early convert in Strasbourg, had forcibly removed his teenage daughter from St. Nicholas-in-Undis in November of 1522, but his daughter’s name can be found back in the convent records two decades later.50

Convent life was not necessarily easy, but it had considerable rewards. In the words of Silvia Evangelisti, “The life of the nun entailed a total spiritual experience in the service of God, based on prayer, silent contemplation, and an unconditional commitment to the religious community, according to the ideal and rules of early monasticism.... But on entering the convent women gained spiritual fulfillment as well as something else: a perfectly acceptable social identity outside marriage. They became part of an all-female group organized like a spiritual family while escaping family duties, motherhood, the possible dangers associated with childbearing, the uncertainties of widowhood, and

48 Leonard, Nuns, op cit., 83.
49 Ibid., 148.
50 Ibid., 86.
—not least—marital authority.” It is no wonder that many nuns had no wish to leave. After living in such a vibrant, purposeful community, the thought of living out the rest of one’s days alone or as a permanent houseguest was particularly unappealing. That choice was what was at stake with the question of the closing of the convents.

The nuns’ resistance efforts sprang from a strong and positive sense of communal identity. According to Ulrike Strasser, the Lutherans’ attack on religious houses (St. Nicholas-in-Undis in particular) “forced their inhabitants to articulate their sense of identity.” Creating a communal life was a large part of living together in the convents, inherent in everything from the order of the day, performing ritual acts, and wearing distinctive and uniform clothing. The three convents in Strasbourg that lasted through the Reformation were the ones that had reformed and become more observant during the fourteenth century; those that were laxer about rules of enclosure and behavior within the convent did not survive. The reforms had strengthened the convents’ sense of communal identity, and, thus, their common strength. The nuns whose convents were dissolved would often try to stay together in the lay world as well.

Akin to the strength through community was the sense of individual religious strength and empowerment. The nuns’ defiance of those who tried to supersede their own beliefs about their religion and God are strikingly clear in primary source writings, particularly when a nun stood up to a male relative and supposed authority because of her religious vocation. Katharine Rem, the nun at St. Katharine’s in Augsburg mentioned previously, exchanged a series of strong letters with her brother Bernhart when he wrote to her, saying “I would rather be counted as carnal with the open sinners in

51 Evangelisti, op. cit., 3-4.
52 Leonard, Nails, op. cit., 83.
53 Strasser, op. cit., 2.
54 Roper, op. cit., 239-240.
the temple (Luke 18) than be religious with you and those like you. Nevertheless I wish you for one the correct knowledge of Jesus Christ, ... so that you know why he in human nature was fastened to the cross.” In response, Katharine called him a “false prophet” and “hypocrite,” made several astute theological arguments of her own, and admonished him for trying to dissuade her from her way of life.⁵⁶

A nun from Strasbourg, Anna Wurm von Geudertheim, similarly reproved her brother Matthias for mocking her vow of celibacy and trying to convince her to leave the convent, writing, “Brother, I understand that you have written publicly and expressed that you want to remove me from the cloister ... and yet you do not even know whether I want that or not. Further, you have no power over me. ... I am in a good, pious, blessed, honorable, free, spiritual estate, wherein both my body and soul are well cared for. I want to stay here. ... No one of the world can sway me. I have never asked you to take me out of the cloister, and I am not asking you to do so now.” She continued, “I know full well that no one of the world—whether pope, emperor, king, or bishop—can force me against my will to give up that which I have promised to God.” When her brother applied to the city’s Council to have her forcibly removed, she wrote to the council on her own to plead her case, and won.⁵⁷

Katharine Ebner of Nuremberg was a novice when her Protestant family members abducted her by force from the Poor Clares convent. In a particularly dramatic passage from Caritas Pirckheimer’s memoirs, Katharine says to her mother: “You are the mother of my body, but not of my spirit, for you did not give me my soul. For that reason I owe you no obedience in matters which my soul opposes.”⁵⁸ Clearly, there was a great deal of personal agency, religious assuredness, and self-empowerment among the nuns who resisted the attacks on their way of life.

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⁵⁶ Wiesner-Hanks, Convents Confront, op. cit., 29–35.
⁵⁷ Leonard, Nails, op. cit., 64–65, 152.
These strengths—from communal living and personal empowerment—powered the many different strategies of resistance that the nuns employed to keep their convents open, from burning slippers to opening finishing schools. The nuns were not merely countering an attack on vows of celibacy or monasticism; they were fighting for the ideological legitimacy of a space that allowed them to be educated, empowered, and religiously fulfilled.

V. Conclusion

The sisters of St. Katherine, St. Nicholas-in-Undis, and the Poor Clares convents did succeed in their efforts, in varying degrees. Each convent, at least, survived decades past the Reformation, whatever its terms of survival were, and each demonstrated the same strength and empowerment that they were fighting to have legitimated. Of course, it should be recognized that the Protestant Reformation was at its heart a conflict about religion, not about gender; and yet gender, as an integral part of individuals’ identity, clearly influences the experience of any person in any situation. This is even more the case in a time so fraught with ideological differences and social change.

I began this project with the hope to use this topic as a case study to discuss women’s agency within patriarchal structures, particularly religious ones. Indeed, the nuns do display admirable strategy and resourcefulness in their attempts to protect their way of life during a deeply divisive and transformative period in history. But their stories don’t seem to present the wholly empowering message we might hope for. After all, the nuns were not everywomen; they were generally from elite families, with high connections that most laypeople would not have. In addition, they were only able to reach empowerment when they were almost completely away from the company of men; they were still part of a patriarchal structure, but they were in a position that gave them relative power, at least over their own small communities. I found myself wondering if it would have been possible to exercise the same agency in a patriarchal society without class privilege or the second-wave feminist
experience of segregated sisterhood. I am realistic about how difficult that would be, but hopeful that it is possible. In any case, the question of agency in laywomen’s lives must be explored further at a different time.
Bibliography


