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# Aut Maritus, Aut Murus: Love, Marriage, and the Convent

Laurence Lux-Sterritt

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## **'Aut maritus, aut murus':<sup>1</sup> Love, Marriage, and the Convent.**

Laurence Lux-Sterritt, Aix Marseille Université, LERMA, Aix-en-Provence, France

Some months back, John McCafferty posted on Twitter **a portrait of A Young Nun**, by French artist Claude Mellan (1598-1688). This drawing attracted interesting reactions as viewers assumed, perhaps from her slightly flushed complexion, that such a charming young sitter must be either an unwilling nun, or a naughty one, bending the rules by wearing *rouge* in a small act of rebellion. Such interpretations may be those of the majority of people today, and they echo some of the questions posed by Frances Dolan in her 2007 article, 'Why are Nuns Funny?'.<sup>2</sup> The cloister is, and ever was, a fertile locus for the imagination of those on the outside.<sup>3</sup> Between convents and marriage, modern society has all but abandoned the former in favour of the latter, and the 'otherness' of conventual life makes it into an object of curiosity, one we cannot comprehend easily.

But let us not forget that nuns were equally as mysterious in 17<sup>th</sup>-century England, where religious houses had been dismantled since **dissolution of the monasteries** (1536-1540). Over time, the establishment of the Church of England had outlawed Roman Catholic practice and, as a result, those who felt a vocation for Catholic religious life had to leave their homeland to enter religion abroad. For today's talk, I invite you to travel with me through time and space, to meet some of the Religious who lived in **English convents in exile**, mostly in the Southern Netherland and Northern France. Between 1598 and 1678, 22 of those convents provided for the religious vocations of English Catholic women. Back in England, they were the object of much curiosity, often depicted as places where English girls were entombed alive, cut off from the rest of the world and enslaved in blind obedience, often to satisfy the base urges of clergymen who were more concerned with lust and power than spirituality.

Like most effective hate speech, that type of discourse latched on to some factual elements around which to weave its rhetoric of alienation. Since the decrees of the **Council of Trent**, contemplative nuns were indeed to observe strict enclosure. The hagiographies of saints, and the edifying texts read in religious communities all praised the virtues of exemplary nuns who embodied

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<sup>1</sup> Ulrike Strasser, ' "Aut Murus Aut Maritus"? Women's Lives in Counter-Reformation Munich (1579-1651)', unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, March 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Frances Dolan, 'Why are Nuns Funny?', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 70.4 (2007), pp. 509-535.

<sup>3</sup> Laurence Lux-Sterritt, 'The Scandalous Nun: Anti-Catholic Representations of English Nuns in Exile in the Seventeenth Century', in Claire Gheeraert-Grafeuille and Géraldine Vaughan (eds.), *Anti-Catholicism in Britain and Ireland since the Reformation, 1600-2000: Practices, Representations and Ideas*, Palgrave, 2020, pp.145-161.

the vows of chastity, poverty, obedience and enclosure. Those heroic models lived for Christ only; they shunned the company of other creatures, and especially the distractions and entrapments of romantic love. Somewhere between those two extreme representations, very few sources reveal anything about the women who became nuns and **their** attitudes to romantic love or marriage, and this is what I would like to focus on today. Deliberately leaving aside both the sensationalized sexuality found in anti-Catholic publications<sup>4</sup>, and the saintly chastity conveyed in edifying texts, this talk will question the tension between the patriarchal injunctions of the secular world (marriage, motherhood) and the demands of Religious life. How did enclosed nuns experience that famous dichotomy: ‘Aut maritus, aut murus’?

### I – The unwilling nun: an indictment of Roman Catholic practice?

In anticlerical publications such as **Robinson’s Anatomy of the English Nunnery at Lisbon**, convents were painted as tombs in which unwilling women were dumped by their families. They were places of enslavement in which nuns were reduced to the service of their male Superior, and much of the narrative focused on moral – and often sexual- misbehaviour, through **bawdy anecdotes**. The unveiling of those sexcapades was meant to be entertaining, but served open anticatholic propaganda, debunking convents as dens of inequity, sin, and hypocrisy. Those were unnatural places, where women were deprived of their true, natural vocations as wives and mothers. But nature was bound to find a way, and some of those women, readers were told, went to extraordinary lengths to escape that world of lies and embrace a woman’s true vocation: marriage (**and motherhood**). This is the kind of rhetoric one would expect in an anticatholic publication, but can echoes of this be found in the documents of the English convents themselves?

There are a few rare cases of runaway nuns, but they appear to be extremely rare. For instance, **Christina Charlton** (AD015) had entered the Augustinian Canonesses as a postulant with what was described as ‘a full resolution to be religious’. Yet, on 8 April 1677, the enclosed nun walked briskly through the wet streets of Bruges, braving the cold to get to the house of an English Colonel who was stationed there. Once at her destination, she met Captain John Talbot of Carrington, Northumberland, with whom she had contracted a secret engagement. The pair eloped, much to the bewilderment of Charlton’s family and friends. On the morning of her wedding barely one week

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<sup>4</sup> such as Robinson’s *The Anatomy of the English Nunnery* (1622) or Barrin’s *Venus in the Cloister* (1683)

later, the bride wrote to her Prioress to tell her the news, plunging the community in great turmoil. She explained she had feared being judged as 'inconstant' if she returned home to her parents before profession, and cited that dread as a reason for such a hasty marriage. (69) However, it does not seem that Christina Charlton's decision to run away meant she now hated the religious life she had once felt attracted to. She was a spiritual person, and her daughter Catherine, the fruit of her marriage with Mr Talbot, actually became a nun herself, first entering the Benedictines at Ghent (BA050) before joining the Hoogstraten Carmelites in 1719.<sup>5</sup>

The Canonesses of Bruges were to know a similar, although more public episode 19 years later, with another Northumberland member, **Dorothy Errington**.<sup>6</sup> By 1696, Errington had been a choir nun for 15 years. She was described as a somewhat too frequent user of the parlour, where she would entertain kith and kin but also talk to English visitors curious to see a nun with their own eyes. That was how she met a certain John Grant, a Protestant, and lieutenant of the army of King William. It is believed that her conversations with Grant began with good intentions; speaking with him at the grate, she eventually effected his conversion to Catholicism. Converting an officer of the 'usurper's' army would have earned her much praise, had it not led to her own apostasy. The chronicler recorded that Grant's conversion seemed sincere and true 'at first' but soon, the pair began their 'wicked contrivance'. A short time later, Errington would run away with Grant and be excommunicated.

On the night of 27 October, she was seen going through the dormitory in her nightgown, probably with her secular clothes underneath, and 'she stole secretly out of the enclosure'. Her escape was only discovered the next day. The shock her departure was soon compounded by Errington's utter lack of discretion, which preempted any attempts by the bishop, the confessor and the nuns themselves to keep the scandal buried. The *Annals* report that, after her marriage, Errington-Grant lived 'in very poor condition, yet in appearance better satisfied with that miserable base poverty, than she was here with the engagement of her religious poverty which abundantly supply'd her necessary wants'. All the community's efforts to entice her to repent her 'Shameful and scandalous life' (100) fell on deaf ears, despite enrolling the help of her sister and brother-in-law and having special masses said in the convent church by the neighbouring Carmelite friars for 30 days. It was no good: worse still, Errington and her beau ran away to Sluis, in Holland, where she publicized her plight to the local Protestant and publicly recanted her faith, thereby adding apostacy to

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<sup>5</sup> Bowden, *The Chronicles of Nazareth*, 68-69

<sup>6</sup> had been sent back to Northumberland on 28 April 1674 to claim her annuity from her father, who 'took no care of her'. On that occasion she had returned to the convent, but

elopement on the list of her scandalous behaviour. The *Annals* report that she 'was much encouraged by the neighbouring people of that unhappy place, who applauded her crimes so much that they even threaten'd to fall upon [her brother-in-law] if he persisted to disturb her'. Her conversion allowed her to receive alms from the local church and support from her Protestant neighbours. As she traveled North to Scotland, also a Protestant land where her status as a runaway nun would make her popular, she declared she had never had a religious vocation but had made her vows under duress.

Interestingly, the *Chronicle* noted that her very entry into religion had been conditioned by another romantic entanglement: 'upon her father's crossing her in the designe she had to cast herself away by marrying one of his servants'. (101) It seems that Errington felt her vocation was for the married state of life, although she exercised little caution when choosing husband. Being prevented from entering one ill-advised engagement, she ran headlong into another. This, of course, fitted nicely with the anti-Catholic *cliché* of the oppressed female held captive within the walls, everyday a living death, in a community which stifled her womanly desire and purpose: to marry and bear children.

Yet Errington's actions beg many questions: did she deny her faith out of conviction? Or did she feel her precarious situation could be better justified if she denigrated the convent? Was she being opportunistic, the better to fund her new marriage? There is no way of being sure. What we do know is that, in 1707, when she became widowed after 11 years of marriage and apostasy, Errington traveled back from Scotland to her brother's house in Northumberland, and from there (with his help), she obtained the lifting of her excommunication and the right to return to her convent in Bruges. (299-300) Astonishingly, she was even restored to her rank. She died 32 years later, on 14 December 1739, aged 81.

The *Chronicle* presented the fact that she had returned to her original community instead of seeking another — where her sin might not have been so well-known — as a sign of her repentance and humility: '[...] she came in the spirit of penance with a desire of repairing the fault where she had commit'd it.' Despite those efforts to paint this story of redemption in a positive light, the fact remained that Errington returned only because Grant had drowned 18 months previously, and we can imagine she had been left destitute. The convent may have been her only recourse; in fact, the chronicler could not contain harsh words about her temperament, describing her as ever difficult, 'disagreeable' and of 'a violent temper'.<sup>7</sup>

But alongside those comments about her unruly nature, the *Chronicle* also highlighted the sincerity of Errington's personal spirituality in later life. She

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<sup>7</sup> Bowden, *The Chronicles of Nazareth*, 97-101

frequented the sacraments with great regularity — perhaps one of the only aspects of convent life for which she was willingly regular. She had a ‘tender devotion to the passion of our saviour’, as well as ‘great Confidence in our Ladys protection & intercession’. Although she was ill-suited to the rules and regulations of conventual life, the sincerity of her piety was apparently not in question.

From such vignettes, it seems that the Protestant debunking of convents as stifling, imprisoning spaces did indeed have a grounding in reality for some women in the English convents. However, they appear to have been extremely rare events. Such publications latched on to the stories of runaway nuns to serve their discourse by depicting the very structures of the Catholic Church as against nature. They did not seek to represent the lived experience of religious women, but rather to instrumentalize them to serve a political purpose. Despite the fact that they portrayed a nun’s life as antithetical with a woman’s nature and intended purpose in creation, they also failed to reveal that often, the sensational stories of runaway nuns were complex and nuanced. The examples above show women who did not forever reject Catholic piety and practice; rather, they show women who struggled to *discern* their vocation, the married state arguably being a vocation also, one to which you would commit for life and where you would vow to obey your husband.<sup>8</sup>

## II -- God the Only Bridegroom

It seems clear that not all vocations were clear-cut, and inspirational literature was meant to convince, to select a few cases to construct an edifying body of evidence. At the other end of the ideological spectrum, some equally extreme representations were found in Catholic publications which used the same rhetorical techniques, but to argue the opposite. In those publications, contemplative life was portrayed as an ideal of perfection, and a religious vocation was seen as far superior to a vocation for the secular married state. Marriage to Christ and service in the Church were deemed altogether more worthy.

Early modern nuns were taught that their Divine Bridegroom was a jealous lover. The Cambrai Benedictines were instructed to defect from any relationships they may have had before entering the cloister and to remain vigilant not to form new ones. God must be their only focus:

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**[She] who pretends** to advance in this carriere of divine love, must first purge [her] affections from all carnality, & terrene appetite [...] as soon as the world is cast forth & the heart is cleansed from all longation of sinn & affection to creatures, presently the entire satiating & ravishing Love of the eternal spouse Jesus Christ Crucified enters and takes full possession thereof.<sup>9</sup>

Each nun was encouraged to **'give [her] whole heart** to be possessed by God alone, rejecting all other creatures as unworthy to have a share in that gift with which thou present thy God'.<sup>10</sup> To prepare themselves to become worthy, they embarked upon a long process of prayer and devotion. In that context, it is no surprise that the *Lives* of exemplary nuns often emphasized their rejection of male suitors from the earliest stages of their secular lives.

Romantic pursuits were construed not only as a distraction but as an obstruction on the path to spiritual perfection. The narratives documenting influential nuns took special care to highlight the indifference of these virtuous women towards their suitors. For instance, it is known that Mary Ward, founder of the English Poor Clares at Gravelines and later, of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, rejected three suitors as teenager living in Yorkshire. When recalling these episodes of her life in her autobiography, **Ward indicated that she turned down her suitors** not 'fourth of anie desirs to be a religious, nor other reason, but because I could not affect them'. She further explained that her shy and bashful nature made any commerce with men so uncomfortable for her that she found it easy to remain virtuous even when she 'was several times solicited to falle'.<sup>11</sup> With hindsight, she saw those moments as narrow escapes, and thanked God for preserving her from these matches, so she would be able to become Religious once she had discerned her vocation.

Over time however, the later biographies written by her companions expanded her narrative to frame her refusals of marriage within the discourse of holy chastity and dedication to God. First, the English *Vita* (c. 1650) expressed Ward's virtue through inspirational tropes; about the engagement made for her when she was ten years old, the author redeemed the frailty of Ward's yet immature heart through God's intervention: **'The Devine Providence** having designed this selected Soule for a higher State, would not let this Love though so innocent have longer place in her Hart reserved to himselfe'. But about the

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<sup>9</sup> ADN, Ms 20H-17, 'A short treatise on the three principall vertues and vows of religious persons', fos 122-3.

<sup>10</sup> ADN, Ms 20H- 37, 'Of the love of God', fo. 144.

<sup>11</sup> Christina Kenworthy-Browne, Mary Ward, 1585-1645. A Briefe Relation with Autobiographical Fragments an a Selection of Letters, Catholic Records Society, Records Series vol. 81, Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2008, pp. 108-109; 113-114; 117-118.

second engagement, which Ward turned down at thirteen, it is said that **'her mind was** so much an other Way, as the very greefe had like to have putt her into mortall Sickness'.<sup>12</sup> Where Ward explicitly claimed she did not reject her suitor for the love of religious life but out of dislike of him, the vague wording of the *Vita* let readers interpret the episode differently. Later still, the *Painted Life* (c. 1680 – 1717) gave Mary Ward agency on all three occasions, recounting that, on **the first, 'she prayed fervently**, imploring God to prevent this marriage'; on **the second, 'she insisted** on turning down this proposal, claiming that in God alone would she place her love.' Finally, by her **third proposal, 'her heart** was so caught up in divine love that she could not consent to any earthly love'.<sup>13</sup> In those materials, specifically designed for edification, Ward was shown as fully dedicated to the religious life from the start: she would not entertain the love of a man when she craved the love of Christ.

In a similar vein, Mary Windsor, who professed at Louvain as an Augustinian Canoness in 1616, had reportedly shunned many occasions to be married, despite the fact that 'oftentimes men were like to kill one another about her'.<sup>14</sup> This was seen as a sign of her wisdom and of her spiritual discernment: she kept her heart pure, for God only.

For some nuns, those precepts were so deeply absorbed that any possibility of a romantic relationship seemed a grievous offence against God's will. The idea of a love affair became so odious as to take on the appearance of an evil to be fought at all costs. In their youth, Margaret and Ursula Mostyn, both (in)famous Carmelites who went on to become Prioresses at Lierre, had remained steadfast when their mother had presented them with suitable matches. But unlike the examples given above, both Margaret and Ursula confessed to having been in love with at least one of their respective suitors. Margaret recalled that she had felt an 'inordinate affection' for a particular person. Unsettled by these feelings, she experienced visions in which she saw a jealous Christ 'pictured like a spouse', demanding to know what this mere mortal man had more than He did.<sup>15</sup> This, in itself, was a common trope. But the Mostyns related to such feelings in very intense ways. At the time of witnessing in their autobiographical documents, they presented it not as a temporary weakness which they recovered from, but as the result of witchcraft. It was the devil's work. Ursula recalled experiencing visions of the man who 'had caused her for to fall in love with him previously, by reason of his witchcraft'; the

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<sup>12</sup> Also known as the *Briefe Relation*, this is believed to have been written by Mary Poyntz, perhaps in collaboration with Winefred Wigmore, *Ibid.* pp. 4 and 6.

<sup>13</sup> See *The Painted Life*, paintings 2, 5 and 8.

<sup>14</sup> Hamilton (ed.) *Augustinian Canonesses of St Monica's ... Louvain*, vol. 1, 158.

<sup>15</sup> Hallett, *Witchcraft*, 54.

unnamed love interest was then referred to as ‘the devil’, precipitating ‘the beginning of all her temptations’.<sup>16</sup>

Ursula’s and Margaret’s spiritual path was not to be an easy one; they were so tormented that, in 1651, their confessor Edmund Bedingfield found them to be possessed and embarked upon a painful process of exorcism. The Mostyn case is the only documented example of exorcisms being carried out on English nuns, and it is unique in many respects.<sup>17</sup> When the sisters were finally delivered of their demons, Margaret was able to identify 22 who had tormented her with amorous and carnal desires.<sup>18</sup> The Mostyn case can be construed as the extreme expression of an internalized discourse. To desire a person meant that one’s heart was not entirely filled with God; it was therefore reprehensible in a contemplative nun.

The fact that suitors could be demonized as spell-casters indicates that, for some women, the appeal of romance was strong although it went hand in hand with deep feelings of guilt and fear. In those instances, conventual texts often insist that the women’s vocations predated their entry in the convent and took precedence over worldly interests: they refused marriage because their hearts were already set on God. That was the narrative around Margaret Mostyn, who is said to have discerned her religious vocation despite her grandmother’s and her mother’s reluctance, and who viewed marriage as a betrayal of her godly purpose. However, not everyone adopted such a drastic stance regarding marriage.

The passage of time and the nature of the documents make it impossible to evaluate the role played by strong spiritual vocations in instances of rejected suitors. Some women may indeed have had an ardent wish to become a nun, as others yearned to become wives. Some may have been culturally and socially conditioned into cloistered life or into marriage.<sup>19</sup> Others yet may have entered without a solid initial vocation, keen to avoid becoming a wife. With each case, one would likely find all the nuances of spiritual engagement and a variety of dispositions towards marriage.

The story of Mary Morgan (prof 1651) can illustrate this point: she was a wealthy heiress who turned down the proposal of ‘the greatest Earl of the kingdom’; not taking no for an answer, the unnamed Earl then appealed to **the royal couple** themselves as mediators. When Morgan persevered in her decision, the Earl turned to more violent devices and lay siege to her house. The situation resulted in Morgan leaving the country in disguise to enter the Antwerp Carmel to avoid his unrequited pursuits. Although it would be tempting to join Hamilton

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<sup>16</sup> Hallett, *Witchcraft*, 67

<sup>17</sup> See Francis Young, *English Catholics and the Supernatural, 1553-1829*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, pp. 209-217.

<sup>18</sup> Hallett, *Witchcraft*, 92 – 106; altogether she names 300 demons.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Rapley ... and Caroline Bowden ...

in his conclusion that this was a ‘noble young lady, whom our Lord had designed for Himself’, the factors leading Morgan to her decision would, no doubt, have been complex.<sup>20</sup> Some women shunned their admirers, perhaps less out of the love of God than out of a dislike for their prospective husbands, or because the prospect of conforming to the expectations from an obedient wife and mother did not appeal to them. After all, marriage was as binding as conventual life. It implied a life-long contract, a vow of obedience and faithfulness, the loss of personal property, and restrictions on physical mobility outside the home, only this time, to a man of flesh and blood. Despite anticlerical publications insisting that they were a woman’s natural vocation, some marriages may not have been all that tempting. In such cases, the convent represented a safe haven, a shelter from a life of domestic unhappiness.

### III - Entering religion in the wake of thwarted marriage plans

Keeping in mind the idea of a safe haven, and the fact that marriage and the cloister were not necessarily as diametrically opposed as either camp represented them to be, I would like to look at the stories of a number of women who became nuns in the wake of failed marriage plans. English convents do not seem to have been used as discreet locations to place unmarried daughters, at least not as routinely as their Continental counterparts.<sup>21</sup> Yet it would be naïve to believe that **all** the women who entered did so entirely out of a long-lasting and fervent vocation for contemplative life and that none of them had ever had any other plans but to wed their heavenly Bridegroom. Some vocations were revealed after unhappy experiences, some of which impacted these women’s positions regarding marriage. Unlike the clear-cut and resolute vocations extolled in hagiographical *Lives*, those intimate journeys took more winding and secret paths.

**When Frances Stamford professed at** Louvain in 1617, she did so ‘upon a discontent she took, being cross’d by her father in a marriage she desired, for the young gentleman who courted her, and on whom she had settled her affection, tho’ he was of fit quality for her, yet he had no means and therefore her father would not consent to the match’. In the aftermath of this unhappy conclusion, Stamford could have remained at home; perhaps other suitors would be equally as loveable, and more adequately funded. Yet we are told she

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<sup>20</sup> Hamilton (ed.), *Augustinian Canonesses ... Louvain* v2, 4

<sup>21</sup> Laurence Lux-Sterritt, *English Benedictine Nuns in Exile in the Seventeenth Century. Living Spirituality*. Manchester University Press, 2017, pp. 68-69.

'resolved never to marry any other man, but settled her mind to a religious state'. Did she do so to spite her family, effectively putting a stop to any marriage plans they might have envisaged and escaping their control? Perhaps. But maybe she saw a contemplative life as a salve to heal her wounds and a way to give her heart to a greater lover. The *Chronicle* explained that, from her first entering, she had expressed the wish to remain a scholar for an entire year, in order to test her aptitude at contemplative life. We can guess that her adaptation to cloistered discipline was, at least initially, a challenge. '[Y]et from the first she gave herself seriously to virtue, and regular observance and [...] she took great pains to perfect herself'; the Chronicler's choice of words, the use of 'yet', hints at the seeming tension between a religious vocation and entering the convent in the wake of a failed marriage proposal. In the end, however, Stamford proceeded to take the veil to become 'ever a very regular religious, and a prudent discreet woman, very much beloved in her cloister'. The chronicler praised her for not being 'over hasty in binding herself' and turned those difficulties into examples of hardships which the nun overcame through God's grace and her own constancy.<sup>22</sup> She became an exemplary nun and after serving as Cellaress at Louvain, she too moved to Bruges in 1629 to establish the new house, of which she became Prioress (1629-1635). And so it was that an unhappy romantic fate furnished the Canonesses with one of their most loved foundresses.

This vignette can be read in different ways. The opponents of religious life would view them as examples of the cloister as a dumping ground for women without marriage prospects. On the contrary, those who extolled the virtues of contemplative life interpreted them as edifying examples of the miracle of Providence, when God chose these women for Himself. Frances Stamford did not choose the convent from the off; yet readers were told it was always a path she envisaged taking, and one which ultimately led her to fulfilment.

Unlike Elizabeth, Margaret or Frances, some young women refused to comply with their families' dismissal of a beloved suitor and contracted a quick, secret marriage. This was **Bridget Gifford's somewhat rash** decision when she was not yet twenty years old. In her late teens, she had promised herself to 'a fine gentleman, although a younger son that had nothing'. Anticipating her father's reaction, the young couple wed secretly, but allegedly did not consummate the marriage. Sometime later, when Gifford fell ill, her decision to marry against her father's wishes weighted heavy upon her conscience. At death's door, asking for God's forgiveness, she 'resolved to become a religious'<sup>23</sup> and she honoured that promise as soon as she was restored to health, as a sign

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<sup>22</sup> Bowden (ed.), *The Chronicles of Nazareth*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>23</sup> What happened to the husband?

of her gratitude to God.<sup>24</sup> Thus, when she professed as a Canoness at Louvain in 1621, she had already been married for two years.

Such entries provide an interesting look at religious entries which happened in the wake of failed marriage plans. It seems clear that the convent was not initially these women's dream life and that they had viewed marriage as a more desirable option, and one which would make them happier. But in the cases above, after the failure of a marriage of the heart, a marriage of spirit provided solace and contentment. Whether they entered to nurse a broken heart or to save face, these women found a haven, a new community of Sisters, and a different way to channel their love within the walls. Early modern women did not always have their say on the topic of marriage or cloister; yet we must be vigilant not to evacuate the notion of choice altogether; not all women who became nuns after a love disappointment were forever unhappy. In the oft-quoted phrase 'Aut maritus, aut murus',<sup>25</sup> not being the first choice did not necessarily mean it was a dreaded alternative; on the contrary, such tales could serve to enhance the superiority of religious life over the trappings of an inconstant secular world. These women's vocations may not have been immediately obvious, but in the end, they applied themselves became well-loved and exemplary nuns. Even taking into account the hagiographical tendencies of the *Chronicles*, it cannot be denied that, when writing about other nuns, the same chronicler was nowhere near as laudatory. An unhappy engagement did not seem to preclude a happy life as an enclosed religious.

**Elizabeth Lovell**, who grew up in exile in Louvain with Lady Cross, her grandmother, and became a professed nun there on in 1621. Earlier, she had been courted by 'an English gentleman of quality' and, with her family's approval, things had proceeded to the point that her wedding gown was made. However, after what was rumoured to be a disagreement regarding her dowry, the suitor broke off the engagement. The *Chronicles* gloss over this event but acknowledge Lovell was 'deeply discontented, having settled her affection'. Her decision to enter religion therefore derived from that disappointment. As can be expected from someone who took the veil in such circumstances, Elizabeth struggled during her novitiate, which had to be extended by six months; she came close to leaving several times. Even after she professed, she still experienced 'great difficulties, and but smal content' for some years. Yet, little by little, she found her place in the community. She was gifted with a beautiful voice, on account of which she was made Chantress when she moved to Bruges in 1629 to help found the new convent there. She also served as procuratrix and

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<sup>24</sup> Hamilton (ed.), *The Chronicle of [...] St Monica's*, vol. 2, p. 44.

<sup>25</sup> Ulrike Strasser, 'Aut Murus Aut Maritus? Women's Lives in Counter-Reformation Munich (1579-1651)'. University of Minnesota ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1997.

grate Sister, a position of ultimate trust where she oversaw the interactions between the community and the outside. She died in 1634, after devoting herself to the care of her plague-stricken Sisters in the infirmary and becoming infected. The chronicler wrote: 'In her vocation to religion we may see the great providence of God'.<sup>26</sup> We cannot know whether Elizabeth Lovell entered the convent to nurse her broken heart, or to allow her family to save face; we do not know whether she initiated that move, or if it was her family's decision, which she then accepted. What is clear, however, is that the convent had not been her first choice; yet she persevered to become a dedicated nun, thereby providing the convent's chroniclers with another type of exemplary life, one whose path was not as smooth as some, yet equally edifying.

Entertaining marriage prospects and a sincere religious vocation were not always antithetical. In fact, conventual Mss indicates that some religious vocations could reveal themselves *through the very medium* of a romantic encounter. **Agnes Tasburgh** professed at St Monica's in 1622; at first glance, her story is familiar since she entered the convent after she fell in love with a French gentleman who lodged at her family house. Her father, Sir John Tasburgh of Flixton (Norfolk), described as 'a hot Protestant', had insisted his children be raised in the Church of England, although his wife continued to practise her Catholicism in private. The *Chronicle* indicates that Agnes was particularly attracted to this young man especially *because* he was a Roman Catholic and talked often of matters of religion in a way which resonated with her. When she 'secretly reconciled to the Church', this French gentleman's discourses of the faith fanned the flames both of her newfound devotion and of her love for him. Her hopes were shattered when her father refused to envisage a match and sent his guest away; he ordered his daughter never to see him again. He demanded she return to her filial obedience and to the fold of conformity, and as she ardently defended the Catholic faith, we are told he threatened to cut out her tongue if she spoke another word. With that, he turned her away and she went to her grandmother's; the elderly relative was more amenable to the old faith, and she managed to find her a place at Louvain, thanks to her acquaintance with Matthew Kellison, President of the English College. This case is interesting because it seems that Agnes's feelings for the French gentleman stemmed partly from the fact that he could talk to her about spiritual matters and edify her on certain points. One could see her vocation in the making in this attraction and later she did not waver, deliberately preferring Louvain to an unnamed

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<sup>26</sup> Caroline Bowden (ed.), *The Chronicles of Nazareth (The English Convent), Bruges 1629-1763*, CRS Records series, vol. 87, Boydell, 2017, p. 10.

community at Douai which, according to the *Chronicle*, she declined on the grounds that it was unenclosed and too lax for her vocation.<sup>27</sup>

This example shows that the love of God and the love of a suitor were not always mutually exclusive. Although ultimately the woman would have to choose to commit to one type of life or the other, falling in love did not preclude being devoutly Catholic and dedicated to the cause.

### **Some thoughts ...**

So, over the last X minutes, it has been my goal to address the blanket assumptions that still remain in the popular psyche today. Like the Twitter users reacting to John McCafferty's portrait of a young, fresh-faced nun, we often contribute to the perpetuation of that oft-quoted maxim, "Aut maritus, aut murus", a husband or a cloister, as if those two polarities were so mutually-exclusive as to negate any possibility for overlap, or any other possibilities.

The vignettes included in the Augustinian *Chronicles* of Louvain and Bruges and the documents of other English congregations offer insight into the private lives of some of the women who went on to become nuns there. Allowing room for critical distance and caution, since the process of *creating a narrative* of course fashioned those memory documents to suit the purpose of edification, they show that the relationship between earthly love and the decision to enter the cloister was a complex, fluid one, which had as much to do with personal preference as it had with family strategies or societal expectations. Many nuns-to-be entered the convent after refusing one or several suitors. For some of those, the cloister was a shelter from a marriage prospect they did not want; for others, there was only ever one Bridegroom in their heart, and they married Him when they became Brides of Christ. And for those who entered less out of ardent religious zeal than out of more worldly motives, it was not impossible to develop a true and sincere love of contemplative life once in the convent.

Even in the convent, the dialectic between romantic love and religious life never stopped being a sensitive issue. Whilst some found perfect contentment in divine love, others met with forms of terrene passions which sometimes challenged their Religious vocations.

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<sup>27</sup> Hamilton (ed.) *The Chronicle [...] of St Monica's*, vol. 1, p. 255.