WOMEN OF THE BOOK: The Spiritual Lives of Early Modern Women
We offer a collection of 650 books, pamphlets, broadsides, and manuscripts focused mainly on the intersections between convent culture and print. The vast majority of the items (90%) date to the 17th and 18th centuries, when this relationship was at its most fertile. As the collection reveals, convents provided important centers of reading, instruction, and writing for women in Italy, France, Belgium, Germany, Spain, and Switzerland.

The rapid spread of female monastic orders (the Poor Clares, Ursulines, Discalced Carmelites, Visitadines, and so on) is reflected well in the translations and adaptations of biographies of notable nuns. Gathering together a statistically significant number of such biographies, we can perhaps begin to address broad questions of who was writing them, why they were written, and who was supposed to read them (reflected in the large number of ownership inscriptions found on these books). The approximately 350 biographies also invite analysis of common themes in the lives of ‘venerable’ women: age of first religious experience; age at marriage or refusal of marriage; medical afflictions; death of children; and overall lifespan (an astonishing number did not reach the age of 30).

Beyond biographies, we have focused on conduct-books for nuns, rules and regulations of convents, spiritual texts written by laywomen, ephemera produced to commemorate nuns and their professions of faith, and even on the legal difficulties faced by convents. The present prospectus offers a brief overview of different aspects of this collection.
**Bindings** 70% of the books are in contemporary bindings. Most of these are unadorned, produced for daily use in convents, but those for secular private devotion can be highly personalized.

**Pictured:** Five unrecorded Lutheran tracts from the press of a female provincial printer in a fine contemporary Bauern-Einband [“Farmer’s binding”] of painted blind-tooled velum, with a motto in Hessian dialect and ownership inscriptions of two female readers dated 1735.

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**Teresa of Avila** The collection strongly reflects the popularity of the Discalced Carmelite Order and its founder, Teresa of Avila (1515-1582). Among the highlights are translations and adaptations of her life in German, French, and Italian as well as biographies of her earliest followers, particularly in the Low Countries.

**Pictured:** Various illustrations from biographies of Teresa, including Arnould van Westerhout’s entirely engraved *Vita Effigiata* (72 plates, Rome, 1716); the image of an ecstatic Teresa pierced by an arrow is based on Bernini’s marble statue.
Maria of Agreda  Lesser-known than her countrywoman Teresa of Avila, but equally fascinating. Maria of Agreda (1602-1665) experienced ‘bi-location’, allowing her to minister to the Jumano Indians of Texas from her convent cell in rural Spain. The collection contains the first biography of Maria (Barcelona, 1687) owned by a ‘Senora Donna Emanuela Sanet y Truyol’.

PICTURED: Maria’s Mystical City of God attracted the attention of the censors of the Sorbonne when it was translated into French in 1695; only the first volume appeared, and is extremely rare.

Dedications  Books intended for a female readership often featured female dedicatees. 138 of the books in this collection are dedicated to women.

PICTURED: GALLE, Cornelius (engr.) / PUGET DE LA SERRE, Jean. Les Merveilles de l’Amour Divin. Brussels, 1633. With added engraved title-page and 7 plates. De la Serre was the author of a number of texts aimed at women. This, his treatment of the Passion, is dedicated not to the Infanta of Spain, but to her lady-in-waiting, ‘Demoiselle d’Arschot’, pictured as an adolescent girl already exemplifying the virtues of a pious noblewoman. She clutches in one hand a string of prayer beads, while in front of her is her personal altarpiece with a candle and crucifix, and a cloth-covered lectern for reading her devotions while kneeling. OCLC shows 1 US copy (Harvard).
Manuscripts The collection contains 45 manuscripts, including the account books of an early 16th century Benedictine convent; the will of an Italian nun; personal devotional manuscripts; and a trove of 75 letters dated 1688-1692 supporting the beatification of the recipient’s aunt, Giacinta Mariscotti (d. 1640).

PICTURED: In 1794 the Revolutionary government executed 11 Ursuline nuns in Valenciennes for their refusal to cease teaching religion at their convent school. The collection includes several class notebooks dated 1777-1793 from this school, consisting of sample exercises, a list of classmates, and popular songs and poems of the time. Also mentioned is Mère Clotilde Paillot, executed on October 24th. Ironically, one of the songs found in the note-books is a very early transcription of the Marseillaise.

Ownership inscriptions

300+ books feature female ownership inscriptions or markings of convents. Sometimes a succession of owners is noted, “given to my sister”, “with the permission of the Abbess”, etc.
Persecuted nuns  The collection includes a manuscript book of rules and regulations for a refugee community of Augustinian nuns exiled from the Netherlands in 1732, as well as a Relacion authored by a Franciscan nun in 1627 recounting her convent’s journey from Hoogstraten to Portugal fleeing the violence of the Wars of Religion (both pictured).

Rarity  Particular care was taken in assembling this collection to select items poorly represented in institutional holdings. 350+ items (not including manuscripts) are not held in any US institution according to OCLC. Of these, 200+ are significantly rare worldwide, and are wholly unrecorded in OCLC.

Conduct books  A strength of this collection is 50+ conduct-books, generally written by men for nuns. Among these are guides in Spanish, German (on how to be a perfect Lutheran pastor’s wife!), French, and Italian, including several adaptations of a Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ* and Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* for women and several ‘spiritual retreats’ for nuns. **Pictured:** RICHIEDEI, Paolo. *Pratica di Coscienza per Tutte le Religiose Claustriali... Con un Trattato pure dell’autorità che tiene ogni Superiore sopra le sue Monache...* Brescia, 1689. With added engraved title-page. Two different early Florentine ownership inscriptions, one of the ‘Madre Soppriora’ of the Convento di Chiarito, and the other of Costanza Felice Bracci, a nun at the Convent of St. Dominic.

Signs of use  Many of these books were intended for daily, communal use. A handful even bear annotations or elaborations. **Pictured:** FORNARI, Maria Vittoria. *Costumi, o Siano Buoni Usi delle Monache dell’Ordine della Santissima Annontiata Celeste... stampati ad instanza delle medesime Monache.* Milan, 1659. Woodcut of the Annunciation on title-page. An unrecorded printing of the rules formulated by Maria Vittoria Fornari for her famously austere Order of the Celestial Annunciation, approved in 1604. This copy features a number of early manuscript corrections on paper slips pasted over the original text.
Ephemera
The collection contains 40+ broadsides as well as ephemera relating to lawsuits against convents, accounts of miracles, and so on.

Pictured: a remarkable 17 pp ‘newsletter’ printed at the behest of the Visitadines of Annecy reporting on various tidbits of convent news. No similar item has been traced in any library database worldwide.

Mystics
Many of the women in the collection were at some time considered ‘mystics’, including: St. Gertrude of Eisleben (1256-1302), Margarete Ebner (1291-1351), St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), Felice of Barbarano (1527-53), Maria of Agreda (1602-1665), Armelle Nicholas (1606-1671), Antoinette Bourignon (1616-1680), Maria Petyt de St. Teresa (1623-1677), Françoise-Clara de St. Lieven (1629-1652), Louise-Agnès Bellere du Tronchay (1639-1694), Marie de la Rose (1640-1717), Marie Herincx Helyot (1644-1682), and Rosa Maria Serio (1674-1726).

Female authors, printers, and engravers

Books for women were often written by women. 60 of the books in the present collection are by female authors or feature female contributors. 20 were printed by women, and 10 feature the work of female engravers or artists. Among the most notable is Lucrezia Marinelli’s *De’ Gesti Heroici, e della Vita Maravigliosa della Serafica S. Caterina da Siena* (1624), in which she paints the ‘heroic feats’ of Catherine of Siena in the same light as those of male protagonists of medieval lore.

Pictured: [BRUNAND, Claudine, engr.]. *La Vie de la Seraphique Mere Sainte Terese de Jesus... En Figures, & en Vers Francois & Latins.* Grenoble, 1678. With engraved title-page and 55 plates.

Festivities

The entrance of a (wealthy) nun into a convent was a cause for celebration. The collection includes 25+ examples of ephemeral poetry composed for these occasions; one such pamphlet even features a contribution by the female prodigy Francesca Manzoni of the Accademia dell’Arcadi.

Pictured: Untraced, ephemeral broadside produced for the entry of Suor Barbara Felice Ottani into a local Dominican convent.
Music A handful of the books in this collection feature musical notation, including a ‘novena’ for Rita de Cassia (patron saint of abused women) to be sung in Portuguese, and a collection of original ‘spiritual songs’ in Romansch intended for Lutheran congregations on the Italian border, belonging to ‘Ursula Madlaina Gallas’.
The Women of the Book Collection was acquired by the Sheridan Libraries of Johns Hopkins University in 2017. It constitutes the largest research collection of rare books, manuscripts, and ephemera dedicated to the diffusion of the religious culture of early modern women. New acquisitions doubled its size by 2021, encompassing materials from across the period 1450-1800, now including Latin Americana as well.

The Sheridan Libraries’ Virginia Fox Stern Center for the History of the Book in the Renaissance hosted an international symposium on the collection during the 2019-20 academic year. A major exhibition of the collection will follow at the historic George Peabody Library in downtown Baltimore in Fall 2022, followed by a major illustrated scholarly publication.

Please address any questions about access and research with the collection to Earle Havens, Nancy H. Hall Curator of Rare Books and Manuscripts, earle.havens@jhu.edu.