As Thomas M. Carr, Jr. observes in his excellent synthetic introduction to this collection of ten articles, early modern French nuns have been the poor sisters of their Spanish counterparts as far as research on their writings is concerned. Among Hispanists, Teresa of Avila and Juana Inés de la Cruz have long enjoyed a canonical standing that has prompted extensive work on the writings of “untold sisters,” to borrow the suggestive title of an important anthology published in 1989. From one point of view, of course, work on French nuns has not exactly been lacking: Geneviève Raynes's *Couvents de femmes: La vie des religieuses contemplatives dans la France des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* and Elizabeth Rapley’s *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* appeared in 1987 and 1990, respectively, and other important full-length studies have followed, especially in recent years. But these are generally works of cultural history, written by historians; unlike in Spain, the actual textual production of women religious has seldom been claimed by those teaching in literature departments. Carr, mixing contributions by historians and literary scholars in equal proportions, and topping the volume with a path-breaking 26-page checklist of writings by early modern French nuns, aims to lay the groundwork for an interdisciplinary field.

Happily, the field looks to be one of harmony, with historians and literary scholars all tackling fairly similar questions: how permeable was the boundary between the convent and the world? what sort of access did nuns have to books, to writing? what were the modes of circulation of their texts? what were the limits – imposed or self-imposed – on the agency derived from writing? Indeed, the question of agency haunts most of this work – a heavily problematized agency. With the exception perhaps of Claire Carlin’s nonetheless convincing piece on Jeanne de Cambry, author of a unique marriage manual and various mystic works, one notes the eclipse here of the celebratory feminist tone that characterized much earlier work in the Spanish domain. (“Good sisters use the power of the pen against bad patriarchal institutions” : so might read the imaginary advertising tag of Hispanist scholarship of fifteen or twenty years ago.) Carr’s contributors tend to offer sober appraisals of a situation in which the coming to writing obeyed constraints and motives that are not easily organized into a Manichean struggle between oppression and resistance.

Two of the group’s historians concentrate on self-presentation in convent writings – not so much presentation of an “inner self,” but the formation of
a collective identity. Elisabeth M. Wengler uses the *Petite chronique* of Jeanne de Jussieu to excavate the ways in which the sisters of Sainte Claire “conceived of themselves and their communities” (38). The obituaries of Visitandine nuns, intended for in-house consumption, provide Elisabeth Rapley with a large archive from which to distill the commonplaces these women used when talking about their values. In both these articles the question of agency is present, but shifted from the level of *énoncé* to *énonciation*, as it were: even where the content of writings might stress obedience and abnegation, the writings themselves must be viewed as symbolic actions by which groups identify themselves and present a view of the world irreducible to our own.

Agency is similarly nuanced in a number of other contributions studying the links between convents and the world. And links there were: *clausura* was not as rigorous as commonly supposed, and convents did, as a matter of culture or circumstance, interact with the outside. The historian Susan Broomhill looks at the preoccupation, evident in the writings of certain Benedictines, with familial and social networks that remain an important part of their identity. In a complementary study, the literary scholar Gary Ferguson examines the uncommonly worldly Dominican priory of Poissy, where nuns published works of devotion, usually without the customary oversight of male clerics, and undertook translations; all of this was possible due to “an aristocratic female community of learning” (54) that stretched well beyond convent walls. Interaction with the outside world – specifically, with the courts – became important for the Franciscan nuns of Sainte-Catherine-lès-Provins, who took the unusual step of breaking their vow of silence so as to accuse their male overseers of (sexual) abuse of authority; Leslie Tuttle’s study and detailed contextualization of the legal brief or factum that the sisters filed makes for fascinating reading, and Tuttle, a historian, is careful to present the text both as a product of female authority and as part of “a high-level political battle between men” (149). Finally, underlining the porosity of convent walls in the only purely secular (and fictional) text analyzed here, Villedieu’s *Mémoires de la vie de Henriette-Sylvie de Molière*, Barbara Woshinski demonstrates how the convent is represented as an important shelter from the familial and legal restrictions placed on women.

Another group of studies examine the always vexed issue of male oversight of female spirituality – spiritual direction, but also exorcism. Pauline Chaduc, studying Fénelon’s direction of the mystic Charlotte de Saint-Cyprien, underlines the two-way nature of the relationship (Charlotte contributed to her director’s spiritual development), and refrains from facile indictments of Fénelon’s insistence that the mystic give up writing so as to
achieve utmost simplicity. Katherine Dauge-Roth’s study of the possession of Louise Capeau at the Ursuline convent of Aix-en-Provence is a scholarly and theoretical tour-de-force; starting from the premise that exorcism is by nature about the control of speech, Dauge-Roth presents a compelling case for seeing the possessed Capeau as a hybrid speaker who manages to use the discourse of the demonic other to circumvent the Pauline proscription of female preaching. (By contrast with Chaduc, Dauge-Roth, and most of the other work discussed above, Daniel-Odon Hurel’s detailed account of spiritual direction in the Benedictine congregation of Saint-Maur is unconcerned with issues of agency; instead, the author reconstructs the various factors responsible for Benedictine monks’ changing involvement with nuns’ spirituality.)

In a word, Carr’s study productively dedramatizes the early modern convent world: the place neither of dark repression nor of sunny female bonding, the convent, and its often rich archive, is now one site among many scholars can look for data on a host of subjects of interest to cultural and literary history – textual practices as situated at the meeting point between individuals and institutions; the role that social, familial, and institutional networks play in the constitution of identity; gender relations in historical manifestations that are instructive precisely to the extent they do not easily align with our late modern preoccupations. The Cloister and the World should become the “go-to” volume for a new generation of scholarship on religious writing.

Nicholas Paige


La citation du titre provient du Poème du Quinquina de La Fontaine. L’auteur l’a choisie parce qu’elle explique le terme de « poésie d'idées » qui circonscrit le champ de sa recherche, à savoir la poésie dont le thème est la science. Celle-ci est rattachée au XVIIe siècle à la philosophie et en voie de se dissocier de la théologie qu’un autre type de poésie d'idées, écartée dans cette étude, transmet toujours. Le Moyne, « poète jésuite » (111), fait partie du riche corpus des textes analysés, mais, selon Chométy, celui-ci connote « péjorativement » les notions de physique cartésienne dans De la Paix du Sage, entretien dédié à H.-L. Habert de Montmort, éditeur des œuvres de Gassendi, qui habita et mourut chez lui.