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Shaping the Spiritual Exercises: the *Maisons des retraites* in Brittany during the Seventeenth Century as a Gendered Pastoral Tool

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Abstract

In the second half of the seventeenth century, on the periphery of Catholic Europe, Brittany was the site of intensive missionary activity aimed at both men and women. Based on a heterogeneous corpus of manuscripts, printed books, and iconographic sources, this article shows how, far from Rome, Jesuits and devout laywomen adopted a gendered perspective in reconceptualizing mission. In the city of Vannes, the Jesuit Vincent Huby and the aristocrat Catherine de Francheville instructed large groups of men and women in the Spiritual Exercises. They supervised two retreat houses to welcome them and created a “missionary kit” of moral images adapted to their gendered pastoral field. The Breton context presents a particularly good example of the importance of gender to missionary interactions. Here, the Jesuit “way of proceeding” allowed for the integration of local communitarian perspectives, in order to enhance the effectiveness of the mission.

Keywords

popular missions – *Spiritual Exercises* – retreat houses – moral images (*images morales*) – Brittany-Vannes – Vincent Huby, SJ – Catherine de Francheville – semi-religious women

Introduction. A New Kind of Mission

In the mid-1660s, the Breton city of Vannes saw a new kind of religious behavior take root, in the form of the Spiritual Exercises. Members of the laity,

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as well as secular and regular priests, gathered together in purpose-built houses, able to accommodate over one hundred people, in order to practice the devotional program pioneered by Ignatius of Loyola. The unprecedented nature of this development is evident in the diversity of those undertaking the Exercises, in terms of social status and state of life (married or unmarried, lay or clerical); the creation of a temporary community, cut off from the outside world; and the mobilization of new missionary tools, such as the “moral images,” developed in the context of Breton itinerant missions. An even more astonishing innovation was the creation of two houses: one for men and another for women. The former, opening its doors in 1663, was directly tied to the Society of Jesus, which supplied its directors, the first being Vincent Huby (1608–1693). The second was established in 1665, thanks to the devoted commitment of a wealthy aristocrat, Catherine de Francheville (1620–1689), who from her youth had received spiritual direction from the Jesuits. Catherine was supported in her actions by a small group of “demoiselles”—semi-religious women—living in community. In the first ten years of its existence, this second house changed locations and status several times before settling in Saint-Salomon House in Vannes in 1674, thanks to the support of the bishop, city leaders, influential members of Brittany’s Parlement, and the region’s Jesuits. Due to the opposition of the Society’s hierarchy in Rome, the order’s support for the female house was of necessity discreet and unofficial, but continued until the century’s end.¹

Recent contributions to the early modern history of the Society of Jesus have rejected the idea of a monolithic Jesuit identity, pointing instead to the multiplicity of practices—reflecting local conditions—promoted by the Society. This variety of experiences was nevertheless united by a common missionary attitude founded on both accommodation and the acceptance of the papacy’s priorities.² The analysis of missionary and pastoral practices offers a

1 Concerning these two institutions, the most important works, based on abundant edited and non-edited sources, are: Ignacio Iparraguirre, *Historia de los Ejercicios espirituales de San Ignacio. 3. Evolucion en Europa durante el siglo XVII* (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 1973), 20–44; Gabriel Théry, *Contribution à l'histoire religieuse de la Bretagne au XVII^e siècle. Catherine de Francheville, fondatrice à Vannes de la première Maison de Retraites de Femmes*, 2 vols. (Tours: Imprimerie Mame, 1957); Anne Sauvy, *Le miroir du coeur. Quatre siècles d'images savantes et populaires* (Paris: Cerf, 1989); on the essential role of the city authorities in the retreat initiative, see Marion Thouvenin, “Catherine de Francheville” in *Dictionnaire des femmes de l'ancienne France* (http://www.siefar.org/dictionnaire/fr/Catherine_de_Francheville, consulted 2/10/2014).

2 Luke Clossey, *Salvation and Globalization in the Early Jesuit Missions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Silvia Mostaccio, “A Conscious Ambiguity: Jesuits and Early

key not only to the Society's *raison d'être*, but also to the role of gender within it. Among the most fruitful directions for research on gender, we find, on the one hand, an alertness to the role of discourses about women in the construction of 'the female;' on the other, the need to reexamine historical phenomena from a gendered perspective.³ The latter approach has permitted new understandings of Jesuit missions outside Europe: a history of interaction between men and women, told from the perspective of both missionaries and missionized.⁴

The broader aim of this article is to show how, within the context of the missions in Brittany, one of the central practices of Jesuit identity—the Spiritual Exercises—was transformed into a “missionary tool,” adapted from the outset for a public of both men and women. The need to address this ‘double public’ conditioned the project itself, as well as the instruments used to further it. In particular, Huby and Francheville were at the center of an exclusively Bretonne network that was capable of far-reaching innovation in pastoral practices, but also aware of its own limitations, including the scope of action open to the Jesuit missionary and the devout woman.

It is certainly true that seventeenth-century Brittany was not the first place the Jesuits were forced to take stock of the limitations maleness imposed on their ministry. However, the Breton context saw the evolution of distinctive ways of negotiating these limitations as they related to the female public. While those governing the Society from Rome might have wished to ignore the female half of local populations, the missionaries targeted women through the establishment of gender-segregated houses for the Spiritual Exercises. In this context, the *dévotes*, too, had to rethink the boundaries of their behavior: from

Modernity According to Some Recent Publications,” *Journal of Early Modern History*, 12 (2008): 409–41; Anne-Sophie Gallo, “Réflexions et jalons pour une histoire de l’identité jésuite pendant la suppression de la Compagnie de Jésus (1762–1814),” *Europa moderna*, 3 (2012): 108–11.

3 Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge, “Women as Historical Actors,” in *A History of Women in the West*, vol. 3, *Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes*, ed. Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 2; Laura Lee Downs, *Writing Gender History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).

4 For an overview of recent historiographical perspectives on the Jesuits, women and missions in modern times: Sabina Pavone, “Une histoire de longue durée. Le modèle ignatien par les hommes et par les femmes,” in *Echelles de pouvoir, rapports de genre. Femmes, jésuites et modèle ignatien dans le long XIX^e siècle*, ed. Silvia Mostaccio et al. (Louvain-la-Neuve: Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2014), 3–13; Simon Ditchfield, “Decentering the Catholic Reformation. Papacy and Peoples in the Early Modern World,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, 101 (2010): 186–208.

being the aristocratic patrons who financed the missionaries, they took on prominent roles in directing the female retreat house and attending to the spiritual needs of the exercitants. Here we see Jesuit missionaries and devout women negotiating gendered identities at the levels of the individual, the local religious and civic community, and the central governance of the Society. The last was radically opposed to the establishment of a female house and favored the same approach—houses for the collective practice of the Spiritual Exercises—for both men and women. The institutional story of the houses of retreat is too complex to be treated exhaustively in an article. It is enough to emphasize here how, on the periphery of Catholic Europe, the missionary context favored experimentation, leading to the development of gender-specific methods.

In relation to this, particular emphasis will be placed on the “moral images” used in the retreat houses. These painted placards were central to pastoral work in Brittany well before the arrival of the Jesuits. In the final section of this article, these images will be examined as a conscious mirror of a gendered pastoral strategy, one which emphasized both the necessity of using the same means—the Spiritual Exercises—for men and women and their adaptation to the specific needs of each sex. Such specificity inevitably reflected the beliefs and prejudices of the age that produced it and was therefore creative of shared models of identity.

Context: Expanding Devotion in the French Brittany

One of the earliest sources providing detailed information on the organization of this new form of mission is Huby's book, published in 1678 and dedicated to “La Retraite de Vennes.”⁵ In terms of scheduling, there was no major difference between the retreats of men and women; the programming of retreat weeks

5 [Vincent Huby], *La Retraite de Vennes ou la façon dont la retraite des hommes se fait dans Vennes, sous la conduite des pères jésuites, et les grands biens que Dieu opère par elle* (Vennes: Jean Galles, 1678). In the context of this work, I refer to the integral copy of the text, established during the proceedings with a view to the canonization of Catherine de Francheville at the end of the nineteenth century: Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Archivum Congregationis Rituum, Processus, Catherine de Francheville, nn. 6407–6412 [henceforth *Processus*]; particularly n. 6407, *Catharina de Francheville. Processus ordinarius Venetensis super fama*, n. 2, 461–521. All citations refer to this dossier. It should be noted that Huby's text ends with a chapter expressly dedicated to the women's retreats: “La retraite des femmes et filles dans la même Ville et les grands biens qu'elle fait,” 497–512. For a detailed presentation of the functioning of women's retreats, see Thret, “Fontionnement des retraites,” in *Contribution à*

was coordinated between the two houses, facilitating the participation of couples or families. Those wishing to make a retreat presented themselves without pre-registration on Tuesday mornings, a calendar of retreats having been distributed in the parishes and neighboring dioceses several months in advance. The retreats took place from Tuesday until the following Wednesday, according to the organization of time envisaged by Ignatius for practicing the Spiritual Exercises. Each retreat was, however, modified as necessary to meet the needs of large, heterogeneous groups, especially as regards the three moments of personal prayer stipulated by Ignatius. The day started at 5:30, with a prayer and an hour of group exhortation in the chapel, guided by a priest, followed by mass and breakfast. The rest of the morning included various activities depending on the exercitant's level: reflection and solitary prayer for those capable of it, and small exercises of guided devotion—such as listening to pious readings and praying the rosary—for the less advanced. After the midday meal everyone gathered in the common room for commentary on one or two of the 'moral images': this was conducted by a priest for men and a *demoiselle* for women. "Using these placards is extremely helpful," Huby underlined, because "they make the verities we want to make known more sensible and the impression is that much stronger and more easily made than if they only heard it. Everyone is quite gratified, the *savants* as well as the ignorant."⁶ Group adoration of the Blessed Sacrament was followed by a period of solitary meditation, often accompanied by individual discussion with a father or a *demoiselle*. After a second exhortation for everyone in the chapel, the exercitants were divided according to their state of life and position in society to attend a conference dealing with their particular needs, or to spend a moment in solitude. A conference consisted of a lecture given by the priest, followed by questions from the attendees. After supper, everyone gathered in the chapel for evening prayers, as well as to listen to a meditation on the mysteries of Christ's passion by a Jesuit or a *demoiselle*, hidden in the dark, using an 'oiled picture' (a drawing on paper, dipped in oil and made translucent) illuminated by candlelight from behind.⁷ I will come back to this sort of "composition of place" in the third part of this article. The day ended with a penitential devotion, in which the exercitants were encouraged to identify with Christ's suffering for the sins of men and women. This liminal experience between vigil and the night's rest

l'histoire religieuse, 2:178–96; Jean Quénart, "La 'retraite de Vannes' à la fin du xvii^e siècle," *Revue d'Histoire des Religions* 217, no. 3 (2000): 547–61.

6 Huby, *La Retraite*, 482.

7 Huby, *La Retraite*, 480. Referring to Tuesday evenings, Huby insists on the exercitants' fascination at "finding a transparent image of our Lord at prayer" in the Garden of Olives.

brought each day, spent in a succession of individual and collective exercises, to a unified end: "It is this quantity and variety of exhortations, discussions, explanations, pictures, expositions of images, readings, prayers and other things I have spoken of, and which are done in common, which we see as such a powerful means for gaining souls for God."⁸

The retreat house experience should thus be understood as a missionary undertaking, having as its explicit goal that of increasing "the desire for conversion" in men as well as women, the latter perceived as "being more inclined to devotion than are men."⁹ Huby's attitude was echoed by Francheville, who described the purpose of the venture as being "for the conversion of souls and their advancement."¹⁰

In 1698, in Nantes, the Jesuit Pierre Champion published a collection of lives of the three founders of the Vannes retreat houses: Huby, Francheville, and Monsieur de Kerlivio, a secular priest of the diocese of Vannes, vicar general of Charles de Rosmadec, the first bishop to encourage the houses, and an essential protagonist in the project's success.¹¹ This triple hagiography confirms the impression of a Breton specificity, which should be taken into account, while the mobilization of the Spiritual Exercises in the late seventeenth century was of course particular to the Society of Jesus. It is impossible to venture an interpretation of the retreat houses without discussing these Breton and Jesuit contexts. Let us start with the actors in what Jean Delumeau has called the "titanic effort of religious acculturation" that followed the confessionalization of Europe, by underlining certain practices typical of Brittany.¹²

Since the second half of the sixteenth century, this region of deeply-rooted traditions and a hard, seafaring lifestyle moved several missionaries to seek a true christianization on the same level as that of certain isolated areas of the Iberian peninsula, the islands of Corsica and Sardinia, and the mountainous regions of Southern Italy or the Alps.¹³ Among the initiators of this Catholic conquest we find the well-known secular priest Michel Le Nobletz (1577–1652).

8 Ibid., 512.

9 Ibid., 498.

10 *Acte de fondation de la Retraite de Vannes*, 1675, in *Processus*, n. 6407, 527–31.

11 Pierre Champion, *La vie des fondateurs des Maisons de Retraite, monsieur De Kerlivio, le père Vincent Huby de la Compagnie de Jésus, et Mademoiselle De Francheville* (Nantes: Jacques Mareschal, 1698).

12 Jean Delumeau, "Prescription and Reality," in *Conscience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Edmund Leites, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 134–58, especially 143–50.

13 *Missions religieuses modernes. "Notre lieu est le monde,"* ed. Pierre-Antoine Fabre and Bernard Vincent (Rome: Ecole Française de Rome, 2007), 229–391.

Trained in the school run by Pierre Coton, S.J., Le Nobletz dedicated himself to itinerant missionary activity in Lower Brittany, making the port of Douarnenez his point of departure, as well as a base for organizing a team of lay men and women to support his work among their fellow-citizens.¹⁴ Particularly interesting is his collaborative relationships with women, especially those who lived and worked on the local farms, whose confidence he was determined to win. He recruited such women both as catechists and as designers and users of his celebrated “painted placards,” inspired by those deployed as visual aids in Capuchin itinerant preaching as. Painted on rawhide, Michel Le Nobletz’s *Taolennou* were produced by Bretons, such as Alain Lestobec and Françoise Troadec, skilled in the fabrication of sea charts.¹⁵ Here the path to heaven took the place of maritime routes, via images narrating and illustrating both everyday life and the struggle between good and evil, truths of the Catholic faith and the sacraments.¹⁶ Through these images, Le Nobletz nourished in his listeners’ a need to identify with the concrete and spiritual realities depicted. Society as a whole was depicted with remarkable realism and a particular insistence on the violence and abuses of daily life.¹⁷ Thus the approach was to encourage identification, *via* the depiction of everyday hardships, with the ultimate aim of moral and religious acculturation.

Throughout his approximately twenty years of activity, Le Nobletz cherished his contacts with certain Jesuits, one of whom he selected as his spiritual successor in the mission: Father Julien Maunoir (1606–1652). With Maunoir and his collaborators, the mission entered a more systematic phase, reaching a much wider population.¹⁸ In particular, Maunoir was able to systematize two elements present in germinal form during the Le Nobletz period: the involvement of women and the creation of heterogeneous missionary teams. Maunoir did not content himself with the generous support of certain ladies. He was conscious of the exemplary role that women catechists, illiterate but full of

14 On Le Nobletz and the context of his activity, see Fañch Roudaut, Alain Croix, and Fañch Broudic, *Les chemins du Paradis* (Douarnenez: Le Chasse-Marée-Éditions de l'Estran, 1988), 17–44; Sauvy, *Le miroir du coeur*, 65–93; Dominique Deslandres, *Croire et faire croire. Les missions françaises au XVII^e siècle*, (Paris: Fayard, 2003), 130–40; François Trémolieres, “L’enseignement par l’image de Michel Le Nobletz,” in *Emblemata sacra. Rhétorique et herméneutique du discours sacré dans la littérature en images*, ed. Ralph Dekoninck and Agnès Guiderdoni (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 553–68.

15 Sauvy, *Le miroir du coeur*, 72–75.

16 For a complete presentation of these images, accompanied by beautiful reproductions, see Roudaut, Croix, and Broudic, *Les chemins du Paradis*, 45–74.

17 Cfr. “Une société au complet,” in *Les chemins du Paradis*, 45–55.

18 On Maunoir, see Deslandres, *Croire et faire croire*, 159–71.

enthusiasm, could play in dealing with the simple people he addressed. It was this aspect that he underlined concerning a woman who had been among his stalwarts for twenty years: "Even the most prominent people invite her to educate their entourage. But above all the peasants are attracted to her: mothers and girls gather to receive her teaching, all the while seeing to some task or other."¹⁹ Maunoir also knew how to take advantage of the mystical gifts and spiritual qualities of some of his followers in difficult cases of the discernment of spirits.²⁰

Besides this mobilization of female resources, during his itinerant missions Maunoir also set up missionary teams of his confrères, as well as of secular priests, who shared his missionary spirit, but were in need of serious training. The mission thus became a two-pronged enterprise aimed at the local people and their clergy. Throughout the mission (about a month long), the clergy attended conferences given by missionaries, where they could question Maunoir and other Jesuits on thorny aspects of their evangelical activity.²¹ This is a practice that we find again, as we have seen, in the retreat houses for men, with afternoon conferences reserved for the clergy.

Behind this desire to bring to bear locally the Catholic resources of the region, there was a wider initiative that was soon to make itself felt. This involved a Catholic reconquest fashioned by men like François de Sales (1567–1622) and, later, Vincent de Paul (1576–1660), a project mobilizing people from all walks of life and gradually giving the poor a new role.²² This context must also be kept in mind in studying and interpreting the missions by the French Jesuits.²³ As regards de Sales, Deslandres refers to a plan of "socio-religious integration," aimed at an in-depth Catholicization and requiring the Catholic laity's involvement at the levels of administration, politics, the military and, of course, the "devout life," leading to sanctity for all.²⁴ This is the perspective

19 Cited in *ibid.*, 162.

20 *Ibid.*, 162–63.

21 *Ibid.*, 163–66.

22 Besides Deslandres, see Alison Forrestal, "Vincent de Paul: The Making of a Catholic *Dévo*t," in *Politics and Religion in Early Bourbon France*, ed. Alison Forrestal and Eric Nelson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 180–201.

23 On the particularity of the Jesuits in France, see Eric Nelson, *The Jesuits and the Monarchy. Catholic Reform and Political Authority in France (1590–1615)* (Aldershot-Rome: Ashgate-Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 2005).

24 Deslandres, *Croire et faire croire*, 118–29, in particular 119. On sanctity for everyone, see Paola Vismara, "Il cattolicesimo dalla 'riforma cattolica' all'assolutismo illuminato," in *Storia del cristianesimo. Letà moderna*, ed. Giovanni Filoramo (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1997), 153–238, in particular 206–24.

within which we should understand “the concerted action with regards to women” so characteristic of de Sales.²⁵ The campaign involved both women religious—we need only think of Jeanne de Chantal and her Sisters of the Visitation—and laywomen. What is interesting is that de Sales did not limit himself to a practical collaboration, but managed to elaborate, foster and disseminate a new status for a female apostolate via his writings. In addressing the Visitation sisters, he specified that God “renders you ‘*apôtresses*’ [female apostles], not in the dignity, but in the office and merit.” Hence women are recognized as “capable of apostolic office,” a position, species François, not at all comparable with the dignity afforded to male roles—the priesthood in particular—but which is real and notably manifests in the capacity to set the right example.²⁶

Aside from these gradually developing ideas about the role of women in social and religious life, we should also keep in mind a new attitude towards the poor that developed in France a few years later. Thanks, among other things, to the reflection and action of a powerful and visionary man like Vincent de Paul, the poor increasingly became both the objects and the agents of dedicated missions requiring specialized tools. This new approach was especially relevant in impoverished regions like Brittany. Monsieur de Kerlivio, co-founder of the retreat houses with Huby and Francheville, is a very good example. For it was an encounter with Vincent de Paul that changed the priorities of this brilliant youth, apparently destined for a worldly career. After ordination and a few years of theological study at the Sorbonne, Kerlivio returned to his native Hennebont to exercise the function of chaplain and confessor in the hospital there, alongside the Sisters of Charity. There he discovered a more unusual class of the poor: Irish Catholic refugees fleeing Cromwell’s persecutions, who were particularly badly treated by the local population.²⁷

But all the elements discussed so far would not be enough to explain the retreat houses if we ignored the role of the Spiritual Exercises in the evolution of the Society of Jesus in this period. Here we find the missing link in existing studies of the Breton houses. In his analysis of the Exercises, which remains a standard reference, Ignacio Iparraguirre underlines how, from the late sixteenth century, the Exercises were mobilized by the Society above all as a tool

25 Deslandres, *Croire et faire croire*, 120.

26 Linda Timmermans, *L'accès des femmes à la culture (1598–1715). Un débat d'idées de saint François de Sales à la Marquise de Lambert*, (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1993), in particular 529–55, here 534.

27 Théry, *Contribution à l'histoire religieuse*, 1:297–317; on Kerlivio, 1:297–308.

for learning how to pray.²⁸ Indeed, it is with that precise goal in mind that they were given to those outside the Society. While mistrust of mystics increased during this period, the Jesuits adopted a more affective attitude towards God, and in particular towards Christ's time on earth.²⁹ In this context, the Gospels became the historical basis for meditation.³⁰ Through Ignatian composition of place, an individual praying with the *Exercises* located themselves within a specific episode in the life of Jesus and trained themselves to become aware of inner movements vis-à-vis what was happening. By this means, the exercitant sought love and a desire to imitate Christ; hence, a change of attitude in everyday life. This is what is called "conversion." This affective contemplation finds its legitimation in the *Directory* of the *Spiritual Exercises*, approved in 1599, which opened the way towards the so-called 'mystical invasion' of the seventeenth century.³¹ The Exercises could then be accompanied by other prayer practices, such as the *oraison cordiale* (cordial prayer), familiar to many in France in the latter half of the century, including Catherine de Francheville and Vincent Huby.³² Moreover, from the 1630s, the *Exercises* became increasingly popular in monasteries and religious and semi-religious houses.³³ Among female orders, the Ursulines were joined by the English Ladies of Mary Ward and the Sisters of Notre Dame, founded by Jeanne de Lestonnac in Bordeaux. Requests from female congregations became more frequent and interactions between Jesuits and "Ignatians" so habitual that even the Roman authorities acquiesced to Jesuits entering convents and monasteries to direct the Exercises. However, during this phase, the generals' practice was to grant permission for one occasion only. Consequently, several community superiors began to give the Exercises to their sisters themselves on a yearly basis, a practice common among Breton Ursulines.³⁴ Given the influence of interior missions and the

28 Iparraguirre, *Historia*, 3–43.

29 Philip Endean, "'The strange style of prayer': Mercurian, Cordeses, and Alvarez," in *The Mercurian Project. Forming Jesuit Culture (1573–1580)*, ed. Thomas McCoog (Rome-St. Louis: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu-Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2004), 351–97.

30 A primordial role in this movement belongs to Jerónimo Nadal and to his *Adnotationes et meditationes in Evangelia*, well known in Northern Europe. See Walter S. Melion, *The Meditative Art. Studies in the Northern Devotional Print 1550–1625* (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 2009), especially 1–35.

31 Iparraguirre, *Historia*, 432–61 and 495–534. For the Directory text, see *Directoria Exercitiorum spiritualium (1540–1599)*, ed. Ignatius Iparraguirre (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 1955).

32 Sauvy, *Le miroir du coeur*, 109–28.

33 Iparraguirre, *Historia*, 519–39.

34 *Ibid.*, 526–30.

intra muros practice, the Exercises were soon being practiced by women of every age and condition. Meditations on the life of Jesus were central: this was stressed in connection with Catherine de Francheville's retreat house in 1685 by a Milanese Jesuit, Carlo Gregorio Rosignoli, who was heavily involved in propagating the Exercises and images that awakened the *affectus* of man:

I will just add that there is a chapel in the salon and that in the gallery we find fifteen well executed placards representing the Mysteries of the Redeemer's life and Passion. They [those on retreat] go up to them in pilgrimage, as if they were Stations, two by two. They visit two of them a day: one in the morning and the other in the evening, stopping to hear a pious reflection and fervent discourse for each Mystery.³⁵

The Retreat House: a Missionary Tool Designed for and by Women

In the last pages of the *Vie* which he devotes to Catherine de Francheville, Pierre Champion relates the events surrounding her death in Vannes on 23 March 1689.³⁶ As Champion describes it, the entire community was united around Catherine's body, exposed in the retreat house chapel. The city's inhabitants were joined by several bishops from neighboring dioceses, as well as by Jesuits, who obtained Catherine's heart with a view to preserving it in the college chapel (built through her patronage). Among the laity, we find Monsieur d'Argouges, first president of the Parlement of Brittany during its transfer from Rennes to Vannes in 1675, and his wife.³⁷ Champion insists that it was above all thanks to the support of Madame d'Argouges that the women's retreat house could be permanently established in Vannes. She personally participated in the retreats, giving them legitimacy and working for the creation of a similar house in Paris under the direction of Madame de Miramion.³⁸ Champion's insistence does not seem to stem from the fact that the *Vie* was commissioned by the bishop of Vannes, François d'Argouges (the president's son).³⁹ It is rather

35 Carlo Gregorio Rosignoli, *Notizie memorabili degli Esercizi Spirituali* (Milan: Federico Agnelli, 1685), 160.

36 Pierre Champion, *La vie des Fondateurs*, 245–398, in particular 393–98.

37 Alain Croix, *Le Parlement de Bretagne, histoire et symboles* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1994).

38 Champion, *La vie des Fondateurs*, 395–96.

39 Cfr. Champion, *La vie des Fondateurs*; see dedicatory letter to Monseigneur François d'Argouges.

a matter of underlining the local character of the retreat houses supported by Catherine.

Indeed, on the Jesuit side, too, this project has a “Breton feel” to it; a thread connects its creators, particularly Fathers Adrien Daran and Vincent Huby, to those who continued and told the story, de la Piltière and Pierre Champion. All were connected in various ways to the Breton missions. Father Daran began his journey among the Hurons of North America, beside his confrères Lallemant and Brebeuf, and completed it in Vannes. Huby, his studies finished, never left his native Brittany again, focusing on providing his mission with all the tools he deemed necessary: devotional objects such as small medals, statues of the Virgin Mary, religious images, and retreat houses with books to accompany the devout during and after the Exercises.⁴⁰ Supported by secular priests like Monsieur de Kerlivio, in early 1660 the Jesuits envisaged the creation of a seminary in Vannes. Modeled on the practices of Father Maunoir, it would have been a place of training for young men aspiring to the priesthood and for local clergy who wanted to help the missions.⁴¹ Since the synod in Vannes in 1663 refused to entrust management of the diocesan seminar to the Jesuits, Vicar General Kerlivio envisaged offering the Society the building that would have accommodated the seminary as a retreat house for men. In July of that same year, the Society’s General Oliva approved the house’s foundation: the result of missionary adaptation to the local context. Nor should we be surprised by the involvement of women in the new project since, as we have seen, they had been both actors in and objects of missionary work for years. Thus it was that in 1665 Catherine began accommodating women in the small house she rented in Vannes for a week of Exercises directed by her own spiritual guide, Father Daran. From those modest beginnings, the bond between the two institutions, for men and for women, remained very strong, despite the refusal of the Society’s general to accept the Jesuits’ involvement with the women: between 1671 and 1673, the registers of letters sent by the general to the Breton and French authorities testify to this opposition and his contempt for the “*mulierculae*” (little women) from Vannes.⁴² In Vincent Huby’s eyes, the two houses,

40 A thorough discussion of his activity is to be found in Champion, *La vie des Fondateurs* 131–300. See also Théry, *Contribution à l’histoire religieuse*, t. 2, 297–317. For the works of Huby, veritable classics for the Spiritual Exercises of the masses, see Carlos Sommervogel, *Bibliothèque de la Compagnie de Jésus* (12 vols., Brussels-Paris-Louvain: 1890–1960), 4:499–504.

41 Iparraguirre, *Historia*, 20–44. See also Théry, *Contribution à l’histoire religieuse*, 2:297–308.

42 For example: Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, *Gall*, Epist. Gen., 1667–1684; particularly August 11, 1671, cc. 130^v/131^r; 15 Sept. 1671, c. 132^r; 13 Oct. 1671. The General insisted that any Jesuit failing to respect the interdiction would be removed from Vannes. There was no

adapted for men and for women, formed part of one and the same mission, as several documents, written during Huby's life or in the years following his death, testify. Théry lists these in his study of Catherine de Francheville.⁴³ In agreement with Monsieur le Merdy, the chaplain of the Saint-Salomon women's retreat, Huby decided that they would write two parallel works, with le Merdy focusing on the practices of the house for women and Huby recording those activities of the male house. Father de la Piltière inherited the material collected by Huby—whose death prevented him from publishing his work—and completed a manuscript account. Le Merdy's text is unfortunately lost, but La Piltière, who was able to consult it, is categorical: "the greater part of the Spiritual Exercises which are done in the women's retreat [...] are the same as to substance and the order in which they are done as those of the men's retreat."⁴⁴ The profound union between the two initiatives was also reaffirmed by Catherine de Francheville's women companions, who saw their rules adopted by the bishop of Vannes in 1703. The third part of this text insists on the two elements essential to guaranteeing the institution's future: remaining under the bishop's jurisdiction and "preserving a perfect union and correspondence with the men's retreat house."⁴⁵ So much for the earlier attempts by the Jesuit General Curia to prevent such a union.

It should be underlined that this union with the Jesuits—solicited and sustained—did not prevent Catherine and her *demoiselles* from developing an awareness of the consequences of being women, for themselves and for the exercitants they directed. This obviously did not involve a theoretical discourse—no writing of any kind by Catherine has come down to us, for that matter—but rather practices that fashioned an individual and group identity. The creation of images diversified for men and for women, to be used in the retreat context, only illustrates the desire to reach women in their alterity. In Catherine's case, moreover, difference was also asserted with regard to the exclusively-male Society of Jesus. Catherine supported the Jesuits and collaborated with them, but did not want to be a "jesuitess." Her intention was to contribute to a Jesuit missionary project addressed to both men and women and

question of following the example of Vincent Huby and helping these women gather funds for the construction of the house, or of directing the exercises which would follow. See also Théry, *Contribution à l'histoire religieuse*, 1:322–28.

43 Théry, *Contribution à l'histoire religieuse*, 2:335–49.

44 Ibid., 2:337.

45 *Reglemens de la Communauté des Filles de la Sainte Vierge pour les Retraites de leur sexe; établie dans la Ville de Vannes* (Vannes: Jacques de Heuqueville, 1703), in *Processus*, 567–641, in particular 624.

requiring a range of actors. The rather hasty choice to rely on the bishop in recognizing his jurisdiction over the house accords with this interpretation.

The Catherine presented by Champion's *Vie* hesitates between two models of collaboration with the Jesuits: a desire for direct action seems gradually to superimpose itself on the classical form of female patronage, a desire rendered concrete in the house for women. From 1663 on, when the house for men opened its doors under Vincent Huby's direction, Catherine began financing retreats for the most downtrodden. At the same time she continued to welcome women directed by Adrian Daran into her small house: she saw to the practical organization while the Jesuit attended to matters spiritual. It was "the great fruits" that the house for men harvested that "made her wish [*désir*] for a similar establishment for women."⁴⁶ Thus Catherine had to manage at once both her *désir*—an important word in the process of listening to inner movements—and the distrust of a part of the local clergy towards this "innovation." Supported by Bishop Charles Rosmadec and by his vicar, Kerlivio, she decided to finance the construction of a house in the garden of the Ursulines of Vannes, which would seem to guarantee the new mission's orthodoxy. What is interesting is that, motivated by a sort of missionary urgency (though Champion does not use these terms), Catherine obtained permission to use the period of construction for organizing retreats in her country house—some forty women at a time—as well as in several neighboring dioceses: the practice of itinerant missions seems to have found a new formula here, yet always under the Jesuits' spiritual direction. In Quilo, an inland parish, the missionary team "recognized that the farmers were just as capable of retreats as the bourgeois women & ladies of quality."⁴⁷ This social heterogeneity, which Huby tried to maintain for the men as well, became a characteristic of the women's houses and is also found in the rules for recruiting *demoiselles*.⁴⁸ After the short season with the Ursulines (1672), who reneged on their support for the project under pressure from the new bishop, Louis Cazet de Vautorte, a new solution was found: a house to be built at Catherine's expense for the women's Spiritual Exercises, with Kerlivio as superior (1674).⁴⁹ With Kerlivio's presence, episcopal support thenceforth took the form of a diocesan initiative, while the Jesuits, prevented by Roman prohibitions and mistrust on the part of some of the local clergy, could only offer informal support. Catherine was only able finally to

46 Champion, *La vie des Fondateurs*, 365.

47 Ibid., 370.

48 As for men, see Quéniart, "La Retraite," in particular 551–53.

49 Letter of Kerlivio to his cousin, Mademoiselle de Kerdeff, a collaborator of Catherine. See Théry, *Contribution à l'histoire religieuse*, 2:375.

assume the role of directress of retreats in the new Saint-Salomon house, which could accommodate up to four hundred women at a time. What induced her to abandon her discreet role as patroness and to adopt a more proactive attitude was the arrival of another woman, with mystical gifts, who spent almost a year at Saint-Salomon (1674) and formally assumed the directorship and supported Catherine: Madame du Houx (1616–1677).⁵⁰ Catherine's financing and logistical support was now accompanied by a torrent of words. Champion summarizes information on Catherine that may also be found in other sources: "Over the course of the retreat, she saw to all the pious ceremonies practiced there, & certain instructions & lectures that were dispensed there; so that she spoke almost three hours every day." Furthermore: "Several people acknowledged that her familiar talks and exhortations touched them more than the sermons of the most skillful preachers."⁵¹ Thus Catherine made her mark: she reached women through familiarity and an affective attitude, as had so many catechists in the itinerant missions before her. She moreover sought out that same approach among the retreat directors she recruited to preach twice a day in the chapel and confess the women: often Carmelites, like Fulgence de Sainte Barbe, who did not humiliate the country women for their "coarseness and repetitiveness."⁵² Catherine was also confirmed in her choices through her readings. Théry has identified seven books containing her autograph of ownership: a coherent ensemble of Jesuit authors and reformed Carmelites, as well as a text that was truly a best seller of the moment, *Le Chrestien intérieur* by Jean de Bernières (1602–1659).⁵³ Written by a layman who had been a member of the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement, this book encouraged the quest for an inner uniformity with Christ through the affective and mystical path.⁵⁴ This was the same path that we find in the moral images invented by Vincent Huby and commented on by Catherine and her *demoiselles* during retreats. To accomplish her mission, Catherine opted for a small community of young girls or widows, whom she chose personally and who

50 Henri Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France depuis la fin des guerres de religion jusqu'à nos jours*, vol. 5, *La conquête mystique* (Paris: Bloud et Gay éditeurs, 1920); on Mme du Houx, *ibid.*, 140–47.

51 Champion, *La vie des Fondateurs*, 379.

52 *Ibid.*, 381.

53 Jean de Bernières Louvigny Escudier, *Le Chrestien intérieur ou la conformité intérieure que doivent avoir les Chrestiens avec Jésus-Christ* (Paris: Claude Cramoisy, 1661). Thirteen editions in twelve years. Cfr. Théry, *Contribution à l'histoire religieuse*, 2:283–86.

54 Alain Tallon, *La Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement, 1629–1667: spiritualité et société* (Paris: Cerf, 1990).

lived together, without vows and under the bishop's jurisdiction.⁵⁵ After the founder's death, the house evolved into a group of semi-religious women taking simple vows. This community's rules were approved by Bishop François d'Argouges in 1703. Dressed simply in black, these women were not selected according to criteria of *qualité*. They should, however, show "talent for speaking in private and in public during retreats," preferably being able to speak Breton, and they must be willing "To work [...] for the salvation of souls by means of retreats."⁵⁶ To be able to accompany others effectively, they should become experts on inner life, able "to know and faithfully follow all the movements of their heart."⁵⁷ The model chosen by these women was that of Mary, the mother of Jesus, after his ascension to heaven. They should act in "proposing for themselves the model of life she led on earth after her Son's ascension, constantly meditating the Law of God in her Retreat, while at the same time striving to instruct the first faithful and support them in the faith."⁵⁸ This is the apostolate by office mentioned earlier in connection with François de Sales.

A Pastoral Activity Gendered by Images

Insisting on Vincent Huby's pastoral creativity, Champion underlines his most innovative missionary contribution:

Fr. Huby's third zealous invention is placards or moral images: of two kinds, ones for the men's retreats & the others for the women's. *Spiritual things are represented there in a perceptible way regarding various states of the soul*, in life, at death; after death; the state of sin, the state of grace, the passage from one to the other of those two states. It is like *a synopsis of all Christian morals*. Experience has shown that nothing is better suited to teaching people than these pictures; and that is why Fr. Huby had prints engraved, which were printed in Paris together with explanations. Missionaries and the other evangelists make fruitful use of them.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ See *Acte de Fondation*, 529.

⁵⁶ *Reglements de la Communauté des Filles de la Sainte Vierge pour les Retraites de leur sexe; établie dans la Ville de Vannes*, in Processus, 567–641, especially 573–74.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 592.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 572.

⁵⁹ Champion, *La vie des fondateurs*, 212. Italics mine. Sauvvy's *Le miroir du coeur* remains the key point of reference on these images.

Huby worked on this corpus of twelve images between 1675 and 1682, adapting various traditions to his priorities; notably Le Nobletz's painted placards and images from *l'Oratoire du cœur*. This little book was a veritable publishing phenomenon from its first French edition in 1670; it proposed a form of affective prayer, based on contemplating the mysteries of the Passion. Those mysteries were illustrated by images framed by a heart, which insisted on the mobilization of the *affectus* and encouraged a more public form of prayer.⁶⁰ Huby designed an innovative synthesis of these various traditions, which offered an iconography of the man's heart and the woman's heart. Each image shows a head, representing appearance, and a large heart, where the great battles between good and evil are fought out. The object of a person's desire determines whether their heart is inhabited by God or the devil. During each retreat, after the noon meal, everybody gathered in the common room to attend an explanation of one or two of these images by a Jesuit, or a *demoiselle* for the women. The arguments dealt with the phases of the spiritual life—and its dangers—based on concrete examples taken from everyday life. The order of presentations varied with the director of Exercises. Those relating to the good and paradise were often presented early in the week; sin, attrition, contrition, penitence, a good death, and paradise, while warnings against slackening, relapse, a bad death and hell were addressed towards the week's end.⁶¹

In his little book on the Vannes retreats, Huby observed that in the women's house, "The placards shown there and explained by one of the demoiselles of the house correspond to those of the men's retreat, but they have women's faces and other things proper to them. They have been printed too and are sold in Paris at Jollain's."⁶² To conclude, I venture beyond Anne Sauvy's analysis, in order to underline the ways these images were adapted to the female context, and thereby shed light on an attitude shared by Huby and Francheville regarding God and men and women.⁶³ Handwritten commentaries in Armenian testify to the global use of these Parisian images, which still have many tales to

60 Sauvy, *Le miroir du cœur*, 109–28.

61 Sauvy, *Le miroir du cœur*, 170. See also Théry, *Contribution à l'histoire religieuse*, 2:203–10.

62 Huby, *Le Retraite de Vannes*, 501.

63 Anne Sauvy was unable to find this series, which she believed lost (*Le miroir du cœur*, 163). I wish to thank Madame Vanessa Selbach, conservateur au département des Estampe of the Bibliothèque nationale, for drawing my attention to the superb complete color series of grand format images for women printed by Jollain in 1697 (Réserve, Re-125-Ft4). Selbach has recently written a note on the image entitled "Miroir d'une âme touché d'attrition," in *Images du Grand Siècle, l'estampe française sous le règne de Louis XIV (1660–1715)*, ed. Louis Marchesano, Peter Fuhring, Rémi Mathis, and Vanessa Selbach (Paris-Los Angeles: BNF-Getty Research Institute, 2015, forthcoming). On Jollain, see "Jollain,

tell. The series will be compared to that for men printed by Gallais and reproduced and commented on by Sauvy.⁶⁴

"God accommodates himself to our natural way of acting and makes use of perceptible things to make us conceive of the spiritual," Huby said in legitimizing his missionary adaptations to the poor and worldly context of the Breton missions.⁶⁵ In order to apply this general principle to the moral images for women, we note—even more than for the men—the desire to multiply the objects of daily life that mirror inner attitudes. The commentary accompanying the image of *La vie mondaine* [figure 1] explains: "the goal of these moral images is to place them before the eyes of those who consider them to be the true state of souls." In this instance, the heart of the *mondaine* woman is inhabited by the devil and beasts representing the capital vices, the bottom of the page presenting a violin, a mirror, various jewels, and articles for hairstyling. The same objects, to which are added playing cards and money, are found in *L'attrition* [figure 2], but here they are moving away from the heart, thenceforth inhabited by the desire to shun its sins and by the guardian angel. Beyond the objects of daily life, what is striking here is the desire to emphasize to the female viewer the need for clerical mediation in striving for salvation. We know that among the claims of scandal raised by the local clergy regarding Catherine and her activities during her short stay near the Ursulines of Vannes was the fact that those women—laywomen, not religious women—were meeting together on their own in order to progress spiritually. The image of *La bonne mort* [figure 3] seems to echo these fears: whereas in the version engraved by Gallais for men, the dying man is alone with his guardian angel, who shows Christ a book with all his good deeds, Jollain's dying woman is represented in a dialogue of eyes with her confessor, quite an old man, who shows the woman a cross.⁶⁶ In the construction of the drawing, the priest is on the diagonal which unites the woman with Christ, who calls to her, "Come beloved of my Father:" by virtue of his office, he interposes himself between the Savior and the woman to the very end. A similar remark might be made for *La persévérance* [figure 4].⁶⁷ Among the tools that support female perseverance, the Eucharist, which requires a priest, is underlined in both the image and the commentary: "when she approaches the divine Eucharist, she adores it with

François-Gérard," in *Dictionnaire des éditeurs d'estampes à Paris sous l'Ancien Régime*, ed. Maxime Préaud et al. (Paris: Promodi, 1987), 177–78.

64 Sauvy, *Le miroir du coeur*, 15–37.

65 Cited by Sauvy from the manuscript of Huby's *Apologie*, *ibid.*, 167.

66 *Ibid.*, 33, fig. 11.

67 For men, *ibid.*, 33, fig. 10.



FIGURE 1 *François-Gérard Jollain, La vie mondaine. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Réserve, Re-125-Ft4.*
COURTESY OF BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE.



FIGURE 2 *François-Gérard Jollain, L'attrition. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Réserve, Re-125-Ft4.*
COURTESY OF BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE.



FIGURE 3 *François-Gérard Jollain, La bone mort. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Réserve, Re-125-Ft4.*
COURTESY OF BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE.



FIGURE 4 *François-Gérard Jollain, La perseverance dans le bien. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Réserve, Re-125-Ft4.*
COURTESY OF BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE.

the angels and receives it with the saints." Tellingly, the Eucharist is absent from the version for men.

Still more striking is the difference in images depicting the happiness of those who meet God. If for the men, as Sauvy underlines, a progressive identification with Christ or the Trinity is staged, for women, there is rather an insistence on the relationship between the truly devout woman and her Lord, who remains Other in regard to her.⁶⁸ This is the case for *Le salut, ou Mirroir d'une ame qui entre dans le ciel* [figure 5], where the guardian angel accompanies the devout woman to paradise to contemplate the Father and Son in conversation in the Holy Spirit's presence. But the distinctiveness of the image is still more evident insofar as a group of women has taken the place of the man in the corresponding image relating to *La ferveur*. Whereas the fervent man is represented as inhabited by the Trinity, for women, "true and false devotion" is dwelt on [figure 6]. Three women are represented, only one of whom is able to ascend to the summit of the "montagne de la dévotion," where "she tastes the delights of eternity in advance." The other two remain chained at the mountain's base because they were unwilling to renounce themselves. On the right, a society lady had nourished the illusion that "some prayers, some communions, some charity done by habit or whim gave her the right to give free rein to her passions." On the left, a false devout woman "is hardly less far from the true path [...] her spirit was in no way mortified and she sought sensible consolations in her piety," her pride fed on the merits of her good deeds.⁶⁹

Thus in these images, devised by a man, the "devout sex," to use Champion's term, encountered her anthropological and existential limits.⁷⁰ It would be interesting to compare this viewpoint with Catherine's, but her commentaries on these images have not come down to us. Herein lies the interest of a missionary project, which from its origins involved men and women with their imagined and real differences.

In his narrative dedicated to the history of "religious sentiment" in France, Henri Bremond reflected at length on "mystic Brittany" ("La Bretagne mystique"). In his view, the religious missions developed in the terrain of a mysticism shared by men and women of all social levels. In this twofold context, mystic and missionary, a veritable "triumph of meditation" flourished, well represented by the houses for the Spiritual Exercises of Vannes.⁷¹ If the

68 See particularly, *ibid.*, *La ferveur*, with Trinitarian inhabitation, fig. 5, 26, and *Le paradis*, fig. 12, 36, and 37 for the explanation.

69 *La montagne de la dévotion*, Ms, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Réserve, Re-125-Ft4.

70 Cfr. Champion, "La Vie de Mademoiselle de Francheville," 385.

71 Bremond, "Jean Rigoleuc et la Bretagne mystique," in *Histoire littéraire*, 5:118–47, in particular 119 and 139.



FIGURE 5 *François-Gérard Jollain, Le salut. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Réserve, Re-125-Ft4.*
COURTESY OF BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE.

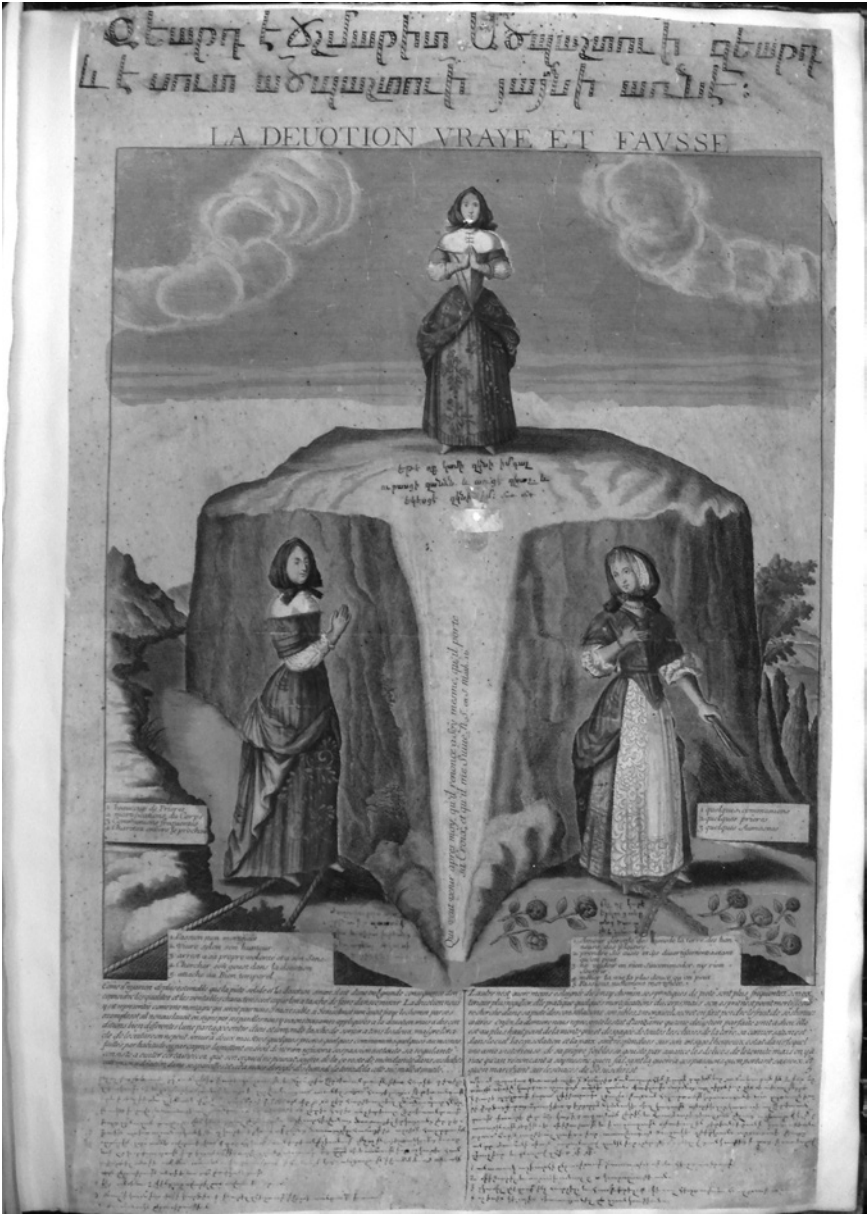


FIGURE 6 *François-Gérard Jollain, La devotion vraie et fausse. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Réserve, Re-125-Ft4.*
COURTESY OF BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE.

interests of researchers today are much more often turned to religious practices than religious sentiments, the specificity of a country like the Brittany of the Ancien Régime remains pertinent. At the same time, the ongoing study of the pastoral involvement of women in a regional missionary project finds its echo in the missionary experiences of other lands, still further from Rome and its univocal models. This is notably the case regarding the involvement of women in Japanese missions of the seventeenth century, which Haruko Nawata Ward does not hesitate to describe as “a global phenomenon:” further proof of the interest of a project of the comparative—and gendered—history of missionary spaces.⁷²

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⁷² Haruko Nawata Ward, *Women Religious Leaders in Japan's Christian Century, 1549–1650* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).