Taking the Veil: Clothing and the Transformation of Identity

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I spoke my name in religion.
He asked me for my family name as well. . . .
I spoke it out loud without shame because
In such an encounter,
Speaking our name,
When I want to renounce it for Him,
Is like speaking the name of God. ¹

Most female monastic rules include a description of a ceremony for taking the veil: "Receiving the Habit," "Offering the Habit," "Ceremony for Veiling and Profession" – the variety of descriptions emphasizes the solemnity of a celebration in which postulants enter into a new estate. This essay analyzes both the symbolic and material aspects of this moment in which identity is transformed. Taking the veil is a rite of passage whose every aspect, including both gesture and speech, has been carefully formalized. This essay focuses first on the ceremony's script, in which clothing draws together the postulant, her family and friends, and the monastic community that welcomes her. I then turn to an analysis of the transformation of the novice's identity, examining both how the performance of the ordinary acts of monastic life

reveals this new identity and how the nun inhabits this doubled personality.

The traditional ceremony has origins dating back to the beginning of monastic institutions, but it assumed its present form during the Counter Reformation. Vatican II sought to return religious life to the simplicity of early monasticism, but the Tridentine ceremony of taking the veil remains in use in some communities. Using the methods of historical anthropology, this essay analyzes a set of practices that have existed since the fifteenth century by bringing together archival material and ethnographic interviews with nuns who have undergone this process of identity transformation. Both national and departmental archives contain materials pertaining to regular clergy, particularly lists of women who joined religious orders (registres de vêtue) dating to the eighteenth century. The French Revolution's attack on regular clergy and the religious reconciliation of the Consulate and the Empire both generated vast quantities of documentation currently in the National Archives. Private collections have also contributed to this analysis.

The drama of the veil

After a probationary period of a few months during which both the postulant and the monastic community assess her vocation, the assembly of nuns decides whether or not to receive her. If the vote is favorable, the community sets a date for the ceremony. The ritual for this ceremony has not fundamentally changed since the early modern period; whether recorded in manuscript or printed form, the script organizes the postulant's acceptance of the veil down to the last detail. The ritual emphasizes the ceremony's immutability: posture, gestures, words, songs, and prayers all follow a strict and unchanging order. The
highly scripted ritual seeks both to represent and to affirm the cohesion of the group, whose very existence is guaranteed by the unchanging nature of its practices. 

The postulant goes into retreat several days before taking the veil. After her last visit to the world outside the convent, she returns to the community and dedicates her last days as a laywoman to meditating on her spiritual future. At the same time, the convent begins its preparations: the mother superior sends invitations to the postulant's family and to the convent's friends and benefactors. She consults with the bursar and cook about the meal following the ceremony. The mistress of robes completes the new habit, sometimes having the postulant try it on, and she counts out the pins that will attach the veil. Josette, a sister of Saint-Joseph, recounted her own experience of the ceremony: her aunt, the convent's mistress of novices, encouraged her to let her mother see her trying on the new habit. She recalled,

My aunt helped me because at first it was complicated. I went down to the room where my mother was waiting for me. She looked at me without saying anything and pointed at the mirror. I went to it, and when I saw myself all in black I broke down in tears and then I went back up to my room.

The actual ceremony of taking the veil involves a ritual that Vatican II did little to change and that remained intact in many orders through to the last decades of the twentieth

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2 See, for instance, the exquisite eighteenth-century manuscript for the "Cérémoniale de vêture des Religieuses de Sainte-Elisabeth," Archives Nationales [hereafter AN] LL 1678.

3 Some orders, especially in the nineteenth century, refused to hold ceremonial meals that would mark the day of the ceremony as different from any other day.

The sisters set the scene for the ceremony; for instance, the sacristan places to the left of the altar a little Table covered in a white cloth, on which lies the habit of a tertiary with a stoup of holy water and an aspergillum. . . . On the day for offering the veil . . . early in the morning the Sacristans will begin adorning the altar as for a solemn feast; they will also prepare a prie-dieu and a carpet in the middle of the chapel and a candlestick with a one-pound candle next to it.

The postulants' reception may be individual or collective. During the Old Regime individual ceremonies seem to have been most common; thus, in 1737 the convent of Notre Dame de Carentan in Normandy received five postulants in separate ceremonies between July and December. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, collective reception was more common, probably because of the large numbers of vocations. In 1943, for instance, on the congregation's centenary, the Dominican sisters of Gramond in the Aveyron received twelve novices in a single grand ceremony that older sisters still remember vividly. Families also take part in the celebration. Josette, for example, remembers her father escorting her to the altar to take the veil in August 1953 at Villecomtal, a village near Rodez: "There were four of us [taking the veil], and I will always remember it because it was so painful; I went

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into the church in a bridal gown and came out all in black."\(^7\)

Although bridal gowns have mostly disappeared, the marital symbolism remains intact.\(^8\) Formerly, ceremonies emphasized the postulant's renunciation of the world. They began with the joyous trappings of a wedding, as in May 1623 when "Anne Le Roux . . . as a bride accompanied by her parents, was led by violins from the home of M le chastelain to Saint Ursule."\(^9\) For contemplative nuns the symbolic act of claustration followed: the cloistered sisters welcomed the postulant and led her to the choir in the convent chapel for the rest of the ceremony. In her journal, Hélène Massalska, future Princess de Ligne, left an account of Mademoiselle de Rastignac taking the veil at the Abbaye aux Bois in 1778:

On the day of her profession, every Hautefort was in the church, because she was close kin. Mademoiselle de Guignes carried her candle and acted as godmother, and the comte de Hautefort was her escort. She looked lovely; she started out in the outside chapel kneeling on a prie-dieu and wearing a dress of white crepe embroidered in silver and covered in diamonds. She held up well through the abbé de Marolle's sermon, in which he told her how pleasing it is to God to see someone who was made for social success renounce the world. . . . After the sermon the comte de Hautefort took her hand and led her to the gate of the cloister. As soon as she had gone through, the gate shut with a bang and they

\(^7\) Interview with Sister Josette.

\(^8\) Nonetheless, the Dominican convent of Unterlinden in Colmar has in its archives a photo of a bridal gown purchased by a postulant for her taking the veil ceremony – in 1980. See Jeanne Andlauer, Modele les Corps. Reliquaire, canivets et figures de cire des religieuses chrétiennes (thèse de doctorat, E.H.E.S.S., 2002), 158.

\(^9\) Andre Vachez, Les Livres de raison dans le Lyonnais et les provinces voisines (Lyon: Brun et Cote, 1891), 14.
shot the bolts noisily, because they never miss this last little touch. She was more dead than alive when she went in."\(^{10}\)

This ritual of entering the cloister reappears frequently in Old Regime ceremonies. The Sisters of Saint Elizabeth of Toulouse, for instance, specified that "the Postulant, at the gate of the convent, knocks with all her family and friends around her to ask that she be received."\(^{11}\) The Annonciades maintained this practice until the 1970s.\(^{12}\)

At this point the actual ceremony by which the postulant is transformed begins. There is a dialogue between the postulant and the priest, punctuated by prayers and liturgical chant. The use of Latin, a language for men and for sacred occasions, renders the moment even more solemn and represents the break between the world that these women leave and the one that they enter. The ceremony moves along at a slow rhythm set by successive renunciations, and symbolic language and gestures represent the postulant's death to the world.

The abandonment of lay dress is the first stage of the process. The priest emphasizes the link between "the sacred habit" and the requirement that its wearer "be dead to the world, to your parents, to your friends and to yourself." He reinforces the symbolic charge of shedding the clothes, and thereby the life of a lay person, by inviting the novice to

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\(^{10}\) L. Perey [A. G. Herpin], *Histoire d'une grande dame au XVIIIe siècle, la princesse Hélène de Ligne*, quoted by Geneviève Reynes, *Couvents de femmes, la vie des religieuses cloitrées dans la France des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Fayard, 1987), 74.

\(^{11}\) *Cérémonial des religieuses de Sainte Elisabeth du Tiers-Ordre de St Francois establi en la ville de Toulouse touchant a la manière de donner l'habit et profession aux dites Religieuses* (1629), BEP, Res. D XVII – 519.

\(^{12}\) Roth-Hailotte, 128.
"dress [herself] in Jesus Christ."\textsuperscript{13} Out of sight, the novice assumes her new habit. Hélène Massalka continues her account, "When she arrived at the grille of the choir, it was closed so that she could change clothes; they hurried to remove all her worldly ornaments. . . . She was dressed in the robe of the order, with a veil and a wreath of white roses; then they opened the grille and presented her to the priest who blessed her."\textsuperscript{14} The "robe of the order" at this stage was not the final garment, but a "new dress," signaling her liminal status between the secular world, to which she could still return if she or the convent wished, and the religious life, which she would enter definitively with her final profession.\textsuperscript{15} According to Roselyne Roth-Haillotte,

the novice may wear the habit of the Annonciade, but there are telltale signs that she is not fully consecrated to the religious life. Her veil remains white; she wears neither a medal of the Virgin, nor a silver ring, nor a white robe. . . . This initial step toward religious dress proves only . . . that she has the necessary qualities to be accepted into the community.\textsuperscript{16}

The wreath to which the Princess de Ligne refers also requires some explanation. Many orders used two wreaths, one made of flowers and the other of thorns, and some rituals asked the novice to choose between them:

\textsuperscript{13} Con\textsuperscript{itutions pour la congr\textsuperscript{eg}ation des soeurs de Saint-Joseph, Rodez, 483-6.
\textsuperscript{14} Perey, 74.
\textsuperscript{15} Most rules specify that sisters charged with laundry will keep and mark the lay clothes (les hardes) of novices until their final profession.
\textsuperscript{16} Roth-Haillotte, 129.
Formerly, taking the veil and the profession took place . . . , alone in the presence of the Prioress and of the community. . . . Before she [the novice] receives the white veil, she approaches the communion window, and the Superior General cuts a lock of her hair. . . . Then he presents her with two wreaths, one of flowers and the other of thorns. The novice chooses the latter. 17

The allusion to the novice's desire to share the sufferings of Jesus is clear. In some orders, this crown of thorns features as the key element of the ceremony and reappears in the postulant's final profession. Traditionally the crown of thorns is placed on the body of a dead nun as she awaits burial in the chapel, an element from an earlier rite of passage repeating itself in this final ritual. 18

The novice's second renunciation "of the display and vanity of the world" 19 is her hair. Mademoiselle de Rastignac "had long blonde hair. . . . She shuddered at the moment when the mistress of novices put the scissors to her hair. They put her hair on a big silver platter." 20 Sometimes the hair would be burned as in a ritual of purification. The moment when the novice offers up her hair and renounces this instrument of feminine seduction was always central to veil-taking ceremonies. It represented a rejection of the body – "that abominable garment of the soul" – that had to be denied before it could be disciplined. 21 Elizabeth Kuhn's research demonstrates the persistence of this tradition: "Some Poor Clare nuns continue the tradition of shearing...

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17 Ceremonial a l'usage des soeurs dominicaines du second ordre (Poitiers: Oudin, 1871), ch. 3, art. 1, quoted by Andlauer, 161.
18 Ibid, 160.
19 Cérémonial pour la congégation des soeurs de Saint-Joseph, 485.
20 Perey, 75.
their hair at profession and placing it in a basket overnight with a blessed crucifix.\footnote{22}

The next stage pursues this desire to erase everything that identifies the individual: the mother superior covers the novice's head with the wimple and veil. The novice leaves behind her former appearance as she leaves the secular world, and the veiling completes the ritual of retreat from the world. The kneeling novice then stands and receives the mother superior's embrace, a sign of her full integration into the community whose uniform she now wears.

A naming ceremony completes the transformation of the novice's identity. The assumption of a new name is the apotheosis of the renunciation ritual; it marks the final stage of the novice's death to the world. "You no longer bear your father's name," the new nun hears, and she understands that the change of name guarantees her spiritual transformation and her definitive integration into the new community.\footnote{23} The attribution of her new name in religion completes her transformation, marking her passage from her fleshly family to her new family in grace.\footnote{24}

Although the final farewells in front of the gates and the symbolic closing of the curtains have largely disappeared, separation remains the essence of the ceremony.\footnote{25}

\footnote{23} Cérémonial des soeurs de St François d'Assise, gardes-malades de Rodez (Rodez: Carrere, n.d.), 34.
\footnote{24} Constitutions des Soeurs de l'Union, établies à Saint-Geniez (Rodez: Carrere, 1887), 155.
\footnote{25} The ritual of the nuns of Saint Elizabeth of Toulouse ended with: "The Sisters extinguish their candles and retire, leaving the novice in her place so that her parents can see her. The mistress of novices remains close to her in order to close the curtains and instructs her not to respond to her parents as long as her face remains uncovered." Cérémonial des religieuses de Sainte Elisabeth.
The community recognizes their new member: "the mother superior and the sisters go the room where the novice waits to greet them and embrace them modestly." 26 A new alternative family of mother and sisters receives her and offers her spiritual gifts as they share in the celebration. 27

The ritual of taking the veil is a double celebration of both death and life. On the one hand, it signifies the nun's death to the world; not long ago novices dressed in their new habits lay covered with a shroud on the cold paving stones of the chapel, and they left the chapel to the funeral strains of the De profundis. But the ceremony also expresses rebirth as the novice is rebaptized with the name of a patron saint. Taking the veil celebrates the novice's passage from the society of people who live and die in the world to the community of those who are already on the threshold of eternity. The Capuchin Nicolas de Dijon explained this passage in his sermon to brothers taking their vows: "My dear Brother, allow me . . . as you enter the religious life to offer you the same words that the Church offers a Christian at the moment of death: Profisciere anima christiana de hoc mundo. Go, Christian soul, escape the prison of your body, because heaven offers you freedom." 28 Like their Capuchin brothers, nuns "live on earth in an empty body because, as Eusebius of Caesaria says, their soul has already mysteriously gone to heaven." 29

26 Constitutions pour la congrégation des soeurs de Saint-Joseph, 490-1.
27 Andlauer describes the pious images distributed for the occasion as well as the devotional objects that play a role in the ritual.
28 Nicolas de Dijon, Sermons de vêtures et professions religieuses, Lyon, 1695, quoted by Bernard Dompnier, Enquête au pays des frères des anges. Les capucins de la province de Lyon au XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l'université, 1993), 64.
The transformation of identity, with the new name either chosen by or imposed on the novice as a symbol of this metamorphosis, has for centuries marked the entry into the religious life. Moving beyond the ritual that cuts the novice off from the world and prepares her for the final profession and vows, I turn now to understanding how women experience this rupture and live their transformed identity.

**Names and transformed identities**

Dress always features in the religious life, but the renunciation of baptismal names has never been a requirement for entry into a female religious community. The Cistercians, for instance, retain their original family names. There is no canonical text establishing a name-changing ritual; each community makes its own choice in the matter. The practice of taking a new name in religion became increasingly common from the late fifteenth century and peaked after the Revolution during the nineteenth-century expansion of female religious orders. Beyond its spiritual meaning, the religious name functioned as a sign of ideological commitment, a statement of militant opposition to a secular world that had attempted to destroy monastic institutions.

Monastic rules never formally regulate naming practices, and some do not even raise the question of names.\(^{30}\) Rules that do mention name changing do so in relatively low-key language; for example, the rule of the Dominican sisters of Gramond specifies that "to fully signify the change that has taken place in her life, the postulant will receive a name in religion. She will use this name, proceeded by the word 'sister,' in all aspects of life.

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\(^{30}\) This silence on naming rituals holds for early modern monastic rules as well as for those of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
covered by the rule."31 Public use of religious names derives more from circumstances or common usage than from specific rules.

Neither canon law texts nor theological dictionaries explain what role names play in the entry into the spiritual perfection of the religious life.32 Only occasionally do we come across any consideration at all of the question. Philippe Lejeune, for instance, suggests an analogy between religious names and an author's pseudonym, which is "not exactly a false name, but a nom de plume, a second name, just like the name that a nun takes upon entering the convent."33 The name in religion, however, is not a tool for hiding the nun behind a borrowed name, analogous to the veil that used to cover most of her face. Rather, it is a go-between, even a stage name for the performance of religious devotion enacted in a theatre hidden behind the convent walls.

Nuns themselves testify to the importance of receiving a new name. According to Josette, "You change your name along with your clothing; they go together. You leave behind your old clothes and your baptismal name! The new habit has to go with the new name and it's dramatic, a major break with your previous life."34 For Sister Madeleine, who works with poor and dispossessed families in Toulouse, "the important thing is the call that you can't ignore. I chose the name Madeleine because I felt a special

31 Règles et constitution des religieuses du Tiers-Ordre de Saint Dominique, Congrégation de Gramond, diocese de Rodez (Lyon: Lecuyer, 1934), 137.
34 Interview with Sister Josette.
empathy for the patron saint of sinners, but that's not really what's important. I had a life before, I liked boys, but you have to choose, give up things, and it's not easy."

Long after taking the veil, women recall intensely their renaming, and they offer emotional accounts of their transformation. They remember entering the religious life as about making choices, about the conscious renunciation of what previously defined their lives in response to an interior voice. Describing the new name as a "pseudonym" seems inadequate to capture their experience. Early modern texts similarly bind leaving behind family, ordinary clothes, and name into an indivisible ensemble: "Leave behind vain ornaments with a holy scorn, because you want nothing more to do with the vanity of the world; drop them all in obedience to the baptismal vow that you took to renounce the world and its vanity and that you have perhaps not yet fulfilled."

Prescriptive texts denounce the frivolity and coquetry of secular clothing; its rejection becomes a technique for the denial of the body. Entering the convent, a young woman leaves her old clothes at the door along with the name that at her baptism had brought her into the larger Christian family:

Those who profess and who enter the religious life and are dressed in the habit should have a name that reflects the holiness of their life and their dress. The name given to us at our profession, which is our second birth, must be received with respect, borne with veneration and we must strive faithfully to live up to the virtues that it represents."

36 Bernardin de Paris, Le Parfait Novice instruit des voyes qu'il doit tenir pour arriver à la perfection de son estat (Paris, 1648), 815, quoted by Dompnier, 72.
37 Bernardin de Paris, Le Parfait novice, quoted by Dompnier, 77.
For centuries the veil's purpose has been to smother the individual woman's identity. The prolixity of official descriptions of nuns' habits — they linger over fabrics, colors, shapes, and lengths — clearly demonstrates the desire to create a person without identity who will melt into the community. Francis de Sales considered clothing a sort of "symbol that penetrates to the interior of our soul and whose exterior manifestations signal our disposition, whether serious or frivolous." The nun's gray, black, or brown tunic should help her "remember that one day she will die."

The practice of changing names developed gradually and unevenly across religious orders. The Carmelites, as part of a discipline of spiritual self-annihilation, adopted it early, while the Visitandines were much slower. On the occasion of the canonization of St Francis de Sales, Mother Marie-Jacqueline Favre, who had founded the Visitandines (the Visitation of Mary) along with Jeanne de Chantal, observed,

He [Francis de Sales] didn't want us to be like other reformed orders of nuns who are called things like Catherine de Jésus, Marguerite de la Croix, but rather we should be Jeanne-Françoise, Marie-Marguerite, simply adding a saint's name to the name that a sister received by holy baptism.

Within a single order, individual houses followed their own preferences with regard to name changing. Thus the Clares in Milleau en Rouergue began adopting religious names at the very end of the seventeenth century, while their sisters

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38 Francis de Sales to Jeanne de Chantal, quoted in "Spiritualité du corps," DSAM, 2. col. 2365.
39 Jérome de Marcelia quoted in Ibid.
40 My thanks to Patricia Burns, archivist of the Convent of the Visitation, Annecy, for this quotation.
in Castenlau de Magnoac near Toulouse maintained their baptismal names and secular forms of address well into the eighteenth century, suggesting the continued importance of secular forms of sociability to this house.\footnote{P.-E. Viviers, "Notes sur les Clarisses de Millau avant la Révolution, in \textit{Sainte Claire en Rouergue} (Paris: Les Amis de Sainte Claire, 1994), 193. Fonds de Pointis, Archives départementales de la Haute Garonne \textit{[hereafter ADHG]} 1 J 644. The maintenance of secular forms of address was not unusual and appears regularly in the correspondence of prioresses and mothers superior. See, e.g., the dossier of correspondence in the papers of the Carmelite Tertiary sisters (Tiercerettes) in ADHG 212 H 2.}

Religious names often indicated devotional practices, and in some houses they took on totemic qualities. The Benedictine tradition, always attentive to the order's history, regularly gave nuns the names of its founders: Scholastica, Mechtilde, or Benedict. The Visitandines, who remained particularly attached to the Sacred Heart tradition popularized by Marguerite-Marie Alacoque, often attached "of the Sacred Heart" to their chosen saints' names.\footnote{Sister Marie du Sacré-Coeur of the convent in Bourg-en-Bresse encouraged devotion to the Sacred Heart in the wake of the canonization of Marguerite-Marie Alacoque. See Musée des Pays de l'Ain, \textit{Ma fille qu'es-tu venue faire ici? Scènes de vie au couvent} (Saint-Cyr-sur-Meuthon: Musée des pays de l'Ain, 1999), 19.}

The records of veilings and professions kept by the Sisters of Notre Dame in Carentan, a post-Tridentine teaching order, reveal trends in eighteenth-century religious naming practices.\footnote{M de Pontaumont, \textit{Livre de raison des Filles de la Congrégation de Notre Dame de Carentan} (Cherbourg: A Mouchel, 1860).} Fifty-one novices took the veil between 1737 and 1783. Of these, thirteen incorporated a masculine name into their religious name, perhaps out of respect for the dictates of the Council of Trent, which condemned the feminization of the names of male exemplars of piety.\footnote{Two sisters nonetheless took the name "Augustine."}
The most common female names suggest that the novices regularly drew on the era's most common devotional literature in their choice of name.\textsuperscript{45} Christological devotion was a dominant influence, with the overwhelming majority of new names combining a saint's name with a reference to Jesus or to the holy sacrament.\textsuperscript{46} The cults of Mary and the angels appear in second place, with eight and seven appearances respectively. Saint Joseph and Pierre Fourrier, one of the order's founders, both appeared once. There were no references to particular dogmas of the Church, but the early fathers and episodes in the life of Christ both showed up occasionally.

This practice of double naming placed the nun under the protection of a specific saint while also linking her to a transcendent form of spirituality, and it suggests a clear process of identity-formation well beyond the simple change of civil status. To be called "Sister Adélaïde de Jésus" or "Colombe du Saint-Sacrement" places the individual within a sacred genealogy that distinguishes her from both ordinary lay people and other religious. It would be interesting to know more about how religious naming reflected the social origins and educational levels of the individuals concerned; the small sample in the Carentan


\textsuperscript{46} Among the many sisters named for the "child of Jesus" or the "Sacred Heart of Jesus" we find one unusual sister, Lover of Jesus (\textit{Amante de Jésus}), who took the veil in 1771.
took the veil

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records offers some hints but provides an inadequate basis for generalization. Clearly, the choice of a name in religion varies both by religious order and across time. In the nineteenth century, particularly in contemplative orders, the convent hierarchy, usually the mother superior, generally chose names for postulants. At the other extreme were houses that allow novices free choice of a name, although the convent authorities did seek to discourage overly mystical or imaginative names. This freedom to choose a name is the most common practice in religious houses today. Midway between the two possibilities was a name negotiated between the novice, the mistress of novices and/or the mother superior. Many houses maintained a tradition of having the postulant propose a list from which her superiors made the final choice.

Whether imposed, negotiated, or freely chosen, the new name becomes a fully integrated element of the nun's identity, a process that demands our attention. Rejecting the nineteenth-century notion of taking the veil as a "cowardly retreat" for women incapable of facing the world, J. P. Peterson suggests that we consider their act as "a strong, although unusual, affirmation of the self. It is like a rejection (even a revolt against) a humiliating status, although it takes the form of a radical annihilation of self,


48 According to the Constitutions des Soeurs de Saint-Joseph sisters would "avoid overly long, strange, or affectedly mystical names" (59).

49 The convent of the Holy Providence in Ribeauvillé (Alsace) traditionally attempted to integrate the Christian names of the novice's parents into her religious name. Interview with Sister Marie-Alberta, Ribeauvillé, Jan. 2005.
an absolute humility, but this time in the name of God alone.\textsuperscript{50} If we follow Peterson's suggestion in our analysis of naming, then the name in religion features as both the symbol and tool of that affirmation. The new name serves not only to identify a specific nun, but to place her both within her new community and with regard to the world that she has left behind. There are many nineteenth-century examples of women who founded religious orders and whose name in religion served them as a sort of standard in their combat for a spiritual ideal. Far from being a peaceful retreat, the convent served these women as a site for the full expression of self.\textsuperscript{51}

Some contemporary interviews confirm this reading. Among my interview subjects, some seem to consider their name in religion as conferring a certain social status, although they were not entirely comfortable with this idea. Daughters of modest rural families, they had often experienced their entry into the convent as upward mobility, and their new name was part of this social achievement. Françoise-Thérèse explained in detail the spiritual reasons for her choice of name, including her decision not to return to her baptismal name after Vatican II: "Eliette wasn't a religious name; it was just for family."\textsuperscript{52} Family life and the religious life were two different worlds, and names kept them separate. Records reveal that different orders understood the social significance of naming differently; some carefully followed established rules, while others made more grandiose

\begin{footnotes}
\item[52] Interview by the author at the convent of Gramond (Aveyron), Dec. 2004.
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choices that might draw attention to their recruits' elevated social status.

We know very little about what the secular world, notably political authorities, made of religious names. Even though no text in canon law specifically describes name changing, the French monarchy did regulate the practice beginning in 1736. Royal edict required all monastic orders to keep records of all entries and professions and to turn over one copy to the bailliage clerk every five years. Religious houses were to record birth names; the edict said nothing of religious names, although some houses listed the latter more prominently than the former. Occasionally, political authorities, even under the Old Regime, objected to the use of religious names on the grounds that they tended to exempt part of the population from the law. At the time of the foundation of Saint-Cyr, Louis XIV required the new order to reject officially any use of religious names. The Republic has also occasionally confronted religious orders over the question of names, since name-changing could be used for both minor and more serious deception. Finally, it is worth considering that the interplay between naming and identity does not take place exclusively in the written record. What role did names play in religious life within the convent? We do know something about what nuns called one another. Sometimes rules prescribed naming practices, forbidding, for instance,

53 Durand de Maillane, *Dictionnaire de droit canonique et de pratique bénéficielle*, 2nd ed. (Lyon, 1770), 277-91.
55 Rives, "Mourir au monde."
using "any other name that the one that the order selects."\textsuperscript{56} At Saint-Geniez "the sisters always speak French, refer to one another formally (\textit{ne se tutoient point}), and do not use any name other than their office or their name in religion."\textsuperscript{57} Some sisters in positions of authority or assigned to specific tasks were most commonly referred to by their title or office, a practice that emphasized a place in a hierarchy rather than an individual identity. Use of personal names, in contrast, whether the original name or the religious name, called attention to individuality.

Obituary notices composed by religious communities for their members are also quite revealing about the significance of names. The Visitandine archives contain many examples of these \textit{Abrégés de vie et vertus}, usually written by a mother superior to narrate the religious life of the deceased. Their length and detail generally vary according to the deceased nun's social rank or the functions she fulfilled within the community: commemorations of sisters (\textit{sœurs de choeur}) from good families tended to be long and to present their subjects as spiritual exemplars, while the lives of the less elevated \textit{sœurs domestiques} could be summarized briefly, with the emphasis on their "willing submission."\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{56} ADHG 1 J 581, \textit{Constitutions de colège et monastère des sœurs religieuses de Ste Ursule dans l'ordre de St Augustin de Granade}, f. 38.

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Constitutions des sœurs de l'Union}.

\textsuperscript{58} In 1706, for instance, the mother superior of the convent of the Visitation at Villefranche-de-Rouergue wrote obituaries for two nuns; she dedicated five pages to the "virtues of our honorable sister Jeanne Marguerite Déléris" and half a page to "our dear Sister Marie Christine Chicard, who kept the convent's turn-box." My thanks to Patricia Burns for this information.
Titles and names also feature in convent sisters' relationships with the outside world.\textsuperscript{59} Nuns' correspondence – both letters that they wrote and those that they received – is important evidence of how names worked in religious life. In 1690 one M Decomps, a jurist from Bordeaux, addressed a letter to the leaders of the Carmelite Tertiary convent in Toulouse: "Mesdames de St Jehan Mother Superior and de St Jehan-Baptiste, vicar of the convent of the tertiary sisters of Toulouse." Decomps was the convent's legal representative, charged with representing their interests in the world, yet his official report used religious names even though legal acts required family names. In this case, monastic practice trumped public practice. Sometimes official correspondence combined both forms of address.\textsuperscript{60} All these practices reveal the largely unregulated complexity of the lives of women with a double identity.

In general, these nuns do not seem to have been conscious of this double identity; some denied that it existed, others that it was in any way complex. The de-individualization that takes place as a woman passes through the novitiate to her final vows goes well beyond the loss of a family name. The novitiate is a time of reflection on self-renunciation. The novice learns to become part of a community by giving up what makes her an individual, neither thinking nor acting for herself but as a small piece of a greater whole. Her name is the least of what the future nun abandons at the convent gate; she leaves behind her very being, an obligation that explains why many novices experience this as a time of suffering. Refusing the option of leaving before taking vows – which

\textsuperscript{59} Rives, "Mourir au monde."

\textsuperscript{60} See ADHG H 212/2, e.g., a letter addressed to Madame de Manere de Ste Margueritte, tertiary sister in Toulouse (16 Jan. 1730).
is not painless either – some of my interview subjects who found community life difficult created for themselves a more or less solitary mission outside the convent walls: Madeleine as a prison visitor, for instance, or Marie-Lucien as a village nurse. Others found a way to live in community, either by disappearing into it or by dominating it, but always in the name of God.

Giving up one's name and giving up one's clothes belong to a single tradition of renouncing the world, but monastic approaches to these practices are complex. Vatican II's insistence that neither renunciation was necessary generated a great deal of controversy. The possibility of returning to one's family name and of wearing ordinary clothes radically called into question a long tradition of religious life. In the course of my interviews, some nuns expressed joy at being able to drop religious names and nuns' habits, both of which they associated with rule-bound formality rather than spiritual value. Others, however, perceived the abandonment of a religious name as a denial of the religious life. Even if they were perfectly willing to give up their habit for ordinary street clothes, they nonetheless understood their name in religion as invested with a certain sanctity. Clothing might be irrelevant to the essence of the religious life, but the name represented the nun's vows and was thus crucial to her engagement in the religious life. For some, the religious name was a marker of the social status they gained by entering the convent; the name gave them dignity in their own eyes and those of others. These multiple positions vis-à-vis religious names and dress suggest the complexity of the transformation of personal identity undergone by women in the name of a transcendent ideal.

translated by Carol E. Harrison

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