

**AUTHORITATIVE LETTERS:
JEANNE DE CHANTAL AND FEMININE AUTHORITY
IN THE EARLY MODERN CATHOLIC CHURCH**

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ABSTRACT

The early modern period of a time of religious renewal and upheaval that resulted in a wealth of new religious orders, particularly those for women. During this period of change, Catholic women responded to the threat of Protestantism by adapting the convent to their own needs. One of the most successful orders for women was the Congregation of the Visitation, founded by Jeanne de Chantal and François de Sales. The history of the Visitation tends to focus on de Sales rather than its cofounder de Chantal. This thesis attempts to reconcile this omission, detailing de Chantal's ability to demonstrate and enact her authority through the mode of letters. In doing so, this paper enters into a conversation on religious revival in the early modern period by illustrating the porous nature of the early modern convent and the role women had in shaping early modern religiosity.

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PREFACE

In the spring of 2013, while researching on Mary Ward, an English nun who lived in the seventeenth century, I came across the name Jeanne de Chantal. The article I was reading stated that she was a cofounder of the Congregation of the Visitation and then went on to describe the life and works of her partner, François de Sales. I was intrigued. Who was Jeanne de Chantal and why was she overshadowed by her male counterpart, particularly in an article on religious *women* in early modern Europe? In my spare time that semester, I read as much as I could on Jeanne de Chantal. From the bits I gleaned from historical analysis and the religious biographies I read of her, I pieced together a picture of a charismatic and competent religious leader. I was fascinated with this woman and yet perplexed- why was she basically a footnote in a larger historical analysis? I became determined to fix what I thought was a gross injustice of history. This thesis is my answer to that personal quest.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were an unique moment in Catholic history, when women embraced the ideals of reform inherent in proclamations of the Council of Trent. Women across Europe and the Americas, such as Mary Ward of England, Teresa of Avila of Spain and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz of Mexico, created various movements which adapted the ideals of Trent to create a space for women through schools for girls and charities for the poor and displaced Catholic women.¹ Although the Catholic Church condemned some of these women as heretics, such as Mary Ward, Catholics across Europe venerated Teresa of Avila and others as a saints and models of feminine piety. Like many others, Jeanne de Chantal left her mark on the early modern world through active participation, making it possible for future generations of Catholic women to work within the constraints of Catholicism and adapt it to the needs of the day.

Jeanne de Chantal lived within this period of Catholic renewal. As a cofounder of the Congregation of the Visitation in France, hereafter referred to as the Visitation, she was in a position to spread her ideas and influence the actions of others. De Chantal wrote religious treatises, lectures, and commentaries that were read throughout France.

¹ Robert Bireley, *The Refashioning of Catholicism* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 45-57; Laurence Lux-Sterritt, "English Institute and Prescribed Female Roles," in *Gender, Catholicism, and Spirituality.*, ed. Laurence Lux-Sterritt et al. (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 83-98; Silvia Evangelisti, *Nuns: A History of Convent Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 19,43,63, 78, 158-161.

For more on these movements, see Marcel Bernos et al., *Femmes et gens d'Église dans la France Classique, XVIIe -XVIII Siècle* (Paris: Cerf, 2003); Susan Broomhall, *Women and Religion in Sixteenth-Century France* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006); M. M. Carrion, "Scent of a Mystic Woman: Teresa de Jesus and the Interior Castle," *Medieval Encounters* 15 (2009): 130-156; Denise DuPont, *Writing Teresa: the saint from Ávila at the fin-de-siglo* (Lewisburg,PA: Bucknell University Press, 2012); Nicky Hallett, *The Senses in Religious Communities, 1600-1800: Early Modern 'Convents of Pleasure.'* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013); Christina Kenworthy-Browne et al., *Mary Ward (1585-1645): A Brief Relation* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012).

Her position as a religieuse, or member of a religious order, and her vast corpus of religious literature afforded her a position of authority. In addition to her public works, which were meant to be preserved for the ages, de Chantal wrote letters expanding and personalizing her message to men and women within her network of peers and followers, religious or not. This personal connection established another layer by which de Chantal enacted her position as a leader of a religious movement in early modern France.

De Chantal inherently displayed two types of authority repeatedly within her letters. The first way of displaying authority was, to quote the Oxford English Dictionary, the “[p]ower over, or title to influence, the opinions of others.”² In the case of de Chantal, this definition of authority was significant because it bore no coercion, but rather stemmed from de Chantal’s position as a spiritual leader. It was based upon her relationship with François de Sales and her place within the Salesian movement as the cofounder of the Visitation. The second way that she used authority was “... [p]ower or right to enforce obedience,” again as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary.³ This authority described de Chantal’s position within her own order, through the demonstrated ability to control the actions of the mother superiors running her houses, as well as controlling what was said about her houses.

In this thesis, I examine the strategic ways Jeanne de Chantal used letters to display her authority as a religious woman. I argue that these letters allowed her to demonstrate her leadership abilities through discourse that emphasized and strengthened interpersonal

² This is the second definition of the OED’s authority. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “authority,” accessed 12 September 2013, www.oed.com.

³ This is the first OED definition of authority, subsection a. It has multiple layers, often associated with coercion. I have taken it in its most basic meaning, focusing on the second part, “right to enforce obedience.” De Chantal did not coerce those around her through physical force, but rather demonstrated her right to promote obedience to her rules. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “authority,” accessed 12 September 2013, www.oed.com.

relationships. I divide my analysis between two sets of letters: letters de Chantal wrote promoting Salesian spiritualism (Chapter Two) and letters she wrote regarding the day to day affairs of the convents within her order (Chapter Three). In my chapter on letters of a spiritual nature, I link de Chantal's authority to the confessor/penitent model, which was a common way male religious leaders throughout the medieval and early modern eras guided their penitents on a spiritual journey. In my chapter on de Chantal's position as a leader of a successful order, I illustrate how de Chantal's authority derived from her success as a manager who was aware of the world around her and had a system in place to protect her order. Exercising her authority was a necessary part of her leadership position but it was also a way to cement relations with the outside world. Through my analysis, I provide a case study as to how women in the early modern period were able to demonstrate their authority as leaders of Catholic institutions.

In this introductory chapter, I place de Chantal within the context of seventeenth century French Catholic society and then offer some reflections on how I approach the sources through my methodology. For the remainder of this chapter I examine a historical background that looks at de Chantal's life and work, as well as her relationship to movements in early modern Catholicism. After establishing key historical facts, I address the lack of scholarship on de Chantal and how this project begins to rectify that injustice through the use of letters that demonstrate de Chantal's use of authority. I conclude this chapter by outline the sequent chapters.

Historical Background

Between the 1400s and the 1700s, emerging forms of Christianity changed the world, challenging long-established notions of religious identity, particularly feminine religious

identity. Various types of Protestantism and Catholicism were largely at odds with each other as they debated what function women should play within these various churches. Both sets of churches agreed that women should not preach nor should they hold ecclesiastical or secular offices. The Protestant churches, however, argued against the cloistering of men and women, citing the various abuses of the monastic system, such as forced clostration and inappropriately wealthy convents. Male and female Protestant reformers pushed for increased feminine education, but confined women to the domestic sphere. Meanwhile Catholics of both sexes responded to the question of women's place through their continued support of the convent. They met the Protestant challenge through the increased reform of the monastic system, as well as the creation of new spaces for women, such as schools for girls and short-lived houses for non-cloistered women of faith.⁴ The conflicting values of these various religious institutions created a tension, as women within both churches tried to define themselves.

De Chantal and other prominent religious women, such as Marie de Druc, a fellow Frenchwoman, were part of a combined intellectual and spiritual movement that opened up a dialogue between the late sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries. During this time, women within Catholic institutions had access to more leadership positions as they participated in the Catholic response to the threat of Protestantism. Some religious women wanted new things from Catholicism, such as education for women and a space for female missionaries, which in previous periods were not acceptable. This was a moment of increased feminine participation which lasted until the mid-1600s when the papacy began to strictly enforce the ideals of feminine seclusion from the world.⁵

⁴ Euan Cameron, *The European Reformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 402-405.

⁵ Roberty Bireley, *The Refashioning of Catholicism, 1450-1700* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University

Jeanne de Chantal

Jeanne de Chantal was born Jeanne-Françoise Frémyot (also spelled Frémiot) in 1572 to an elite, royalist family in Dijon, France.⁶ Her family was immensely wealthy, her father being the president of the Parliament of Burgundy. From her biographies, one can surmise she received a classical education. At the age of twenty, de Chantal married the Baron Christophe de Chantal. Throughout her eight year marriage, de Chantal was in charge of running her husband's estate. She used her managerial abilities and position to restore her husband's wealth, putting enough money aside to donate to various charities and schools founded for girls. When de Chantal was 28, her husband died in a hunting accident. Rather than remarry, de Chantal chose a vow of chastity and devoted her widowhood to Christ. However, she did not join a convent immediately and, despite the wealth left to her by her dead husband, instead lived with her cantankerous father-in-law for the first few years after her husband's death. During this time, she traveled a little and raised her children.⁷

De Chantal had four children. Two died young while the others, a boy and a girl, survived to adulthood. According to her biographer, Emily Bowles, de Chantal was devoted to her children and was reluctant to leave them when she formed the Visitation. After the marriage of her daughter to François de Sales' younger brother, de Chantal

of America Press, 1999), 25-26, 37-44, 202,204; R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The World of Catholic Renewal 1540-1700* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 138-151.

⁶ De Chantal's family supported Henri IV during the wars of religion and French succession, which is why I have used the term royalist. Technically both sides of the war were royalists, however history designates the winning side as the true "royalists." Raphael Pernin, "St. Jane Frances de Chantal," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 8. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08282c.htm>.

⁷ Emily Bowles, *The Life of St. Frances Freymont de Chantal* (London: Burns and Oates, 1872), 4, 8-9, 63-66; Raphael Pernin, "St. Jane Frances de Chantal," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 8. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08282c.htm>; Elisabeth Stopp, *Madame de Chantal: Portrait of a Saint* (Stella Niagra, NY: DeSales Resource Center, (2002), 9.

finally made the choice to fully enter a religious order.⁸ De Chantal's renouncement of the secular world was done with careful preparation and not before ensuring the financial stability of her children and of her late husband's estate.⁹ She continued to maintain close ties to her children through letters, even after her official entrance to the Visitation.¹⁰

Despite her devotion to her children, de Chantal did not immediately enter a cloister in part because of her disillusion with current orders. Her biographer Emily Bowles linked this to the political and religious upheaval of early seventeenth century France. According to Bowles, de Chantal had been affected by the religious wars of this period and did not want to associate herself with the politics connected to already established orders.¹¹ Another biographer, Andre Ravier, argued that this delay in De Chantal's entrance to a convent was due to her desire to find the perfect spiritual director. Ravier contended that after her husband's death, de Chantal was confused about her desire for a vocation and thus wanted to find someone who could help her work out her views on religion and what a religious vocation should entail.¹² Either way, it was not until she

⁸ Bowles, *St. Frances Freymont de Chantal*, 88-90; Pernin, "St. Jane Frances de Chantal," <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08282c.htm>.

⁹ Bowles, *St. Frances Freymont de Chantal*, 90-91; Pernin, "St. Jane Frances de Chantal," <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08282c.htm>; Stopp, *Madame de Chantal*, 107-109.

¹⁰ For examples of these letters, see Jeanne de Chantal, "A Monseigneur de Neuchèse [Juin 1622]," in *Lettres Inédites*, ed. François de Rabutin (Charleston, N.-C.: Nabu Press, 2012), 7-8; de Chantal, "Au Même [Monseigneur de Neuchèse]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 8-9; de Chantal, "Au Même [Monseigneur de Neuchèse] [17 mai]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 9-11; de Chantal, "A Monseigneur L'Archevêque de Bourges [14 août 1627]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 11-14; de Chantal, "A Monsieur le Chevalier de Sales [21 mai 1633]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 14-15; de Chantal, "A Madame de Toulangeon [29 mai 1633]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 16-17; de Chantal, "A Monsieur Jaquator [7 novembre 1633]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 17-18; de Chantal, "A Madame Jaquator [7 novembre 1633]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 18; de Chantal "A Monsieur Boulrier, Chanoine du Chapitre de Dijon [31 novembre 1633]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 18-19; de Chantal, "A Monsieur de Coulanges [12 août]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 20; de Chantal, "A Madame la Baronne de Chantal," in *Lettres Inédites*, 21-22.

¹¹ Bowles, *St. Frances Freymont de Chantal*, 67-69.

¹² Ravier, *St. Jeanne de Chantal*, 56-57.

met de Sales that de Chantal formally decided to dedicate her life to God within the confines of a convent.

François de Sales

An integral part of de Chantal's narrative was her relationship to the priest François de Sales. De Sales, 1567-1622, was one of the great Catholic thinkers of the early modern period. His philosophies were so influential that the Catholic Church made him a saint less than forty years after his death. De Sales was part of the mystic tradition as well as the emerging Catholic humanist tradition, arguing that the lay person could have a relationship with the divine, just like the religieuse could. Unique to his message was the importance of women as spiritual leaders within the Catholic Reformation. His association with de Chantal illustrated this belief.¹³

De Sales originally studied to be a lawyer, but instead took holy orders in 1593, quickly moving through the ranks and becoming the bishop of Geneva in 1602. In 1604, de Chantal met and befriended de Sales, after hearing him lecture at mass. Their friendship was important and the two were very close.¹⁴ De Sales became a father figure for de Chantal's children and his younger brother married de Chantal's daughter.¹⁵ Until his death in 1622, de Sales and de Chantal maintained a detailed correspondence, little of which has survived, as the two worked through theological and practical dilemmas relating to the Visitation as well as an exploration of their own personal faith.¹⁶

¹³ Ruth Manning, "A Confessor and His Spiritual Child: François de Sales, Jeanne de Chantal, and the Foundation of the Order of the Visitation," *Past and Present* (2006): 103-105.

¹⁴ Bowles, *St. Jane Frances Freymont de Chantal*, 72-76; Manning, "Spiritual Child," 110.

¹⁵ Bowles, *St. Jane Frances Freymont de Chantal*, 72-76; Manning, "Spiritual Child," 110.

¹⁶ For a good analysis of the religious aspects of de Chantal's and de Sales correspondence, see Wright et al., "Introduction," 7-92; Wendy M. Wright, *Bond of Perfection: Jeanne de Chantal & François de Sales* (Stella Niagra, NY: DeSales Resource Center, 2001).

Originally, de Chantal's authority was based upon her relationship with de Sales. Throughout her life, she wrote to people about their relationship and his spiritual message. She promoted and cited his work in many of her own treatises and letters.¹⁷ De Chantal also elaborated on the priest's ideas so much that, according to historian Jodi Bilinkoff, "de Sales came to recognize his interactions with Jeanne [de Chantal] were enriching his own spiritual life...."¹⁸ Despite her position as a follower of de Sales, de Chantal became one of the most important leaders within Salesianism. Others within this movement were so impressed by her spiritual insights that they often sent new recruits to her. She was a respected individual for her own work, not just her relationship with de Sales.

The Visitation

In 1610, de Chantal and de Sales founded the Congregation of the Visitation. De Chantal used some of the money left to her by her husband as well as capital provided by her family members to fund her and de Sales' early ventures. The Visitation was a joint effort. De Sales was the spiritual director. De Chantal was the practical director, charged with the everyday task of running the houses, although she would also come to work as a spiritual director. Guiding her nuns through various spiritual exercises, she became the sole director of the order after de Sales' death in the early 1620s.¹⁹

¹⁷ For examples, see de Chantal, "A Monseigneur L'Archevêque de Bourges [14 août 1627]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 11-13; de Chantal, "Au Commandeur de Sillery [27 avril 1638]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 23-25; de Chantal, "Au Même [Au Commander du Sillery]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 29-30; de Chantal, "A la Même [Marie-Aimée de Blonay]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 115; Jane Frances de Chantal, "Perfect Simplicity," in *A Simple Life*, ed. Kathryn Hermes (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2011), 5-8, de Chantal, "Fidelity in Prayer," in *A Simple Life*, 17-20; Jeanne de Chantal, "[To Noël Brulart] [Annecy] February 1632," in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, ed. Wendy Wright et al., trans. Péronne Marie Thibert (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 186-188; de Chantal, "[To Noël Brulart] [Annecy, 1640]," in *Spiritual Direction*, 197-203.

¹⁸ Bilinkoff, *Related Lives*, 84.

¹⁹ "Visitation Order," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, accessed December 31, 2013,

The Visitation was originally established as a charitable foundation, a school for young girls, and retreat for women wishing to seclude themselves away from the world. Like many reformers in the years between 1550 and 1640, de Sales and de Chantal wanted women to have a larger role in the world around them, responding in part to earlier rules set forth by the Council of Trent that sought to strictly cloister women. The two originally intended the Visitation not to be a strictly enclosed order, although it later became one due to papal pressure. Overtime, however, de Sales and de Chantal came to see feminine seclusion within the cloister as an essential part to creating a lasting space for women within the Catholic world. The Visitation thus became a place for upper class women who wanted to seclude themselves away from the world.²⁰

De Sales and de Chantal arranged the Visitation hierarchically like traditional convents. The women entering the order took vows informally before taking on the name “sister,” under supervision of “mother superiors.” De Chantal held the title of “Mother,” although she allowed each house to have its own “mother superior,” each of whom she personally selected. Through the superiors of the Visitation, de Chantal oversaw the individual convents, taking an active interest in new recruits, finances, the male confessors, and other details needed to keep the houses running smoothly. De Chantal wanted to seclude herself away from the cares of the world, however the practicality of running a large organization demanded that she travel for a good part of the year. She also oversaw the management of her houses through correspondence, which would prove to be critical to her success as I will later demonstrate. The

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15481a.htm>.

²⁰ Pernin, "St. Jane Frances de Chantal," <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08282c.htm>.

Visitation flourished with thirteen houses in five years. By the time of de Chantal's death in 1641, there were nearly one hundred houses across France.²¹

Historical Conversation

Despite her role as a leader within a powerful movement, Jeanne de Chantal has been forgotten by the historical narrative. Even scholars of women's movements in the early modern period focus on other organizations, glancing over de Chantal or focusing on de Sales when they mention the Visitation.²² There were attempts in the twentieth century to introduce de Chantal into an academic conversation, however this movement was limited to a few scholars in France.²³ Most of the recent literature on de Chantal, be it French or English, is religious- written by nuns and members of the clergy who want to promote a certain type of spiritualism and model of femininity.²⁴ This literature is intended to be devotional material for Catholics and seeks to reinforce de Chantal's sanctity, and

²¹ Wendy M. Wright et al, "Introduction," in *Letters of Spiritual Direction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 26-33; Pernin "St. Jane Frances de Chantal," <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08282c.htm>.

²² These scholars ask questions of whether these women broke Church doctrine or gender norms through their acts. Scholars, particularly feminist scholars, have embraced the courage of these women, arguing for a proto-modern woman, who challenged gender traditions. Amy Hollywood looks with this question of feminism and religious women with the case study of mystics. See Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). Also see, Lux-Sterritt, "English Institute and Prescribed Female Roles," 83-98; David Wallace, "Periodizing Women: Mary Ward (1585-1645) and the Premodern Canon," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 36 (2006): 397-453; Alison Weber, "Little Women: Counter-Reformation Misogyny," in *The Counter Reformation: The Essential Readings*, ed. David M. Luebke (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 143-162.

²³ See for example Augustin Gazier, *Jeanne de Chantal et Angélique Arnauld d'après leur correspondance* (Paris: Champion, 1915); Marcelle Georges-Thomas, *Sainte Chantal et la Spiritualité Salésienne* (Paris: Éditions Saint-Paul, 1963).

²⁴ See for example, Bowles, *The Life of St. Jane Frances Fremyot de Chantal*; Louise Perrotta, ed. *Wisdom from Saints Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal (Live Jesus!)* (Frederick, MD: Word Among US, 2000); Richardson and Son, *Life of St. Jane Frances de Chantal: Foundress of the Order of the Visitation (1852)* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2007); Elisabeth Stopp et al, *Hidden in God: Essays and Talks on St. Jane Frances de Chantal* (Philadelphia: St. Joseph University Press, 1999); Stopp, *Madame de Chantal*; Wendy M. Wright and Gloria Hutchinson, *A Retreat with Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal and Aelred of Rievaulx: Befriending each other in God* (Cincinnati, OH: Saint Anthony Messenger Press, 1996).

therefore is often biased. At the same time, devotional scholarship on de Chantal seeks to re-introduce de Chantal's philosophy on spirituality to present Catholics, arguing for its continuing validity.

Despite not being included in the dominant scholarship, de Chantal's life and work relates to other conversations of religion in early modern Europe, particularly about the changing atmosphere of Catholicism in the seventeenth century. This topic has been covered by prominent historians such as R. Po-Chia Hsia²⁵ and Robert Bireley,²⁶ who argue that the early modern era was a period of vibrant religious renewal within the Catholic Church. Historians such as Barbara Diefendorf,²⁷ Nicky Hallett,²⁸ Katherine

²⁵ Hsia's text, *The World of Catholic Renewal*, examines the ways in which Catholicism in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries revisioned itself. He argues against the traditional view of Catholicism during the early modern period, which sees Catholic reform solely as a reaction to the rise of various Protestant churches. Most relevant to this text, is his analysis on the rise of new orders during this period, which was accompanied by a rise of saints. R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The World of Catholic Renewal 1540-1770* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

²⁶ Bireley's *The Refashioning of Catholicism* places the Catholic Reformation within a long period of reforms in the medieval and early modern periods. He argues that what was unique about these sets of reforms were the increased response of the Church to the needs of the lay people and the ways in which religious reform interacted with political and social reforms. Bireley also points to the rise and importance of women in constructing a successful Catholic Church. Robert Bireley, *The Refashioning of Catholicism, 1450-1700* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999).

²⁷ Barbara Diefendorf's article, "Rethinking the Catholic Reformation: The Role of Women," expands on this idea. She argues that women were active participants in the activity known as the "Protestant Reformation" in Europe and the Americas. She supports this in her article, "Barbe Acarie and her Spiritual Daughters: Women's Spiritual Authority in Seventeenth-Century France," which looks at the role elite women took in founding spiritual houses in seventeenth century France. She argues that France was an unique geographical location, which allowed for elite women to be more active in methods of spiritualism and have more influence in this world. Barbara Diefendorf, "Rethinking the Catholic Reformation: The Role of Women," in *Women, Religion, and the Atlantic World (1600-1800)*, ed. Daniella Kostroun et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 31-59. Diefendorf, "Barbe Acarie and her Spiritual Daughters: Women's Spiritual Authority in Seventeenth-Century France," in *Female Monasticism in Early Modern Europe: An Interdisciplinary View: Catholic Christendom, 1300-1700*, ed. Cordula van Wyhe, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 156.

²⁸ Nicky Hallett has taken on the question of women's ability to create a niche for themselves through Catholicism. Hallett's monography, *The Senses in Religious Communities*, creates a conversation between the Carmelite nuns of Antwerp and the intellectual world of the early modern period. She looks at how these nuns understood the intellectual trends going on in the early modern period (such as the re-introduction of Aristotle to the academic community and the importance of Descartes on philosophical thought) and how they related it to themselves, through their work on the senses. This argues against previous assumptions that nuns during this period were aware of the trends going on in

Kong,²⁹ Elizabeth Rapley,³⁰ and Silvia Evangelisti³¹ have further expanded the argument of a vibrant early modern Catholicism to pinpoint specific instances which illuminate feminine agency within the era of Catholic Reform.³² These historians point to a change in the ways women during this period were able to influence the world around them by using personal relationships and the increasing interconnectedness of Europe to create networks of influence. Moreover, they demonstrate that the convent was not strictly enclosed, but rather was porous, as information and ideas entered the convent walls to be adapted and then leave changed.

This thesis complements these previous historical texts by exploring a specific case study that links early modern spiritual renewal with feminine agency. As with many historians, I agree that Catholicism was an unique way by which women were exert

the world around them. Nicky Hallett, *The Senses in Religious Communities*, 3, 7,9.

²⁹ Kong's literary analysis does not look specifically at de Chantal, however in her section on Christine de Pizan, Kong examines how the nun demonstrated her authority through her assigned role. In the specific case of de Pizan, this role was as the petitioner. Katherine Kong, *Lettering the Self in Medieval and Early Modern France* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), 109-149.

³⁰ Elizabeth Rapley, a French historian, is one of the first to open the conversation of religious women in early modern France. Her 1990 monograph, *The Devotés*, looks at the social needs, such as poverty and feminine education, in France which influenced the creation of various religious houses by women. Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women & Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 8.

³¹ Evangelisti's text, *Nuns: A History of Convent Life*, gives a broad overview of the female religious movements in the early modern era. She argues that the cloister was an intellectual space, of learning and growth, rather than a place of seclusion from the world. At the same time, Evangelisti shows the contradictions within the early modern Catholic Church's view on what it meant to be a religious women. She links the ways in which the nuns in the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries enacted their gender goals of purity and physical seclusion, while at the same time being part of the intellectual trends sweeping Europe. Sylvia Evangelisti, *Nuns: A History of Convent Life 1450-1700* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

³² It should be noted that increasing feminine agency during the early modern period has also been studied within a more secular context. For example, Margaret Ferguson's literary analysis, *Dido's Daughter's*, examines the way national identity developed in the women's writings during the early modern era. Elizabeth C. Goldsmith and Dena Goodman's text *Going Public: Women and Publishing in Early Modern France* looks at how women were able to be part of the intellectual trends of the early modern period, particularly late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by running saloons and publishing responses to these trends. Margaret W. Ferguson, *Dido's daughters : literacy, gender, and empire in early modern England and France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Elizabeth C Goldsmith et al. *Going public : women and publishing in early modern France*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

influence and that the convent did not cut these women off from the world. However, I expand this conversation further by detailing how women, specifically de Chantal, could demonstrate their authority within the mode of the letter. My analysis follows along the same assumption as Katherine Kong's in that authority within letters came through the portrayal of certain roles, in this case the role of the spiritual director or the director of a convent. My argument thus challenges the assumption of de Chantal's lack of authority and agency, making her a viable early modern actor.

Methodology and Sources

In discussing my methodology, I must first answer the question of why did I choose to analyze de Chantal's letters rather than her professional corpus. The answer lies in the ways I see de Chantal viewing her own authority. By the time of her death, de Chantal was a well-established religious leader and had not come under serious investigation by the papacy. Yet, de Chantal most likely knew that the safe haven she had constructed was not immune from papal interference or from scandal. She was a woman and was always in danger of having her authority challenged or disputed. Thus, she needed a network of likeminded people to spread the Salesian message and to protect the houses of the Visitation from outside influence. Her religious treatises, reflections, and commentaries were there for the world to see, however, she needed that final layer, that connection between herself and the individuals within her movement to truly protect herself and her movement as well as secure her position.

The second reason I chose letters is due to their universality. Letters were the common mode of communication in the early modern era, however were also unique to the convent setting. Through letters, religious women corresponded with other

spiritually and intellectually minded people. Within their letters, these women expressed new ideas, elaborated on old ones, and challenged traditional thinking on women's roles within the Church. Letters were a mode of communication which exposed the porous nature of the convent, and the Visitation was no exception.

In this study I intentionally leave out the letters de Chantal wrote to her spiritual director and partner, François de Sales. The reason for this is two-fold. The first is the simple lack of letters. Much of the correspondence written by de Chantal to de Sales is missing.³³ I chose not to analyze what remains because it does not fit within the confines of this study. My goal in this thesis is to show how a religious woman was able to influence a select population within the restricting confines of early modern Catholicism. The second reason is that I want to remove de Chantal from de Sales shadow. De Chantal was an integral player in the Salesian movement. This paper emphasizes that role.

In constructing this project, I analyzed nearly a thousand letters written by de Chantal. Many of these letters are published in collections and the majority maintain their original French.³⁴ These collections contain only letters written by de Chantal. In this thesis, however, I do close readings of only six. Many of the letters de Chantal wrote were repetitive- the style and information being the same despite the difference in intended

³³ Wright, "Introduction," in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 3.

³⁴ The majority of the letters I analyze comes from *Lettres Inédites* (originally published in 1860), *Jeanne de Chantal et Angélique Arnauld, D'Après Leur Correspondance...* (originally published in 1915), and *Lettres de Jeanne Françoise Fremoit de Chantal* (published 2011). However, a handful come from *Letters of Spiritual Direction* (1988) and *A Simple Life* (2011) and are in English. I also conducted research at the Bibliothèque Sainte-Genevieve in Paris, however most of my notes are not relevant to this project. All translations within this thesis are my own. I have also preserved the original French spellings of the names within this text, rather than Anglicanizing them. This is to preserve the historical accuracy of this work. When paraphrasing a quote, I have put the original French in a footnote, however have not translated it. This is to preserve de Chantal's voice.

readers. I thus chose the six letters which best showed her style. Within each chapter, I provide footnotes with selected examples of other letters that support my argument.

Outline of Chapters Two and Three

The remaining chapters of this thesis reflect the ways in which de Chantal used her authority within her letters. She did not use them to argue for her leadership abilities or to establish her authority- it was already assumed within them. I divide the letters I analyze into two categories: letters on Salesian religiosity and letters about the operation of the Congregation of the Visitation. Chapter Two looks at letters de Chantal wrote on spiritual matters while Chapter Three explores the other side of the spectrum and Chantal's letters relating to the practical aspects of running the Visitation. I conclude the thesis by reflecting on the institutional workings of Early Modern Catholicism which allowed for this display of feminine agency to slip into relative obscurity.

CHAPTER 2

LETTERS ON SPIRITUALITY

In this chapter, I examine how de Chantal demonstrated her authority as a spiritual leader. I begin the chapter with a general background on de Chantal's spiritual beliefs, placing her within the Salesian, mystic, and confessor/penitent traditions. I then analyze two specific letters that are representative of the various audiences to whom de Chantal wrote using a gender inverse confessor/penitent model. The first was written to a nun within the Visitation. The second was written to a priest, Noël de Brulart. In both of these letters, de Chantal performed the spiritual role of the confessor, instructing her readers on how to proceed with their spiritual journey, personalizing that message so that the reader would gain the most from it. I conclude this chapter by examining a letter which falls outside the parameter of the confessor/penitent model. It was written to Angélique Arnauld, a leader within the Jansenist movement and demonstrates a different way de Chantal illustrated her position as a religious leader.

Background

By the end of her life, de Chantal was one of the most sought after spiritual leaders in France. In addition to her published work, de Chantal also received letters from members of the nobility, clergy, and laity. In many of the letters she wrote on religion and spirituality, de Chantal demonstrated her role as a spiritual leader by inverting the traditional confessor/penitent model. Traditionally, a confessor/penitent relationship existed between a priest and a member of the secular upper class who wanted to live a religious life and who came to the priest for advice. In the case of the convent, the penitent/confessor relationship was between a priest and a nun. Jodi Bilinkoff described

the confessor/penitent relationship within the convent system as “the ways in which clerics related to female penitents [i.e. those seeking spiritual advise] they [the priests] determined were spiritually gifted....”³⁵ This relationship often resulted in the confessor developing and promoting a cult around the female penitent after her death.³⁶ Confessors’ and penitents’ lives were interconnected and their letters were extremely intimate.³⁷

In technical terms, Jeanne de Chantal had such a relationship with François de Sales.³⁸ Prior to his death, de Sales encouraged de Chantal to study more and write about her spiritual experiences, both for herself and for the public.³⁹ He groomed her as an expert on his beliefs. As her popularity as a religious leader grew, de Chantal assumed the role of the spiritual guide to all who came to her for advice.⁴⁰ In her letters on spiritualism, de Chantal guided her reader’s education focusing on biblical studies and

³⁵ Bilinkoff’s monograph is one of the most defining texts on the confessor/penitent relationship in the early modern era. Bilinkoff examines the nuances of “saint-making” in the early modern period, as confessors molded women mystics into models of piety. Her emphasis, however, is on the male confessor, as she illustrates the ways in which the *vita* these confessors wrote on their female penitents reflected the confessor’s own quest for identity. While Bilinkoff’s text has opened up a new conversation within the field of early modern religion, I disagree with her emphasis on the role of the confessor. The monograph reads as if the women within these relationships had no agency at all. In this chapter, I hope to respond to this text by showing a model of the confessor/penitent relationship, in which the woman played the role of confessor to men and women alike. Jodi Bilinkoff, *Related Lives: Confessors and Female Penitents* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), x.

³⁶ Bilinkoff, *Related Lives*, x.

³⁷ Bilinkoff, *Related Lives*, ix-11.

³⁸ Bilinkhoff, *Related Lives*, 83-88; Ruth Manning, “A Confessor and His Spiritual Child: François de Sales, Jeanne de Chantal, and the Foundation of the Order of the Visitation,” *Past and Present* (2006). Manning’s article is one of the only quasi-academic texts which looks specifically at de Sales and de Chantal’s relationship as confessor and penitent. The article argues that their relationship developed from one of “director and directed” to one of “mutual love, trust, and frankness.” Unfortunately, it does not explore de Chantal as much, but rather focuses on de Sales and his importance in the world around him. Moreover, Manning puts de Sales as the central figure behind the Visitation and its ultimate spiritual director. Manning does not assign any agency to de Chantal, something which my analysis of her corrects by placing de Chantal as a spiritual director within her own right. Manning, “Confessor and His Spiritual Child,” 109.

³⁹ Bilinkoff, *Related Lives*, 83-85; Manning, “Confessor and His Spiritual Child,” 107-108.

⁴⁰ De Chantal never attempted to fully replace the male confessor by administering the sacraments.

texts written by de Sales and walked her penitents through meditations. She emphasized her own spiritual journey, encouraging those to whom she wrote to look past their hardships in their quest for a relationship with the divine. She also forged longterm relationships with her penitents, often writing to them for years.⁴¹ It was through her relationships with her penitents that de Chantal became the spiritual equivalent of the male confessor.

Letter writing was part of the confessor/penitent tradition. Confessors and penitents were not always together and thus utilized the letter to continue their conversations. As Bilinkoff wrote, “...some priests became renowned for their ability to advise, console, and edify via the written word. By the seventeenth century...letters of spiritual direction had gained new respect as a literary genre.”⁴² These letters went both ways, as nuns “compensated for the physical proximity now forbidden in the post-Tridentine convent.”⁴³ As Bilinkoff pointed out, there was no set formula for these letters, however, there were certain elements: advice, consolation, and edification. Letters between confessors and penitents were also intimate, expressing endearments indicative of the personal relationships between the confessor and penitent.⁴⁴ De Chantal’s letters of “spiritual direction” fell into this category, as she advised, consoled, and morally instructed her various penitents in her letters, while giving individual attention that belies the presence of methodical similarities.

⁴¹ This observation comes from my own readings of the collections. The same names came up over and over again, such as Noël Brulart, Marguerite Favrot, Péronne Marie de Chatel, or Marie de Blonay, both discussed within this paper. In many cases, the women de Chantal wrote to were superiors within her order, whom she guided through meditations and prayers. These letters spanned decades at times. Within each of these letters, de Chantal created personal connections, which I will explore within this chapter. Others have analyzed de Chantal’s discourse and come to the same conclusion I have, most particularly Wendy M. Wright, “Introduction,” in *Letters of Authority*, 89.

⁴² Bilinkoff, *Related Lives*, 24.

⁴³ Bilinkoff, *Related Lives*, 24.

⁴⁴ Bilinkoff, *Related Lives*, 24.

De Chantal's Spirituality

De Chantal lived during a period in which there was a revival of the mystic tradition, which she and the Salesian movement were a part of.⁴⁵ Early modern mysticism combined sensualism and intellectualism to allow men and women to express their physical and mental experiences with the divine. For women, mysticism was an acceptable venue for feminine spiritual authority, particularly within the confines of the convent.⁴⁶ In some ways, mysticism circumvented the authority of the male confessor. As mystics, women were able to openly write about their religious experiences, ask questions, and interact with other religieuses throughout the world without needing the permission of their confessor or local priest. At the same time, mysticism symbolized the relationship between the female penitent and the male confessor.⁴⁷ As Sylvia Evangelisti writes, “[c]laiming to be inspired by God, women [mystics] wrote their spiritual autobiographies in response to requests or even orders from their confessors or other clergymen in their circles of acquaintance.”⁴⁸ Female mystics had to rely on their relationships with their confessors in order to create a place for themselves within the hierarchy of Catholicism. Female mystics were thus able to express their beliefs on religious matters and express their own religiosity while at the same time working within the confines of the traditional confessor/penitent model.

⁴⁵ Silvia Evangelisti, *Nuns: A History of Convent Life 1450-1700* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 17; R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The World of Catholic Renewal 1540-1770* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 123, 143.

⁴⁶ Evangelisti, *Convent Life*, 70-71; Hsia, *Catholic Renewal*, 143. Also see Nicky Hallett, *The Senses in Religious Communities, 1600-1800: Early Modern 'Convents of Pleasure,'* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).

⁴⁷ It must be noted that there were a few early modern male mystics. Hsia, *Catholic Renewal*, 141-142.

⁴⁸ Evangelisti, *Convent Life*, 73.

One of the key tenants of mysticism and Salesian philosophy was the belief in a personal relationship between the divine and the individual. De Chantal built this ideal into her writings, instructing those seeking her advice to spend time alone meditating.⁴⁹ Through intense study of the gospels and theological literature, de Chantal believed that the individual could completely submit to the divine. As she wrote to Sister Marie de Chantal Delapierre, the superior at the house at Sainte-Maire, “God wonderfully protects the souls who seek only him, and when they follow him with humility and simplicity, he gives them divine guidance and loving providence.”⁵⁰ Careful study and submission were a part of the process of creating a link to God.

De Chantal believed that a part of the process of creating a relationship with the divine was spiritual torture as the soul strove towards perfection. This belief was not unique to de Chantal, as various Christian traditions, particularly mysticism, throughout the medieval and early modern eras emphasized the importance of suffering for Christ.⁵¹ De Chantal wrote in an undated letter to one of her nuns that it was through suffering an illness or spiritual malady that the soul could prove its worthiness to its heavenly father. The suffering would challenge the integrity of the perfect soul, and did not have to be welcomed by the penitent, though it was “still better, if...[the] desire for suffering

⁴⁹ Manning, “Spiritual Child,” 103-107.

⁵⁰ . “...Dieu protège merveilleusement les âmes qui ne cherchent que lui, et, quand elles le suivent avec humilité et simplicité, il a pour elles une conduite toute divine et une providence toute amoureuse....” Jeanne de Chantal, “A Madame de Toulangeon,” in *Lettres Inédites*, ed. François de Rabutin, (Charleston, Nabu Books, 2012), 17. Also see de Chantal, “A la M^{me} [A la M^{re} Gabrielle Bailly], in *Lettres Inédites*, 65; de Chantal, “A la S^{œur} Claire-Marie Françoise de Cuisance,” in *Lettres Inédites*, 306.

⁵¹ See for example, Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987); Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1-73; Hsia, *Catholic Renewal*, 125-156.

increases....”⁵² De Chantal emphasized that although the penitent should welcome pain as a sign of the holy state of their soul, the suffering should not be self-inflicted physical pain nor should it come from extreme penance, such as fasting.⁵³ In a 1634 letter to Noël Brulart, the Commandeur de Sillery, de Chantal emphatically wrote that he must not overly perform any more “austerities,” because of his advancing age.⁵⁴ Through suffering and personal time spent in meditation de Chantal believed that others could reach a personal connection with the divine, just as she had.

Letter to A Nun within the Visitation

De Chantal invited all the women within her houses to write to her concerning their fears and to ask for advice, while setting up a spiritual support. De Chantal wrote letters to novices, encouraging them to listen to their mother superiors, as well as letters to mother superiors on how to act as spiritual guides.⁵⁵ De Chantal added that the women within her houses should also talk to their male confessor in times of immense spiritual tribulation.⁵⁶ Despite arranging a support system within each of the houses of the Visitation, de Chantal emphasized her own role as the ultimate authoritative spiritual

⁵² Jane Frances de Chantal, “Drawn to Simplicity,” in *A Simple Life*, ed. Kathryn Hermes (Boston: Pauline Books & Media), 60.

⁵³ This standpoint was drastically different from de Sales, who emphasized the penitent’s active role in punishing their body.

⁵⁴ de Chantal, “[To Noël Brulart] [Annency, 1634],” in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, ed. Wendy M. Wright et al. (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 193. De Chantal also wrote to several women of varying positions within her houses, warning them to cease in their over the top penitence. See de Chantal, “A Notre Sœur Marie-Aimée de Morville,” in *Lettres Inédites*, 522.

⁵⁵ See de Chantal, “A La Sœur Marguerite Favrot,” in *Lettres Inédites*, 339,

⁵⁶ De Chantal allowed for spiritual confessors for each of her houses, choosing men who had the same values as she did. The role of these priests was to provide the sacrament of confession and as a confidant for the women within these houses. See for example, de Chantal, “A Madame la Duchesse de Nemours,” in *Lettres Inédites*, 3; de Chantal, “A la Mème [A La Mère Marie-Aimée de Blonay (Undated)],” in *Lettres Inédites*, 93; de Chantal, “A la Mème [A La Mère Marie-Aimée de Blonay (15 Julliett)],” in *Lettres Inédites*, 98.

leader, one which she was able to fulfill through her letters, including an undated letter written to an unnamed sister of the Visitation.⁵⁷

The letter began with the response to a question posed by the unknown reader: “Most willingly will I give you some signs by which you shall know if your repose and quietude at prayer are good and God -given.”⁵⁸ The opening implied that the nun who had written to de Chantal was worried about the state of her soul, and her supposed lack of progress in creating a relationship with the divine. Through her introduction, de Chantal began to connect to her reader, emphasizing that she would “most willingly” help. The tone was authoritative and intimate, indicative of the relationship between the women and continued throughout the letter.

De Chantal began to outline some ways in which the nun would know she had achieved a level of spiritual superiority and that her “repose and quietude at prayer are good and God-given.”⁵⁹ She wrote that one must be “simple, sincere, upright, candid,” and “humble in suffering your infirmities.”⁶⁰ Suffering for the divine was part of the process of pleasing God, for “if your desire for suffering increases, regardless of relief, or contentment other than the happiness of giving pleasure to your Spouse [Christ].”⁶¹ De Chantal implied that there were levels of achievement, moving from mere “humbly” suffering to the “desire for suffering” to suffering for the divine without thought. These levels were part of the step by step manual which de Chantal constructed for the nun on

⁵⁷ The collection from which this comes does not give the circumstances of the letter.

⁵⁸ de Chantal, “Drawn to Simplicity,” in *Simple Life*, 57.

⁵⁹ de Chantal, “Drawn to Simplicity,” in *Simple Life*, 60. Ardity is “[i]n ascetical theology, the state of a soul devoid of sensible consolation, which makes it very difficult to pray. It may be caused by something physical, such as illness, or voluntary self-indulgence, or an act of God, who is leading a person through trial to contemplation.” “Ardity,” *CatholicCulture.org*, accessed April 2, 2014, <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/dictionary/index.cfm?id=31969>.

⁶⁰ de Chantal, “Drawn to Simplicity,” in *Simple Life*, 60.

⁶¹ de Chantal, “Drawn to Simplicity,” in *Simple Life*, 60.

her journey to spiritual perfection. This personal quest was a long process, done solely for the reward of Christ's pleasure. But becoming willingly to suffer for the divine was not easy.

As the letter progressed, de Chantal wrote openly about the problems associated with extensive meditation and prayer, acknowledging the nun's supposed feelings of inferiority. She hoped to soothe the novice. De Chantal argued against the idea that woman should give up such attempts at a personal connection to God, because it was too difficult: "[a]nd moreover, my dear Daughter, this I maintain: your attraction is undoubtedly good and it is from God."⁶² In this phrase, de Chantal brushed aside any fears the nun might have that her desire for a contemplative life was abnormal. De Chantal's insistence that the nun should continue to move forward also reaffirmed her role as feminine spiritual guide for she believed that the nun had a special connection with the divine that needed to be cultivated or else it would go to waste. She did not want any particularly gifted nuns to stop their journey. Thus, she affirmed to the nun, her "dear Daughter," that the presumably younger woman was one of the special ones and what she experienced was from God.

De Chantal then comforted the nun, using food imagery. She wrote "Do not be anxious about the nourishment of your soul...and although it seems that your soul is slumbering, believe me it is not without nourishment ; it is partaking good and delicious food."⁶³ She built upon this sentiment towards the end of the letter by adding "[b]ut being so completely taken up with the love of Jesus, upon which you feast, it takes no

⁶² de Chantal, "Drawn to Simplicity," in *Simple Life*, 60.

⁶³ de Chantal, "Drawn to Simplicity," in *Simple Life*, 60.

notice of the other banquets that he provides for....”⁶⁴ De Chantal assured the nun that the sister’s efforts may seem fruitless at the moment but were all a part of her personal growth. In providing this comfort, de Chantal drew upon well-established food imagery. As Caroline Bynum wrote in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, the image of the banquet, or feast, had long been a part of the mystic tradition. The feast represented the divine Eucharist, in which the faithful consumed the body and blood of Christ. The physical act of eating represented the spiritual act of becoming part of the divine.⁶⁵ De Chantal replicated this message, writing of the divine “banquet” which provided “nourishment” to the soul, despite the soul’s supposed inactivity. This was all part of becoming part of the divine.

De Chantal knew that she could strengthen her penitent’s resolve through the image of the feast, however, she also needed to point out what would happen if the nun strayed from the path. She thus gave a warning: “[the soul]takes no notice of the other banquets that he provides for, and so it must be, or else the soul puts herself in danger of falling from her place.”⁶⁶ The reference again was part of the mystic tradition. It reflected a belief that in order to partake of the divine feast, the penitent must give up worldly goods. To fail to do so meant that the penitent would not receive the divine reward of the holy feast, or complete assimilation to the divine.⁶⁷ De Chantal warned the nun of what might happen should the nun stray from the spiritual path- she would “[fall] from her place,” or the fall from divine grace. For the devout, the fall from grace would be devastating. De Chantal cared about the nun’s spiritual journey and thus wanted to

⁶⁴ de Chantal, “Drawn to Simplicity,” in *Simple Life*, 60.

⁶⁵ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 3.

⁶⁶ de Chantal, “Drawn to Simplicity,” in *Simple Life*, 61.

⁶⁷ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 3.

prevent the nun she valued from experiencing this desolation.

Throughout this and other letters, de Chantal approximated some of the spiritual role of the male confessor and demonstrated her authority in this position through her discussion of how the women within her order should proceed in their spiritual journeys. She tailored her message specifically for the women within her houses and allowed for human suffering and frustration in this process, while following the basic model of letters of spiritual direction (advice, comfort, and edification). In doing so, de Chantal argued that these women were on the right track, yet should continue to seek guidance. She implied that by reading her work these nuns no longer had to go exclusively to the priest, except for the sacraments, but rather had a new person to go for spiritual guidance.

Letter to Noël Brulart

De Chantal wrote “letters of spiritual direction” not just to the women within her convents but also to members of the clergy. This was surprising given the power structures that placed women in subordinate positions under the priest. Only mystics and a few other women in positions of authority were able to change this dynamic, as they became the spiritual guides. De Chantal was one of these women. Her reversal of the traditional power structure with priests was evident in her letters as she became the dominant guide.

One of De Chantal’s favorite ‘penitents’ was Noël Brulart, Commandeur de Sillery. Only a bare outline of his life is known. Brulart was a diplomat, serving in Spain and Rome. He renounced the world to take holy vows in 1632 and that same year began to correspond with de Chantal, whom he had heard of from Vincent de Paul, a

priest associated with the Visitation.⁶⁸ Brulart wrote to de Chantal, detailing all his trials, frustrations, and pains until his death in 1640. She responded kindly, encouraging him in certain practices, while discouraging others. She sympathized with his troubles and trials, writing in 1640 that his inability to fully concentrate during his devotions was a common occurrence among new practitioners to the cloistered and that he could get through it.⁶⁹ Her emphasis on his trials and her role as confident left no doubt that she was the superior one in their relationship.

Even from their first letter, de Chantal enacted her role as a leader.⁷⁰ She began by forging a personal relationship with the man. She emphasized the fact that she did not know the man writing to her, and could only write based on what she knew of him. There was a hope that she and Brulart could become better acquainted so that her letters might become more personal.⁷¹ She wrote that she was honored that Brulart was writing to her, a woman who is “content to admire and desire the excellence which I recognize in this great Saint [de Sales] without seriously applying myself...”⁷² De Chantal’s expressed awe of de Sales was a rhetorical device. She wanted to place herself in the same position as Brulart, someone who knew what spiritual greatness was, but who had not taken the steps to achieve it. De Chantal contrasted this humility in the next part of the letter as she began to assess Brulart’s spiritual progress thus far, evoking her role as a director, not a penitent.

De Chantal acknowledged Brulart’s current work. Drawn to various forms of religiosity, Brulart had already read some of de Sale’s writings, as de Chantal recognized:

⁶⁸ Wendy M. Wright et al, “Letters to the Commandeur de Sillery,” in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 185.

⁶⁹ de Chantal, “[To Noël Brulart] [Annecy, 1640],” in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 198.

⁷⁰ Source is in English.

⁷¹ de Chantal, “[To Noël Brulart] February 1632,” in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 186.

⁷² de Chantal, “[To Noël Brulart] February 1632,” in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 186.

“His writings [de Sales], which you are reading so carefully and lovingly, are full of this doctrine [reference to a previous remark about how God’s hand guides those who are willing]. I am sure, Sir, that you find them in all the satisfaction and instruction that your dear, deserving soul needs.”⁷³ Her tone was warm and kind, giving Brulart encouragement that he was on the right track, as she she seriously evaluated the list of literature Brulart had presumably sent or described to her in a previous letter. De Chantal’s critical appraisal was more than a simple matter of Brulart’s reading material. It was an assessment of the state of Brulart’s soul. De Chantal was looking for people she could guide- a special person with a special connection. She saw that in Brulart, whom she felt had a “dear, deserving soul....” She later elaborated on her perceived state of his soul, stating that she knew “[God’s] divine light inspires you and that the warmth of his love animates you.”⁷⁴ At the end of her letter, de Chantal came back to this sentiment, writing that it was not only she who saw the state of Brulart’s soul: “Our dearest Sister Favre has written to me about you in terms that show me plainly that your virtue and devotion have powerfully won her heart and give you authority over her.”⁷⁵ These endearments were not written casually- they were de Chantal’s seal of approval.

Despite her encouragement, de Chantal pointed out areas in which Brulart could improve. She wrote, “All that remains, as our blessed Father [reference I believe to de Sales] would say, is to humble yourself profoundly under God’s holy hand, and let yourself be led....”⁷⁶ De Chantal was impressed with her pupil, but knew that he had not taken what she saw as a necessary step: submission to the divine. In her opinion,

⁷³ de Chantal, “[To Noël Brulart] February 1632,” in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 187.

⁷⁴ de Chantal, “[To Noël Brulart] February 1632,” in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 187.

⁷⁵ de Chantal, “[To Noël Brulart] February 1632,” in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 188.

⁷⁶ de Chantal, “[To Noël Brulart] February 1632,” in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 187.

Brulart needed to stop worrying and submit to the experience, allowing himself to feel, not just read. This related back to de Chantal's letter to the unnamed nun, as she also encouraged this woman to begin the journey. The difference was that in the nun's case, de Chantal used gendered language to emphasize that her penitent must submit to the suffering in order to please the divine. In Brulart's case, de Chantal wanted him to give up his will- she did not ask him to suffer.⁷⁷ Brulart's lack of submission to the divine was the only real criticism de Chantal had with his education, thus far.

In closing her letter, de Chantal continued building her personal relationship with Brulart. She emphasized her role as a trustworthy guide, writing that she would keep a certain secret Brulart had entrusted her with. She then detailed the spiritual support system Brulart could expect through his association with the Visitation.⁷⁸ It was uniquely a female support system of both de Chantal herself and two of the mother superiors within the order, with whom Brulart was already acquainted. This was in response to a request, supposedly made by Brulart in a previous letter, and one to which de Chantal had to grant permission for.⁷⁹ De Chantal added these two persons in order to make Brulart feel more comfortable- one of her priorities was the personal relationship which would help lead to the spiritual perfection of the soul. But, she emphasized the spiritual bond between herself and Brulart, "I am yours wholly in this divine Savior," a sentiment which was repeated over and over in the last lines of the letter.⁸⁰ This

⁷⁷ Indeed, de Chantal begged Brulart in later letters not to be so strict in his desire for physical pain. She worried that the ways he 'tortured' himself were affecting his health. de Chantal, "[To Noël Brulart] [Annecy 1634]," in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 193.

⁷⁸ "...I shall faithfully keep your secret, as your goodness and trust deserve." de Chantal, "[To Noël Brulart] February 1632," in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 187.

⁷⁹ "Nevertheless, since you wish, you may write to her [Mother Favre] and to our Sister Superior in town [Paris]. I think they are very fortunate to be able to communicate with you...." de Chantal, "[To Noël Brulart] February 1632," in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 188.

⁸⁰ de Chantal, "[To Noël Brulart] February 1632," in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 187, 188.

emphasis on her willingness to help and guide him was de Chantal's way of creating a lasting relationship with the priest.

The letter to Noël Brulart represented the way de Chantal took the role of spiritual confessor, or guide, seriously, and thus worked to mold those she saw as being spiritually adept into her image of what Salesianism in practice should be. It was a reversal of gender roles, one which was only allowed within the convent and the tradition of mysticism. Despite her confidence in this role, de Chantal did not always demonstrate her position as a spiritual leader by guiding those who came to her. In letters to Angélique Arnauld, de Chantal candidly explored her own weaknesses and doubts. These "confessions" were made not as a nun to a priest, but rather between two peers. This was a different type of relationship that we now turn to.

Letter to Angélique Arnauld

Throughout this chapter, I have looked specifically at instances when de Chantal used the mode of confessor/penitent as a way of demonstrating her authority. Yet, this was not always the case. When writing to those she considered her spiritual equal, de Chantal adapted a different method of asserting her position. This demonstration of authority was more subtle, although still based upon personal relationships. Instead of taking on the role of confessor, de Chantal would use such letters to discuss traditions within the medieval and early modern Catholic Church and her place within the larger picture. She let her guard down and explored her own shortcomings and trials. This was a different demonstration of de Chantal's legitimacy- it was a tacit recognition of it by herself and someone she considered to be her spiritual peer. De Chantal's position of leadership allowed her to write such people, and have such a relationship with them. It

is this type of authority that I now turn to through analysis of a letter de Chantal wrote to Angélique Arnauld.

Arnauld was the Abbess of the Abbey of Port Royal, a Jansenist institution. Like de Chantal, she was of a wealthy background, however Arnauld had never married, having dedicated herself to a religious life at a young age. Through her family connections and spiritual confessor, Jean du Vergier de Hauranne, Arnauld became interested in Jansenism and promoted it within her cloister at Port-Royal. By the early seventeenth century, she had become one of the most influential Jansenist leaders.⁸¹ The letters she wrote to de Chantal reflected the tensions of leadership- in a time when the papacy was targeting Jansenism. She was in so many ways, de Chantal's contemporary.

The letters de Chantal wrote to Arnauld were different from the ones she wrote to the superiors within her houses. These letters were not only about how to handle the novices or instructional letters on spiritualism, but also about de Chantal's and Arnauld's own spiritual doubts and trials. Each wrote to each other offering advice and consolation.⁸² De Chantal never questioned her faith or calling, but rather spoke of how hard it was to get to this spiritual connection. In 1639, Chantal wrote a letter to Arnauld in which she related a recent illness that she termed to be a trial from the divine.⁸³ After

⁸¹ Jansenism was a religio-political movement from the seventeenth and eighteenth century France, the Low Countries, and Italy. Conceived by Cornelius Otto Jansen, Jansenism defended traditional Augustine ideals. Jansenism argued that humankind was depraved due to original sin and it was only through divine grace that mankind could be saved. This was a response to the ideals of Lutheranism and Calvinism, which emphasized humanity ability to redeem itself. Politically, Jansenists wanted to curtail papal power. It set itself against the Jesuits, ones of the most powerful orders of the period, a move which helped lead to the papacy persecuting its leaders in the later half of the seventeenth century. "Jacqueline-Marie-Angélique Arnauld," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, accessed December 31, 2013, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01742a.htm>; "Jansenism," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/300421/Jansenism>.

⁸² See de Chantal et al., *D'Après Leur Correspondance, (1620-1641): Etude Historique et Critique* (Charleston: Nabu Press, 2010), 123-202.

⁸³ Original source is in French.

addressing Arnauld in the typical manner, de Chantal wrote, “I would well know if I was worthy of the suffering of the true servants of God [for] according to my sentiments I would choose the very large heart of the virtuous prelate and with the grace of good custom which he had accomplished, rather than all the bliss that one can find in that [undedicated] life.”⁸⁴ De Chantal wrote that her own priorities were wrong and that de Chantal herself must reform. There was a slight air of affectation, however de Chantal seemed to want to figure out her feelings of insufficiency.

Through her descriptions of her personal suffering, de Chantal attempted to understand her place within a larger Christian martyr tradition. She wrote of her pain and suffering, emphasizing that she saw the pain as a test, a way in which to show her worth to the divine.⁸⁵ It was due to these trials that de Chantal aligned herself with the spiritual and physical martyrs, with a combination of the mystic and martyr traditions. The martyr tales from the late Roman and early middle ages emphasized physical suffering- describing the vast rewards which one could earn from them. The early modern period revived the martyr tradition, elaborating on the theme of physical torture in Catholic missionary work, both in and outside of Europe. Such pain was the work of the devil, not of God, and was a test to try to move the future saint or martyr from the path of righteousness.⁸⁶ De Chantal was aware of these traditions and emphasized how

⁸⁴ “Ma très chère Mère, Si j’étais digne de quelque souffrance des vrais serviteurs de Dieu, je sais bien que, selon mon sentiment, je choiserais de très grand coeur celle de ce vertueux prélat, avec la grâce du bon usage qu’il en fait, plutôt que toutes les félicité qui se peuvent trouver en cette vie.” de Chantal, “Sante Chantal a la Mère Angélique [15 février 1639],” *D’Après leur Correspondance*, 178-179.

⁸⁵ de Chantal, “Sante Chantal a la Mère Angélique [15 février 1639],” *D’Après leur Correspondance*, 179.

⁸⁶ For work on martyrdom in the medieval and early modern periods, see Peter Burschel, *Sterben und Unsterblichkeit: zur Kultur des Martyriums in der frühen Neuzeit* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 2004); Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*; Gail Corrington Streete, *Redeemed Bodies: Women Martyrs in Early Christianity* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009); Karen A. Winstead, ed. *Chaste Passions: Medieval English Virgin Martyr Legends* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

terrible her suffering was and how difficult it was to handle.⁸⁷ She wrote that she was sure that the divine did not want her to suffer in such a horrendous manner, but she placed all in his hands for she knew he had a good purpose for his glory.⁸⁸

In her letters to Arnauld, de Chantal tried to understand her position as a spiritual leader, and where she fit in to the larger picture. She did not want to convert Arnauld to her way of thinking or mold Arnauld into a model of Salesianism. Instead, de Chantal candidly wrote about the spiritual and physical trials she was suffering, and wondered why, since she had worked so hard to reach the level of perfection she had. The point was not to complain or even emphasize her superiority: it was an attempt to understand what was going on in her life. This exercise of personal and spiritual exploration was a demonstration of authority for it showed de Chantal's leadership. Her position allowed for such exploration.

Conclusion

The letters in this chapter demonstrate the unique discourse through which de Chantal was able to express her authority as a spiritual leader in an era dominated by male spiritual leaders. In letters written throughout the early half of the seventeenth century, she built upon personal networks, replacing the spiritual role of male confessor in these intimate relationships with her penitents. Penitents still went to priests to receive the sacraments, however, they went to de Chantal for spiritual direction. She

⁸⁷ "Il est impossible d'exprimer la qualité de ma souffrance. Mon esprit actif et toujours réfléchissant fait toujours quelque regard, et cela l'effraye.... Quelquefois, la tête et le coeur sont si saisis que c'est chose étrange. Je tâche de souffrir tout comme que dis et ne faire aucune réflexion volontaire." de Chantal, "Sante Chantal a la Mère Angélique [15 février 1639]," *D'Après leur Correspondance*, 179-180.

⁸⁸ "Dieu ne le vœux pas, ni moi aussi...Je recommande cette affaire au bon serviteur de Dieu afin que, si c'est un dessein de Dieu, qu'il réussisse à sa gloire." de Chantal, "Sante Chantal a la Mère Angélique [15 février 1639]," *D'Après leur Correspondance*, 180.

exerted influence, inverting traditional structures within the confessor/penitent and mystic traditions and attempting to understand her place.

In the next section of this thesis, I turn from looking at the ways de Chantal demonstrated her spiritual authority to look at how she demonstrated her position as a leader of a popular order. I argue that de Chantal managed the systems she had in place to secure the order against any eventuality proved her management skills through her letters. I point to the nuances in the reasoning behind these displays, which range from it being an outcome of her position as the head of the Visitation to a performance intended to persuade an audience to remain within her network.

CHAPTER 3

LETTERS ON THE ORDER OF THE VISITATION

In this chapter, I examine how de Chantal asserted her control over the Visitation, through the mode of letters. I analyze three letters which range from the early days of the institution to the peak of its popularity in the late 1620s. The three letters include an undated one written to Mère Marie Aimée de Blonay, a mother superior within the Congregation of the Visitation, another from 1629 to an unnamed Confessor of the Visitation at Annecy, and one written in 1618 to Madame de Garès, a patron of the order. Through these letters, I illuminate the differences in how de Chantal used this authority. Her letters reinforced her control, drawing on her position and previous successes to enforce obedience and using that obedience to create a patron system which would secure the continuation of the Visitation.

Background

Jeanne de Chantal was not only a spiritual leader, but also a savvy business woman who wanted to ensure that everything within her domain ran smoothly. De Chantal promoted propaganda about her supposed seclusion but the practicality of managing a successful order demanded that de Chantal take an active role, visiting new or floundering convents if they needed her support. In addition to being physically present at her houses, de Chantal wrote letters soliciting funds, choosing confessors for her houses, and guiding mother superiors on how to help their new recruits.⁸⁹ In these

⁸⁹ For an example of letters on soliciting funds see example, de Chantal, *Lettres Inédites*, 30-31. For those on choosing confessors, see Jeanne de Chantal, "A la Mème [Mère Marie-Aimée de Blonay]," in *Lettres Inédites*, ed. François de Rabutin, (Charleston, Nabu Books, 2012), 74. For letters on guiding mother superiors see de Chantal, "Lettres a des Supérieures et Religieuse de L'Ordre," in *Lettres Inédites*, 57-507.

letters de Chantal exhibited her management skills as the basis for her authority as the leader of a series of religious houses.

De Chantal depicted her position as a leader slightly differently when writing to priests. She did not want to make this group of readers feel subjugated by her rules but rather ensure their continuing patronage to the order. De Chantal was always in need of funds as running nearly a hundred houses was an expense she herself could not bear. Financial support had to come from donations or wealthy women joining the various houses.⁹⁰ More importantly de Chantal needed political support for her order, powerful friends, secular and clerical, who would defend her against any accusations of impropriety, or worse heresy.⁹¹ She had to be above reproach and execute complete control of her houses to secure this support.

Letter to Mère Marie Aimée de Blonay

Letters to the superiors of various houses show that De Chantal maintained strict control over her convents. Many survived to this day, as de Chantal wrote these letters with the intention of them being preserved as manuals for future superiors.⁹² De Chantal made all decisions, from who was admitted to who was appointed a confessor to who was allowed to divulge information to the outside world.⁹³ She handpicked priests and mother superiors to preside over individual houses in order to be certain that her

⁹⁰ For letters on soliciting funds see example, de Chantal, "Au Mème [Commandeur de Sillery]" in *Lettres Inédites*, 29-30. For letters working to bring in wealthy novices, see de Chantal, "Au Mème [Monseigneur de Neuchèse [17 Mai], in *Lettres Inédites*, 9-11; de Chantal, "A Monseigneur l'Archevêque de Bourges [14 août 1627]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 13.

⁹¹ See for example, de Chantal, "A Mademoiselle de Chasteigner D'Abin de la Rocheposay [17 juin 1635]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 36; de Chantal, "A la Mème [Mère Marie-Aimée de Blonay]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 96; de Chantal, "A la Mème [Mère Marie-Aimée de Blonay] [25 mai]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 103-105.

⁹² See for example, de Chantal, "A la même [Mère Marié- Aimée de Blonay [undated], in *Lettres Inédites*, 206-207; de Chantal, "A la Mère Jeanne-Françoie de Valon," in *Lettres Inédites*, 480.

⁹³ This will be illustrated and discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. For other examples, see de Chantal, "To Mother Paule-Jéronyme de Monthoux [5 July 1621], in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 243-245.

instructions would be followed to the letter.⁹⁴ Anyone who disobeyed de Chantal knew that they could lose their place within the Visitation.⁹⁵

De Chantal wrote a representative letter to Mère Marie Aimée de Blonay, whom she had a long personal history and had been corresponding with for years.⁹⁶ De Blonay was the daughter of one of François de Sales' friends, Claude de Blonay.⁹⁷ Based on the clues from within de Chantal's letters, de Blonay was of a nervous disposition, and did not relish the position of mother superior.⁹⁸ At the same time, de Blonay seemingly expected some measure of favoritism, having a personal connection to de Chantal through de Sales. De Chantal wrote several times stating that she was neither being too harsh on de Blonay, nor was she treating her differently than any of the other superiors.⁹⁹ Despite their personal history, de Chantal expected de Blonay to run the Visitation's houses according to de Chantal's instructions without exception.

⁹⁴ For example, see de Chantal, "To Sister Péronne-Marie de Châtel [9 February 1616]," in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 232-234; de Chantal, "To Mother Marie-Jacqueline Favre [1617]," in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 236-237; de Chantal, "To Mother Paule-Jéronyme de Monthouglou [11 April 1621]," 243-244; de Chantal, "To Mother Marie-Madeleine de Mouxy [19 September 1622], in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 245-246.

⁹⁵ De Chantal often wrote letters to the superiors within her order which addressed various novices and nuns within the individual convents who were acting up. In many cases, she ordered (or strongly suggested) their immediate dismissal. See for example Jeanne de Chantal, "A la même [Mère Marié-Aimée de Blonay] [5 Septembre]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 85-87; de Chantal, "A la même [Mère M.H. De Chatelux,]" in *Lettres Inédites*, 290; de Chantal, "To Mother Marie-Jacqueline Favre [9 February 1616], in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 230-231; de Chantal, "To Marie-Jacqueline Favre [1617]," in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 236-237.

⁹⁶ Original source is in French.

⁹⁷ "Notes: Appendix," *Oblates of St. Frances de Sales*, accessed January 15, 2014, http://www.oblates.org/dss/spiritual_conferences/spirconf_appendixnotes.pdf.

⁹⁸ I only have de Chantal's letters to de Blonay, not visa versa, and must work from context clues in order to establish de Blonay's character. Letters to de Blonay are among the most detailed of all those written to superiors and nuns. They are also the most numerous.

In regards to de Blonay's distaste for leadership, in a letter marked the fifth of April, de Chantal argued that de Blonay was doing great work as the mother superior at her new convent, and did not need to return to her previous place at Lyon (from the grouping of the letters and dates, de Blonay's previous position had been akin to novice mistress). de Chantal, "A La Mère Marie-Aimée de Blonay [5 Avril], in *Lettres Inédites*, 71-73.

⁹⁹ de Chantal, "A la mère Marié-Aimée de Blonay," in *Lettres Inédites* 74-75.

De Chantal sent a case letter to de Blonay dated 5 September, responding to a question posed to her in the previous letter by de Blonay regarding the status of de Blonay's niece who either wanted to transfer houses or enter the order. Either way, the niece would be under direct supervision of her aunt and in response to de Blonay's request, de Chantal's answer was no.¹⁰⁰ De Chantal backed up her decision through practical reasons, suggesting that she had the order's best interests at heart. De Chantal argued that the house was filled with fifty girls, most of whom had nowhere else to go. She went on to explain that if the niece had a true religious conviction, she would be able to persevere, no matter where she was.¹⁰¹ De Chantal's justification of her actions was not normally needed, but was probably given to ward off any feelings of resentment de Blonay might have had adding an element of personal attention appropriate to the relationship.

De Chantal moved on from the more heated topic to discuss the situation regarding a superior at a different order in Avignon and the superior's confessor. An unnamed superior at another order had been served with a papal bull, a religious sanction, one that could affect all the houses in that area including de Blonay's at Annecy.¹⁰² The bull was

¹⁰⁰ "Je le voudrais, certes, ausi bien que vous, ma très-chère fille, que nous pussions retirer auprès de nous votre chère petite seconde nièce; mais cette maison est chargée de cinquante filles, sans celles qui en sont dehors, pour y revenir, et nous ne voyons même aucunes faibles et incertaines apparences de la pouvoir décharger par le moyen de quelque fondations, il ne nous est donc pas possible de la recevoir." de Chantal, "A la même [Mère Marié-Aimée de Blonay] [5 Septembre]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 86.

¹⁰¹ "Mais pusique l'on est si constamment résolu de vous garder à Lyon, il me semble que vous avez rendu assez de services à cette maison-là, et y avez été assez utile, pour qu'on fasse la charité à cette petite créature de l'y recevoir; et de vrai, si elle a la vocation religieuse et qu'elle persévère, il faut qu'elle lui procure cette charité; car vous avez plusieurs fondations en main, et vortre maison est bâtie et accommodée." de Chantal, "A la même [Mère Marié-Aimée de Blonay] [5 Septembre]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 86.

¹⁰² "Vous verrez ce que j'écris à ma soeur la supérieure d'Avignon et à M. Leur confesseur: ce n'est pas une chose nouvelle que cette bulle qu'elle nous a envoyée; 'on ne demande riend d'elle en cela de plus que ce que l'on demande de toutes les autres maisons religieuse de ce pays là...." de Chantal, "A la

not spelled out within the letter, assumingly known to de Blonay.¹⁰³ In responding to the bull, de Chantal set specific instructions which must be followed to the letter. She ordered de Blonay to give asylum to the besieged superior until the woman could go to Rome to present her case: “It is necessary [il faut que] that you [vous] send for my sister the superior so that she carries out a little of the precarious events, and it is not necessary to move on this, to go until she would go to Rome, so that nothing distorts this affair.”¹⁰⁴ The tone of the original French wording of “it is necessary,” “il faut que” leaves little doubt that de Chantal expected de Blonay to listen to her and should not deviate from her instructions.

It was not enough to order a specific response to an unappetizing situation, de Chantal felt the need to explain her reasoning, no doubt expecting that her actions within the letter were unpopular. De Chantal explained her actions by emphasizing that she was looking after the nuns of her order citing that she “never ceas[ed] to work,” for the souls” of her convents.¹⁰⁵ Yet, she stressed that she was “imperfect” in her “actions.”¹⁰⁶ De Chantal’s emotional display was a play on the message she used towards novices: if they never ceased trying they would achieve spiritual perfection. Running the houses

même [Mère Marié-Aimée de Blonay] [5 Septembre],” in *Lettres Inédites*, 86.

¹⁰³ “Nous voulons quelquefois tant pénétrer les affaires, que nous le gâtons.” de Chantal, “A la même,” *Lettres Inédites*, 86.

¹⁰⁴ “Il faut que vous mandiez à ma sœur la supérieure qu’elle mène un peu le train de sa devancière, et qu’il ne faut rien altérer en cette affaire.” de Chantal, “A la même [Mère Marié-Aimée de Blonay] [5 Septembre],” in *Lettres Inédites*, 86.

¹⁰⁵ Whole passage reads: “Hélas! ma chère fille, certes, je ne fais rien en toute ma journée qui vous puisse donner édification! Au moins, si vous voyiez l’imperfection avec laquelle je fais toutes mes actions: je ne cesse jamais de travailler, comme les mouches ne cessent de s’émouvoir; mais tout cela assez inutilement. Dieu, par sa bonté, veuille toutefois tout prendre à soi, car c’est mon désir, et qu’il profite aux âmes pour lesquelles je suis si continuellement occupée.” de Chantal, “A la même [Mère Marié-Aimée de Blonay] [5 Septembre],” in *Lettres Inédites*, 87.

¹⁰⁶ Whole passage reads: “Hélas! ma chère fille, certes, je ne fais rien en toute ma journée qui vous puisse donner édification! Au moins, si vous voyiez l’imperfection avec laquelle je fais toutes mes actions...” de Chantal, “A la même [Mère Marié-Aimée de Blonay] [5 Septembre],” in *Lettres Inédites*, 87.

was a struggle, she admitted, but one which she would never stop working to overcome. Within these few sentences, she stresses her duty to work for the best interest of the houses, using words such as “cesser” (to cease) and “occupier” (to occupy). De Chantal emphasized that she would maintain order over the Visitation.

In this letter to de Blonay, de Chantal’s authority over her houses rested on her ability to know the intimate workings within each one, and to show that she was always working for their continued survival, even if she was away. De Chantal wanted to ensure that her houses were above reproach to the outside world. In order to do so, she needed to ensure that the women within these houses always followed her rules, even if they might not like them. De Chantal knew that if she wanted her institution to succeed she had to present a model of feminine perfection, along with herself in control of every facet. De Chantal instituted this model of control within the convents and based her authority on it when writing to members of the clergy.

Letter to an Unnamed Priest

When writing to priests associated with the Visitation, de Chantal walked a thin line between demonstrating that she was a good leader and using her credibility to persuade the priest to support her actions. Given the politics of the Catholic Church, de Chantal was still answerable to the priest assigned to watch over a house or group of houses within the order.¹⁰⁷ Even though de Chantal did not want her organization to be run by the papacy, she knew that she had to follow the rules outlined by the Council of Trent, for she needed the support of the priesthood in order to protect her order against scrutiny

¹⁰⁷ The role of the priest was to provide the sacraments of the Eucharist and Confession to the nuns, as well as grant permission to travel. *The Canons and Degrees of the Council of Trent: Literally Translated. Into English. With Supplement.* (London: George Routledge and Co., 1851), Googlebooks, 219.

from archbishops and the papacy.¹⁰⁸ Despite this obstacle, de Chantal still cofounded and maintained the control over the order. She thus wrote in a way which showed she was in charge, but was only deferring to the priest out of tradition and respect for his position. Ultimately, she did what she wanted with the understanding of what was expected from her and when.

De Chantal's ability to navigate the thin line between authority and insubordination was evident in a 1629 letter she wrote to the unnamed confessor of the Congregation of the Visitation at Annecy.¹⁰⁹ This was at the height of de Chantal's popularity, after successfully running an order for nearly twenty years. In this letter, de Chantal asked permission to travel from the house she was staying at in Lyons, to the country to do some fundraising work. It was odd that de Chantal wrote to the confessor at Annecy rather than the one at Lyons, where she was staying, although this could have been a courtesy to the bishop of her primary house. Whatever the reason, de Chantal had to persuade the bishop to allow her to travel to help two struggling houses, while acting upon her position as the founder of the Visitation.

After the typical pleasantries, wishing the confessor good health and informing him of her arrival in Lyons, de Chantal explained the purpose of her letter.¹¹⁰ She wanted permission to go to Auvergne to solicit funds for two houses.¹¹¹ De Chantal emphasized

¹⁰⁸ See for example, de Chantal, "Au Doyen de Notre-Dame, Confesseur de la Visitation D'Annecy," in *Lettres Inédites*, 47; de Chantal, "Au Révérend Père Brossard [4 mars 1624], in *Lettres Inédites*, 56.

¹⁰⁹ Original source is in French. Try as I might, I cannot find the records of who was the confessor at this house.

¹¹⁰ de Chantal, "Au Doyen de Notre-Dame, Confesseur de la Visitation D'Annecy," in *Lettres Inédites*, 47.

¹¹¹ "Voilà de nouvelles instances que l'on vous fait pour me faire aller en Auvergne; pour moi je n'ai aucune inclination ni considération que pour la sainte obéissance: je n'ai pas cru que celle que vous m'avez donnée pour la Provence me donnât pouvoir d'aller en une autre province qui est en arrière de mon chemin de trois journées....Il me fait bien douze ou quinze jours pour les deux maisons de cette ville...." de Chantal, "Au Doyen de Notre-Dame, Confesseur de la Visitation D'Annecy," in *Lettres Inédites*, 47.

that she had not set out to Lyons with such an inconvenient side-trip in mind, but “new entreaties” for help from the houses had emerged.¹¹² De Chantal emphasized the necessity of this, working to persuade the confessor for permission to travel. She wrote that she could lose the patronage of the people in Auvergne if she did not take this opportunity. De Chantal’s mention of the possibility of losing future funds implied past successes, by which de Chantal had succeeded in soliciting funds and building new houses. However, she needed the official permission of her home priest in order to safely travel through France.

De Chantal thus ended her letter by creating the illusion that the authority lay in the hands of the priest, not hers. She had laid her case forward, while placing the burden on the confessor, only to make it clear that she would find another way to do the work of the divine. She wrote, “That if you do not make your decision on it, it would be necessary that we stay here a few more days, to see the mother [superiors] who desire to come, in case we cannot go to them.”¹¹³ De Chantal knew that she had to do something. She had the experience which enabled her to do the divine’s work in creating long-lasting houses and if her confessor did not agree to give her permission to travel, she would find a way to work around it. She would not disobey an order not to travel, as her

¹¹² “Voilà de nouvelles instances que l’on vous fait pour me faire aller en Auvergne; pour moi je n’ai aucune inclination ni considération que pour la sainte obéissance: je n’ai pas cru que celle que vous m’avez donnée pour la Provence me donnât pouvoir d’aller en une autre province qui est en arrière de mon chemin de trois journées....Il me fait bien douze ou quinze jours pour les deux maisons de cette ville...” de Chantal, “Au Doyen de Notre-Dame, Confesseur de la Visitation D’Annecy,” in *Lettres Inédites*, 47.

“...je n’ai pas cru que celle que vous n’avez donnée pour la Provence me donnât pouvoir d’aller en une autre province qui est en arrière de mon chemin de trois journées....” de Chantal, “Au Doyen de Notre-Dame, Confesseur de la Visitation D’Annecy,” in *Lettres Inédites*, 47.

¹¹³ “Que si vous ne le jugez à propos, il faudra que nous séjournions ici quelques jours de plus, pour y voir les mères qui désirent y venir, en cas que nous n’allions pas à elles.” de Chantal, “Au Doyen de Notre-Dame, Confesseur de la Visitation D’Annecy,” in *Lettres Inédites*, 47.

contemporary Mary Ward often did, but would find another way to work.¹¹⁴

The message within the letter was clear. De Chantal had the authority to do what she felt was necessary to facilitate the spread of the Visitation, but she also had to rely upon the good graces of the priests. The clergy were the ones who would defend her in times of trouble, or could bring her progress to a grinding halt. Her letter to this particular priest was thus crafted to walk that fine line between asking permission and telling the priest what he was going to let her do. However, the tone of her letters to her lay patrons was slightly different. In letters to patrons, de Chantal took a more modest approach, emphasizing her humility, all the while demonstrating her authority as the leader of a popular religious order.

Letter to Madame de Garès

In her letters to the laity, Chantal emphasized the importance of her order. She wrote primarily to the upper classes, from the newly wealthy to the nobility of France, as well as members of her extended family. She wrote asking for monetary donations, thanking various patrons for their protection of the order, and emphasizing the importance of the houses.¹¹⁵ She defended the order against all attacks.¹¹⁶ De Chantal also tried to recruit members for her houses from the elite classes, whom she knew would

¹¹⁴ "...je demeure en tout respect et de mon cœur, mon très-honoré et cher père..." de Chantal, "Au Doyen de Notre-Dame, Confesseur de la Visitation D'Annecy," in *Lettres Inédites*, 47.

¹¹⁵ For monetary donations, see de Chantal, "Au même [Commandeur de Sillery] [12 décembre 1639], in *Lettres Inédites*, 26-28; de Chantal, "A Madame de Haraucourt [27 avril 1633]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 31-32; de Chantal, "A Madame la comtesse de la Forêt [12 décembre 1633]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 33-34; de Chantal, "A M. Favre [10 novembre]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 34-35; de Chantal, "A Mademoiselle de Chasteigner d'Abin de la Rocheposay [17 juin 1635], in *Lettres Inédites*, 36-37. For protection see de Chantal, "A Madame de Haraucourt [27 avril 1633]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 31-32; de Chantal, "A Mademoiselle de Chasteigner d'Abin de la Rocheposay [17 juin 1635], in *Lettres Inédites*, 36-37.

¹¹⁶ See de Chantal, "A Monseigneur l'Archevêque de Bourges," in *Lettres Inédites*, 11-14; de Chantal, "A Madame de Garès [5 mai 1618], in *Lettres Inédites*, 39-40.

bring in much needed revenue and social prestige for the Visitation.¹¹⁷ But in order to secure the support of these powerful men and women, de Chantal needed to show them that she had the authority as a practical leader of a new religious order.

Unlike her letters to the nuns, letters to the laity were not written for posterity. These letters were not as well preserved and some exist only in parts. The ones that are well preserved are short and are informal in tone. One such letter was written in 1618 at the beginning of de Chantal's career to Madame de Garès, a patron of the house at Poitiers.¹¹⁸ 1618 was a stressful year. It was the year Pope Paul V canonically created the order and enclosed it under Augustine rules. He also called for the Visitation's rules to be published, or at least opened to the public.¹¹⁹ The Visitation's rules, or "règles," had been written by de Sales and de Chantal and explained how the nuns within the Visitation were supposed to behave, as well as the values of the order. De Chantal wanted the order to remain true to its original goals, rather than have the Church rewrite its rules, according to their whim. The disclosure of these rules would have caused the patron, who would have valued the privacy accorded to the Order through nondisclosure, to distrust the integrity of the project. In addition to de Chantal's concern over the rules, a recent scandal had called into question the respectability of the Visitation's members. The letter did not go into detail of what happened, other than the nun at the root of it all had been dismissed. With all these worries in mind, De Chantal wrote in haste to her patron of the house of Poitiers, to assure her that she had the situation under control.

¹¹⁷ See de Chantal, "A M. Le Prince Thomas [de Savoie] [7 octobre 1633]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 1-2.

¹¹⁸ Original source is in French.

¹¹⁹ "Visitation Order," The Catholic Encyclopedia, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15481a.htm>; de Chantal, "A Madame de Garès," in *Lettres Inédites*, 39-40.

In the first section of the letter, de Chantal described how she controlling the situation with the papacy and its demand for the publication of the rules. In order to protect the order, she knew that she had to disclose the actual rules, but only to choice persons: “I will ... send to Monseigneur de Bourges our rules and a letter to the good Father Feuillant whom I know well.”¹²⁰ The tone was regretful, for publishing the rules was a task which de Chantal did not wish to do. She explained that it must be done, but in such a way that would maintain the privacy of the order. Instead of disclosing the rules to a papal representative, de Chantal gave them to those sympathetic to their Visitation’s cause, rather than to outsiders.¹²¹ This implied that de Chantal controlled who was able to have access to the official rules of the order. De Chantal wanted de Garès to know that she would use everything in her power to prevent a further scandal and intrusion into the Visitation’s privacy.

De Chantal knew that it was not enough to have a tight reign on who was investigating the order- she had to show her patron that everything was in order. She thus encouraged de Garès to see a “Father Feuillant whom I know well,” a “good father rector,” who was the local keeper of the rules.¹²² A visit to Father Feuillant would allow de Garès the satisfaction of knowing what exactly the rules said, while still controlling what de Garès saw. Since Father Feuillant was a friend of de Chantal’s, he would keep

¹²⁰ “Je ne manquerai dès le vendredi matin d’envoyer à Monseigneur de Bourges nos règles et une lettres pour le bon père Feuillant que je connois bien.” de Chantal, “A Madame de Garès,” in *Lettres Inédites*, 39.

¹²¹ “Hélas! il faut laisser parler Monseigneur de Bourges; ce n’est pas chose qui se puisse ni se doive que de faire voir à le monde les règles de l’Institut: demandez-le voir au bon père recteur, lequel les a vues, et plusieurs autres personnes d’onneur...” “...car on ne les refuse pas aux amis qui les demandent à voir.” “Ma très-chère mère, nous sommes pour souffrir telles et semblables censures! Notre-Seigneur en a bien souffert d’autres: vraiment nous ne nous étions jamais trouvées en ville où l’on dit tant de contrôlements qu’à Bourges, ou bien, nous les laissons dire et nous irons notre petit train.” de Chantal, “A Madame de Garès,” in *Lettres Inédites*, 39-40.

¹²² “...demandez-le [les règles] voir au bon père recteur, lequel les a vues....” de Chantal, “A Madame de Garès,” in *Lettres Inédites*, 39.

anything that might worry the patron out of sight. Moreover, being de Chantal's local representative, the priest would have the power to sooth the patron, and prove that all was well within the order. By extending the invitation to allow de Garès to see the rules, de Chantal proved that she was in the control of the situation.

In ending her letter, De Chantal made it clear that she had dealt with the nun around whom all the rumors revolved.¹²³ This was particularly significant. De Chantal never mentioned the specific house where the nun was, probably because de Garès already knew. De Chantal herself was perhaps at another house in the country, not at one where the nun was, and was dealing with matters from afar. Despite her absence, de Chantal was still able to enforce obedience and dismiss the nun who had caused all this trouble. It was not enough to state that she had safeguards in place: she had to be able to deal any and all situations, no matter where she was in the country. This was the ultimate display of her authority and the ultimate act of persuasion by which de Chantal would be able to convince de Garès and other patrons that she could control the women within her order and run her houses efficiently.

Conclusion

Throughout her life, de Chantal became adept at establishing and controlling her convents for the Congregation of the Visitation. She knew how to keep her nuns obedient to her, despite her long absences from the individual houses. She could manage the priests assigned to oversee her order, adeptly walking the line between submission and power. De Chantal also knew how to persuade rich patrons to invest in her order, as well as manage publicity and the workings within the house. Through her

¹²³ "Vous [Madame de Garès] aurez déjà su que cette dame n'a été bien avertie." de Chantal, "A Madame de Garès," in *Lettres Inédites*, 40.

skill and confidence, she was able to secure the continued success of the Visitation so that it expanded long past her death.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

De Chantal's legacy has waxed and waned over the years. She was beatified in 1767 largely due to her relationship with François de Sales and role in the Visitation's founding. Her body currently lies at rest beside de Sales in Annecy, after being moved there from Moulins in the eighteenth century.¹²⁴ In recent years, there has been a revival of Salesian philosophy, with a small interest in de Chantal's spiritual message. In her introduction to the 2011 collection *A Simple Life*, Sister Kathryn Hermes describes the personal importance of Jeanne de Chantal. Hermes writes that de Chantal's message of love and "affection" resonate even to this day.¹²⁵ Despite her obvious influence over the world at her time, history has forgotten de Chantal. Even the history of her order barely mentions their founder. Websites of current houses associated with the Visitation mention de Chantal only as a cofounder. For example, the website of Visitation Nuns of Philadelphia, the city in which this thesis was written, elaborates on de Sales and his philosophies within the "Daily Life" section. De Chantal is not mentioned beyond the one sentence.¹²⁶ This omission is true of every website I visited that is hosted by the order.

It is very possible that Chantal herself was partially responsible for her obscure position in the historical narrative. De Chantal spent the last twenty years of her life promoting a cult around de Sales. I cited in a footnote in Chapter One just a few of the

¹²⁴ "St. Jane Frances de Chantal," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, accessed 31 December 2013, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08282c.htm>.

¹²⁵ Kathryn Hermes, "Foreward," in *Simple Life* (Boston: Paulist Books & Media, 2011), xvi-xvii.

¹²⁶ "Daily Life," The Visitation Nuns of Philadelphia, accessed January 15, 2014, <http://www.visitationuns.org/Daily-Life.html>.

letters she wrote which emphasized de Sale's perfection and his teachings.¹²⁷ Even the letter to Brulart demonstrated this desire to promote de Sales as de Chantal wrote of her awe for her spiritual mentor.¹²⁸ She worked so hard to create this cult around de Sales that she downplayed her own role in his spiritual formation and the success of his ideas.

Despite de Chantal's agency in creating a historical narrative based solely around de Sales, a more important reason for de Chantal's obscured place in history lies within the institution of the Catholic Church. The early modern Catholic Church was unreceptive to individual women's voices. Cults around female saints were mitigated by the male confessors. These men prepared the feminine message, interpreting and reworking parts of it. Women's female voice and agency was mitigated through the voice of the priest. De Chantal did not have this because François de Sales had died before nearly twenty years before she did. Without a male priest molding de Chantal's work after her death, her message was not easily assimilated into Catholic culture, almost becoming lost in time.

The study of Jeanne de Chantal illuminates the vibrant culture of early modern Catholicism. As a spiritual director, de Chantal drew upon the various Christian traditions, such as Augustinianism, mysticism and the confessor/penitent model, molding them to match her religious ideals. She then used letters to show her position within this world. Through her letters on spiritualism, de Chantal guided, comforted, and advised

¹²⁷ For examples, see de Chantal, "A Monseigneur L'Archevêque de Bourges [14 août 1627]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 11-13; de Chantal, "Au Commandeur de Sillery [27 avril 1638]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 23-25; de Chantal, "Au Même [Au Commander du Sillery]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 29-30; de Chantal, "A la Même [Marie-Aimée de Blonay]," in *Lettres Inédites*, 115; Jane Frances de Chantal, "Perfect Simplicity," in *A Simple Life*, ed. Kathryn Hermes (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2011), 5-8, de Chantal, "Fidelity in Prayer," in *A Simple Life*, 17-20; Jeanne de Chantal, "[To Noël Brulart] [Annecy] February 1632," in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, ed. Wendy Wright et al., trans. Péronne Marie Thibert (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 186-188; de Chantal, "[To Noël Brulart] [Annecy, 1640]," in *Spiritual Direction*, 197-203.

¹²⁸ de Chantal, "[To Noël Brulart] February 1632," in *Letters of Spiritual Direction*, 186.

her penitents. Meanwhile, her letters regarding the operation of the Visitation illustrate de Chantal's ability to control the women within her new order while at the same time securing outside patronage through these letters. The combination of these letters showed that her order was a dynamic space, in which the convent interacted with the outside world.

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