

Nunneries as an Alternative to Marriage

Cornelis Oudenaarden

Cornelis is a senior history and religious studies major and is originally from the Netherlands. His interests lie in the social history of the Reformation in Germany and the Netherlands. After IUP, he hopes to attend graduate school to study Reformation history. This paper was originally written as part of an honors thesis in history in cooperation with Dr. R. Scott Moore in the fall of 2004.

The first particular saith that you shall be obedient: to wit to him and to his commandments whatsoever they be, whether they be made in earnest or in jest, or whether they be orders to do strange things, or whether they be made concerning matters of small import or of great; for all things should be of great import to you, since he that shall be your husband hath bidden you to do them.

- The Goodman of Paris¹

During the Middle Ages women were required to marry; in her book *Women and Spiritual Equality in Christian Tradition*, Patricia Ranft says of fourth century women that “To withhold one’s virginity was to stand outside the solidarity of society, it was a deliberate choice not to join the normal structures and roles of society.”² This attitude persisted until deep into the twentieth century and was based on the Christian idea that women and men were put on Earth to procreate. The nobility during the Middle Ages was particularly invested in creating marriages that were beneficial to both families and provided proper, preferably male, offspring. For women of noble class during the ninth

through the twelfth centuries, being married was not always the most desirable state to be in. For the noblewomen who felt this way there was one relatively appealing alternative: and this was entering a convent.

Any sort of discussion concerning the subject of nunneries should start with an examination of marriage during this period and its importance to the nobility. Within the nobility, marriage served a very distinct purpose, as explained by Marilyn Yalom in her book *A History of the Wife*:

Marriage was the means by which the powerful made alliances and transmitted inheritances. Fathers had the responsibility of finding the best partners for their sons and daughters so as to ensure proper unions and maintain their status into the next generation.³

There was something very real at risk here, namely the status of a family within society. A noble family could move up in society by marrying into a higher ranking noble family, and in somewhat later times, marriage became a way for the nobility to procure wealth by marrying into the merchant class.

Since a woman's marriage served the good of the entire family, only the most stubborn of women would even suggest going against the plans made by her family.⁴ An example of a woman who did go against her family's wishes was Christina of Markyate, who was born to Beatrix and Autti in 1096 CE in "a family of 'ancient and influential English nobles' who were considerable landowners."⁵ Christina had, at a very young age, promised herself to a life in the service of God and would under no circumstances marry the man that her parents had selected for her. This kind of filial defiance turned the entire matrimonial system upside down. Christina, by not playing the role that had been

assigned to her, put her family at risk of falling into political obscurity and becoming the laughing stock of the English nobility to which they belonged. The English king himself set up the marriages of his daughters in an attempt to gain more control over the political situation in France.⁶ All of the nobility was invested in this system of using marriage to create political alliances.

At this point the question might be presented as to how marrying into a certain family could benefit a political situation in any way. The answer lies within the one thing women can do that men cannot: birth. When the English kings married their daughters off to French kings, they expected their daughters to work for them by generating a political situation that was in their favor. This was accomplished in a twofold manner; on the one hand the daughter was supposed to try and influence her husband, but more importantly she raised and therefore shaped her children. After all, the French king's first son would be the next king of France. The idea was that if the English king's daughter could raise the French king's son in such a manner that he thought positively of England, the political situation between these two countries would inevitably improve and it would provide England with a diplomatic advantage. Though it did not always work out the way it was planned, the system was in place and did not change for quite some time; to this day many of the European royal families share intricate genetic and social ties among each other.

Why would any daughter not desire to marry the man that her family had selected for her? There is a myriad of possible reasons. For one, there could be a significant age difference between the two married parties. A good example of this, though not in the time period examined, was the marriage between Mary Tudor of England and Louis XII

of France, who died New Year's Day 1515 "wasted by illness" related to his old age while she was still in her teens.⁷ Though this is an extreme example of a marriage in which the participants were over fifty years in age apart, these kinds of situations did occur. Generally speaking the age difference would have been somewhat less, but often it still would have been palpable. One can only imagine the horror that some of these women might have felt at the prospect of marrying a man their fathers' age. In addition to this, there were no guarantees that the man she was to marry was a good human being.

Today there are laws protecting both men and women against marital violence, but during the Middle Ages "battering was an accepted practice, sanctioned by law and custom, that allowed husbands to enforce authority over their wives."⁸ Apart from this sanctioned wife beating, canon law saw sex within the bounds of marriage as being inherently consensual and thus a woman could not accuse her husband of rape, which canon law saw as morally wrong act.⁹ A woman had no reprieve from a sexually or physically abusive husband. Given that marriage was an agreement between two families the daughter had little to no influence as to whom she was going to marry.

In addition to the possibility of marrying an undesirable man there were a number of other things concerning marriage with which a woman might take issue. Most medieval legal systems were set up so that a woman's legal rights were "defined by her age and marital and social status and even her place of residence."¹⁰ However, of these, the most important factor was whether or not a woman was married.¹¹ A woman's legal rights were greatly subordinate to the legal rights of her husband. A married woman had her lands transferred to her husband, could not enter into a contract, and could not have a lawsuit brought against her in court.¹² From a legal point of view the wife was simply a

lesser human being. She was the legal property of the husband, and in general the law treated her as such. A good example of this is that common law saw rape not as a crime against morality, but rather as a crime against property.¹³ Of course, in reality a woman's legal position could not always be held to such a strict definition. After all, if a woman could not enter into a contract she could not go to the market and purchase goods for the household. Within actual society her legal rights were made somewhat more lenient to enable her to enter into minor contracts for the good of her household. However, from a technical point of view her husband could still contend in court that the sale was invalid. So when a woman married she had to accept that "for the duration of the marriage" she lost control of all her rights.¹⁴ In reality, the best position for a woman to be in was to be widowed, because only when widowed did she have any form of control over her own fate rather than either her father or her husband.

The importance of procreation within a marriage cannot be understated. Not only did procreation serve as the fulfillment of the alliance between two families, but it was also considered to be a moral obligation. In an age when birth-control was still limited to coitus interruptus and the rhythm method women could expect to be pregnant frequently before they finally reached menopause. It was not uncommon for women to have a great number of children in their lifetime; however, often it was that relatively few of these children survived childhood. This does not detract from the fact that every time a woman was pregnant her own health was at risk, especially during the actual process of giving birth.

During the Middle Ages, we find that common women giving birth were often attended to by the village midwife. This title of village midwife really had relatively little

to do with a woman's actual medical knowledge; rather, it was related to her reputation. Any woman who "set up in practice as a physician outside the limits of her home and pretended to something more than the skill of an amateur" would generally provoke an outcry.¹⁵ Though there were women who gained the reputation of having medical knowledge, "women had no medical degrees" and were therefore considered to have "no knowledge or training" by the established elite.¹⁶ The village midwife had normally gained a reputation of being a wise woman, a description we still find in the French word for midwife: *sage-femme*, which literally means "wise-woman." These women were generally older, had had a number of children themselves, and had attended a number of other successful births. As stated, the scientific medical knowledge these women had is debatable, since much was based on folklore and things learned through trial and error.

It is hard to say whether or not women within the nobility used midwives or physicians during the process of childbirth, but a good guideline would be that the lower the status of the noble family in question, the more likely they were to use a midwife over a physician. This is not to imply that physicians were more skilled than midwives, although their techniques were at least based on accepted medical practice, mostly also procured through trial and error. One of the most famous physicians of the period was a person called Trotula of Salerno, "for whom no substantive historical evidence has ever been brought forth."¹⁷ Supposedly she was the first female professor of medicine. She lived in a town by the name of Salerno and wrote a book called *On the Diseases of Women*; however, a number of sources hold that Trotula was not an actual person and that the text attributed to her was written by several men.¹⁸ Even if Trotula was not a woman or did not write *On the Diseases of Women*, the text still gives us a valuable insight into

development of medical knowledge aimed at women during this period. *On the Diseases of Women* “reflects the problems and horrors of childbirth in the whole pre-industrial era, during which doctors and midwives had few aids other than potions and poultices.”¹⁹

Take for example the prescription “On Extracting the Dead Fetus”:

Those who labor excessively in giving birth to a dead fetus we assist thus. Let us place the patient on a linen sheet and let us have it held by four strong men at the four corners, the head of the patient a little bit elevated. We will make the sheet be *pulled* strongly this way and that at the opposite corners, and immediately she will give birth.²⁰

Whether the woman is supposed to fall back onto the sheet or if the sheets are actually removed from under her is not clear from the text, but the danger in the procedure becomes apparent even if we consider the lesser of the two evils. Since there is no guarantee that the men will be able to hold the sheet or that the sheet itself will hold, there is always the possibility of the pregnant woman falling on the ground which could result in a number of injuries.

From the discussion above it becomes clear that marriage might not always have been a desirable state for women during the Middle Ages. However, there was little else these noblewomen could do. Noblewomen were simply required to marry as their familial obligation not only to form alliances, but also to have offspring. There was only one alternative to marriage for noblewomen during this period and that was joining a monastery, which had several advantages over marriage. One of these advantages was that in a monastic setting a woman was finally able to exercise some control over her own

life rather than being bound by what the men had chosen for her. An extreme example of this is found in double monasteries.

Seventh-century England was characterized by the popularization and spread of the monastery type known as the double monastery.²¹ The idea behind these double monasteries was really quite revolutionary. Double monasteries were often “headed by an abbess who supervised both monks and nuns.”²² Double monasteries gave women the opportunity to not only exercise control over their own lives, but also over the lives of men. This was unheard of in medieval society, where no woman should ever be in control of a man. In any case, it would appear that the Catholic Church felt the same way, because at the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 CE it was decided “that from henceforth no double monastery shall be erected.”²³ In addition to the decree by the Second Council of Nicaea many double monasteries did not survive the Danish invasions of the eight and ninth centuries CE.²⁴ Though this particular institution died out in the ninth century CE, it is a good example of what monastic life had to offer to women: a hierarchical structure controlled by women, at least within their own monastery.

A good example of this we find in the life of Hildegard of Bingen, one of the most prominent nuns of the twelfth century CE, who was appointed to the position of abbess after nearly three decades of being a nun, the nuns within her monastery being accountable to her.²⁵ However, it is important to note that Hildegard and the nuns still had to answer to the monks and the abbot of the nearby male monastery.²⁶ The main reason why these nuns still had to answer to the monks and the abbot at the male monastery (in Hildegard’s case this monastery was Disibodenberg) has to do with the fact that the men were considered their religious superiors. Traditionally, women were not

been allowed to preach or take confession. This Catholic doctrine is based in part on a letter from Paul to the Corinthians: "...women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says."²⁷ This was also the case during the period while there were still double monasteries. Even then women were not allowed to preach and thus had to rely on monks to perform the religious services. Spiritual inequality for these nuns thus becomes evident in the established doctrine of the period, a doctrine that still haunts the Catholic Church today. However, the fact still remains that within their own monasteries these women could exercise a degree of independence that was unheard of in medieval society.

This is not to say that noblewomen who were married never exercised any control over men or over their own destiny within medieval society, but the difference lies in the fact that this power could only be exercised because of the absence of her husband or the delegation of these tasks by her husband. The simple reality of life was that men within the nobility often left to participate in military campaigns, and during these instances "the family home was left in the capable hands of their wives."²⁸ So a woman was indeed called upon from time to time to set up the defense of her husband's estates. After all, the lands of a member of the nobility who was off to fight in a military campaign with his lord and most likely a relatively large portion of his military forces would have been a prime target for any other member of the nobility looking to take over those lands. In addition to this, noblewomen were generally in charge of the household, and the point can be made that "as effective and efficient administrators, noblewomen could hold considerable economic power."²⁹ However, it is important to realize that at all times noblewomen were under the control of their husbands. Their responsibility was granted

to them by their husbands and could be taken away from them with equal ease. The only reason why noblemen did not do these things themselves in the first place was because they were too busy with politics and especially the continual preparation for battle, for “the noble endowed with wealth and freedom from the necessity of working for his living was the only effective soldier.”³⁰ Once more, it was merely because their husbands were too busy that women were granted this power; however, in nunneries there were no husbands to be busy, so everything depended on the nuns themselves.

The control of the nunnery and all its aspects was in the hands of women and a nun ultimately only answered to her abbess and her peers, who were all women. In actuality, running a nunnery was much like running a nobleman’s estate, depending on its wealth, since virtually all nunneries “employed cooks, maids, and laborers, and a large establishment typically had butler, brewer, baker, maltster, dairy woman, housekeeper, laundress, even private servants for individual nuns.”³¹ Nunneries generally owned land and were given endowments by the nobility. Thus, there was a whole administrative and economic aspect to these nunneries that the nuns themselves attended too. Some women might have thought it a good thing that rather than working for a husband they were working for themselves and their fellow sisters. Those who chose the monastery over marriage might have felt that it was good to be working for a spiritual cause, something that was greater than doing it because a husband had told them to do it.

In addition to not having to work for their husbands, nuns were also able to develop their education within nunneries. It is important to realize that, because noblewomen were responsible for the administration and general economy of the household, they were more likely than their husbands to be literate.³² So noblewomen,

even if they had not been married, were more likely to be more highly educated than noblemen, simply because the virtue of being literate was held to be more important for future wives than for future knights. Nunneries provided women with the tools necessary to enhance their education. Just like monasteries, nunneries generally had a library in which books could be read and a scriptorium in which they could be copied. It is from this type of education that we get masterpieces as written by Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, who was a canoness living in the Imperial Abbey of Gandersheim and was born between 930 and 940 CE.³³ Her works consisted of hagiographies in the form of plays. The reading of plays was actually “a large part in recommended daily activity” in nunneries.³⁴ Monastic life included a lot of time for reflection and personal development; hence it was the ideal place for female intellectuals who “thrived mostly in monastic settings.”³⁵ This is not to say that there were no female intellectuals outside of nunneries, but part of the attractiveness of nunneries to these women was in the fact that nunneries supported their intellectual activities and provided a safe environment, away from men, to develop them. So it came to be that on occasion powerful women joined nunneries for safety.³⁶

Another reason why nunneries might have been an attractive alternative to marriage was the very nature of it being such a well-regulated institution. During the ninth through the twelfth century CE the predominant rule for nunneries was the *Rule of Saint Benedict*.³⁷ The Benedictine rule was a relatively strict rule that allowed for little variation. As a result of this, a woman living in a Benedictine nunnery would always know her schedule. Literally every aspect of life was controlled within a Benedictine nunnery. An example of this is food and drink: “whether at noon or in midafternoon, it is enough, we believe, to provide all tables with two kinds of cooked food because of

individual weaknesses” and “we believe that a half bottle of wine a day is sufficient for each.”³⁸ Other prescriptions made in *The Rule of Saint Benedict* included daily manual labor: “the brothers should have specified periods for manual labor as well as for prayerful reading.”³⁹ This kind of structured life would have been a welcome variation on the life generally led by women living outside of the convents. In the outside world one never knew what was going to happen; even a noblewoman could become a widow overnight, her husband having died in battle. Though the nobility virtually never went hungry, with perhaps the exception of the extremely poor nobility, at least the monastery gave one the assurance of a meal at regular intervals.

Though stories like those of Christina of Markyate, who refused to marry the man selected for her, did occur, often the nobility supported the entering of a nunnery by one of their own. An example of this is the founding of the nunnery at Shaftesbury by King Alfred of England for his daughter in the early tenth century CE.⁴⁰ The man who founded a nunnery and allowed his daughter to enter it could have a great variety of motives. Some of these motives were of course related to religion; the establishment of a nunnery could be considered pious and it could also put one in favor with the religious establishment. However, the reality was that founding a nunnery did not actually require a donation of any of property to the church since usually a relative was going to be in charge of it. An example of this is the Bishop Gauzelin of Toul who “founded a house near the village of Bouxières in Lorraine.”⁴¹ In his book *Women’s Monasticism and Medieval Society*, Bruce Vernarde notes that according to the editor of the charter, “the relation of Gauzelin to this clan [his family] and the bishop’s burial at the convent indicate that the early history of the house was a family matter.”⁴² So in reality, a family

lost relatively little by donating its resources to a monastery because it still remained within the family. Another argument why nobles might not mind their daughters joining a convent was because the late eleventh century brought what Vernarde describes as a “matrimonial crisis,” according to Vernarde:

A complex system of prohibitions of marriage between families already linked by blood or marriage meant that many otherwise desirable marriages were impeded, especially between people of similar social station.⁴³

There were simply not enough males of equal or higher social status to go around, and the only thing worse than not marrying at all was marrying someone of lesser status.

So it becomes evident that nunneries had a lot to offer women during this period. The marriage of noblewomen just was not the fairy tale found in children’s books. Johann Busch, a Saxon reformer, documented a conversation he once had with the Duchess of Brunswick, in which she is supposed to have said:

I have lived here in this castle like an anchoress in a cell. What delights or pleasures have I enjoyed here, save that I have made shift to show a happy face to my servants and the gentlewomen?⁴⁴

Though this was during the early fifteenth century, for many noblewomen the prospect of marriage was just as described by the Duchess of Brunswick. Nunneries had a certain appeal to them; they were places where woman could take control of her life, could develop herself, and could lead life in a peaceful environment. Joining a monastery was also something that a father and a family could agree to as well. All in all, the life of a nun was an appealing alternative to getting married.

-
- ¹ “The Goodman of Paris,” n.d., available at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/goodman.html> (accessed 8 December 2004).
- ² Patricia Ranft, *Women and Spiritual Equality in Christian Tradition* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2000), 54.
- ³ Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Wife* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2002), 49.
- ⁴ *Ibid*, 51.
- ⁵ Monica Furlong, *The Life of Christian of Markyate*, trans. Monica Furlong (London: Arthur James Ltd., 1997), 13.
- ⁶ Robert Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings 1075-1225* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 46.
- ⁷ Maria Perry, *The Sisters of Henry VIII* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000), 108.
- ⁸ Yalom, 47.
- ⁹ Linda E. Mitchell, ed., *Women in Medieval Western European Culture* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), 150.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*, 118.
- ¹¹ *Ibid*.
- ¹² *Ibid*, 121-125.
- ¹³ *Ibid*, 149.
- ¹⁴ Eileen Power, *Medieval Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 30.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, 78.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, 79.
- ¹⁷ Monica H. Green, *The Trotula: An English Translation of the Medieval Compendium of Women’s Medicine*, trans. Monica H. Green (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), XI.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*.
- ¹⁹ Frances Gies and Joseph Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), 5.
- ²⁰ Green, 92.
- ²¹ Ranft, 118.
- ²² Mitchell, 285.
- ²³ Ranft, 120.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*, 121.
- ²⁵ Fiona Maddocks, *Hildegard of Bingen: The Woman of her Age* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 54.
- ²⁶ *Ibid*, 54.
- ²⁷ 1 Corinthians 14.34. Wayne A. Meeks et al., eds, *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 2160.
- ²⁸ Mitchell, 10.
- ²⁹ *Ibid*, 216.
- ³⁰ Sidney Painter, *French Chivalry: Chivalric Ideas and Practices in Mediaeval France* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1951), 2.
- ³¹ Gies, 73.
- ³² Mitchell, 12.
- ³³ Katharina Wilson, *Hrotsvit of Ganderheim: A Florilegium of Her Works* (Rochester: Boydell & Brewer Ltd., 1998), 2.
- ³⁴ Mitchell, 334.
- ³⁵ *Ibid*, 332.
- ³⁶ *Ibid*, 337.
- ³⁷ *Ibid*, 287.
- ³⁸ St. Benedict, *The Rule of Saint Benedict* (New York: Random House Inc., 1981), 40-41.
- ³⁹ *Ibid*, 47.
- ⁴⁰ Bruce L. Vernerde, *Women’s Monasticism and Medieval Society: Nunneries in France and England, 890-1215* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 21.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid*, 29.
- ⁴² *Ibid*, 30.
- ⁴³ *Ibid*, 93.
- ⁴⁴ Power, 28.