

The Embodiment of Truth and Sanctity: Women's Deathbed Conversions and Confessional Conflict in Seventeenth-Century France

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After the Wars of Religion in France in 1598, the confrontation between Catholics and Protestants continued in polemical publications, which often narrated the religious changes of converts between the rival faiths. Deathbed conversions were seen as particularly significant because Christians approaching death faced the supreme moment of truth. This essay examines Catholic accounts of the deathbed scenes of two women. Given that women were often characterised as sinful and likely to make wrong religious choices, it may seem surprising that the Catholic Church would advertise the women's deathbed conversions. But because female spirituality had long been linked to women's physical nature, while that of men was associated with their rational faculties, polemicists could easily draw spiritual truths from women's physical suffering on their deathbeds. Women converts could thereby meet the expectations of the Church's teachings on the "good death", and they could become important markers of religious truth.

The end of the Wars of Religion in France in 1598 did not end the discord between the kingdom's Catholics and Protestants.¹ Despite a widespread desire for peace and a monarchy determined to enforce it, confrontations continued in law courts, public debates, and fierce polemical publications.² Each side's pursuit of converts from the other faith provided one of the most contentious subjects of dispute. Conversions conveyed a powerful message that both confessions could use in

1 I would like to thank Mary D. Sheriff for her help with this essay.

2 Although the monarchy campaigned against Huguenot military power in the early decades of the seventeenth century, it continued to arbitrate disputes between the religious parties under the terms of the Edict of Nantes (1598). In the middle decades of the century, royal policy changed and became more persecutory. See Keith P. Luria 2005. *Sacred Boundaries: Religious Coexistence and Conflict in Early-Modern France*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 3–10, 26–30.

promoting their causes, as converts testified to the truth of their newly adopted faith. Churches announced their victories in the conversion campaigns primarily through narrative accounts published under the converts' names but vetted by religious authorities. Many of these accounts appeared in print over the century.³ Some exemplary converts, however, did not write of their conversion experiences, for they only embraced religious change on their deathbeds. Nonetheless, through reports of their conversions, such cases could achieve notoriety and live on to fuel polemics after the converts' deaths.

Published personal conversion narratives described their subjects' passages from the false faith to the true through a series of steps. The converts first struggled with inner doubts about their old religion. They sought out instruction in the new church's doctrines and arrived at a carefully reasoned acceptance of them. They were ready to make the change but found that worldly concerns, especially connections to their families, held them back. Eventually, with God's help they broke through all obstacles and made a (usually) public abjuration of their old faith.⁴ Deathbed converts did not, of course, compose their own narratives, but descriptions of the conversions also focused on their striving for truth. Their struggles entailed not only realising their old religion was false but also disavowing the worldly attractions of that false faith, including, as we will see, attachment to their kin. Although both personal narratives and reports on deathbed conversions furthered the conflict between the churches, deathbed changes had a particular significance because Christians approaching death faced the supreme moment of truth. The decisions the dying made, the pronouncements they delivered, and the examples they set for the living carried enormous weight precisely because of the supposition that so much was at risk.⁵

What is curious about accounts of deathbed abjurations, especially given their exemplary purposes, is that they often describe the conversions of women rather than men. Given what was at stake in pursuing and publicising such conversions, one might assume that churches would be more likely to advertise the cases of men who chose in their last moments either to convert or to hold fast to their faith. After all, long and deeply held attitudes characterised women as weak, irrational, easily subject to sin, and thus likely to make wrong religious choices or to vacillate

3 Luria, *Sacred Boundaries*, 248–307; Louis Desgraves 1982. Un aspect des controverses entre catholiques et protestants, les récits de conversion (1598–1628). In Roger Duchêne (ed.) *La conversion au XVII^e siècle, Actes du XII^e Colloque de Marseille (janvier 1982)*. Marseilles: Centre méridionale de rencontres sur le XVII^e siècle. 89–110; Louis Desgraves 1984. *Répertoire des ouvrages de controverses entre catholiques et protestants en France (1598–1685)*, 2 vols. Geneva: Droz.

4 I summarise here the description of the conversion accounts and the models of conversion they proposed found in Luria, *Sacred Boundaries*, 252–286.

5 As Michael C. Questier has pointed out: "Illness and considerations of death were generally seen as powerful persuasive factors impelling people to consider whether they belonged to the true Church. The zealous on both sides were determined both to assist and exploit them" (Michael C. Questier 1996. *Conversion, Politics and Religion in England, 1580–1625*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 192).

between the faiths.⁶ Although writers defending women frequently challenged such misogynistic views, French society and culture became more, not less, patriarchal over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Recent historians have shown that the French state increasingly subordinated the women (and children) of elite families to the authority of male heads of households who were interested in controlling family resources – property and government offices – as a means of improving their lineages' social status and political position.⁷ Women lost control over property and their economic independence, at least under the law if not in actual practice.⁸ In this situation would not the conversions of men have more exemplary value than those of women? Indeed, the personal conversion narratives (as opposed to reports of deathbed abjurations) suggest this was the case. Although narratives of women's religious changes were published, those of men far outnumbered them. And the accounts of female conversions usually concerned noblewomen, whose experiences offered polemical value because of their subjects' social status as well as their sex.⁹

Why then, in a society where women supposedly counted for so much less than men, were women so often the focus of deathbed struggles over conversion? The answer, in part, lies in the link between conversion and the physical suffering the deathbed converts endured. No doubt men suffered as much as women in their final hours. Yet because female spirituality had long been linked to women's physical nature while that of men was associated with their rational faculties, polemicists could more easily draw spiritual truths from women's than men's bodily

6 The historical literature on such gendered attitudes is far too large to present here, but for a useful overview, see Merry Wiesner 2000. *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 15–35.

7 Sarah Hanley 1989. Engendering the State: Family Formation and State Building in Early Modern France. *French Historical Studies* 16, 4–27. Hanley has also described the construction and operation of the compact in Sarah Hanley 1987. *Family and State in Early Modern France: The Marriage Pact*. In Marilyn J. Boxer & Jean H. Quataert (eds.) *Connecting Spheres: Women in the Western World 1500 to the Present*. New York: Oxford University Press. 53–63; Sarah Hanley 1989. Women in the Body Politic of Early Modern France. *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History* 16, 408–414; and Sarah Hanley 1987. Social Sites of Political Practice in France: Lawsuits, Civil Rights, and the Separation of Powers in Domestic and State Government, 1500–1800. *American Historical Review* 102, 27–52. Indeed current work by Sarah Hanley is suggesting that the French state feared that family patriarchs were not always sufficiently willing to enforce such policies and thus legislated more state control. See Sarah Hanley 2003. The Jurisprudence of the Arrêts: Marital Union, Civil Society, and State Formation in France, 1550–1650. *Law and History Review* 23, 1–40.

8 The laws did not necessarily dictate how all families behaved. Wives retained some independence in matters of work and the disposition of family property. In addition to Hanley's work cited above, see Gayle K. Brunelle 1995. Dangerous Liaisons: Mésalliance and Early Modern French Noblewomen. *French Historical Studies* 19, 75–103; James B. Collins 1989. The Economic Role of Women in Seventeenth-Century France. *French Historical Studies* 16, 436–470; Carol L. Loats 1997. Gender, Guilds, and Work Identity: Perspectives from Sixteenth-Century Paris. *French Historical Studies* 20, 15–30; Julie Hardwick 1998. Seeking Separations: Gender, Marriages, and Household Economies in Early Modern France. *French Historical Studies* 21, 157–180; and Julie Hardwick 1998. *The Practice of Patriarchy: Gender and the Politics of Household Authority in Early Modern France*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press.

9 On women's conversion narratives, see Luria, *Sacred Boundaries*, 231–232, 263–265.

agonies. Or at least, Catholic polemicists could do so; Protestants were less likely to understand sanctity in physical terms. Furthermore, since the polemical value of conversions lay in converts meeting the great sacrifices the pursuit of religious truth demanded, the adoption of the true faith had to be placed above all other social and cultural expectations. In this respect, the break that converts made with their families was even more dramatic for women than men. Women were not supposed to live lives unbound by family ties and patriarchal supervision. However, their deathbed conversions placed them above such mundane concerns. They surrendered everything at the end to find religious truth.

The two cases of women's deathbed struggles to be examined here raise a number of gender-related questions that require us to rethink our understanding of women's cultural and religious significance, if not their legal and economic position, in this society. The cases come from the western province of Poitou, where a Catholic majority faced a large and powerful Huguenot minority. In many communities the two groups had achieved a practical coexistence, but confessional tensions had not disappeared. As royal policy toward the Reformed Church became more repressive in the century's middle decades, Poitou became a major staging ground for the anti-Protestant campaign.¹⁰ In various ways, women and women's bodies became important points of contention in the increasing conflict. Each faith had female leaders and defenders in the province, most notably Protestant noblewomen and Catholic abbesses. And women were central figures in confessional polemics, especially, during the years preceding the cases examined here, in the famous affair of the Ursuline nuns of Loudun, whose demonic possession each side used to score polemical points against the other.

The women in the cases under consideration were neither famous nor high-ranking. They were not well-known in their own lifetimes much less in ours, though one gained local notoriety because of her deathbed struggle. Nonetheless, the obscurity of these women makes them useful to us. They did not gain attention because of family rank or position; nor did they have a celebrity status outside their use in the confessional conflict. However because of that conflict, these women, as they lay in agony on their deathbeds, became very significant markers of religious truth and targets for contestation. The first case, that of Toussainte Perseran, is known to us because the events around her deathbed provoked an episcopal investigation of which the testimony of witnesses survives. For her Catholic contemporaries, she set an example of steadfastness in the faith despite the great pressure she faced during her final hours and despite uncertainty over her confessional identity. The second, Anne Violette, demonstrated how the female body could become a vehicle for manifesting religious truth in standing up to the devil and his Protestant allies. Both women illustrated how accepting the true faith might necessitate transcending the normal social and familial structures of authority of early modern France.

¹⁰ Luria, *Sacred Boundaries*, xxi–xxii.

Toussainte Perseran

In September of 1646, the Bishop of Poitiers, Henri-Louis Chasteigner de La Roche-posay, commissioned a priest, Pierre Mandon, to investigate reports he had received concerning the Huguenot Dame de Coismé, wife of the local seigneur of Boutelaye.¹¹ The case concerned the attempts of Coismé to pressure a Catholic woman, Toussainte Perseran of Lésigny (today Lésigny-sur-Creuse), to convert to Protestantism while she lay on her deathbed. Mandon collected depositions from Lésigny's parish priest and three women who had attended Perseran during her last hours – her sister-in-law Marie Pinart, her daughter Suzanne Pignault, and Preiante Thibault, whose relation to Perseran is not noted.¹² The depositions vary only slightly, and I will construct my narration of the case by combining their accounts. The last one, however, adds some crucial information, namely that Perseran's husband was a Huguenot.

On the first of September, the parish priest, Jacques Herpin, was summoned to bring the Blessed Sacrament to Toussainte Perseran by her brother Louis Perseran (the husband of Pinart). The priest arrived to find by her bedside the three women who would later testify. He administered the sacrament, and two days later he administered extreme unction, which the invalid received with great devotion and “feelings of faith in the Apostolic, Roman Catholic religion”. When the priest departed, Perseran was praying with fervor to the Virgin, a “chaplet” in her hands; in other words, she was saying the Rosary. Her daughter claimed that Perseran had always been a “very good Catholic”, and Thibault insisted that “she had always lived “very religiously in the faith of the Roman church and that she had received the Blessed Sacrament of the altar and extreme unction with great piety”. She had repeatedly recommended her soul to the saints and “to the Virgin Mary for whom she had a singular devotion”.

As the curé was leaving, he saw the Dame de Coismé arriving, but because he had another sick parishioner to attend, he went on his way. The other witnesses testified that Coismé ordered everyone out of the room. Each of the women echoed the sister-in-law's comment: “No one was willing to resist because of [Coismé's] great authority in the parish and town” (her family were the local noble lords). The daughter “did not imagine that [Coismé] wanted to trouble her mother's conscience”. The Huguenot spent two hours with the invalid, and when the women returned,

11 The bishop was well-known for his efforts against the Protestant community in his diocese. See Marcelle Gabrielle Formon 1951. *Un évêque de la Contre-Réforme: La Roche-posay et le diocèse de Poitiers, 1612–1651*. (thèse pour le doctorat, Université de Poitiers).

12 Poitiers, France. Archives départementales de la Vienne C 49, “Information secreete faite par nous Pierre Mandon [...] 14ème septembre 1646”. The documents are not paginated. Unfortunately neither the dossier nor any other document that I have found provides information on the case's outcome, and there may not have been one beyond the bishop's investigation. Pierre Dez mentions the case briefly in Pierre Dez 1936. *Histoire des protestants et des églises réformées du Poitou*. La Rochelle: Imprimerie de l'Ouest, 301–302). He was interested in the case as an example of the Catholic clergy's bigotry.

they found Perseran “completely changed in regards to the Catholic religion”. They reported that the invalid asked them repeatedly to remove from the room a cross that the priest had left. According to Pinart, she insisted: “My God! Get rid of that cross”. And Thibault recounted her saying that “it was nothing but a piece of brass”. She refused to invoke the names of “Jesus and Mary”, despite her daughter’s plea, “that she do it for love of me”. She also mocked the sacrament of extreme unction: “It is nothing but a little grease that the priest rubbed on her feet, ears, eyes, and mouth”.¹³ Or, as the sister-in-law explained, Coismé had told Perseran it was nothing but grease. All of these matters – the cross, the invocations, extreme unction – were mere trifles (“bagatelles et badinoires”), “they were of no use”. Of course, for these Catholics, the invalid’s salvation was now in jeopardy, a point that the priest would make in a brutal fashion when he returned to the scene.

The curé came back in the evening when Perseran’s illness seemed to be worsening. He was shocked to find her so changed. She declined to kiss the cross he proffered. Once again, she refused “with horror” to invoke Jesus and Mary. She remained in these “errors” throughout the night. According to Pinart, the priest “made the [...] sorts of remonstrations that priests make in such cases”. He warned Perseran that if she did not return to the Catholic faith, she would be refused burial in consecrated ground. “He would throw her body by the roadside”. And she would be condemned to hell. Although he tried to soften his intimidation with some “pious mollifications”, the threat was fearsome; all the witnesses made a point of repeating the priest’s menacing words. And they worked. By daybreak, not long before she expired, Perseran indicated that her conscience was filled with remorse. She was ready to kiss the cross. She asked for her chaplet and “gave evidence of the displeasure she felt for having been so mistaken”. She prayed to the Virgin and the saints. And she made her confession to a Capuchin friar.

Capuchins were noted in Poitou for leading the Catholic campaign against Protestantism. In 1617 they began a mission in the province, which won numerous conversions, including notable members of the provincial Huguenot elite. They staged large ceremonies that rallied Catholics, sought to humiliate Protestant ministers in public debates, and lobbied the royal government to challenge Huguenot political power in Poitevin towns. Protestant leaders regarded the friars as their chief opponents and accused them of undermining the peace the Edict of Nantes had established.¹⁴ Thus, the presence of the Capuchin at Perseran’s bedside was likely no accident. It suggests that news of the struggle for Perseran’s soul had spread and that the parish priest had called in reinforcements experienced in the confessional battle.

13 There is no disagreement over Perseran’s saying this but there are some differences over just when she said it – either before or after the priest’s return – and over whom she said it to. Thibault claims that the comment was made to a girl (perhaps a servant) present in the room, who then repeated it to the other women. They, in turn, make no mention of the girl.

14 On Capuchin activities in Poitou, see Luria, *Sacred Boundaries*, 47–102.

In her last moments, Perseran had attached herself firmly to Catholicism in word and deed. Thibault added that everyone present was “consoled” by Perseran’s return to the faith, except her Huguenot husband (presumably Coismé would not have been pleased either, but she was no longer there). Perseran had made a mixed marriage and lived in a biconfessional household. This disclosure raises questions to which the documents unfortunately do not provide answers. But we can, at least, pose them. For instance, what was the nature of Perseran’s religious beliefs? Her situation raises the possibility that her confessional identity was not as firmly fixed as the witnesses claimed. They describe her as a devout Catholic. Is it possible that they did so to counter the suspicion that life with a Huguenot husband had weakened her adherence to Catholicism? Perhaps the struggle over her was more complicated than the depositions make clear. Might her husband have thought of her not as a Catholic at all but as a Protestant? Is it possible that he called Coismé to the house to try to secure her for the Reformed Church at the end, when the priest and the others were applying pressure to win her for the other side?

Indeed, despite the witnesses’ insistence that Perseran had always been a fervent Catholic, their depositions suggest an uncertainty in her religious identity. Pinart and Pignault testified that the invalid’s denial of the cross, extreme unction, and the invocation of Jesus and Mary was Coismé’s fault. But given her husband’s faith, it seems likely that she would already have been familiar with Protestant ideas about these Catholic practices. Coismé had spent only two hours with her, which was probably not sufficient to produce such extreme doubts in one supposedly so convinced of Catholicism’s truth. Before Coismé’s visit, Perseran had repeatedly asked the priest to pray for her soul and to pray to the Virgin Mary for her. She had specifically appealed to the “bonne dame des Ardilliers”, in other words, Notre-Dame des Ardilliers in Saumur, a major Marian regional shrine, which played an important role in the anti-Protestant struggle.¹⁵ After the noblewoman had left, Perseran was in great anguish. Such distress could be read as uncertainty about which faith was true. Thibault’s testimony that she found the invalid “sicker in her spirit than in her body [...] [and] so troubled in her conscience that she did not want to see the cross or hear about the Virgin Mary”, suggests that Perseran was torn between the religions. Therefore, what the Catholic witnesses wanted to see as Perseran’s steadfastness in the faith may not have been the case. Instead, the Catholic triumph lay in her overcoming anguish and doubt to make a choice between religions. She did so under great pressure from Coismé and from the parish priest. For the Catholics present, Perseran’s final and correct choice was evident in her having made the right signs in her last moments. She showed remorse, kissed the cross, and invoked Jesus and Mary. Then she could expire calmly. Her decision not only secured her salvation, it also marked a victory in the confessional struggle, a victory that her exemplary “good death” ensured.

¹⁵ Saumur was a Huguenot stronghold and home to one of the Reformed Church’s academies. But the Protestants had to contend with the popular Catholic shrine within the city’s walls.

The theatre of the “Good Death”

Toussainte Perseran had achieved a “good death”, which was, as the seventeenth-century Church taught, the last and most crucial act on the road to salvation. In Christian thought all of life was a preparation for death and for God's judgment of one's soul. But in the late Middle Ages and the early modern period, descriptions of the good death emphasised the importance of the dying person's final hours over the efforts of a lifetime. The change accompanied a shift in emphasis from thinking of God's judgment as a verdict on the collectivity of Christians at the end of time to, instead, a sentencing of individuals immediately upon their demise.¹⁶ The *Ars moriendi* books, which were published in large numbers in the seventeenth century, described how the dying person's fate rested on resisting despair and temptation during the last moments.¹⁷ According to John McManners, these instructional manuals taught that dying with the proper signs of repentance could overcome a lifetime of sin, while failure to make a good death could render null a life of meritorious behaviour. Of course, the *Ars moriendi* described the good death as clerics liked to imagine it for reasons that went beyond the fate of any individual soul. Such deaths were exemplary because they taught theological truths and reinforced the authority of the Church.

Descriptions of the good death portrayed a theatrical setting with the invalid on his (less often her) deathbed surrounded by what might be a sizeable crowd. Claude Blum refers to the scene as a “socialised agony”.¹⁸ As these texts imagined it, the death proceeded in stages: the invalid gave signs of repentance and a willingness to be reconciled with those around him. He made a confession and received the viaticum brought to him by a priest. The clergyman's procession to the invalid's house with the viaticum is what attracted the crowd; anyone could accompany it into the sickroom and could receive an indulgence for doing so.¹⁹ The administration of

16 See Pierre Chaunu 1978. *La mort à Paris, 16e, 17e, 18e siècles*. Paris: Fayard, 275; Roger Chartier 1987. Texts and Images, The Arts of Dying, 1450–1600. In Roger Chartier *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France*. Trans. Lydia G. Cochrane. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 40; John McManners 1981. *Death and the Enlightenment: Changing Attitudes to Death among Christians and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 195; Ralph Houlbrooke 1998. *Death, Religion, and the Family in England, 1480–1750*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 147.

17 Chaunu and Chartier have traced the publication record of the *Ars moriendi* in France. Many were produced in the fifteenth century, but the genre went into decline in the sixteenth as religious publishing turned to issues that were in more heated dispute between the confessions. In the seventeenth century *Ars moriendi* publications grew again: 236 were published in French between 1600 and 1789 with the highpoint coming in the seventeenth century. Chaunu, *Mort à Paris*, 275; Chartier, *Arts of Dying*, 34, 53–57.

18 Claude Blum 1990. Le corps à l'agonie dans la littérature de la Renaissance. In Jean Céard, Marie Madeleine Fontaine, and Jean-Claude Margolin (eds.) *Le corps à la Renaissance: Actes du XXXe colloque de Tours 1987*. Paris: Aux Amateurs des Livres, 149.

19 For example, Restif de la Bretonne describes passers-by accompanying the viaticum to deathbeds. See Vanessa Harding 2002. *The Dead and the Living in Paris and London, 1500–1670*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 182; Chaunu, *Mort à Paris*, 347; and McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment*, 235. McManners reminds us, however, that crowds were not always present; many died alone or only with a priest and perhaps a few attendants. Some people, following the example of Saint Augustine, saw a lonely death as more meritorious (see McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment*, 236).

extreme unction, which Pope Paul V universalised in 1614, followed communion.²⁰ People attending the invalid had certain roles to play. While medieval handbooks often stressed the presence of a friend next to the bed comforting the dying person, their seventeenth-century counterparts increasingly gave that position to the priest. Otherwise, the spouse and immediate family were the closest. The death scene provided the last opportunity for communication among family members. It reinforced the family's unity but also its patriarchal structure. The expiring man (again, less often a woman) was expected to exhort his family to remain steadfast in their faith, and he might deliver parting advice to his wife and children. Beyond the family stood friends, neighbours, and those people who had accompanied the viaticum. They assisted and admonished the invalid, recited appropriate prayers, bore witness to the good death, and were edified by it.²¹

Blum's analysis of the deaths of prominent figures (both men and women, Catholic and Protestant), emphasises the role of speech in the death scene, what he refers to as "religious speech" (the exhortation) and "civil speech" (the paternal advice). Speech masked the physical suffering of the dying person, which could be seen as a sign of despair and even damnation. But the gestures and demeanour of the invalid were also crucial. Those who made a good death had to overcome the torments they suffered and demonstrate their resignation or submission to God's will, even their joyful acceptance of it. Tranquillity was displayed not in words but in calmness, quietude, a serenity visible in the body and on the face. Both sexes had to display tranquillity physically for their deaths to be considered exemplary. But one might wonder if the role of speech was emphasised less for dying women and more for dying men, who after all would more likely be figured as having important advice to impart to children and whose exhortations would carry more weight. Men might also have to contend with physical torments in an exemplary manner, but the lesson they offered those at the bedside came as much if not more from what they had to say. Women might offer religious instruction, but their words counted for less. Their bodily comportment loomed larger in their exemplary deaths. Hence their behaviour on their deathbeds was still crucial and contests over their souls could be fierce, as was that over Toussainte Perseran.

The late-medieval *Ars moriendi* had depicted such combats with graphic images of angels battling demons, and such images continued to appear in the books of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²² Despair was a sign that demons held the upper hand in the fight; tranquillity and resignation were evidence that angels were prevailing. Perseran survived the struggle over her soul. Her final acts confirmed her adherence to the faith and the resignation of her fate into God's hands. But what she demonstrated was not just the triumph over sin; rather it was the victory over Protestantism. Her good death served a polemical purpose in the

20 Chaunu, *Mort à Paris*, 349.

21 Harding, *Dead and the Living*, 182; Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion, and the Family*, 150.

22 Chaunu, *Mort à Paris*, 279, 344. Deathbed rooms were often depicted as being filled with terrifying devils. Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion, and the Family*, 157.

larger confessional struggle. In these circumstances, demons were not just the representatives of sin and damnation, they were also champions of the false religion.

Anne Violette

At the end of July 1638, while she lay on her deathbed, a young Huguenot woman of Poitiers, named Anne Violette, asked to see a priest so that she could convert to Catholicism. The Catholic account of her death describes how, after her abjuration, the devil tempted and mocked her. Satan tormented her by pointing out that in deserting Protestantism she was also abandoning what, given the construction of gender roles in early modern France, should have been her normal existence, a life centred around her natural family. By converting, Violette would not only renounce her former faith, she would also have to forsake her Huguenot kin. She defended both decisions against the devil's stratagems, thereby lending them the aura of great conviction. In doing so, she also demonstrated the demonic character of the religion she had abjured.

The Catholic account of Violette's conversion appears in Jean Filleau's *Décisions catholiques* (1668), a large compendium of laws, legal cases, court decisions, and reports of events that advanced the anti-Protestant campaign.²³ Filleau was a Poitiers magistrate associated with that city's branch Company of the Holy Sacrament, an organisation devoted to advancing the Catholic cause against the Reformed Church. Entries in his book came from throughout the kingdom, but he was especially aware of incidents from his home province of Poitou. For Filleau, Violette's story illustrated the legal issue of whether priests should be admitted to the bedsides of Huguenots who were ill so as to know if they wanted to convert. Filleau introduced his discussion of the case by writing: "We see often in court complaints made by individuals, who, having fallen into a serious illness, find themselves immediately touched in their interiors and who, by means of their affliction, receive a divine light pushing them to convert. But *religionnaires* do not want to permit a curé or priest to approach [these individuals] and thereby prevent them from making their confession".²⁴ The Reformed Church adamantly opposed allowing priests near dying Huguenots, which the monarchy would eventually not only permit but also require. They feared, of course, the pressures priests would exert, indeed the threats they would impose on the dying in their weakest moments. They were well aware of cases like that of Toussainte Perseran.²⁵

23 Jean Filleau 1668. *Décisions catholiques ou recueil general des arrests rendus dans toutes les cours souveraines de France en exécution, ou interpretation, des edits, qui concernent l'exercice de la religion pret. reformée avec les raisons fondamentales desdits arrests, tirées de la doctrine des pères de l'église, des conciles, & des loix civiles & politiques du royaume* [...]. Poitiers: J. Fleuriau, 234–237.

24 Filleau, *Décisions catholiques*, 229.

25 However, the investigation of Coismé was actually about the opposite issue – whether Huguenots should be allowed near the deathbeds of their co-religionists, who might want to convert to Catholicism.

It should be clear that, as was the case with Toussainte Perseran, I have no sense of what “really happened” to Anne Violette. The crucial issue, instead, is how Catholics represented the actions of the dying woman and her demon and put them to use in serving the anti-Protestant campaign. Filleau relates that on 29 July 1638, an Augustinian prior by the name of Berger encountered two of Violette’s neighbours, who asked him to visit the invalid (aged 23 or 24), assuring him that several times during the day she had loudly proclaimed that her “minister was damned and that all the Huguenots were damned”.²⁶ She had reportedly prayed for help to the Virgin and Saint Anne. Violette’s situation was apparently well publicised. Berger found the bedchamber filled with Huguenots, including Poitiers’s minister Samuel Cottiby, who tried, unsuccessfully, to prevent the prior from approaching the bed. A large number of Catholics entered the room in the priest’s wake. An altercation seemed likely but was avoided when someone sent for the mayor and other Catholic officials. Poitiers had a history of sharp confessional conflict stretching back to the Wars of Religion. Unlike Catholics and Protestants in other Poitevin towns with mixed populations, the two groups in Poitiers had not achieved a peaceful coexistence.²⁷ The ongoing tensions help explain the alacrity with which the city’s Catholic officialdom rushed to the potential convert’s bedside; it presented another opportunity to confront the city’s Huguenots.

The invalid gave Berger “very pressing signs of her conversion” by taking a chaplet into her hands, raising herself up to a crucifix that was presented to her, and pronouncing “Jesus, Maria”, several times. On the mayor’s orders, she was left in “full and complete liberty”. Further action was put off until the next day, when she would be allowed to make her decision freely “according to the movement in her of the Holy Spirit”.²⁸ The next morning Violette insisted to the mayor that she did want to become a Catholic. He sent for the Augustinian prior, who asked for her decision in the presence of the mayor, “people of quality”, and the *gens du roi* (local royal officers). The prior gave her a crucifix. According to this Catholic account, all those present, about sixty, were Catholics, and they fell to their knees as they heard her say, “I willingly renounce the heresy in which I have lived up to now and request admission to the bosom of the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman Church”.²⁹ She kissed the crucifix and delivered her confession to the prior. She received absolution, and took communion. Afterwards the priest spoke to her about the principal points of the Catholic faith, such as the Eucharist and the invocation of saints (in other words, specifically doctrines that Calvinism denied). He asked her if she wanted to receive the viaticum and told her to signal her willingness to do so by kissing the crucifix, which she did. The parish curé brought the sacrament and asked her if she believed that it was the true body of the son of God (as Calvinists would deny).

²⁶ Filleau, *Décisions catholiques*, 235.

²⁷ Luria, *Sacred Boundaries*, 21–22, 28.

²⁸ Filleau, *Décisions catholiques*, 235.

²⁹ Filleau, *Décisions catholiques*, 235.

She kissed the crucifix again and tears flowed from the eyes of those present, a sign, in this Catholic account, of the emotional force of the moment. She expressed her contentment and claimed that her conscience was calm. Indeed her tranquillity was apparent to everyone present; her complexion was rosy and “filled with an extraordinary beauty”.³⁰ The mayor ordered that since Violette was now a Catholic, she should be served only by Catholic physicians, apothecaries, and surgeons. Henceforth, when Protestants show up in the account, they do so as the devil’s allies.

Violette’s tranquillity did not last. Two hours after her abjuration her fever returned and she fell into a “furious delirium”. The devil now made the first of his three appearances in the account. Filleau writes that, at this point, “Satan, just as he had done at the world’s beginning when he used a woman to the ruin of Adam and of his posterity”, tried to provoke Violette’s downfall by using her Huguenot sister, with whom the unmarried convert lived.³¹ It does not appear that the sister was allowed to see her. But from outside the bedroom window, the invalid heard her sister demand in a horrible voice (the devil’s voice): “spit out that which you have swallowed (the Host), throw down that wooden god (the crucifix), break it in pieces, spit in its face, break the chaplets, spit in the faces of all these seducers who lead you astray, stay strong”!³² Satan was tormenting her imagination, the faculty of the mind that was most susceptible to demonic or false images when it was uncontrolled by reason, as was thought likely in the case of invalids but also of women generally.

The devil’s tactic here was to play on the familial bond between the two sisters. Or, more to the point, the Catholic account’s strategy was to suggest a demonic link between these family ties and heresy. To deny the devil was to deny Violette’s closest kin as well as her old faith. After three or four hours, the fever passed, and another Augustinian friar asked if she wanted to make a new abjuration. She willingly replied that she wanted to renounce the heresy of “Calvin, Luther, and Beza”.³³ She repeated her abjuration three times, loudly enough to be heard outside from where her sister had spoken. She kissed the crucifix again, and following the friar’s promptings, said the Our Father and the Ave Maria. It appeared that she had regained her tranquillity.

The devil did not give up. He tempted her again by appearing to her in a vision and by presenting to her the enormity of her sins. The vision provoked a sad declaration from the invalid: “Ah poor Anne Violette! Miserable sinner that you are. You have committed so many sins. Could God possibly pardon you?” After the friar administered holy water, she moaned, “Ah holy water, I don’t deserve it. If only I could cry for my sins”. She added: “Voilà Satan, voilà the devil”. The friar then had her say several times, “I renounce you Satan”, after which, Filleau’s account

30 Filleau, *Décisions catholiques*, 235.

31 Filleau, *Décisions catholiques*, 235.

32 Filleau, *Décisions catholiques*, 236.

33 Filleau, *Décisions catholiques*, 236.

explains, the vision disappeared because God removed it.³⁴ The devil was God's instrument, a means of testing her steadfastness. The point was exactly in keeping with Catholic teaching: Satan did not work independently in the world, but only at God's bidding. That is why exorcists had power over demons. The Church could make the devil and his minions serve the truth of Catholic doctrine and practices, including those that were part of Violette's conversion – the crucifix she repeatedly kissed, the holy water sprinkled on her, and the Eucharist she took.³⁵

The enemy still was not finished. Satan, "using what time was left to the invalid, provoked in her mind a new temptation, by representing to [Violette] her flesh and blood". Here was the "rudest shock of all". The devil provoked in her a fear of having to die without the assistance of her Huguenot kin.³⁶ The mayor and other Catholics present promised not to abandon her. With their help, with the intercessions of her patron Saint Anne, and with the urging of the Augustinian prior to trust in God's providence, she overcame "all the temptations and persecutions of the enemy" and "she remained in perfect quietude".³⁷ Throughout the next two days, she continued to invoke the aid of Saint Anne and the Virgin, and she frequently kissed the crucifix. She remained tranquil, except for an hour when she had to endure violent convulsions, an attack that Filleau did not attribute to the devil. She regained her calmness; the curé administered extreme unction; and she gradually weakened and expired. In her last moments, she experienced no bodily tortures but remained calm with her eyes raised to heaven. And after her death, her face appeared beautiful, "like a person who was in ecstasy".³⁸

Like other converts, Anne Violette had suffered physically at the devil's hands, but the sequence of her conversion and the torments she endured was different from that usually encountered in the personal narratives of other converts. They, too, were tortured in their souls, and the torment could take physical form. It was evident in their faces and in their bodies. But they endured these struggles before they abjured the false faith. The "interior combats" and "interior agitations" were necessary to demonstrate the conversion's sincerity.³⁹ That is not what happened with Anne Violette. Although she no doubt was suffering during her terminal illness, her greatest torments came after she had abjured and achieved a tranquil spirit, usually the sign of the successful conversion. The devil's torments had not provoked her conversion. They happened afterwards and, thereby, reinforced a

34 Filleau, *Décisions catholiques*, 236.

35 Marc Venard 1980. Le démon controversiste. In Michel Péronnet (ed.) *La Controverse religieuse: XVIe-XIXe siècles. Actes du Premier Colloque Jean Boisset, Vlième colloque du Centre d'Histoire de la Réforme et du Protestantisme*. Montpellier: Université Paul Valéry. 45–60; Lyndal Roper 1994. Exorcism and the Theology of the Body. In Roper Lyndal *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe*. London: Routledge. 171–198.

36 Filleau, *Décisions catholiques*, 236.

37 Filleau, *Décisions catholiques*, 236.

38 Filleau, *Décisions catholiques*, 236.

39 Luria, *Sacred Boundaries*, 258–261.

lesson of which the Catholics around her were already convinced, that demons and Protestants were collaborators. In her physical suffering, in her fever and delirium, and in her visions of the devil, her body revealed not a troubled, false (Protestant) conscience but instead Catholic truth.

The emotions on display in such struggles were often thought to be typical of women rather than of men, who were presumed to be more capable than women of self-control and a reasoned acceptance of religious truth. However, the personal conversion narratives show little gender difference. While considering conversion, women examined doctrinal differences between the churches dispassionately and reasonably, and men suffered emotional torments.⁴⁰ Anne Violette's conversion may also have demonstrated this point. At the end of his account, Filleau mentions very briefly that her bedroom window was across the street from a chapel in which a Jesuit had preached during the previous Lent. Violette had listened to the sermons and absorbed the message the preacher delivered in a presumably reasoned discourse. Her conversion may not, after all, have just been the result of her last delirious hours.

Protestants saw the suffering of Anne Violette differently; for them, there was no conversion just a poor, sick woman beset by Catholics eager to capitalise on her situation. The only seventeenth-century Huguenot version of the Violette incident of which I am aware is in Elie Benoist's *Histoire de l'Edit de Nantes* (1693), a chronicle of the Huguenots' misfortunes in France under the edict. It was written decades after Violette's death, but it reflects the characteristic Protestant response to the Catholic claim that the suffering bodies of women revealed Protestantism's association with the devil. To be sure, Protestants were as convinced as Catholics of the devil's work in the world and, as witchcraft cases in Protestant areas show, they recognised the devil's ability to manifest his power in women's bodies. But in a case such as Violette's, which was a challenge to the validity of their faith, they rejected any notion of the devil's involvement, as they did in the episode of the Loudun Ursulines. Benoist insists that Violette's illness led to the loss of her senses. The Augustinian prior made her say certain words, which he then claimed indicated her desire to convert. The Huguenot minister arrived on the scene and opposed the prior's actions. It was their dispute, not Violette's impending death, that attracted the crowd. And, according to Benoist, rather than looking out for the invalid's welfare, the Catholic mayor took over the room, ejected those from the opposite faith, and issued a legal summary (*procès-verbal*) that supported the Catholic cause. Benoist argues that Violette's visions were not due to the devil but to the woman's physical and mental state. And despite Filleau's account, these visions did not cease once she had – supposedly – converted. Instead, her troubled state of mind continued and so did her fear of damnation. For the Protestant, it was not the devil who was at work in Violette's body but rather physical and mental illness. And her death revealed no theological or doctrinal truths but, instead, a malicious Catholic clergy

40 Luria, *Sacred Boundaries*, 261–272.

and officialdom. In Benoist's version, there was nothing "good" about Violette's death.⁴¹

But that was not the message that the people around Anne Violette's deathbed took away with them. She endured her long agony in the presence of a large crowd, who appear in Filleau's account crowding into her bedroom and responding on their knees to the priests' calls to prayer. They included young Catholic women left there to assist her, but also friars, the parish priest, doctors, the mayor, royal officials, and "a quantity of people of quality". The attendance of Poitiers's Catholic elite is evidence of how important the deathbed conversion was for local anti-Protestant campaigners.⁴² According to Filleau's account, the Catholics around her had not flocked to her bedside to witness a reasoned defense of their faith. They had preachers for that. Instead, they were eager to see in Anne Violette's suffering body a sign of the religious truth to which they held. They believed her to be significant not despite her female nature but because of it.

Truth in the female body

That the devil chose Anne Violette's body to prey upon would not have surprised those early modern observers who readily believed that women were more susceptible to the devil's harassment than men. A long tradition evident in the Catholic and Protestant faiths held that women were weaker in mind than men, less capable of self-control and rational thought, and more likely to stray from religious truth. And if they were in positions of authority, like the Dame de Coismé, they could lead others astray as well. But there was an equally prominent discourse also based on a long tradition that honoured women's religious virtue. They were the "devout sex"; they could be examples of proper piety. Indeed, they could surpass men in this regard and display a virile spirituality. This is not to say that especially devout women were seen as men. Rather they had developed a supposedly natural characteristic of women, their devotion, to a remarkable degree, one which reached beyond what could normally be expected of women. They became heroines of their faiths. The defenders of Catholicism and Protestantism celebrated such women because of the examples they provided to their co-religionists but also because they served as a riposte to their confessional opponents, who supposedly encouraged women in their natural tendency to err.⁴³

41 Elie Benoist 1693–1694. *Histoire de l'Edit de Nantes contenant les choses les plus remarquables qui se sont passées en France avant & après sa publication* [...], 5 vols. Delft: Adrien Beman, 2: 581–582. Benoist offers no clear indication of the sources for his retelling of the case, but he refers to writings by the monks present, composed in the "style of legend".

42 Filleau's description of the elaborate funeral Violette received reinforces this impression. Along with a number of priests, young women accompanied her coffin carrying torches and candles. The city's Catholic officer corps marched in the cortège as well as other Poitiers notables and a large "affluence of people". The church was full (Filleau, *Décisions catholiques*, 236).

43 Constance Jordan explains that the virile woman of the Renaissance was understood in heroic terms, but she was endowed with feminine, not masculine, virtues. Constance Jordan 1990. *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 8; 11, n. 1. For a further discussion of the concept of the "devout sex" in the context of the confessional struggle, see Luria, *Sacred Boundaries*, 194–195.

But Anne Violette did not fit the description of the religious heroine. Heroic conduct had to be displayed over years, indeed a lifetime, and nothing in Filleau's account portrays her in such terms. He offers no description of her life, which, in any case, was spent as a follower of the false faith. In her last moments, she had little opportunity to display a "virile" Catholic piety. She did, however, make a good, Catholic, death. She renounced the devil repeatedly; she took the sacraments, she showed great reverence for the crucifix; and she obeyed the Catholic clerics who were present (an essential feature of approved behaviour in an age of confessional rivalry). Finally, having endured great torments she died in tranquillity, resigning her fate into God's hands. Her conversion was, in and of itself, a powerful act that furthered the Church's claim to truth. But so too were her physical experiences as she lay on her deathbed. In Filleau's re-telling of her story, the suffering she endured in her encounter with the devil became a sign of Catholic truth; her body revealed it.

The work of Caroline Walker Bynum on medieval women mystics can help us to understand how female bodies, often understood as prone to sinfulness and predisposed to heterodox beliefs and actions, could, instead, be seen as the epitome of sanctity.⁴⁴ To be sure the experiences of such women in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were far from those of Anne Violette in the seventeenth. At the very least, unlike these medieval mystics, Violette never became a famous figure. But in both cases, the Church's male writers and defenders could imbue their experiences with great value.

Women could be understood as having access to the divine through their bodily experiences. In part, the reason lies in the notions of reversal and inversion central to Christianity. As the lowest, women could be seen as the holiest, as could the poor. Women might be associated with the body and flesh, as opposed to men associated with the mind and intellect, but Catholics worshiped a God who had been incarnated and whose flesh was present in the faith's central sacramental ritual. Women's fleshiness could place them closer to Christ. Indeed, Jesus was often figured as a mother, a woman who bled and who nurtured his flock. Such characterisations of Jesus were found less often in the early modern period than in the medieval. But as was the case in the Middle Ages, saintly men were sometimes described as weak women or fertile mothers.⁴⁵

Precisely because women were understood as flesh, it was expected that devout members of the sex would experience contact with the divine in physical (Bynum would say "somatic") terms. As women mystics moved along the path toward divine

44 She has explored the religious meanings of women's bodliness in Caroline Walker Bynum 1987. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. Berkeley: University of California Press, but I will be drawing primarily on her essay, Caroline Walker Bynum 1992. *The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages*. In Caroline Walker Bynum *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*. New York: Zone Books. 181–238. See also Caroline Walker Bynum 1982. *Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writing*. In Caroline Walker Bynum *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 110–169.

45 Bynum, *Female Body*, 218. For an example of a Capuchin missionary from the 1590s, Chérubin de Maurienne, described in maternal terms, see Luria, *Sacred Boundaries*, 67.

union, their bodies displayed the marks of their progress in phenomena that appear strange to modern sensibilities – trances, levitations, seizures, virgin lactation, stigmata, and so forth. They manipulated their bodies in acts of privation or even self-torture as a means of seeking union with Christ's body. Illnesses and persistent pain, at least for these holy women if not all women, were also understood as having a religious significance. Physical and mental suffering was an “opportunity for their own salvation” just as it was for those around them who witnessed their torment and understood it in holy terms.⁴⁶

Such a conception of physical female spirituality continued into the early modern period. But the explanations for the experiences of twelfth- and thirteenth-century holy women cannot be directly transposed onto those of Anne Violette or even those of her contemporaries the demonically possessed Ursulines of Loudun, who, as nuns, provide more likely counterparts to the medieval mystics. One reason is that, as Bynum explains it, the theologians of the High Middle Ages understood body and soul as closely linked, a “psychosomatic unity” in which divine phenomena could be understood readily as manifesting themselves in physical ways. Early modern theologians were less willing to see the divine as manifested in the flesh.⁴⁷ However, in a world where holy women were still noted for their visions and other paramystical experiences – those of Saint Teresa are the most famous – the idea that women came into contact with the divine in physical ways was very much alive.

Of course, Anne Violette was not a mystic; she was not seeking divine union; her visions were of the devil not Christ. But her suffering, the physical torments she endured as the devil appeared to her, still carried an important lesson, and one that was of great importance to the seventeenth-century French Catholic Church engaged in its polemical conflict with the Huguenots. The lesson concerned confessional truth, and it was expressed through her body and its extraordinary experiences. It is in the context of the confessional battle that the devil's appearances, and the timing of those appearances, were significant. They made clear the demonic nature of the false church.

Catholics had no doubt that the growth of Protestantism and the resulting Wars of Religion showed that the devil was hard at work in France. The legalisation of the Reformed Church in the 1598 Edict of Nantes only proved the point, as a number of highly publicised cases of demonic possession demonstrated. In 1599, Marthe Brossier, who suffered from possession and whose exorcisms became a *cause célèbre*, claimed that her demon travelled daily to Huguenot-dominated La Rochelle to seek new souls.⁴⁸ In the following decades, other notorious cases of

46 Bynum, *Female Body*, 188.

47 Bynum, *Female Body*, 183, 200–205. See also the discussion in Fernando Cervantes 1994. *The Devil in the New World: The Impact of Diabolism in New Spain*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 21–24.

48 Robert Mandrou 1980. *Magistrats et sorciers en France au XVIIe siècle: Une analyse de psychologie historique*. Paris: Seuil, 166, 171. Venard, *Démon controversiste*, 49; Denis Crouzet 1997. *A Woman and the Devil: Possession and Exorcism in Sixteenth-Century France*. In Michael Wolfe (ed.) *Changing Identities in Early Modern France*. Durham: Duke University Press. 191–215.

possession occurred in Aix-en-Provence, Louviers, and Chinon. These also played a role in the anti-Huguenot struggle. During the exorcisms of Ursuline nuns in Aix in 1611, demons representing the Catholic side in a debate over the Eucharistic doctrine defeated those arguing for the Calvinists.⁴⁹

In the decades of the 1620s and 1630s, the struggle against the devil and his Huguenot allies was particularly intense in Western France. La Rochelle, the center of Protestant resistance, fell to the royal army in 1628, and according to local Catholic exorcists, demons fleeing the city had found other places nearby to pursue their evil designs, most notably in the Huguenot center of Loudun, where they took up residence in an Ursuline convent in 1632.⁵⁰ The exorcisms of the nuns revealed a whole range of social and political conflicts at work, including rivalries among local elites, a power struggle between local power holders and the centralising regime of Louis XIII and Richelieu, and the ideological disagreement between the clergy firmly convinced of the devil's power and the increasing scientific rationalism of some physicians. But the confessional confrontation was very much on the mind of the nuns, their demons, the Catholic clergy, and political authorities.⁵¹ Exorcists, royal officials and Catholic observers always had foremost on their agenda the use of the possessions to promote the truth of Catholic beliefs, to undermine local Protestant political power, and to convince Huguenots to convert.

The Catholics' view of the possessions' potential in this regard made sense within the Church's understanding of the devil's powers and changing Catholic conceptions of his purpose. The devil was not an independent agent; he operated in the world only within the limits God placed on him and ultimately to serve God's intentions. Even if early modern theologians found the devil more powerful and fearsome than their medieval predecessors, he ultimately served a good cause.⁵² In the Middle Ages, the devil was understood as the instigator of social evils; he sowed hatred, discord, and the sins that people committed against one another. The famous fifteenth-century handbook of demonology, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, explained the devil's work in such terms by emphasising sexual crimes, especially in its discussions of women's susceptibility to demonic influence.⁵³ Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theologians increasingly understood the devil as promoting idolatry or false worship, whether among people encountered in non-European lands or among heretics at home. Submission to the devil was an act of apostasy

49 Venard, *Démon controversiste*, 49–50.

50 Michel Carmona 1988. *Les diables de Loudun: Sorcellerie et politique sous Richelieu*. Paris: Fayard, 173; de Certeau, Michel 2000. *The Possession at Loudun*. Trans. Michael B. Smith. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 158–159.

51 Luria, *Sacred Boundaries*, 232–244.

52 On changing early modern European conceptions of the devil, see Cervantes, *Devil in the New World*, 18–19, 107. I largely follow here Cervantes's discussion.

53 For the standard English translation see, Heinrich Kramer & James Sprenger 1971. *The Malleus Maleficarum*. Trans. Montagu Summer. New York, Dover. See also Cervantes, *Devil in the New World*, 21.

from the true faith.⁵⁴ The degree to which common opinion shared this understanding of the devil is open to question, but it is entirely likely that Filleau – member of the Company of the Holy Sacrament and brother of a diocesan official – would have been aware of it.

The triumph of the Loudun exorcisms depended on the ability of female bodies to reveal the truth of the heretics' association with the devil. The Ursulines' bodies became the battleground where "Protestant" demons contended with the Catholic exorcists. Under the control of exorcists, the devils defended heretical doctrines and swore that Huguenots were their followers. The ordeal the nuns suffered during the possession was resolved with the eventual expulsion of the demons, the re-conversion of the women into holy bodies, and the end of their suffering. The Ursulines did not demonstrate truth in the way male clerics could: they did not debate the demons; they did not teach; they did not preach on Catholic doctrine. Instead, they embodied truth in the physical trials the possessions imposed on them and in their eventual resolution.⁵⁵

Violette's conversion and death occurred just as the demonic possession of the Loudun Ursulines was reaching its spectacular end. The devil's tormenting of Anne Violette also revealed itself in her body and its travails during her last days. But the devil had not "possessed" Anne Violette; he "obsessed" her. As the Catholic writer Jean Le Breton explained, the devil acts on those he obsessed, "in an extraordinary manner, such as by appearing to them visibly and often, or by troubling them, or by provoking in them passions and strange movements [...] In possession the demon actually disposes of the faculties and the organs of the possessed person to produce, not only in her but by her, actions which that person could never have produced herself".⁵⁶ The devil who obsessed Anne Violette did not take over her body, but he still tormented her physically. The torments the devil provoked could reveal religious truth by leading to dramatic conversions, in two senses of the term – the abjuration of one faith in favour of the other and the resolution to lead a devout life within the same faith. Jeanne des Anges, the prior of the Ursuline convent in Loudun, saw her deliverance from demonic tormentors as a conversion.⁵⁷ Catholic sinners and those people sceptical of the possessions converted by repenting their transgressions and renewing their piety. And some, though not many, Protestants, at whom so much of the Loudun possessions' polemical power was directed, abjured their heresy.⁵⁸ Obsession could also provoke conversions, and could do so

54 Cervantes, *Devil in the New World*, 20–21, 24.

55 Luria, *Sacred Boundaries*, 241–244. Protestants and sceptics also understood the nuns' problems in bodily terms, namely as frustrated female sexuality.

56 From J. Le Breton 1643. *La deffense de la vérité touchant la possession des religieuses de Louviers*. Evreux, quoted in de Certeau, *Possession at Loudun*, 38.

57 Luria, *Sacred Boundaries*, 242–243.

58 Jean-Martin Laubardemont, Richelieu's commissioner in Loudun, reported, for example, that ten Huguenots converted in August 1634. Luria, *Sacred Boundaries*, 237.

among Protestants as well as Catholics. For example, according to Keith Thomas, many English Puritans felt the devil obsessed them prior to their conversion experiences.⁵⁹ However, Anne Violette's obsession by the devil did not prompt her conversion. Rather, it was the other way around. The devil appeared to her only after her formal abjuration of Protestantism. It was as a Catholic that she could demonstrate religious truth physically by the illness, pain, fever, and delirium she suffered at the hands of the "heretic" devil and then by remaining steadfast and achieving a good death signified by the physical sign of ecstatic beauty. Like the bodies of medieval mystics and Ursuline nuns, her body, too, became holy.

The tradition of understanding women's bodies as saintly was longstanding and tied to the notion of women as the devout sex. Although it represented a challenge to the misogynistic discourse about women as sinful because of their association with the body, it did not in any way challenge the otherwise patriarchal and masculinist cultural norms of early modern society. After all, the Ursulines became holy figures only under the supervision of male exorcists. Anne Violette's body achieved sanctity under the watchful care of Augustinian friars and Poitiers's Catholic officialdom. In another sense, however, Anne Violette's and Toussainte Perseran's deaths demonstrated a potentially more troublesome lesson, though one that was certainly part of the Catholic understanding of conversion in the seventeenth century. To become exemplars of religious truth and to achieve their good deaths, both women had to break free of normal familial (and, in Perseran's case, social) structures of authority that were supposed to control women and other dependents as well.

Seventeenth-century conversion accounts often depict family loyalties as "worldly" ties that hold converts back from abjuring their false faith until such time as they are able to break free of them. To convert, children frequently had to rebel against their parents, and wives had to defy their husbands. Conversion *récits* celebrate these decisions.⁶⁰ Given what we know from the work of Sarah Hanley and others about the importance the French state placed on the patriarchal control of families to ensure the maintenance of political order, it is striking how often and to what degree the French Church's conversion campaign, and the royal legislation that furthered its aims, permitted the transgression of normal lines of authority and cohesion in the family.⁶¹

Toussainte Perseran lived in a confessionally-mixed family; her daughter and sister-in-law were Catholics. As a result she did not have to break ties with all

59 Keith Thomas 1973. *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 570.

60 Luria, *Sacred Boundaries*, 274–276.

61 Most scandalous, even for Catholics, was the 1681 royal declaration that children seven years old could legitimately convert from Protestantism to Catholicism without their families' permission. "Déclaration du 18 juin 1681 portant que des enfants de la R.P.R. pourront se convertir à l'âge de sept ans" in Catherine Bergeal & Antoine Durrleman (eds.) 1985. *Protestantisme et libertés en France au 17e siècle de l'édit de Nantes à sa révocation, 1598–1685*. Carrières-sous-Poissy: La Cause, 126–128.

of her kin. But she had to resist both her Huguenot husband and her seigneurial noblewoman. Anne Violette does not appear to have been under the control of either parents or a husband. But Filleau's account makes clear the heavy price she had to pay in separating from her Huguenot relatives, the devil's allies. "Consider", he wrote, "the efforts, stratagems, and ruses of Satan, who had done everything he could to prevent this action [the conversion] from succeeding to the greater glory of God. How many assaults did this enemy of our salvation direct against this poor girl, especially on Friday, the day of her profession of faith and abjuration from heresy"?⁶² Among Satan's attacks on that day were two in which he made direct use of Violette's Huguenot family. The first was her sister's importuning of her to reject the Eucharist, crucifix, and chaplet; and the second was in the vision the devil provoked of her "flesh and blood".

Could women who had broken away from normal familial and social controls be thought of as the embodiment of truth in this intensely patriarchal society? Could not their freedom from the usual bonds of authority raise anxieties about their uncontrolled bodies? The powerful examples Violette and Perseran presented of women converting on their deathbeds and of their bodies displaying truth rather than error prevailed over any such fears. In any case, they did not become loose bodies. Perseran did not have to break ties with all her family, and, furthermore, she had a priest so vigilant that he was willing to terrorise her into compliance. Violette not only had Catholic clerics keeping a watchful eye on her, she acquired a substitute family in the Catholic mayor, officials, and the five or six Catholic women attending her, who served as alternate sisters. But, of course, there was an even more obvious reason why no harm could come from these women's breach of family and social norms. Neither of them lived long enough to present a problem. Their bodies became the embodiment of sanctity and religious truth, but only as their deaths were interpreted by those who found them useful in furthering their contest with the rival church.

62 Filleau, *Décisions catholiques*, 237.

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