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Section: A13

### Sample Research Question Worksheet

#### Research Question #1

I am studying: Religious women (nuns) in Early Modern Europe (Topic)

#### In my reading, I have made the following observations:

Observation	Source
Teenage girls were forced into convents by their families in order to increase the status of the family or to limit the inheritance that must be provided to them (22-35). Since convent dowries were cheaper than marriage dowries (51-60), it was cheaper for a family to send an unmarried daughter to the convent than to try to find a husband for her. These daughters had little choice about which to convent to enter. Girls were sometimes forced into being nuns against their will.	Sperling, Jutta Gisela. <i>Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice</i> .
Women in convents wrote their own plays and music (60), and performed them for the public in their convents (65-66). They also ran small businesses (selling produce, lace work, baked goods, etc.) from within the convent that contributed to their livelihoods (150-165).	Matter, E. Ann, and John Coakley, eds. <i>Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy: A Religious and Artistic Renaissance</i> .
Sometimes, nuns played a role in political intrigue. This is very surprising, as I had thought that nuns had to stay out of "the world" and its affairs.	Walker, Claire. "Prayer, Patronage, and Political Conspiracy: English Nuns and the Restoration."
Some religious orders were teaching and nursing orders (12-34). Nuns in these orders could leave the convent to teach young girls (45-50), work in hospitals (60-67), open refuge houses for prostitutes and abused women (67-70), and visit the sick and poor in their homes (75-89).	Rapley, Elizabeth. <i>The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France</i> .
There were hierarchies of female leadership in early modern European convents. This allowed—even required—some women to become very educated in ways they could not outside the convent. Convents held councils, nuns voted, and leadership positions rotated among the nuns in the community. Convent libraries contained many of the most important spiritual, scientific, and philosophic works of the day.	Weisner, Merry. "The Reformation of Women."
After the Council of Trent (1563), a papal ruling required that all women who took religious vows must be cloistered behind monastery walls for their protection and for the protection of society (25). This means that women who had been preachers and mystics during the medieval period (42-42) were supposed to give up their active vocations for lives of constant prayer and contemplation behind convent walls (79-88). There were many rules regulating who could enter and leave convents (90-95).	Schulte van Kessel, Elisja. "Virgins and Mothers between Heaven and Earth."
Some nuns had intimate friendships, even romantic relationships, within convents. They lived in a protected, woman-centered community.	Brown, Judith. <i>Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy</i> .

#### These observations reveal the following problem:

Some of these sources portray early modern nuns as forced into convents and restricted in their activity. Others, however, describe nuns in active roles that I had previously thought were available only to men. It appears that nuns had more choices than I previously thought and that

they may even have had more options than married women. I would like to know more about the opportunities available to nuns and about how those opportunities differed (if at all) from those available to lay women. It seems as if the issue is far from straightforward and well worth pursuing to learn more about early modern women's agency in general . (Problem)

**My observations lead me to ask the following question that addresses the problem:**

How much agency did early modern European nuns have, especially compared to vowed religious men (monks and priests) and lay women? (Question)

**Review:**

**I am studying** early modern European nuns (Topic)

**because I want to find out** how much agency they had compared to religious men and lay women (Question)

**in order to help my reader understand** that our assumptions about gender and religion may be too rigid. Early modern nuns may indeed have had options that lay women had and that early modern women, in general, may have had more options than we usually think. Religion may have restricted women at the same time that it offered them new options. (Significance)

## Works Cited

- Brown, Judith. *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*. Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 1986. Print.
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