

Sample Research Question Worksheet

Name Ima Student Section: A13

Topic: Religious women (nuns) in Early Modern Europe

Context: Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Germany and France. Traditional depictions of nuns seem to portray them as women oppressed behind convent walls and locked away from the world, yet new research reveals different experiences.

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 lead me to ask my question: Why did early modern woman want to become nuns?

My observations lead me to ask this question because: Most of these sources describe nuns in the Early Modern period filling roles that I had thought were available only to men. 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. I would also like to find more sources like Schulte van Kessel, who describes the *limitations* that nuns sometimes faced. It seems as if the issue of early modern's women's experiences and opportunities is far from straightforward, and well worth pursuing as part of my overall interest in how accurately scholars have portrayed the experience of women in the past.

Works Cited

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- Sperling, Jutta Gisela. *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1999. Print.
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- Weisner, Merry. "The Reformation of Women." *Gender, Church, and State in Early Modern Germany*. London: Longman, 1998. 63-78. Print.