A Curable Poison? The Role of Women in the Development of the Medieval Premonstratensian Order.

"The wickedness of women is greater than all the other wickedness of the world … The poison of asps and dragons is more curable and less dangerous to men than the familiarity of women." So wrote the Premonstratensian abbot Konrad of Marchtal in the late thirteenth-century, when asked to account for why his order no longer accepted female members. Such views, coupled with legislation passed by the Premonstratensians in the twelfth and thirteenth century to exclude women, have given the order a reputation amongst historians as one unusual for its misogyny even by the standard of its contemporaries—no mean feat, given the views expressed by Bernard of Clairvaux who was establishing the Cistercian Order around the same time.

In this paper, it is my intention to tease apart the traditional narrative of the order's history in France and to examine the assumptions about women, gender and membership on which it is built. I will not be arguing that the Premonstratensian Order was at heart one devoted to gender egalitarianism, or that any more than a handful of Premonstratensian women remained in France past 1300. However, I will argue that the traditional historical narrative about the order is an oversimplification. Past histories of the Premonstratensians have tended to take medieval narrative and prescriptive sources at face value. They have also assumed that the impetus for the order's foundation was provided by a handful of prominent men, that adherence to the order's spiritual orientation could be and was defined and authorized only by men, and that women chose to enter or leave the order seemingly only according to the decisions of men. By setting aside presumptions based on prescriptive literature and by re-examining other forms of evidence such as charters and obituaries, by focusing on what women were actually doing as opposed to
what they are supposed to have done, we re-evaluate what it meant for a woman to be a member of a reforming religious order in medieval France. Even if legislation and male attitudes sought to diminish women's roles within the Premonstratensian order, they did not necessarily render them marginal.

The standard narrative of the order's foundation, and the history of its female members, is roughly as follows. The order began in the region of Picardy in northern France in about 1120, with the foundation of the monastery of Prémontré. (See Figs. 1 and 2) It swiftly grew to encompass some 600 houses stretching from the Atlantic coast of Ireland in the west to Jerusalem in the east. Most of the houses, however, clustered in northern France and the Rhineland, the areas once evangelized by the order's founder, the charismatic Norbert of Xanten. A contemporary of Norbert's, Herman of Laon, wrote with admiration of how many women Norbert had converted to the religious life and who were now inhabiting Premonstratensian communities. The first Premonstratensian statutes date to the early 1130s and make explicit provision for the needs of female communities; these statutes, with their descriptions of the kinds of physical labor expected of the women such as cooking, sewing and laundry, have usually been interpreted by historians as demonstrating how the order's female members enjoyed a lower status than their male counterparts. Following Norbert's death in 1134, women were increasingly unwelcome within the order's ranks. André Vauchez, writing in the New Cambridge Medieval History, described the Premonstratensians as turning away from their female counterparts even before the Cistercians did from theirs. He did, however, note that female Premonstratensian houses were founded into the thirteenth century. This was despite the issuance of the papal decree De non recipiendis sororibus, or "On the not receiving of sisters", in 1198. Vauchez wrote that these new thirteenth century houses "had no official links to the[ir] masculine
counterpart[s] but were generally placed under their spiritual direction. This was still too much: in 1270, the general chapter forbade nuns from being accepted in the future, and gave those who were already in the convents the choice between gradual extinction or entry into other religious establishments."

Most modern studies of medieval Premonstratensian history have gone along with this narrative, and have also assumed that the male houses were the primary foundations, with any associated female houses secondary. Where the women of a double house are known to have left in order to establish a new, female-only house, they are almost always described as having been transferred there by the men. Men found, women are transferred; women may be under an order's spiritual direction, their lands and houses owned by the order, but this does not constitute "an official link", as Vauchez put it. Historians have often presumed a marginalization and an expulsion of religious women rather than, say, that women may have deliberately chosen to leave a given community for their own reasons. The latter scenario cannot be definitively proven in most cases any more than the former can, but just as the actions of medieval people were shaped by their sometimes unconscious assumptions about gender, about women and their membership in religious orders, so too is modern scholarship.

The vagaries of source survival and accessibility have also shaped scholarship on the order. Many of the granges, or external satellite farms, of Prémontré appear to be the donations of women and to be inhabited by women. Yet, as they often lack in grand structures or abundant written sources, their archaeological remains often lying beneath still-working farms, they remain understudied by archaeologists and historians, with the exception of those studying their economic productivity. The focus on abbeys and priories obscures the involvement of women who inhabited other kinds of religious communities, and makes marginal places which were vital
as much to the social and religious as to the economic functioning of the Premonstratensians.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries it appears that these granges were often built on lands donated to the order by women, or a woman in association with a male family member, and that many of the granges' inhabitants were female. This is the case with the granges of Hannapes, Walescourt, and Rozières, for example. A charter of 1135 records that Adelvie, the widow of a lord of Guise, gave an allod of land at Germaine to the monastery of Prémontré when she took the veil. Later charters suggest that women continued to inhabit a grange at Germaine. Agnes, wife of André de Balidementus, donated the court and mill at Fontenelle so that she could "join with the sisters" in serving God "in that remote place". Adelaide, wife of Gervinus, entered the order in 1155 and gave it all her lands at Sélicourt—which became another grange. These examples can be multiplied. Some of these granges could be quite substantial. The female members of the house at Saint-Jean d'Amiens, for example, moved in the early 1160s to a grange at Bertricourt, some four kilometers away. Confirmation privileges given by Popes Alexander III and Celestine III in 1163 and 1196 respectively record the presence of women there, living in a domos sororum, or house of sisters, large enough to have its own attached cemetery, fosses, courtyards, mill, fishing rights and meadows for pasturage. It looked, perhaps, not unlike the female house at Bonneuil which we can see in a plan dating to 1724, where both the surviving residential buildings and the remains of the cloister wall and other building foundations are marked. (Fig. 3) Bertricourt and Bonneuil both appear to have continued as houses well into the late thirteenth century at least. These granges, then, were not necessarily ephemeral communities and physically could have been, like Bertricourt and Bonneuil, quite extensive—a vibrant part of the network of medieval Premonstratensian communities.

Men who entered the order in northern France were set apart from their peers in the
religious life, at least initially, by their desire to minister to lay people. Their female counterparts seem to have had similar motivations. Ricwera, the widow of Count Raymond of Clastres, was revered within the Order for her collaboration with Norbert of Xanten. She is reputed to have founded and worked in a hospital at Prémontré in the 1130s, the ruins of which are some of the few remaining medieval structures at the site. There are other instances of women who are associated with the Premonstratensian Order working in hospitals or similar kinds of charitable institutions. The best documented of these is the case of Genlis, which lies about thirty kilometers northwest of Prémontré. In 1177, Philip I, Count of Flanders and his wife Elizabeth donated the altar at Genlis to the Premonstratensian women of Rouez. In 1221, a further donation was made to establish a hospital at Genlis for "the consolation of the poor"—to the altar was added a house with adjacent gardens, meadows, vineyards, and an annual grant of wheat.

This hospital continued there for some twenty-five years, seemingly continuously under the control of the women who had once been at Rouez. In 1246, the hospital and its female inhabitants decided to incorporate as an abbey, and to transfer to the Order of St Victor. The Victorines were another religious order who were particularly known for their pastoral work. A charter confirming this transfer, issued by the bishop of Vermandois in 1247, showed that in the intervening years the women at Genlis had acquired properties and assets in several other places.

The immediate question, of course, is why transfer? What was the impetus for this group of women, who must surely have been well-respected in their community if their financial prosperity is any guide, to leave the Premonstratensian Order after 25 years and join the Victorines? One answer may, of course, be that this was the result of an act of misogyny—that the men forced their female colleagues out of the order, and that what we see here is the men washing their hands of the *cura monialium*, the care for nuns. Yet all the surviving charters about
the transfer, whether royal, episcopal or Premonstratensian, explicitly state that the impetus for
the transfer came from the women. This may just be a pious fiction, concocted to disguise men
casting out defenseless nuns, but equally it may show women actively deciding on their own
affiliations. In contrast with the Premonstratensian communities of German-speaking regions,
which maintained an active outlook and a substantial number of female members well into the
eighteenth century, the French male communities increasingly turned away from Norbert's idea
of what the religious life should be in order to adopt a more contemplative role. For women who
entered the order out of a desire to help others, this must not have been a happy prospect—faced
with marginalization, with the choice of either a full return to the secular world or life as an
enclosed nun, they may well have chosen to leave the Premonstratensian order for another. And
as Erin Jordan has pointed out in her work on the Victorines of Flanders and Hainault, that order
was particularly popular with women who chose to serve in hospitals.¹¹

The body of source material most often cited in favour of the idea of the
Premonstratensian Order being actively anti-women is the legislation produced by its annual
General Chapter meetings. But the legislation for the order must be treated with care; no
complete record of a medieval Premonstratensian general chapter meeting is known to survive.
We have scraps, mostly notes made by the seventeenth-century antiquarian abbot of Prémontré,
Charles-Louis Hugo, who had access to documentation since lost to us. Hugo did indeed note, as
Vauchez wrote, that the chapter had forbid the further acceptance of women in 1270 in an
attempt to finally enforce the papal bull of 1196. However, in 1271, the women of the monastery
of Wouw requested and were granted admission to the order, and a provost was appointed to
supervise their temporal and spiritual direction.¹² In 1279, the general chapter again said that it
would accept no more women, nulla mulier, yet in 1288 they were preoccupied with setting the
numbers of the house of women at Crécy, and decreeing that the father-abbot should attempt to reduce the numbers there to just ten. In 1290, Aelide, sister of Enguerrand de Coucy, countess of Guines, entered the order, and in 1292 the general chapter had to issue a stern reminder that no women were supposed to enter the confines of a male house.13

Clearly there was a strain of the Premonstratensian Order which disdained either an associated female presence, or the financial and logistical burden of having women in the order, or both; but just as clearly, they were not particularly effective on their own at removing women from the order. That these decrees legally marginalized women is undeniable, but a neat concordance between this legislation and actual practice is not so evident. Women were still active in the order long after the first decree which supposedly expelled them, and continued in Germany well into the early modern period. That French Premonstratensian women do fade from the historical picture in the fourteenth century cannot then be said to happen solely because of the actions of their male counterparts. We must look to the wider historical contexts of twelfth and thirteenth century northern France for further explanation. Although there were many interacting contributing factors, I will detail just one here—the issue of religious patronage, particularly patronage as exercised by aristocratic women.

As will already have become apparent, many of the women who entered Premonstratensian communities were also generous donors. Yet there were also many lay women who gave generously to the order, both to male and to female houses. The obituaries of the houses at Prémontré, Braine, and Silly are full of women whose donations earned them perpetual remembrance by the community. In the surviving documents of Prémontré, it is possible in some instances to trace the female-line descent of donors over three or four generations. Some women, seemingly so discouraged by the order in life, were welcomed into
male communities in death. For example, Béatrix de Picquigny, who died in 1144, was buried within the abbey church of St-Jean d'Amiens, while Agnes of Champagne, countess of Braine, received a lavish tomb in the abbey church of Braine. She had not only given funds to the community for its foundation and for the importation of expensive stained glass for its church from England, but her authority was respected enough by the canons that she had helped them to adjudicate disputes. Likewise, the abbey at Séry is also the burial place of its female founder, Marguerite de Longueval, while a number of other thirteenth and fourteenth-century tombs of laywomen survive at Séry, Mont-Saint-Martin and Prémontré itself. Some female communities even attracted royal favour. Adele of Champagne, queen of Louis VII, donated land to the women of Valprofonde in 1190, a donation which was confirmed by her son Philip Augustus in 1197.

In other words, the mostly middle-class or aristocratic women who formed the female Premonstratensian communities at this point needed the support of other middle-class or aristocratic women both to source new members and to obtain funding. Unfortunately, as the thirteenth century progressed, aristocrats were precisely the stratum of Picard society most affected by a regional economic slump. There are a number of charters in the cartulary of Prémontré which show people—particularly women—selling off land to the monastery for less than its true value because they were desperate for cash. The charters state this quite explicitly. Initially this made the order land rich, but over time must have proved a strain on resources as they attempted to maintain so much additional land. Ecclesiastical power faced a challenge on a number of fronts—surviving charters from the bishops of Noyon and the cathedral chapter of Laon reflect increasing numbers of disagreements between these institutions and town inhabitants, while Prémontré was engaged in a protracted struggle with the monastery of
Magdeburg for preeminence within the order. And as royal power increased in the region in the aftermath of the Battle of Bouvines in 1214, that of the regional seigneurial families declined, and so too some of their ability to patronize religious communities. Those who still had financial resources, or daughters who were considering a vocation, now had other possibilities to consider, such as the new mendicant orders, like the Franciscans or Dominicans.

Legislation alone did not marginalize women from the Premonstratensians, nor did male attitudes. To some extent women disappeared from French Premonstratensian houses, it seems, because they could choose their affiliations. As with Genlis, the women may well no longer have been inspired by the actions of their male colleagues; other communities may no longer have been able to rely on a wider network of female support and involvement. Few medieval religious, no matter how devoutly they wished to separate themselves from the world, ever truly managed to do so. To be a member of a religious order was to be part of broader and constantly shifting social, economic and political contexts; a woman's place within the Premonstratensian order was never static. By reexamining the evidence with an eye to the possibility of female agency, we see women who may have been liminal, but were rarely marginal.
FIGURES

Fig. 1

Location of Picardy within France.

Fig. 2

Map with location of the houses of Amiens/Bertricourt, Genlis, Prémontré and Braine.
Archives départementales de l'Oise, H6025: Plan of Bonneuil (1724).
REFERENCES

3 Bibliothèque municipale de Soissons (BMS) Ms. 7, ff. 48-48v, 50v, 58v-59; Archives départementales de l'Aisne (AD Aisne) H775, H777, H797; Société archéologique et historique de Soissons (SAHS) Ms. 14.
4 AD Aisne H793.
5 In a medieval European context, a *curtis* or court is an area of land enclosed by a wall within which there is housing. BMS Ms. 7, ff. 24-24v; AD Aisne H845.
6 BMS Ms 7, f. 77v; Archives nationales de la France (AN), L 995, no. 23.
7 Archives départementales de la Somme H(01)0002, p. 5, col. 10; p. 6, col. 12.
8 Archives départementales de la Oise H6025.
9 Philip I of Flanders reigned 1143-1191. Through his first wife, Elizabeth of Vermandois (1143-1183), he gained control of that northeastern French county.
13 AN L 995 no. 134.
14 BMS Ms. 7, f. 30.
16 Archives départementales de l'Yonne H1201, f. 39.