Wedding (and Divorcing) the Brides of Christ

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The Protestant Reformation wrought comprehensive change across early modern Europe, sparking theological debates that continue today. Although the Reformation can be traced through splintering denominations and theological heterodoxies, recent scholarship has highlighted marriage politics as a potent signpost of change. During the Reformation, marriage, once a private contract between two members of a homogenous religious community, was transformed into a highly-regulated and deeply-gendered change of political status in both Catholic and Protestant communities. At the same time, as Protestants and Catholics defined themselves against each other, they revised the details of the marital contract in the service of forging confessional identity.[1] However, not only marriageable men and women bore the consequences of these changes – the transformation of marriage during the Reformation was equally pronounced for the so-called "brides of Christ," the nuns and sisters who swore to abstain from marriage altogether. Indeed, Catholic nuns and sisters, generally referred to as women religious, became battlegrounds for arguments about sex. Although the implications of the Reformation for women religious have been considered at length by other scholars, this paper will examine the fate of the "brides of Christ" as sexually embodied *brides*, with a geographical focus on Reformation Germany. I contend that the marital discourse surrounding women religious during the Reformation was not incidental to their fate – the status of the "brides of Christ" was inextricably linked to the status of earthly marriage. By examining this connection, I hope to illuminate how women's bodies, and especially the sexualized bodies of women religious, became central to theological and

[1] Ulrike Strasser, *State of Virginity*, (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2004), 34-35.

political discourse in Reformation Germany, reshaping the symbolic role of women and transforming women's daily lives.

To understand the changing fates of the "brides of Christ," let us first examine the Protestant understanding of marriage as it emerged from the chaos of Reformation. Although Luther challenged the Catholic Church on a variety of theological fronts, marriage and celibacy were significant among his many concerns. For most of the Catholic Church's history, anyone who entered religious life took a vow of sexual abstinence. Men and women, sisters and priests, nuns and monks – all were expected to devote themselves to God rather than surrender to desires of the flesh. Thus, in the Catholic hierarchy of sexual virtue, marriage was considered less virtuous than chastity. Reformers like Luther contested this tradition. Luther did not just argue that marriage was more virtuous than celibate religious life – he argued that celibacy itself was unnatural, and an unwise invitation to sexual sin.[2] Luther's marital ideal was by no means, however, a gender-neutral partnership between fellow Christians. Here, Amy Leonard quotes one of Luther's pronouncements on marriage:

> Whereas the man was the definitive ruler within the house and the state, the 'woman, on the other hand, is like a nail driven into the wall… For just as a snail carries its house with it, the wife should sit at home and look after the affairs of the household, as one who has been deprived of the ability of administering those affairs that are outside and that concern the state. She does not go beyond these personal duties.'[3]

In this passage, Luther sets out a deeply gendered ideal of marriage, highlights the growing importance of a divide between public and domestic life, and hints at the connection reformers saw between marriage and the state. Reformers like Luther privileged marriage over celibacy while highlighting the division of marital duties between public and private, urging women to focus on the affairs of the household.[4]

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[2] Carlos Eire, *Reformations*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 710-712.
[3] Amy Leonard, *Nails in the Wall: Catholic Nuns in Reformation Germany,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2.
[4] Eire, *Reformations,* 314.

In places where Luther's Protestantism became the ruling ideology, reformers transformed the legal institution of marriage itself. Lyndal Roper closely examines this transformation in the Reformation town of Augsburg in her book *The Holy Household*. Roper argues that during the Reformation, marriage in Protestant towns like Augsburg became a bureaucratic civil institution rather than the private, religious contract it had once been. As Roper contends, the Protestant transformation of marriage in Reformation Germany must be understood in terms of the economic and political interests that spurred the Reformation in the first place. The politics of the Reformation, "heir to the master craftsmen's own politics, articulated by their guilds," focused intensely on "reinscribing women within the family," a process exemplified by the closing of female communities like convents and brothels throughout Reformation Germany.[5] The connection between the brothel and the convent was hardly coincidental; these two categories of "Frauenhäuser," or women's houses, stood in contradiction to the ideal of the male-headed household. The patriarchal household was the building block of the emerging patriarchal state, and a household master was the only possible candidate for political participation. Thus, marriage in Protestant Germany was transformed by the forces of the Reformation into a religiously valorized status that simultaneously mirrored the developing Protestant state.[6]

The Catholic Church was not a passive foil to the Protestant Reformation. After their strategy of execution, argumentation, and intimidation failed to stop the spread of Protestantism, the Catholic Church had to explicitly define itself against these upstart reformers. Starting in 1545, the Vatican opened the Council of Trent, a convention of bishops and cardinals called to discuss Protestant complaints and issue new Church doctrine in response. During the Council of Trent, the Church solidified its theological positions and definitively rejected

[5] Lyndal Roper, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals, in Reformation Augsburg*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 2.
[6] Roper, *The Holy Household,* 166-167.

Protestant ideas, including Luther's teachings on marriage and celibacy.[7] Although the Council reaffirmed clerical chastity, it nevertheless dealt with marriage in a manner that closely mirrored Protestant developments.[8] Catholics and Protestants operated in a theological dialectic with each other – in defining themselves against the other, they adopted similar vocabularies and similar anxieties. Indeed, as historian Ulrike Strasser argues in *State of Virginity*, marriage and gender politics in Catholic Bavaria underwent strikingly similar changes to Protestant areas, while maintaining the Catholic valorization of virginity. Strasser attributes these similarities to the coordinated process of state-building in early modern Germany, as well as to the irreversibly gendered sexualization of celibacy and marriage introduced by Protestant rhetoric.[9] The Catholic hierarchy used marriage to define themselves against Protestants, but they did so on Protestant terms.

The Council of Trent focused on two key characteristics of marriage: publicity and female containment. Both Protestants and Catholics were concerned with the prospect of "clandestine marriage," which posed a threat to the community control of marriage.[10] Where Protestants tended to institute a requirement for parental consent to prevent clandestine marriages, the Council of Trent responded to this threat by instituting a requirement of publicity for legitimate marriages. No longer did private promises between two individuals constitute a marriage; after the Council of Trent, marital intentions first had to be announced three times by a parish priest, and gender-specific vows then had to be solemnized in front of witnesses.[11] With marriage as an abrupt change in status rather than a private process, physical virginity leading up to marriage was elevated to the primary marker of female honor. Like Protestants, Catholics were

[7] Eire, *Reformations*, 379-381.
[8] Strasser, *State of Virginity*, 34.
[9] Strasser, *State of Virginity,* 29.
[10] Strasser, *State of Virginity*, 34; *The Council of Trent*, ed., trans. J. Waterworth (London: Dolman, 1848), 196.
[11] *Council of Trent*, 197.

concerned with the sexual danger posed by unmarried, uncontained women, and Catholic Munich instituted harsh penalties for women who engaged in sex outside of marriage, especially if they got pregnant.[12] Following the Church's lead, the Bavarian state increasingly stepped in to control who could get married, who could and could not have sex, and exactly how they could do it.[13]

Underlying both Protestant and Catholic discussions of marriage was the growing secular concern with class. Despite the valorization of marriage in both Protestant and Catholic discourse, the threat of economically unstable households and the growing ranks of the poor led authorities in cities of both confessions to limit marriage to class-suitable contexts. Roper discusses this trend in Reformation Augsburg, where "marriage marked the boundary between the guild of masters... and the journeymen."[14] Despite Luther's preference for early marriage to stave off the temptations of premarital sex, economic and social forces in Augsburg led authorities to strictly regulate marriage in the lower classes. Likewise, Strasser details Catholic Munich's bureau of marriage and its attempt to "[create] a community of orthodox, honorable, and financially stable burghers centered on married households," and to "secure public order in Munich through the exclusion of economically and morally undesirable people."[15] Marriage between servants was outlawed in Munich and Augsburg, along with any marriage that did not have an economic basis in shared property.[16] The burden of such legislation fell disproportionately on women, when pregnancy marked them as sexually immoral and physically impure. As a possible path to feminine virtue, marriage was available only to a privileged few.

My argument hinges on connecting this transformation of marriage with the Catholic understanding of women religious as "brides of Christ." Consecrated

[12] Strasser, *State of Virginity,* 108, 103-104.
[13] Strasser, *State of Virginity*, 17.
[14] Roper, *The Holy Household*, 136.
[15] Strasser, *State of Virginity,* 52.
[16] Roper, *The Holy Household,* 138-139; Strasser, *State of Virginity*, 91.

religious life emerged early in the Catholic Church's history, and by the time of the Reformation it played a pivotal role in the Church, both logistically and symbolically. Then, as it is now, men could become priests, celibate men who ran local parishes and celebrated the sacraments. Well-connected or ambitious priests could rise through the Church's ranks to become politically influential bishops, archbishops, and cardinals. Additionally, both men and women could enter celibate monastic life, dedicated to prayer, contemplation, and academic work. Unlike the priesthood, monastic orders of monks and nuns were usually subject to some degree of cloistering, in which they were kept separate from the other gender and from the world at large in monasteries and convents. However, some groups of monks called friars travelled freely, and many monks left the monastery to join the priesthood or teach in universities, like Luther did before his conversion.[17] Further, in the late Middle Ages some monastic orders had "third-order" sisters, celibate women who took simpler vows and worked in the community as teachers, nurses, and social workers. Third-orders were notably more accessible to poorer women, and offered a unique opportunity to work outside either the domestic home or the cloistered convent.[18]

Throughout Catholic history, there have been two primary ways to theorize religious life. An older tradition of asceticism understands both men and women in religious life as a "third gender"— genderless beings who sacrifice their natural sexuality to serve God.[19] Celibacy is more than just a physical requirement, it is a spiritual ideal. This ideal of disembodied spirituality sees both men and women in religious life as desexualized intellectual and spiritual agents.[20] Another tradition of thought, however, imagines nuns and priests to participate in a sort of heavenly marriage when they enter religious life, drawing on the biblical metaphor of the

[17] For a more detailed discussion of consecrated religious life and its structure at the time of the Reformation, see: Eire, *Reformations,* 23-27.
[18] Patricia Ranft, *Women and the Religious Life in Premodern Europe,* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 95-97.
[19] Strasser, *State of Virginity,* 72.
[20] Ranft, *Women and the Religious Life in Premodern Europe,* 2-3, 76.

heavenly marriage between Christ and his Church. Here, Christ is the husband (and head) of the Church, and the Church is the bride (and body) of Christ.[21] Understood through this metaphor, priests take the role of Christ as husbands of the Church," charged with protecting it, and nuns become the "brides of Christ," dedicated to his service. Unlike the older "third gender" conception, this marital metaphor leads to a highly gendered understanding of men and women's roles in religious life. While it positions male clergy as patriarchal stewards, as husbands and heads of the body of the Church, nuns become gendered and submissive brides of Christ, engaging in prayer, intercession, and contemplation rather than active pastoral care.[22] Notably, men who choose enclosed religious life – like monks – and celibate women who work outside the cloister – like third-order sisters –have no place in this marital metaphor. I argue that the Reformation's focus on marriage and gender foregrounded this second conception of religious life – after Protestant rhetoric introduced new anxiety around nuns as sexual bodies, the disembodied Catholic "third gender" ideal was harder to support. Thus, we can understand the convent as a discursive site for debates on the topic of marriage in Reformation Germany, where the status of the "brides of Christ" became inextricably linked to the status of the brides of men.

On a theological level, the "brides of Christ" had no place in the Protestant city. Reformers imagined a feminine Christian ideal entirely in terms of domestic work – according to one reformer in Augsburg, "a wife who washes her children's nappies each day, who feeds them pap, gives her husband food to eat, and nourishes her children in the sweat of her brow… will reach Heaven before a nun will."[23] Protestant Reformers saw no value in convent life, and were suspicious of the works-righteousness implied in the nuns' task of intercessory prayer. Therefore,

[21] Eph 5:22-30, NIV.
[22] This understanding of religious life is further described in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part 1, Section 2, Chapter 3, Article 9, Paragraph 4: "Christ's Faithful – Hierarchy, Laity, Consecrated Life.
[23] Roper, *The Holy Household,* 233.

reformers who gained political power quickly shut down most convents, symbolically divorcing the "brides of Christ."[24] Protestant propaganda during the Reformation was filled with stories of promiscuous nuns, attacking convents as undercover brothels and circulating wild stories about nuns prostituting themselves to men and, in some cases, to the devil himself.[25] As a former monk who wed the former nun Katherina von Bora, Martin Luther symbolically solved the logistical problems posed by the end of celibacy for the clergy and women religious, tying together two loose ends of uncontrolled sexual appetite into a productive domestic household.[26]

The rejection of the convent also had a powerful secular component. Roper argues that the campaign to integrate women religious back into the community stemmed from an underlying desire to bring religious power structures under lay control, and to bring the city's female residents back under the jurisdiction of their families.[27] The scattered cases of surviving "Protestant convents" that Roper presents are especially instructive. If the traditional task of the "brides of Christ" was prayer and intercession in service of the community and its dead, then the Protestant abolition of purgatory and works-righteousness put them out of work. Yet the sudden closure of convents created a surplus of unmarried women, so it seemed impossible to obtain suitable marriage partners and dowries for all the nuns remaining in the convents. Thus, rather than lose a crowd of single women, who were accustomed to communal life with other women and to independent study and economic work, the Augsburg council chose to maintain several of the convents as civic institutions.[28] These Protestant convents strictly enforced celibacy yet, forbid the former nuns from much of their traditional work. This pattern recurred in several German Protestant towns, and

[24] Ibid*, 211*.
[25] Strasser, *State of Virginity*, 70; Eire, *Reformations,* 653; Roper, *The Holy Household,* 232.
[26] Eire, *Reformations*, 712-714.
[27] Roper, *The Holy Household,* 212.
[28] Ibid, 214.

only for *female* monastic institutions.[29] Protestant theology did not value virginity in the Catholic style, but enforced female celibacy was nevertheless preferable to the prospect of women entirely uncontained by male authority.

Although the closure or civic seizure of convents in Protestant areas signaled more abrupt changes for women religious, their sisters in Catholic areas were not unaffected. Instead of solving the problem of the uncontained woman exclusively through marriage, as Protestants did, the Council of Trent presented women with two options: publicly exchanging their virginity for marriage, or a celibate life behind impenetrable convent walls. The Council's approach was neatly summarized thus: "aut murus aut maritus," a Latin phrase that translates "either walls or a husband."[30] The Council of Trent's dictates on marriage were strikingly duplicated in their dictates on convent reform – just as Tridentine marriage reform focused on public ceremonies and female containment, Tridentine convent reform focused on publicly declared vows and strictly enforced enclosure.[31] To be recognized by canon law as distinct from laywomen, women religious had long been required to take public "solemn vows." Nevertheless, in the centuries leading up to the Reformation, third-orders began to take private "simple vows," which circumvented the enclosure requirement, and worked directly in communities as teachers, nurses, and social workers.[32] The Council of Trent heavily restricted this flexibility.

The Council of Trent called for the tightening of enclosure on already-cloistered communities and retroactively called for the enclosure of third-order sisters, who took private simple vows. Notably, all these restrictions were specifically directed at female communities, not cloistered male communities. [33] Concerns about wonton monks do not appear in the Council's proceedings.

[29] Ibid, 242-243.
[30] Strasser, *State of Virginity*, 20.
[31] *Council of Trent,* 240-241.
[32] Ranft, *Women and the Religious Life,* 96-97.
[33] *Council of Trent*, 240-241.

Although the Council of Trent affirmed the spiritual value of chastity, Catholics were no longer immune to Protestant anxiety about it – Protestant portrayals of the convent as a brothel gained currency in Catholic thought, intensifying the need for women's strict enclosure and separation from the world. This heightened focus on enclosure was laid out in physical and architectural terms, suggesting a purely physical understanding of female celibacy, and negating women's own agency in pursuing the celibate life. Convents were physically remodeled in the wake of Tridentine reforms, with their newly constructed walls as symbolic hymens, physically protecting the "brides of Christ" from the world.[34]

The Council of Trent also discouraged unmediated and unsupervised female networks of authority, attempting to subject each community of women religious to direct male supervision and discouraging individual convents from affiliating with each other.[35] Priests and bishops, the husbands of the Church, increasingly held patriarchal power over the daily lives of women religious. Tridentine reforms singled out women religious for additional regulation and supervision, reinforcing their subordinate role as "brides of Christ" while obscuring the parallel position of male monastics. For third-order sisters, private vows no longer sufficed, as the Council of Trent retroactively required public vows and public ceremonies marking women's entrance into cloistered life. As Tridentine reforms strictly limited third orders and cloistered convents generally charged steep entrance fees, it became harder for lower-class women to enter religious life. [36] New class anxieties that emerged in the realm of earthly marriage, brought on by the heightened focus on an economically stable domestic sphere, were mirrored by an increased class-exclusivity within the convent itself.

After the Council of Trent, Catholic women were increasingly expected to remain under patriarchal control, at home and in the convent. Even as the Council reaffirmed the value of celibacy, they joined Protestants in

[34] Strasser, *State of Virginity* 123-124.
[35] *Council of Trent,* 243-244.
[36] Strasser, *State of Virginity*, 120.

conceptualizing female celibacy in physical, gendered, and sexual language, casting women as passive bodies in need of protection and regulation. Further, as virginity before marriage was more frequently defined in physical terms, so too was the virginity of the "brides of Christ" increasingly guaranteed through physical means, sparking contentious debates about wall height, locks, gates, and guards.[37] Because reformers of both varieties stressed the inescapably sexual nature of women and redefined the terms of marriage, the "brides of Christ" were progressively viewed as sexualized women, and Tridentine theology finally overcame older traditions of thought that conceived of men and women religious as a "third gender" that existed outside secular considerations of marriage. Throughout the Reformation, Protestants and Catholics defined themselves against each other by regulating and theorizing women's bodies in debates that brought together theology and statecraft. Female sexuality was politically dangerous in new ways, and women's bodies were unavoidably sexual bodies.

Pre-Reformation Europe was not a utopia of women's emancipation, and the pre-Reformation convent was not a site of uncomplicated female empowerment. However, I argue that the Protestant Reformation, and the Catholic Church's reactions to it, severely limited spiritual and intellectual opportunities for women in early modern Europe, and perhaps shaped women's social positions and symbolic roles during the following centuries. While men in both Protestant and Catholic areas were able to follow religious vocations as priests and preachers, women were physically hidden away from the public sphere, either by walls or by husbands. In Protestant areas, the elimination of the convent made married domestic life into women's only virtuous life path. In Catholic areas, women religious were prized as physical embodiments of a virgin Church rather than spiritual agents, and policing or contesting their virginity functioned as rhetorical combat. Neither Protestants nor Catholics imagined

[37] Strasser, *State of Virginity*, 74-75.

active roles for women in their spiritual communities. Rather than separate storylines in the history of the Reformation, the Protestant shuttering and Tridentine reform of the convent can be viewed as cohesive elements in a wholesale transformation of marriage and gender politics. Caught between Protestant sexual anxieties and Catholic defensiveness, women religious could either be made into virginal "brides of Christ" by the husbands of the Church or divorced by domesticating reformers. In both cases, growing concern with the status of lower-class women led to their exclusion from sexual virtue altogether. The bodies of women, both lay and religious, were the discursive playground for the rhetoric of the Reformation, effecting a revolution in marriage and gender politics whose reverberations we feel even today.

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