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Manipulated Memory – The Seventeenth Century Tale of Female Dominion and Male Servitude in Fontevraud

Annalena Müller

Around the year 1645, Jeanne-Baptiste de Bourbon (1637–1670),[1] abbess of the venerable double order of Fontevraud, sent two of her monks to the monastery of Sainte-Trinité de Vendôme. The men were instructed to destroy a letter that was compromising the reputation of Fontevraud's founder, Robert of Arbrissel (*c.* 1045–1116). In the twelfth century, Robert's practice of syneisaktism[2] had caused scandal and the early Fontevraudines' connection to this (heretical) form of sexual asceticism had remained a stain on the order's history. Five hundred years afterwards, Jeanne-Baptiste sought to obtain Robert's canonisation and tried to erase the dark spot from all memory. Hence, the letter in St. Trinité, which discussed the scandal, had to disappear. In the end, whether due to her envoy's incompetence or reluctance, the targeted document escaped destruction and is today housed in the Bibliothèque Municipale de Vendôme.[3]

1 Jeanne-Baptiste de Bourbon, born in 1608, was the daughter of Henry IV of France and his mistress Charlotte des Essarts. Prior to transferring to Fontevraud, Jeanne-Baptiste lived in Chelles, where her younger sister Marie Henriette was abbess. In 1625, Jeanne Baptiste was appointed coadjutor, i.e. the right arm and designated successor, of Fontevraud's aging abbess Louise de Lavedan, whom she succeeded to the abbatial seat in 1637.

2 Syneisaktism, or spiritual marriage, originated in the ascetic movements of the early Christians and can be described as "cohabitation of the sexes under the condition of strict continence, [members of the sexes] sharing the same room, and sometimes the same bed, yet conducting themselves as brother and sister". This form of sexual asceticism had already caused outrage in the earliest times of its practice and at least six fourth century church councils had condemned its practice as heretical. Not surprisingly, Robert's revived practice of syneisaktism had provoked some severe ecclesiastic opposition in the twelfth century and, by the seventeenth century, the mere memory of syneisaktism had become unacceptable; cf. Derrick Sherwin Bailey, Sexual Relation in Christian Thought, New York 1959, 33, and Elizabeth A. Clark, John Chrysostom and the "Subintroducate", in: Church History, 46, 2 (1977), 173.

3 Bib.mun.Vendôme, ms 193. The history of this letter and its attempted destruction has been discussed in detail by Jacques Dalarun in his L'Impossible Sainteté. La vie retrouvée de Robert d'Arbrissel (v. 1045–1116) fondateur de Fontevraud, Paris 1985, 98–104, as well as on a website of the CNRS and IRHT dedicated to the case, at http://lettrevolee.irht.cnrs.fr/accueil.html, access: August 25, 2014.

Although the abbess failed to rehabilitate Robert's reputation (he was beatified, but never canonised), Jeanne-Baptiste successfully remodelled another aspect of Fontevraud's past: during her abbacy, Fontevraud's identity as an order where women ruled and men served was created. The idea of a powerful abbess, who governed a mixed community, has long since inspired the imagination of historians and, in the process, has seen Robert of Arbrissel emerge as a liberator of women, a 'proto-feminist' or a rebel who consciously challenged social order.[4] This, however, is a misconception of both the order's founder and medieval Fontevraud, a misconception that was deliberately created during a twenty year conflict between the abbess and her monks.

This conflict, which shook Fontevraud between *c.* 1627 and 1643, was in its essence a struggle about restricted versus unrestricted abbatial authority. Within less than two decades the two conflicting parties produced more than 2000 pages of pamphlets, a *factum*,[5] and two monastic histories in which each side sought to advance its respective agenda. While the monks fought their battle mostly via legal deliberations, the abbatial agenda required the extensive manipulation of the Fontevraudine past, and, in the process, produced the philogynous image of Fontevraud still in place today.

This article is interested in the seventeenth century conflict between Fontevraudine monks and their abbess, their respective lines of argumentation as well as the image these early modern disputants created of medieval Fontevraud, an image that still pervades contemporary scholarship. Like few others, the Fontevraudine quarrels point at the same time to the limits and the importance of chronological boundaries: comprehending the conflict's essence requires considering both medieval and early modern Fontevraud, while the seventeenth century manipulations of Fontevraud's history, especially regarding the arguments concerning female authority over male subordinates were clearly the product of their time.

4 Jules Michelet was one of the first to advance the idea; cf. idem, Oeuvres completes, ed. by Paul Viallaneix, Paris 1971, IV, 319–322. Outside of nineteenth century romantic historiography, this idea has experienced a certain revival within gender history; cf. for example Régine Pernoud, Les femmes aux temps des cathédrales, Paris 1980, 130–169. Robert of Arbrissel as a liberator of women has been most vociferous in American scholarship, such as: Howard Bloch, Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love, Chicago 1992, 178–183. Dyan Elliott suggested Robert of Arbrissel to have consciously experimented with "gender boundaries", idem, Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock, Princeton 1993, 111.

5 A *factum* is a publication written in the context of a legal action by one of the involved parties, either in support of its demands or to refute the claims of the opposing party. It often includes a statement of facts and aims to influence the public and *Parlement* or *Conseil* (or other involved institutions) in their favour. See Miscellanées Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), Guide de recherche en bibliothèque, at http://grebib.bnf.fr/html/factums.html, access: August 25, 2014.

1. The Origins – Fontevraud's Foundation and Fontevraudine Hierarchy[6]

In early 1101, Robert of Arbrissel settled his itinerant flock in the remote forests of Anjou, at a place called *Fons Ebraldi*, or Fontevraud. However, this settlement was externally imposed rather than voluntarily chosen. Robert, one of the most successful twelfth century itinerant preachers, had been wandering western France for many years and publicly castigating the sinful ways of the world and the Church. In the process, he had attracted an ever-growing congregation of both sexes, who followed Robert on his preaching tours and lived with him in the Angevin wilderness. However, in the eyes of most of his contemporaries, the preacher's cohabitation with men and women was scandalous and eventually caused Robert to be summoned to the Council of Poitiers in November 1100.[7] In order to avoid charges of heresy, Robert and his flock agreed to settle in one place and to build separate living quarters for men and women.[8] Even after the congregation's establishment, the charismatic preacher continued to attract disciples. Women in particular flocked to him and the congregation's female members soon outnumbered the men.[9]

Within a century, Fontevraud grew to become one of France's largest monastic orders.[10] The reasons for this were as diverse as were its early members. The male Fon-

6 The two *vitae* of Robert of Arbrissel, written within a few years after his death, provide the most comprehensive narratives on early Fontevraud. While these documents did not escape manipulation in the seventeenth century, the indefatigable work of Jacques Dalarun has allowed for a textual restoration of the original documents, cf. Dalarun, Sainteté, see note 3; and idem et al. eds., Les Deux Vies de Robert d'Arbrissel, Fondateur de Fontevraud. Légendes, écrits et témoignanges, Turnhout 2006. In addition to Jacques Dalarun, Jean-Marc Bienvenu has worked extensively on early Fontevraud, cf. in particular idem, Les Premiers Temps de Fontevraud, 1101–1189. Naissance et Evolution d'un Ordre Religieux, Thèse d'Etat Paris 1980. For a comparative approach to early Fontevraud see Bruce L. Venarde, Women's Monasticism and Medieval Society, Ithaca/London 1997.

7 The letter by Marbod, bishop of Rennes , which Jeanne-Baptiste later sought destroyed, gives insight into the turmoil Robert's asceticism caused even among reform-oriented members of the institutional Church. For the best critical edition of this letter to date, see Johannes von Walter, Die ersten Wanderprediger Frankreichs. Studien zur Geschichte des Mönchtums, 1: Robert von Arbrissel, Leipzig 1903, 181–189.

8 Cf. Jean-Marc Bienvenu, L'Étonnant Fondateur de Fontevraud Robert d'Arbrissel Paris 1981, 71–73, and Vita Prima (VP) 16, Patrologia Latina (PL) 162, col. 1051.

9 Four different buildings were erected in Fontevraud to accommodate the women, while only one was needed to house the men; cf. VP, see note 8, 20, PL, see note 8, 162, col. 1053–1054.

10 There were at least 78 Fontevraudine priories located all over France; between 1491 and 1643 another five houses were incorporated from different orders or newly founded, leaving a total of 84 Fontevraudine priories plus the mother houses of Fontevraud Abbey and St. Jean-de-l'Habit, the male convent located near the abbey. This count is based on the inventory of the Archives départementales Maine-et-Loire. The Fontevraudine order was special in two regards – on the one hand, it was a largely 'national' order (the four Fontevraudine houses in Spain and England respectively, did not play a role after the fourteenth century); on the other hand, to my knowledge, there was no comparable (primarily) female monastic order of this size and spreading in Europe.

tevraudines mostly consisted of low clergy without a parish, poor peasants, and artisans,[11] who found both a spiritual and an actual home in Fontevraud. Unlike the men's backgrounds, which appear to have been relatively homogeneous, the congregation's female members were of more diverse origin – both prostitutes and princesses flocked to Robert. The diversity in the women's backgrounds is best explained by the general lack of religious institutions to receive women at the time. In 1100, there was but a single nunnery in all of Anjou which could only receive few well-situated women.[12] For women from the other end of the social spectrum, there was nothing at all. It would take another one hundred fifty years until the *Filles-Dieu*-convents began to offer repentant prostitutes a God-pleasing alternative to their trade.[13] In other words, Fontevraud's rapid growth suggests that, in addition to answering a widespread religious calling, the new order answered to a societal need by welcoming women regardless of their number and backgrounds.

Despite Fontevraud's initial social diversity, aristocratic women quickly predominated. For France's nobility, the nascent order offered a path to provide for their female relatives, whether unmarried or widowed. A close alignment to powerful families indeed manifested itself from the very beginning: Fontevraud's first prioress and abbess, Hersende and Pétronille, came from influential local nobility. And the famous Eleanor of Aquitaine was one of Fontevraud's most important early benefactors who eventually retired to the monastery and chose it as her burial place.[14]

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11 Cf. Ernst Werner, Pauperes Christi. Studien zu sozial-religiösen Bewegungen im Zeitalter des Reformpapsttums, Leipzig 1956, 43–45; Bienvenu, Fondateur, see note 8, 62f.; Suzanne Tunc, Les femmes aux pouvoir. Deux abbesses de Fontevrault au XII^{e} et XVII^{e} siècle, Paris 1993, 22–25. While no medieval registers of St.-Jean-de-l'Habit exist today, we know that still in the eighteenth century the Fontevraudine monks were of socially inferior standing than the nuns. Registre des actes de prise d'habit, de professions des religieux de St. Jean de l'Habit, Archives départementales Maine-et-Loire (AdML) 101 H 23 $^{23/24}$.

12 Namely the convent of Notre-Dame-du-Ronceray which was located in Angers; cf. Bienvenu, Fondateur, see note 8, 56. As is the case for most female monasteries in France, little research has been conducted on Ronceray. A first superficial introduction can be obtained through Anne-Claire Merand, L'Abbaye de Ronceray dans la Ville d'Angers à la fin du Moyen-Âge (vers 1380–1499). Affirmation d'une communauté de femmes au milieu urbain, mémoire de maîtrise, Angers 2001; however, more in-depth research would be desirable.

13 The *Filles-Dieu*-convents were founded during the reign of Louis IX (1224–1270) in several French cities. By the end of the fifteenth century, the Parisian convent of the *Filles-Dieu* would join the Order of Fontevraud; cf. Antoinette Chauvenet, Institution des Filles-Dieu, in: Encyclopaedia Universalis, 2008, at http://www.universalis-edu.com/encyclopedie/institution-des-filles-dieu/, access: August 25, 2014. Dalarun – relying on a seventeenth-century manuscript of uncertain origin – recounts an episode when Robert of Arbrissel entered a brothel in Rouen to warm his feet and entered into a conversation with the local prostitutes whom he convinced to renounce their sinful lives and follow him towards God; cf. Dalarun, Sainteté, see note 3, 102f.

14 Hersende and Petronilla (Fontevraud's first prioress and abbess, respectively) and Agnes, Petronilla's sister and prioress of Fontevraud under Petronilla, and another Agnes, prioress of Orsan and former wife of a local lord are explicitly named in the *vitae* of Robert of Arbrissel. The collection of (selected)

Considering the close affiliation to France's most powerful families as well as the women's social and numerical superiority, Robert's choice to appoint a noble woman abbess was logical. Twelfth century Fontevraud is thus best understood in terms of social rather than gender hierarchies, and instead of institutionalising male submission to female authority, it simply reflected the order of the world it was founded in.

Yet, the choice of an abbess as head of order neither implies voiceless monks nor does it suggest that they assumed a negligible or even a submissive role. On the contrary, Fontevraud's early customs suggest that the monks held relatively influential positions within the order. The *fratres* alone were responsible for the Fontevraudines' spiritual care – the statutes demanded that they regularly celebrate mass and explicitly forbade this task to be transferred to external priests.[15] As confessors, they exercised indirect influence on the order's most authoritative members, and four Fontevraudine priors, who formed the abbatial council, had direct agency in all administrative decisions.[16] Finally, for changes pertaining to the order as a whole, the abbess was obliged to ask the monks' advice and consent.[17]

Although the nature of medieval sources does not allow for a more detailed description of the monks' role, it is certain that they assumed an important place in early Fontevraud. Nothing indicates ascetic or ideological submission of the male sex to the female, as suggested by some scholars.[18] Rather, the hierarchy followed the numeric distribution and social standing of the members without withholding participatory rights from anyone. The Fontevraudines' 'labour division' ran along spiritual lines: the un-ordained noble women prayed and administered and the ordained monks performed manual labour and provided spiritual care – all tasks being equally important for the functioning of the order.

Five hundred years after Fontevraud's foundation, this original division of tasks was but a distant memory, as the discussion of the seventeenth century conflict will make evident. Tensions between the congregation and the order's Bourbon abbesses, who administered the order from 1491 to 1670, marked Fontevraudine life for much of the

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donation-charters housed in the Archives Nationales de France gives an impression of the important benefices transferred to Fontevraud by Eleanor of Aquitaine's (and others), making for the order's impressive wealth. Archives Nationales (AN) LL 1599A.

15 "1. Ut canonicum celebrent officium […] 26. Ut nullus sacerdos et parochianus praesumat celebrare officium si non fuerit prae inopia sacerdotis fratris". Dalarun et al., Les Deux Vies, see note 6, 398 and 402.

16 The councillors of the Fontevraudine abbess, her *coinseillers-nés*, were the priors of St. Jean de l'Habit, of St. Lazare (both located at Fontevraud abbey), of St. Michel (abbatial church) and of St. Laurent, in Gascony. While the *conseillers-nés* are neither mentioned in the statutes nor in the "vitae", later documents testify to this important means of participation which would increasingly be curtailed during Jeanne-Baptiste de Bourbon's abbacy; cf. Honorat Nicquet, Histoire de l'Ordre de Font-Evraud, Paris 1643, 360.

17 Vita Altera (VA), 52.6, in the edition of Jacques Dalarun, in: idem, Sainteté, see note 3, 290.

18 Cf. notes 4 and 10.

sixteenth century. In the first third of the seventeenth century, the situation escalated when Louise II de Bourbon and her successor, Jeanne-Baptiste, began to establish close ties to the rising Jesuit order.

2. The *Querelle des Frères* – The Rise of Jesuit Influence in Fontevraud

The conflict between Fontevraud's monks and their abbess became public around 1627, when a group of anonymous *fratres* circulated the forty two page "Epistre Narrative"[19] which denounced excessive Jesuit influence in Fontevraud. Official ties between Fontevraud and the Society of Jesus had been established eight years earlier, when Louise II de Bourbon (1611–1637) had acquired a building in La Flèche to found a seminary for Fontevraud's male novices in 1619.[20] The choice of La Flèche was a deliberate one. Since 1603, the town accommodated the famous Jesuit Collège Henri IV, which had drawn as many as 1000 students from all over France in its first year;[21] and, since 1619, also Fontevraud's novices were among them. The new seminary was not the only sign of the Society's growing influence in Fontevraud: the number of Jesuit confessors was rising constantly. This fact in particular provoked strong resentments among Fontevraud's own monks, whose position was threatened by the Jesuits' increasingly prominent position. [22]

The monks' "Epistre Narrative" centred on a certain *Père N.*, a Jesuit who had gained the trust of the aging abbess Louise II and her coadjutrix and successor, Jeanne-Baptiste de Bourbon. Within a short time, *Père N.* had risen to an influential position in the abbey, a position he used to deliberately undermine the influence of Fontevraud's monks in order to expand his own.[23] The authors of the "Epistre" claim that *Père N.* persuaded the abbess to assemble a general chapter during which the Jesuit convinced the gathered prioresses of their right to freely appoint the confessor for their respective convent – whether this confessor came from the Fontevraudine or from another order.[24] While there remains doubt if the "Epistre Narrative's" *Père N.* was ever more than

19 The full title reads: Epistre Narrative de l'Entreprise faicte dans l'Ordre de Fontevrauld, par un certain Religieux d'un aulture ordre, addressee par un Docteur celebre à un Evesque de France, & mise en lumière par le commandement dudict Evesque, Paris 1627.

20 Cf. AdML 144 H 2.

21 Cf. Camille de Rochemonteix, Un Collège de Jésuites aux XVIIe & XVIIIe siècles. Le Collège Henri IV de La Flèche, Le Mans 1889, 1, 125–130.

22 Already on page one of the "Epistre Narrative" the author refers to the Fontevraudine abbess's particular fondness for Jesuits, Epistre Narrative, see note 19, 1. It would be interesting to explore the extent of Jesuit influence in seventeenth century Fontevraud in greater detail. However, as there is hardly any scholarship on Fontevraud's post-foundation history, this and other questions have to remain open for the time being.

23 Cf. Epistre Narrative, see note 19, 5.

24 Cf. Epistre Narrative, see note 19, 6f.

a straw man used to personify the spreading evil of Jesuit influence in Fontevraud, the increasingly close ties between the Fontevraudine government and the Society of Jesus were real. As was the threat emanating from the Jesuits.

The debate about who could be appointed Fontevraudine confessor and who had the right to make the appointment had been smouldering since the late fifteenth century. In 1483, Pope Sixtus IV had allowed Fontevraud's abbess Anne d'Orléans (1477–1491) to freely choose her confessor.[25] Interpreting this bull as a general privilege, subsequent abbesses had grown accustomed to choosing their own confessors, often from outside the order. This change had not gone uncontested. In 1543, the Sorbonne was consulted on the matter, but the papal privilege could not be easily ignored. The university's eminent theologians confirmed the abbess's right to appoint confessors, but they warned her of the dangers of doing so and recommended that she rely on the order's own monks.[26]

Eighty years later, *Père N.* interpreted the Sistine privilege as extending also to the prioresses, an interpretation that turned the monks' uneasy situation into a precarious one. According to the "Epistre", the Jesuit praised the advantages of free choice of confessors as solidification of abbatial and priorial sovereignty. In the eyes of the "Epistre's" authors, however, *Père N.*'s reasoning was just an ill-disguised attempt to hide his hunger for more Jesuit influence in Fontevraud.[27] And indeed, the growing Jesuit influence was the very crux of the matter: Fontevraud's ever more open Jesuit turn, which had begun with the foundation of the La Flèche-seminary and which continued with the appointment of Jesuit confessors, moved the monks to seek a public beyond the abbey's cloister, a public they sought to reach by publishing the "Epistre Narrative". In the document, the monks began to articulate a line of legal argumentation, which they would continuously refine in the following years and fully formulate in the two hundred page "Factum pour les Religieux", published in 1641.

3. Arguing the Brothers' Case

In 1627, the most immanent concern was, if not to refute, to at least qualify the Jesuit's claim that the abbess and prioresses could at will choose and appoint confessors. In this matter, Fontevraud's monks demonstrated both wit and obstreperousness. According to the "Epistre Narrative", they convinced *Père N.* to submit three questions to the erudite Jesuits of La Flèche, thus challenging the Jesuit intruder within his own community.

25 Cf. Jean Lardier, La Saincte Famille de Fontevraud, Fontevraud, 1650, 571. A copy of the document can be found in: Notes sur la regle de Marie de Bretagne, et causes pour lesquelles l'Ordre de Font-Evraud est en un si grand desordre, n. p., 1636, 88–95.

26 Cf. Nicquet, Histoire, see note 16, 365.

27 Cf. Epistre Narrative, see note 19, 3 and 6.

The first question concerned the origin of the confessor's authority to absolve and whether that authority was derived from the abbess. The second question built on the first: Are abbess and prioresses allowed to transfer the authority to absolve to others without the consent of the order's confessors or the Fontevraudine visitor?[28] Thirdly, it was asked if the confessor's authority was part of the office *(ratione officii)* or a privilege that could be conferred and revoked.[29]

While the answers from La Flèche seemed to support the monks, they failed to actually resolve the problem. To the first question, the Jesuit reply was as hoped: The confessors did not derive their authority from the abbess, who, due to her sex, did "not hold any such jurisdiction [and therefore] could not confer it to others".[30] In regard to the second question, neither the abbess nor prioresses could transfer said authority; however, due to the privilege granted by Sixtus IV, the abbess had the right to appoint external confessors, while the prioresses did not.[31] To the third, and most important question, the Jesuits of La Flèche replied that the confessor's authority was theirs *ratione officii* and originated not with the abbess but with the pope, to whose authority Fontevraud was directly subject.[32] In other words, canon law and Church tradition were with the monks, except for the Sistine privilege from 1483, which vested the abbess with an authority that proved increasingly threatening to the monks' position in Fontevraud.

As circumventing the Sistine privilege proved impossible, the monks switched strategies and radically expanded their focus in the two following publications. Instead of questioning the legitimacy of external confessors, the "Notes sur la Regle de Marie de Bretagne" (1636) and the "Factum" (1641) challenged the validity of an entire phase of Fontevraudine history, namely the order's fifteenth century reform. The latter, they argued, had brought several changes to Fontevraud's organisation, including its hierarchy and rules. As a result, Fontevraud's post-reform state was in discordance with Church decrees which explicitly forbade the introduction of any changes and understood reform solely as "a bringing back of the order from a mitigated or relaxed observance to the rigour of its primitive rule".[33] In a second step, the monks demanded the (alleged) pre-reformed state to be re-established, a process in which they sought a leading role in

28 The office of visitor was the highest Fontevraudine office held by a monk of the order. The *père visiteur* was appointed for three years and inspected the order's priories on an annual basis, cf. Regula Ordinis Fontis-Ebraldi imprimée par l'ordonnance de très-illustre et religieuse princesse, Madame Jeanne-Baptiste de Bourbon, fille L. de France, abbesse, chef et générale dudit ordre, Paris 1642, 236f.

29 Cf. Epistre Narrative, see note 19, 12f.

30 Epistre Narrative, see note 19, 14, English translations of this and all further quotations are by the author.

31 Cf. Epistre Narrative, see note 19, 15.

32 Cf. Epistre Narrative, see note 19, 16.

33 Gilbert Huddleston, Reform of a Religious Order, in: The Catholic Encyclopedia, New York 1911, 12. Online version at http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12711a.htm, access: June 30, 2013.

order to ensure a pivotal place in Fontevraud's future for themselves. The unpopular Sistine privilege, which had been issued during the order's reform, would vanish along with the contested reform. It was a convoluted plan and its prospect of success must have appeared dim from the beginning – but the monks attempted it nevertheless.

In essence, Fontevraud's fifteenth century reform centred on a new monastic rule that replaced the twelfth century statutes drawn up by Robert of Arbrissel. The revised rule proposed two significant alterations to the original statutes. First, Fontevraud's priors were re-named *pères confesseurs* (father confessors). Second, the new rule, an adaptation of the Benedictine rule, applied to both the male and the female Fontevraudines, causing a change in habit for the men who had originally lived by the Augustinian Rule. The shift from *priors* to *pères confesseurs* was merely a change in name and also the switch from the *Praeceptum* to the *Regula Benedicti* had brought few concrete changes to the brothers' lives.[34] However, any deviation from Fontevraud's original state, organisation, or structure, no matter how insignificant, gave the monks a strong argument against the reformed rule, namely its novelty. If reform meant the return to the origins, any deviation from the original state that was introduced in the process made the entire reform invalid. The monks built their case on this reasoning and vehemently demanded a return to the Augustinian rule in both their publications.

While the switches in rule and name were facts, other deviations allegedly introduced with the reform were fabrications of the monks. The reform, they claimed, had brought significant changes to Fontevraud's internal structure. Pre-reform, and before the priors had been degraded to *pères confesseurs*, the monks had been in charge of the priories, while the prioresses' task had been limited to the care for her convent's nuns. In regard to the abbess, the priors used to be second only to the abbess, who relied on the monks' guidance and advice in administrating the vast order.[35] The reform, the monks asserted, had altered this original hierarchy, and these changes were, in turn, the cause for the order's economic and spiritual crises which plagued seventeenth century Fontevraud.[36] The monks were convinced (and stated) that, being men, they were more gifted in business and administrative matters, which was reflected in the overall better condition of the Fontevraudine order before the reform.[37] The "Notes sur la Règle"

34 The term prior, similar to prioress, suggests administrative tasks and authority. And indeed, in both the "Notes sur la Regle" and the "Factum" one finds the demand for a return of the priors and the transfer of appropriate authority to them. The most detailed in: Notes, see note 25, 36–41. While definite proof is lacking, it seems likely that also Fontevraud's medieval priors had primarily been concerned with spiritual care, while the priory's administration, congruently to the abbatial administration of the abbey and the entire order, behoved the prioress; cf. Annalena Müller, From Charismatic Congregation to Institutional Monasticism. The Case of Fontevraud, in: The American Benedictine Review, 64, 4 (2013), 428–444.

35 Cf. Notes, see note 25, 37.

36 Cf. Notes, see note 25, 33ff. and 40.

37 Cf. Notes, see note 25, 37, 51 and 56.

close with the demand to reinstate the monks (more concretely, the priors) in their old position – second to the abbess and above the order's prioresses.[38]

A few years after the "Notes'" publication, the monks called on the *Parlement* of Paris to try their case about external confessors and the novelties of the reform. By the 1640s, France's highest court was already well experienced with Fontevraudine quarrels. A century earlier, the order's first Bourbon abbess, Renée, had feuded with her monks before the *Parlement* for an entire decade, at which point the case was transferred to the king's *Grand Conseil*, where it was settled in the abbess's favour in 1521. In 1640, the monks and their abbess Jeanne-Baptiste also met in this court. One year later, the former published the "Factum pour les Religieux"[39] in an attempt to gain the support of the public and the court.

The "Factum" is the most considered presentation of the monks' argumentation. While no new arguments were introduced, those already known from the "Epistre Narrative" and "Notes sur la Règle" were significantly expanded, sometimes to the point of legal pedantry. The focus of the two hundred page document lay on Fontevraudine hierarchy and absolute abbatial rule. Despite its length, the "Factum's" content is quickly summarised: While the monks participated in the order's administration and voted in the general chapter in pre-reform Fontevraud, the general chapter had lost its influence post reform. In fact, they claimed, the chapter now resembled "a monster with a head but without a body, or only with the appearance of a body", where the abbess alone orders, absolves, and judges.[40] The abbess's *authorité absoluë*[41] further manifested itself in the *de-facto* abolition of the abbatial council and her undivided rule in the Fontevraudine order.[42] Especially in the abbess's tacit denial of the general-chapter's right of co-determination, the monks saw a violation of canon law. For the general chapter to be in accordance with Church law, each convent's "to be reinstated prior" needed to be re-established as the sole representatives of their convents at the general chapter and actively be involved in any decision-making process that pertained to the order as a whole.[43]

38 Cf. Notes, see note 25, 81f.

39 The full title reads: Factum pour les Religieux de Fonte Vrault, touchant les differents dudit Ordre. For the definition of the nature of a *factum*, see note 5.

40 "[…] cette assemblée pretenduë capitulaire ressembleroit à un monstre, car il y auroit une teste qui n'auroit point de membres, sinon en apparence […]", Factum, see note 39, 25.

41 Factum, see note 39, 33 and 56.

42 Cf. Factum, see note 39, 33. See note 15 for Fontevraud's *counseillers-nés*, the traditional advisory body that, while nominally still existing, had lost its influence by the mid-seventeenth century.

43 Factum, see note 39, 26. That only the monks and not the prioresses can represent their respective priories in a general chapter is based upon the bull *Pericoloso* (1298), a papal decretal that made enclosure mandatory for all female monastics. The Council of Trent reinforced *Pericoloso* in Session 25, Concerning Regulars and Nuns, chap. V. Dekrete der ökumenischen Konzilien, 3, ed. by Josef Wohlmuth, Paderborn/Wien 2001, 177f.

Throughout the entire discussion, the monks never questioned abbatial supremacy. However, they demanded that they be given second rank in the order, a demand they bolstered with three different general arguments.

1. *Tradition:* Fontevraud's founder Robert of Arbrissel had intended that the monks assist the abbess in the order's administration. Indeed, the monks claimed, their predecessors had always done so until the reform had abolished their traditional rights;[44]
2. *Necessity:* The changes brought about by the reform, notably the alleged elevation of prioresses over the monks and the latter's exclusion from all administration, had caused the order's decline both economically and spiritually. (This train of thought was already fully developed in the "Notes sur la Règle").[45]
3. *Spiritual Authority:* The monks' insistence that women be excluded from spiritual authority is linked to the original question of the conflict: who can appoint and who can be appointed confessor of the Fontevraudines? For the monks, the answer remained unambiguous also fourteen years into the quarrel: in order to transfer the spiritual authority necessary to absolve a sinner, the persons transferring said authority needed to possess it themselves. And since women, who could not be ordained, were excluded from all spiritual authority, neither the abbess nor prioresses can appoint external confessors, *i.e.* transfer spiritual authority to people outside the order.[46] This argument remains the most complex also in the "Factum".[47]

Leaving aside those arguments that merely served to demonstrate the rule's novelty and thus invalidity, three core issues can be identified: first, the demand to adjust Fontevraudine hierarchy so that the monks held the second rank after the abbess; second, the insistence on abbatial accountability to the general chapter; and third, the chapter's right of co-determination in all matters.

The last two points in particular suggest concerns that went beyond simple discontent with the introduction of external confessors. The importance of the general chapter is a characteristic of Benedictine monasticism, which is inclined toward a collegial rather than a hierarchical structure. It thus seems fair to say that in seventeenth century Fontevraud, the monks opposed the increasingly undivided rule of an abbess who had come to ignore Fontevraud's traditional institutions and who gave preference to Jesuits for spiritual and administrative guidance. This preference was no coincidence, as will

44 Cf. Factum, see note 39, 37, 46, 48f. and 65. In detail: 83–94.

45 Cf. Factum, see note 39, 39, 70, and Notes, see note 25, 33ff.

46 Cf. Factum, see note 39, 40–44, 59f., and Factum, see note 39, Part II, Raisons, 1–8.

47 While any argument built on Fontevraudine history was *eo ipso* clearly circumscribed, the question of female spiritual authority was necessarily more complex, as it pertained to canon law with its uncountable and often contradictory regulations and also touched on questions of monastic traditions, which were no less complex.

be shown shortly, and it is responsible for the gradual change of Fontevraud's identity from a relatively collegial community to a strictly hierarchical one.

4. Arguing the Abbess's Case

While the abbatial documents are more diverse than those of the monks, all of them advocate abbatial sovereignty. Around the time of the "Epistre Narrative", and possibly in answer to it, the abbatial circle began to select documents that testified to Fontevraud's long and successful history, the order's wealth, and the importance of the Fontevraudine abbesses for both. This first set of documents, which was gathered in cartularies, covers the period from 1100 to 1620 and ranges from donations and privileges to papal bulls and short biographies of the Bourbon abbesses.[48] The second set can be characterised as ad-hoc-publications or immediate reactions to the monks' "Factum".[49] Two historicising chronicles of Fontevraud form the third and final set of documents. The more important of the two histories is Honorat Nicquet's "Histoire de l'Ordre de Font-Evraud", which was published in Paris in 1643. The large number of still extant copies points to the book's high circulation at the time. In 1650, Jeanne-Baptiste's confidant Jean Lardier finished his massive three-volume "La Saincte Famille de Font-Evraud", of which only the third volume, a 1000 page manuscript, has survived the erosion of time. While the monks' publications have received little scholarly attention, the easily accessible abbatial documents have often provided the basis for studies on Fontevraud and its seemingly peculiar hierarchy.

As opposed to the monks' legal angle, the abbatial publications approached the question of Fontevraudine hierarchy from a historical-philosophical perspective. The Jesuit Honorat Nicquet especially depicts Fontevraud's structure as a corporate one with the abbess as its all-powerful head to whom all members owe complete obedience.[50] A simple analogy serves as justification for undivided abbatial sovereignty: When Robert of Arbrissel founded Fontevraud, he modelled the order's identity and structure after the moment during the crucifixion, when Jesus entrusted his favourite disciple John to the care and authority of his mother Mary: "Ecce, mater tuam. Ecce,

48 AN LL 1599[A] and Bibliotheque Nationale (BN), ms. lat. 5480 I and II.

49 These include: Jeanne-Baptiste de Bourbon, Mémoires touchant l'Institut de l'ordre de Fontevrauld présentés au roi par la dame abbesse dudit ordre; Jeanne-Baptiste de Bourbon, Lettre aux prieurés et couvents; Nicolas Picard, Remarques, en forme de response, sur un libelle diffamatoire de l'Ordre de Fontevraud, qui court par les provinces soubs le titre Factum […]; Anonymous, La Response d'un ecclesiastique à la letter d'une religieuse de l'Ordre de Fontevraud sur un libelle imprimé sous ce titre Factum […].

50 The abbess herself used this title, see note 28.

filius tuum."[51] In Fontevraud, the abbess stood in the tradition of Mary and thus became the mother of all Fontevraudines, enjoying parental authority over her children. The monks, who followed in the footsteps of St. John, were her sons and as such owed her unconditional obedience. Despite its apparent simplicity, this analogy is indeed rather sophisticated – combining a religious legitimacy (the crucifixion) with one building on Fontevraud's monastic tradition (Robert of Arbrissel).

However, the analogy's underlying philosophical reasoning is characteristic for the seventeenth century rather than the Middle Ages. In other words, the idea of unrestricted parental authority is not a medieval concept but an early modern one, formulated by apologists for royal authority in the late sixteenth century. Jean Bodin, the most famous apologist for undivided sovereignty, had identified paternal authority as the sole unchallengeable sovereignty and placed it at the centre of his theory of state.[52] Since the early seventeenth century, the Jesuits helped spread the idea of parental sovereignty in the ecclesiastical realm, including Fontevraud. With their worldview that was characterised by a corporate idea of society with an all-powerful head, the principle of strict hierarchy and insistence on complete obedience, the Jesuits were the monastic personification of Bodinian thought .[53]

Evidently, the Jesuit principles appealed to the authority-conscious Bourbon abbesses more than Fontevraud's collegial tradition and these principles were the reason for both Fontevraud's Jesuit turn after 1619 and Honorat Nicquet's presentation of the order's structure in Bodinian terms, while substituting Bodin's paternal with maternal authority. When placing the Fontevraudine conflict in the broader context of the period's political thought, the monks' resistance against Jesuit influence in Fontevraud begins to emerge not only as a defence of their rights as confessors, but also as an uprising against nascent monastic absolutism. On the other hand, rather than defending the abbess's traditional authority against usurping monks, the historicising writings of the abbatial camp served as justifications of abbatial sovereignty.

Yet, in their desire to demonstrate the long tradition of abbatial sovereignty, the abbess's camp was confronted with a considerable problem: there were no historical documents supporting unrestricted abbatial authority in Fontevraud – be it maternal or otherwise. The abbatial response to this challenge was as crafty and as convoluted as the monks' attempt to win their case by challenging the validity of Fontevraud's reform. The pathway to abbatial glory lay in the fabrication of a Fontevraudine tradition of maternal authority and filial obedience that would reach back all the way to the order's medieval origins. This end was achieved by two means: the manipulation of those Fon-

51 The analogy is a reference to John, 19, 26–27 and is repeatedly mentioned in different documents, among others: Regula Ordinis, see note 28, 263.

52 Cf. Jean Bodin, Six Books on the Commonwealth, in particular Book I, chaps. II–V. Cf. also Anna Becker, Jean Bodin on Oeconomics and Politics, in: History of European Ideas (2013), 1–21, 13.

53 Cf. Harro Höpfl, Jesuit Political Thought. The Society of Jesus and the State, c. 1540–1630, Cambridge 2004, 27–44, in particular 5, 24, 27–30 and 34–44.

tevraudine documents that pointed to a collegial rather than the desired hierarchical order and the (re-)writing of Fontevraud's history.

Jeanne-Baptiste assigned the task to write a suitable history to the aforementioned Jesuit Honorat Nicquet. The resulting 547 page "Histoire de l'Ordre de Font-Evraud" (1643) is divided into four books that exude Jesuit ideals of order and hierarchy. The first two books inform the reader about Fontevraud's foundation and its founder Robert of Arbrissel. Book three is dedicated to the theoretical and theological justification of Fontevraud's hierarchy and the monks' subordination to an abbess.[54] Finally, book four is a collection of short biographies of all abbesses. While legal arguments are not absent from the "Histoire", they are less elaborated than those in the monks' writings, and Nicquet seeks to create *auctoritas* primarily through tradition. Much of Nicquet's argumentation comes in the form of answers to the monks' claims and is reinforced by numerous examples of positive female authority taken either from the Bible or secular history.[55] In order to substantiate concrete claims of the long tradition of abbatial sovereignty, Nicquet refers to an extensive list of papal confirmations of past abbesses and royal privileges, demonstrating the great esteem in which both temporal and ecclesiastic powers have held Fontevraud.[56]

The source manipulations, which were the second means to construct a tradition of abbatial absolutism, primarily took the form of omissions. As mentioned earlier, seventeenth century Fontevraud saw fervent activities of compiling and copying documents that were to be assembled in cartularies. In the process, the copyists omitted those parts – sometimes single lines, sometimes entire sections – that did not support the desired image of Fontevraud's hierarchy. The preeminent example of such a manipulation is the "vita altera"[57] of Robert of Arbrissel. Originally written around 1120, the "vita altera" mentioned the monks' role as abbatial advisors whose consent was necessary for important decisions pertaining to the order as a whole.[58] This part, as well as a number of others, is missing in the seventeenth century copies which leave out almost one third of the original "vita". When the copying process was completed, Jeanne-Baptiste ordered all older versions of the "vita altera" destroyed.[59] However, one overlooked sixteenth century French copy, which Jacques Dalarun rediscovered in the early

54 Nicquet portrays the submission of men to women as a God-pleasing exercise in humility which was repeatedly confirmed by numerous popes, cf. idem, Histoire, see note 16, 217–227.

55 Cf. Nicquet, Histoire, see note 16, 346–388.

56 Cf. Nicquet, Histoire, see note 16, 253–281.

57 Two lives were written shortly after the death of Robert of Arbrissel; they are usually referred to as "vita prima" and "vita altera". Until the re-edition of some of the early Fontevraudine sources by Jacques Dalarun the two "vitae" were only accessible through the Patrologia Latina, whose edition was based on the flawed seventeenth century copies, cf. PL, see note 8, 162, col. 1043–1078.

58 Cf. VA, 52.6, see note 17.

59 Cf. Dalarun, Sainteté, see note 3, 98–116.

1980s, brings to light the extent of Fontevraudine source manipulations orchestrated by the abbess.[60]

In the end, Jeanne-Baptiste succeeded in tying abbatial sovereignty to Fontevraudine identity by fabricating a long tradition of its existence. The gathering of documents and their collection in easily accessible cartularies, the manipulation of pivotal documents to omit unfavourable details, as well as the wide circulation of Nicquet's carefully amended "Histoire de l'Ordre de Font-Evraud" helped create the image of Fontevraud as a place where women had always ruled and men had always served. The monks, who lacked the abbess's financial means, her good connections to the king of France and to his *Grand Conseil*, stood no chance to stop the described developments – although they certainly tried.

5. Conclusion

The existing studies of Fontevraud and Robert of Arbrissel have emphasised the seemingly innovative aspect of female authority over a mixed community as a unique reversal of the patriarchal order of medieval society. Scholars of the early modern period, on the other hand, have paid little attention to Fontevraud. The latter situation is somewhat surprising considering the order's religious and political influence in early modern France.[61] Furthermore, it is precisely this neglect that has left historians of both periods with a distorted understanding of Fontevraud, an understanding that was created during the seventeenth century quarrels discussed above. The anachronism of imposing early modern concepts of authority and gender roles on a medieval institution – an institution that was ignorant of them – has gone unnoticed by historians because of the tendency to establish a strict division between the medieval and the early modern periods rather than drawing connections between them.

60 For the edition, cf. Dalarun, Sainteté, see note 3, 255–302, and more recently, Dalarun et al., Deux Vies, see note 6, 191–299. The amended „Vita" is but the most far-reaching example of these manipulations; other examples include the account of Marie d'Avoise about the suppression of the monks in sixteenth century Fontevraud through armed men ordered there by Fontevraud's first Bourbon abbess, Renée. Both copies, the barely legible original, which includes the mentioning of violence, and the seventeenth century copy, which omits this and other events, are today housed in the archives of Angers, AdML, 101 H 23[1].

61 Fontevraud became the role model for the reform of all female monasteries in fifteenth and sixteenth century France; cf. Jean-Marie Le Gall, Les Moines au Temps des Réformes (France 1480–1560), Seyssel 2001, 525f. For Fontevraud's increasing political weight in sixteenth century France, cf. Annalena Müller, Forming and Re-Forming Fontevraud. Monasticism, Geopolitics, and the Querelle des Frères (c. 1100–1643), unpublished PhD Dissertation Yale University 2014, Part II – The Sixteenth Century. For a case study of one of the many convents that came under Fontevraudine influence, cf. Jennifer C. Edwards, My sister for abbess: fifteenth-century disputes over the Abbey of Sainte-Croix, Poitiers, in: Journal of Medieval History, 40, 1 (2014), 85–107.

Absent in medieval Fontevraud, the tale of female rule and male servitude originated in the early seventeenth century, born out of an internal conflict over the monks' waning rights of co-determination, rising Jesuit influence, and the resulting changes for Fontevraud's hierarchy. The reinterpretation of Fontevraud's structure as a hierarchy in which monks were subject to an all-powerful abbess reflected Jesuit thought and was most probably formulated by Jesuit advisors, such as Honorat Nicquet at that time.

Nascent abbatial absolutism divided the order's members into two irreconcilable camps. The monks, who were at times supported by Fontevraudine prioresses,[62] objected to unrestricted abbatial authority and thought it best prevented by demanding for themselves the second rank in Fontevraud with far-reaching rights of co-determination. The abbatial camp, on the other hand, vehemently opposed any (alleged or real) restriction of abbatial sovereignty and, in order to first introduce and then to solidify the desired authority, they began to justify it on grounds of maternal sovereignty, a concept borrowed from sixteenth and seventeenth century political philosophy.

In the process of introducing sole abbatial rule in Fontevraud, the circle around Jeanne-Baptiste de Bourbon rewrote the order's history adapting it to reflect the ideal of abbatial sovereignty. These manipulations of Fontevraudine history not only transcend the chronological boundaries between the medieval and the early modern eras, but also connect them to our own period, when many scholars have wanted to see in Fontevraud an exceptional example of reversed medieval gender hierarchy, but did not recognise that this impression reflects the seventeenth century manipulation of Fontevraudine memory.

62 Also Fontevraud's prioresses opposed ever-growing abbatial authority in the seventeenth century. Several publications of the prioresses testify to this, among others BnF 4-LD74-3 and AN L 1019. However, the abbatial publications largely ignored the prioresses' demands, which is why they were not considered in this article.