

In conversation with Henrike Lähnemann

The Life of Nuns: love, politics, and religion in medieval German convents

In *The Life of Nuns: love, politics, and religion in medieval German convents* (Open Book Publishers, 2024), Henrike Lähnemann and Eva Schlottheuber explore female religious communities from the late medieval and early Reformation-era in northern Germany, revealing them to be vibrant centres of learning, administration, devotion, friendship, and negotiation. The book challenges long-standing clichés of exclusion, passivity, and decline. **Carolyn Gluchowski** spoke with **Henrike Lähnemann** about education, enclosure, friendship, music, reform, and the many ways medieval nuns have been misunderstood.

Henrike, thank you for speaking with *The Historian*. Let me begin with the broadest question. Your book insists that medieval convents were not simply places of seclusion. What did you most want non-specialist readers to take away from *The Life of Nuns*?

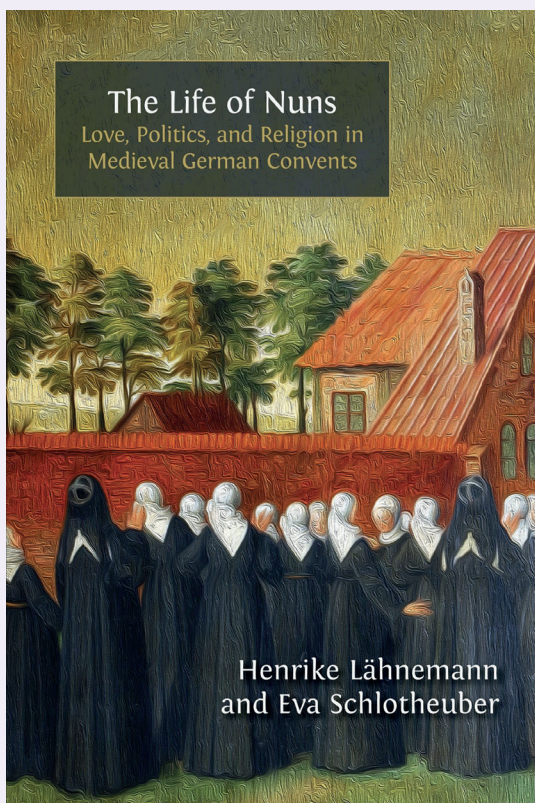
Above all, I wanted to show that the convent could be a fascinating place of learning, an enabling space, especially for girls. It was a place where they could receive an education, exchange ideas with like-minded people, and grow into a very broad range of roles. We still have this black-and-white image of women veiled behind convent walls, shut away from life. But if you look at the evidence from these houses, what opens up is something much more colourful and much more varied: from herb gardens to singing lessons, from manuscript production to what one might almost call business-management training. There were many different areas of responsibility, and the education was not simply restrictive. It could be positive and strengthening.

That matters because the girls were there voluntarily. They could leave before final profession. An everlasting vow could not simply be forced on someone. So the convent had to make itself attractive as a place to grow into. That is something I often think about in Oxford. There are still structures here, for instance in the boys' choirs, that help one see how such systems worked. First you learn the gestures and the rhythm; then you join in more fully; then there are rewards and visible signs of progress. In the convent, too, one had to acquire skills step by step. A girl could only become a nun once she had achieved the educational standard required: Latin, choir training, and the ability to participate fully in convent life. If we take that seriously, the convent looks not like a prison but like an institution of formation.

What first drew you into these convent worlds? Was there a moment when this became more than just an academic topic?

In a way, I was caught by it as the girls from Lüne were caught by it. I was five when my family moved to Lüneburg. I still remember one of the first weekends when we went to the convent of Lüne. You pass through the gate, enter the courtyard, and suddenly you are enclosed by this world of brick Gothic. It felt like a special space at once. Since then, convents have remained for me both aesthetically and intellectually compelling. I was always fascinated by inscriptions, by traces of the past, by the challenge of deciphering what a space still preserves of its history. Later, after we moved away, Lüne remained a kind of place of longing.

The concrete starting point for the work that eventually led to *The Life of Nuns* came much later, almost by accident: I had a delayed train in Hanover and several hours to spare, so I went into the Kestner Museum. There I saw objects from the Lüneburg convents, including a large hanging originally intended as an altar curtain. Small strips of parchment with Latin and German texts had been sewn onto it. At the time I was



working in Tübingen, where there was a strong interest in identifying previously unrecorded German medieval inscriptions. I copied some of these texts and asked whether they were already in the database. The answer was no, and from there everything developed.

What started as a small enquiry turned into real detective work. I realised that in order to understand this object, I had to look at the nuns' manuscripts; and once I did that, an entire intellectual world opened up. The remarkable thing is that this material had not been deliberately hidden. It was simply not taken seriously. People had not realised what a treasure was there.

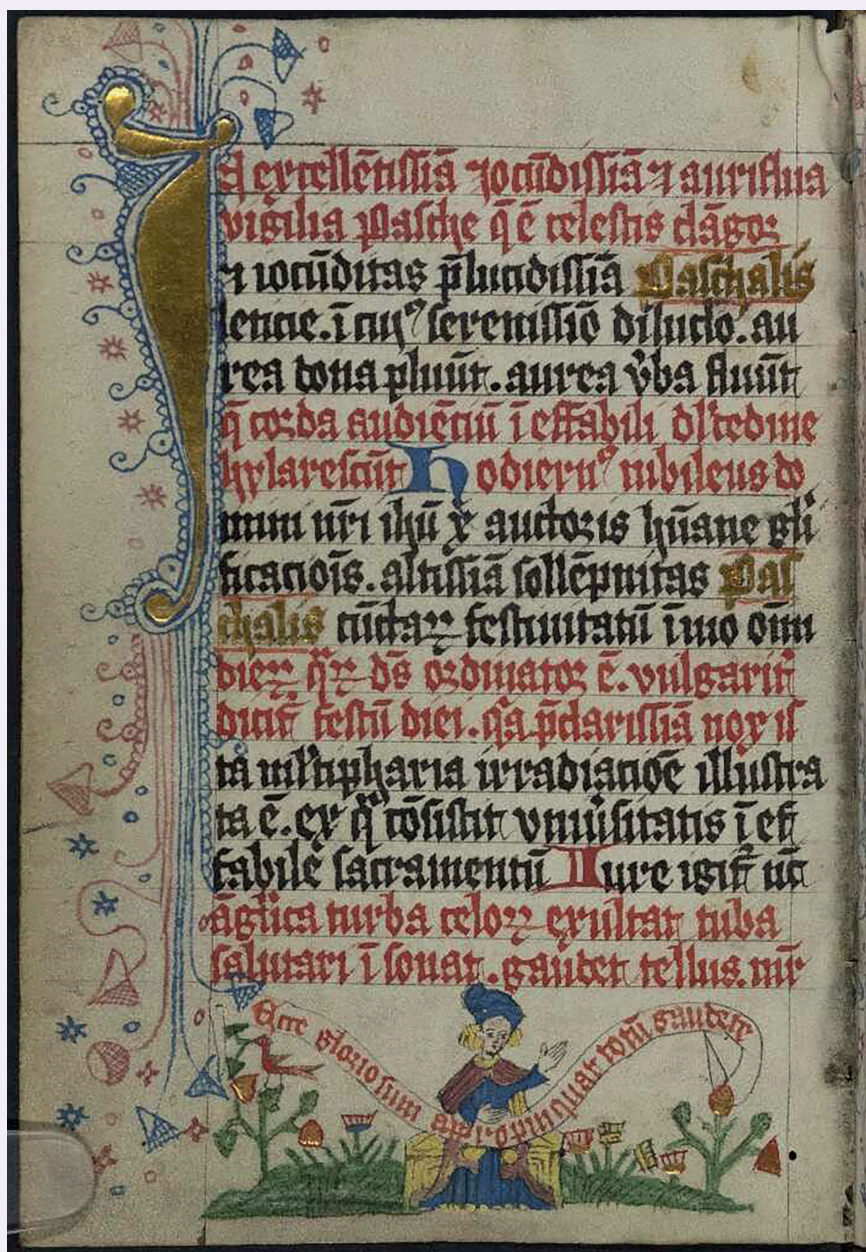
Your book also pushes back very firmly against persistent clichés about convents: the idea that they were gloomy institutions, cut off from the world. Why has that image proved so durable?

I think the Middle Ages are still filtered through two powerful lenses. The first is the Reformation and the Lutheran historical narrative that became so dominant, especially through nineteenth-century academia dominated by Protestant Prussian scholars. That narrative wanted clear period boundaries, clear breaks, and Luther as a national hero. Within such a model, monasteries had to be devalued so that the Reformation could appear as the liberating new beginning. The more differentiated perspective, especially the perspective of women, was pushed aside.

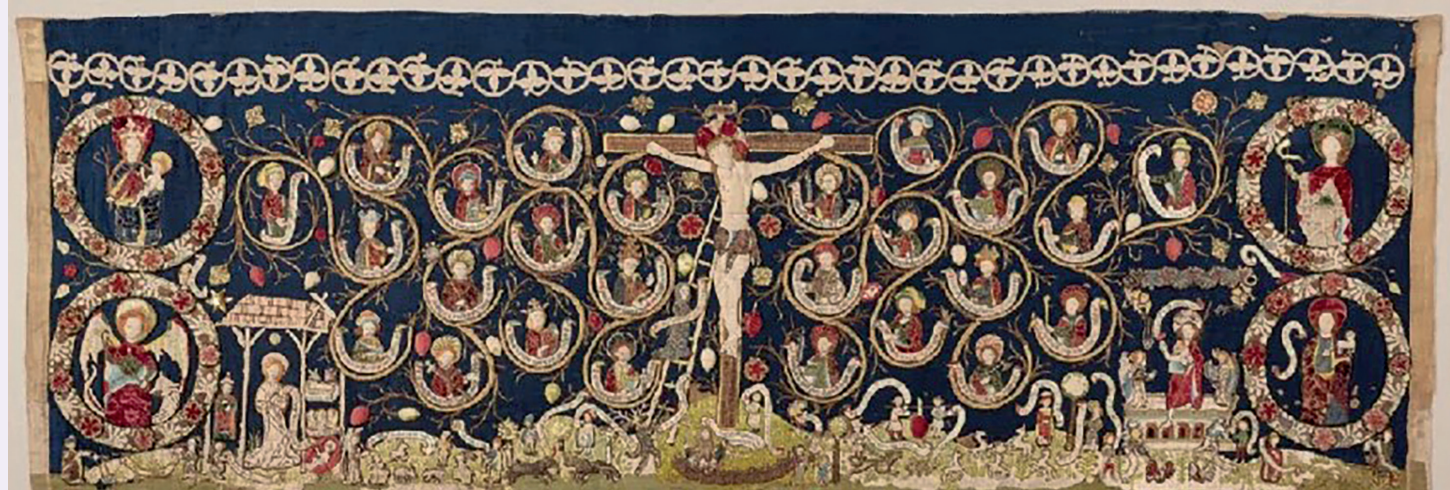
The second filter is Romanticism, and in the English-speaking world one might call it the Gothic Revival. Here convents and castles become haunted spaces. Nuns appear as shadowy figures, half ghost, half fantasy. I have worked recently with a colleague on Gothic book illustration, and it is striking how long-lived those images are: right into modern horror and vampire films. So what we inherit is a mixture of Protestant polemic and Romantic fantasy. Both are, in the end, male fantasies of different kinds, sometimes mixed with the erotic fantasy of the 'sexy nun', sometimes with the fantasy of the inaccessible woman hidden behind walls.

The nuns' extensive education enabled them to produce sophisticated prayer books such as this Easter Prayer Book (Hildesheim, Dombibliothek, Hs. J 29), written at Medingen Convent by Winheid von Winsen in 1478.

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Wichmannsburg Antependium, Kloster Medingen, late 15th century. Hannover, Museum August Kestner, Acc. No. WM XXII, 8
 Photograph: Christian Tepper. © Landeshauptstadt Hannover





That was one reason it mattered so much to us to let the women speak for themselves. Once you do that, the picture becomes both more ordinary and more interesting. You get everyday life rather than scandal. You get concerns that are sometimes surprisingly close to those of women in a college today, but also the real otherness of the medieval world.

One of the strongest voices in the book is the fifteenth-century diary from Heilig Kreuz in Braunschweig. What kind of source is it, and what can it tell us that more official records cannot?

Its survival is an absolute stroke of luck. This is not an official report, and it is not a secret diary in the modern sense either. It is everyday writing. It was not written for publication. In fact, the manuscript is materially quite humble: damaged, cheaply made, partly written on discarded scraps of parchment and recycled material, even on the backs of accounts. It was probably never properly bound, which is why the beginning is lost and we do not know the nun's name.

Yet precisely because of that, it is invaluable. Through the details she records, we can work out quite well where she stood within the convent and when the events took place. She seems, in a wonderful way, to have been rather average. That is an advantage. We are not dealing with a celebrity voice, nor with someone wholly marginalised. We are getting a perspective from the middle of convent life.

I think there are two likely reasons why she kept it. One is practical: she seems to be writing for the next generation,

noting what can go wrong in the organisation of convent life. The stories often end almost with action points, never leave the laundry hanging out if a bishop might arrive; if we had known the threat was exaggerated, we would never have left the convent; things of that sort. Not scandal, but lessons learned. The second reason is that it also seems to have functioned as a writing exercise. Her Latin is competent, but not polished; at one point she even notes that her report has been reviewed and corrected. So the diary may also have been a kind of exercise book, a daily way of improving her written Latin. Eva Schlotheuber, in editing it, very deliberately retained the grammatical irregularities and spelling mistakes so that the texture of the source remains visible. It is not a public text and not a hidden confession.

Your opening chapter on enclosure begins with crisis: the sisters being forced out. What does that episode reveal about what enclosure actually meant in practice?

It shows very clearly that enclosure was not simply about shutting women away. The convent was, among other things, a protected space for women. In the episode with which we begin, the diarist reflects that they have to leave against their will because the town wants access to the convent for military reasons. There is a threat of attack, and the city is interested in the strategic value of the site, not primarily in the women themselves. That makes visible one practical dimension of enclosure: who controls space, and under what conditions a female community can preserve its own boundaries.

At the same time, enclosure was also a marker of status and belonging. Again, I am often reminded of this in Oxford. Colleges are medieval institutions, and they still work on related principles. There is a gate and a lodge, a controlled entrance, not simply to lock people in, but to define a community and, if necessary, keep too many tourists out. Students may not wear uniforms, but they proudly wear their college puffer jackets; the visual language of belonging is still very strong. Convent walls functioned in a comparable symbolic way. They marked a community, a privilege, and a form of shared life.

There is a striking example from Medingen. When the duke planned what one might almost call a hostile takeover, he had parts of the convent wall torn down and used the material to build himself a representative house, complete with his own portrait medallion on the wall. It was an intensely symbolic act: who gets to draw the boundaries? So enclosure is one of the places where politics becomes visible.

A particularly memorable phrase in the book is that friendship functioned as a kind of infrastructure. How should we understand that?

It mattered a great deal to us that the German subtitle spoke of the nuns' networks. Friendship in and around the convent is not simply a private feeling. It is horizontal connection, exchange, mutual support. We find gifts sent as tokens of friendship; prayers offered on one another's behalf; favours, intercession, and practical help. Women supported one another through their different strengths. But all this was shaped by the shared religious vocation as well. Their common relationship to Christ connected them not only vertically, one by one, to the divine, but also horizontally to each other.

Inside the convent, there was always a balance to be maintained between personal friendship and the wider fraternity or community. There were books of confraternity, mutual obligations of prayer, forms of standing for one another that were both duty and personal service. In the letters Eva Schlotheuber and I are editing from Lüne, one can see a continual balancing between 'I', 'we', 'you', and 'you all'. That is one of the things I find most beautiful in the correspondence.

The best image for it is a woven or knotted net. Certain threads are drawn tighter and become more visible: a cousin in another convent, a neighbour's daughter who has entered elsewhere, a group of women who were educated together and then dispersed. Sometimes nuns moved from one house to another and still kept up the sense of a peer group, almost like a class reunion. We have many letters, for example, between Ebstorf and Lüne after a group of Ebstorf nuns moved there. What is striking is the way very personal, even childhood-level memories and affections are combined with spiritual interpretation. The girls had learned in convent school that everyday actions could carry further religious meaning. So these are not simply pleasant messages in a friendship album. They are expressions of real spiritual connectedness.

Music is another part of convent life that your book makes newly vivid. Why was it so central?

Because it structured the entire day. It was really one of the first subjects all girls had to learn. There is a marvellous image we discuss in the book showing a nun teaching a small girl to trace musical notes with a stylus, and above them is a stork in its nest feeding its young. I love that image because it captures the idea that teaching is a form of spiritual feeding, of

Epitaph for Abbess Margaretha Puffen, Medingen Abbey, who died on St Margaret's Day 1513. She led the convent's reform and negotiated for the office of prioress to be elevated to that of an abbess.

© Kloster Medingen



nurturing and raising the child so that she can grow not only bodily but intellectually and spiritually as well.

The whole community was ordered by the liturgy of the hours. The girls were gradually introduced to it. At first they did not have to attend every office; the adult nuns were already rising in the night for the earliest prayers. But then, again rather like the boys' choirs at Oxford, you were gradually sung into the liturgy. Through the repeated psalms you learned Latin. Through chant you learned rhythm, memory, discipline and participation. Music determined the rhythm of life.

And it was not only practical. Music was an intellectual discipline, one of the seven liberal arts, closely bound to

mathematics. The girls learned intervals, proportion, harmonic structures, the monochord, how the natural sequence of tones is built up and what kinds of spiritual meanings could be attached to certain tonal relations. Medieval devotional writing can describe heaven itself as a musical sphere. In some prayer books, the Trinity is imagined almost as an organ: the Father playing, the Son as the pipe, the Holy Spirit as the breath moving through it. That means that when the nuns heard the organ, they could imagine not merely an instrument, but a theological reality made audible.

That brings us to reform and Reformation. One of your most arresting formulations is: 'Reform is a process, not a break.' How does that change the way we read women's convents in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries?

It changes almost everything. Reform is not a single cut in time. *Re-formare* means forming again, shaping again. It presupposes material that can be worked on. In that sense, the later Middle Ages can be understood as a series of reform waves, and networks are often constituted precisely through the transmission of those reforms from one house to the next.

At the same time, the nuns themselves could experience reform as very significant indeed. One sees that in the way inscriptions and texts are dated 'in the year x after the reform'. So I would not deny that reform could feel like a rupture from within. But historically, what we see is a very wide range of responses: fierce resistance, enthusiastic adoption, and everything in between. Much depended on where the reform impulse came from. That is the crucial point. Women were far more willing to embrace change when they had a say in it. In the fifteenth century, if reform was imposed from outside, resistance could be intense. If it came through linked houses, through networks of sisters and friends, it could be appropriated and made productive. The same is true again in the sixteenth century.

That is why one really should not speak of 'the' Reformation in the singular as if it were one uniform process. Each female community found its own path. Recent work has made this much clearer than it used to be. Even around 1600, a remarkable number of women's communities still existed in Protestant territories, but on very different models: some strongly Lutheran, some effectively Catholic under a changed label, most somewhere on a spectrum in between. Some women understood the institution simply as a place of communal residence; others continued to understand it as a full spiritual vocation.

For English-speaking readers, this is especially important, because the English case encourages the expectation of abrupt dissolution. In England, centralisation made the suppression of women's convents much more radical. But in the German lands, because political power was more fragmented and because women often had strong support from family and local conditions, there was more room for adaptation and negotiation. That diversity is one of the things I most want readers to see.

If a reader finishes *The Life of Nuns* with one changed assumption about medieval women, what would you hope that assumption would be?

That women's contributions need to be made much more visible, and not only through a few exceptional figure-heads. We need a broader and more representative account of who

Henrike Lähnemann in front of the Grave Slab of Margarete Puffen
© Henrike Lähnemann



shaped the past: one that includes the many women whose intellectual, social, religious, and cultural work has long remained in the background.

For me, that also means teaching more everyday history, history beyond military milestones, beyond top-down narratives of rulers and conflicts. The convents of northern Germany help us to do that because they reveal alternative forms of life, alternative structures of knowledge, and women's agency in ordinary as well as extraordinary situations. They make the Middle Ages both more authentic and more accessible, because they allow us to see a world of schooling, administration, craft, devotion, conversation, and community.

And finally: what comes next for you?

The Lüneburg convents still contain so much material that I suspect they will remain with me for a very long time. That is especially true of our project *The Nuns' Networks*. The first volume, with 413 letters, has now gone into print, and the second, containing another 415, is close to completion, but with around 1,800 letters in total, there is certainly no shortage of work.

What particularly excites me at the moment is the possibility of doing more linguistic analysis on this still largely unknown corpus. One next project will definitely be on the nuns' code-switching: their very distinctive movement between learned and everyday language. I am also writing a cultural history of the German language. One of my aims there is to inscribe as many women's voices as possible into that history. So yes, the convents will continue, but they will continue in ways that keep opening into larger questions about language, culture, and the place of women in the medieval and early modern archive.

Further Reading

Lähnemann, H., Schlotheuber, E., translator, Simon, A. (2024) *The Life of Nuns: love, politics, and religion in medieval German convents*, Open Book Publishers.

Henrike Lähnemann is Professor of Medieval German Literature and Linguistics at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of St Edmund Hall. Her work brings literary history into conversation with manuscript studies, visual and material culture, and the religious communities of late medieval northern Germany. She has published widely on women's convents, devotional books, reform, and the circulation of texts across monastic networks, and she is currently co-editing the letters of the Benedictine nuns of Lüne with Eva Schlotheuber.