The history of conventual representation in early modern France roughly parallels the historical movement from desert to social enclosure which took place in the formative centuries of the Christian era. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the *topos* of the *désert*, or deserted place, was very much in vogue in both secular and spiritual literature. As Danièle Duport explains, “Sur un fond de guerres et de doutes, les influences conjuguées des définitions du bonheur chez les Anciens font surgir le rêve d’un âge d’or pastoral et agricole” (Duport 89). “Cette vogue de la retraite aux champs” is reflected in Montaigne’s “De la solitude” as well as in Camus’ *Elise*: “Agreables deserts, sejour de l’innocence, où loing des vanitez de la magnificence/ Commence mon repos, et finit mon tourment;/ Valons, fleuves, rochers, plaisante solitude,/ Soyez-le desormais de mon contentement” (Camus, *Elise*, 353). Like popular pastorals of the time, conventual fictions of 1600-1620 tend to be episodic, chronicling the wanderings in deserted places of voluntary and involuntary exiles from society.

Antoine de Nervèze (1570?-1625?) was *secrétaire de la chambre* to Henri IV and an author of pastorals and religious poetry. His *L’Hermitage de l’Isle Saincte*, which was published in 1612 with the approbation of the Sorbonne is liminal for religious writings of the turn of the century period. Through it, we see how Renaissance neo-Platonism and counter-Reformation zeal shaped the concept of sacred space at the beginning of the seventeenth century, establishing persistent patterns of thought and imagery. *L’Hermitage de l’Isle Saincte* is an illustrated allegorical work, divided into Meditations. Like Bunyan’s better known *Pilgrim’s Progress*, it shows the advances and backslidings of the soul as it navigates its way through the world. Its complex structure—the work contains not only narrative and illustrations but allegorical glosses on the illustrations—calls for a reading on sev-
eral levels. In the most immediate and literal sense, Nervèze enjoins the Christian to escape from the world (*le monde*) into a sacred refuge. Quoting the Gospel according to St. John, chapter 2, Nervèze characterizes the world as a place of sin, totally removed from God and given up to carnality: “N’aymez point le monde ny les choses qui sont au monde… car tout ce qui est au monde est la convoitise de la chair” (129). In this total dichotomy between world and God, the former is portrayed almost as a projection of the body, and described in the negative terms ascetics use for corporeal functions: “cette grande Babilone du monde n’est qu’un bourbier d’immondices.” We are trapped in the body with the same fatality as we are trapped in sin: “Le corps n’est pas plus naturellement suivi de son ombre, que le peché l’est de son châtiment” (85). Thus, whoever remains in the world is determined physically to be lost spiritually. Nervèze prays: “ne me laissez pas esgare dans ce labirintthe du monde” (36). From the perspective of the text, both Babylon and the labyrinth are pagan architectural constructions associated with sin and sensuality.

In this gloomy situation, the only hope of escape is to leave society for *le désert*. Using military imagery going back to the early desert fathers and reiterated by Saint Teresa (Carrion 263), Nervèze describes the desert retreat as a fortress against temptation:

> Et quels sont ces lieux? Les deserts et les solitudes ou l’on fait les retrenchements dedans et dehors pour fermer les advenuâs à l’ennemy dedans par la mortification de la volonté, dehors par l’esloignement des objets mondains.

At the same time, one goes into the desert for a more positive reason: to find God. Alluding to both the Old and New Testaments, Nervèze states:

> C’est en ses retraicts solitaires ou Dieu se comunique & converse avec les hommes: *Je t’ay cogneu au desert en la terre de solitude.* (124)
Car c’est en ces demeures de solitude & de silence, 
or les oracles du Ciel se font entendre, & non dans 
les bruits & foules populaires… Dieu ne s’est appa-
ru à Moyse, qu’aux deserts, & aux montagnes. 

The text and its illustrations combine forest, mountain and is-
land to create a privileged site of retreat. At the same time, this 
desert contains a variety of buildings which represent various steps 
along the spiritual journey. The frontispiece shows a pilgrim cross-
ing a bridge to a rustic island hermitage. On a metaphorical level, 
the desert retreat also represents the convent in which, paradoxical-
ly, physical imprisonment brings spiritual liberation:

Il est vray qu’en ceste condition captive il nous 
reste toujours le pouvoir de racheter nostre liberté 
comme font ces belles ames qui devotement hon-
teuses de vivre en ceste captivité terrestre se mettent 
en franchise dans les sainctes prisons de Iesus 
Christ. (136)

Both the desert hermitage and the convent are *Isles Sainctes* where 
the soul can take refuge from the world. In the first case, one re-
treats into a space outside society; in the second, one locks oneself 
away from society, in a sacred counter-labyrinth which protects 
against *le labirinthe du monde*.

Finally, as the narration unfolds, evocations of a physical re-
treat to desert or convent gives way to a purely allegorical journey. 
In this evolution, the illustrations play an important role. Thus in 
Figure 1, we see the Soul entering with alacrity into a *palais*: a 
“modern” neo-classical style building which looks incongruous in 
its forest setting. The clouds hovering over the palace the roof line 
and divide the picture, like a medieval painting, into levels repre-
senting Earth and Heaven. This hierarchical vision is emphasized 
by the artist’s use of space and proportion. More space is given to 
Heaven than to Earth; the palace is squeezed into a corner of the 
picture by the many crosses on the left (which the soul has refused 
to bear). In addition, Christ and the angel are drawn in a dispropor-
tionately large scale, overwhelming the smaller figure of the Soul below.

The next two illustrations display an identical image with different explications or glosses. In figure 2, the angel’s right arm is pointing upward to Christ on the Cross, the rising path, or Heaven. At the same time, its right wing is projected protectively over the Soul. However, the Soul’s posture, with arms raised and palms up, seems to resist this protection. According to the explication, the Soul is looking back at the vanités du monde represented by a portrait of a fashionably dressed woman. In the background, we see an austere, fortress-like building (in contrast to both the hermitage and the palace), with a suggestion of a further retreat sketched yet higher against the mountains.

The next illustration in L’Hermitage is a duplicate of figure 2, but this time the explication “reads” the repentance of the soul into its closeness to the cross: “L’Ame touchée de repentance s’approche de Jésus Christ” (194). The gloss further reinterprets the visual allegory by stating that the cherubic figure (l’amour) holding the frame is in fact l’amour du monde, and that the image is not a painting, but a reflection: “l’amour . . . luy veut faire voir comme dans un miroir les beautez humaines qu’elle a jadis aymees. . .” (194). Both the mirror and the female figure within it are representations of concupiscence, or attachment to the flesh.

In the following illustration (figure 3), the Soul is kneeling in front of the cross, showing further progress towards repentance and salvation. The building in the background is closer and more accessible. It is no longer the forbidding fortress of figure 2 but a small church or chapel with an open door. In front of the structure stands the bon ange awaiting the Soul’s arrival. But the Soul’s journey is not yet over: three cherubs, flitting about like flies in front of it, represent the senses which still attach the Soul to “ces folles amours du monde.”

In figure 4, finally, Christ himself has descended to lead the Soul by the hand into retreat. The three cherubs of the previous illustration are shown drowning in a sea of penitent tears which
serves to separate the Soul from the world. This scene marks the closest point de rencontre between illustration and main text:

[J]e vous propose une Isle que vous formerez pour vous & en vous mesme, vostre corps sera la terre, & vos pleurs les eaux qui l’environneront et couleront d’une vie repentante. (24)

Significantly, there are no buildings in this figure; in contrast to human habitations, the dwelling place of God is an open space:

O mon Dieu et mon Createur… que mon Ange me montre dans un espace, orné & divinement embelly de vos hierarchies celestes. (190)

To summarize, Nervèze’s allegory is both macrocosmic and microcosmic, expanding and contracting in vertiginous fashion like Pascal’s infinite universe. On the one hand, the whole earth (terre), as distinguished from the world (monde), is an Isle saïncé, “un Hermitage aux esprits solitaires et contemplatifs” (444). On the other hand, the place of sanctuary is localized within the human body, which becomes a whole world unto itself. The narrator compares himself to Aeneas who, arriving on an island, nailed his arms to the door. “Ces armes, c’est la Croix, la porte c’est le coeur; ou les cloùant avec des cloux d’amour elles y demeureront eternellement” (445-6). Within the microcosmic earth/body, the heart becomes the sanctuary which Christ’s arms (the Cross) identify as his own. In addition, the nails which pierce the heart as the crosses are nailed to it reproduce Christ’s sufferings as his body was nailed to the cross. Finally, the crosses nailed to the door recall the medieval tradition of planting crosses outside the church door to indicate the limits of clôture (as was also the medieval custom at Fontrevraud). There is no attempt to illustrate this conceit; perhaps the result would have been too baroque! In a move which can be conceived of allegorically if not represented visually, the soul takes refuge within the heart, protected by its dedication to Christ, as the
religious take refuge behind convent walls. Paradoxically, in the end it is the body which offers the soul a retreat from the world.

The question then arises: whose body? *L’Isle saincte* is dedicated to a woman, Magdalene de Monteclair, who is directly apostrophized as “vous” in the text. In her honor (if the word is appropriate) the narrative contains a meditation on Mary Magdalen who cries an ocean of penitent tears (as illustrated in Figure 4.) It hardly seems flattering for Nervèze to compare his patroness to this personage; Mary Magdalen, fragile woman *par excellence*, represents human carnality in its most aggravated form. But she also was redeemed by Christ.

Like Mary Magdalen, the soul of the first-person narrator is both female and “une miserable pecheresse” (101). But unlike Magdalene de Monteclair, who is addressed formally as “vous”, the Soul is addressed as “tu” and personified as a girl child towards whom the narrator assumes a protective, avuncular attitude: “Et me souvient qu’en un jardin sacré ou ie t’ay autresfois solitairement entretenue, tu as apprins de moi plusieurs secrets de la vie contemplative” (94). The *jardin sacré* suggests both a real cloister garden and the *hortus conclusus* of the virgin body. It also evokes associations with the *mariage mistique* of female Soul and male Savior to which Nervèze alludes in the text (34-35).

On the point of gender, however, text and illustration are found to be in disharmony. While the narrator defines the Soul as allegorically (and not just grammatically) female, the drawings depict it as a naked, somewhat epicene, but clearly male being. The only female figure in the illustrations is the woman in the mirror, who plays the role of temptress and embodiment of concupiscence. The reason for this disparity is unclear; after all, from the Middle Ages on, allegorical illustrations had typically represented spiritual qualities as female (Woshinsky 151). Perhaps the illustrator of Nervèze’s work, which was published under the authority of the Sorbonne, felt reluctant to give the Soul a nude female form.³

Whatever the reason, in *L’Hermitage de l’Isle Saincte* feminine attribution is only allowed to take place in the context of allegori-
cal narrative. Within the strange, shifting and infinitely malleable discourse of allegory, it is possible for the (female) Soul to take refuge within a (male) body (the hermitage, the convent, the Church) which will protect its frailty and seal its purity with the arms of Christ. In Nervèze’s particular “construction of femininity,” the Soul can retain her femaleness as long as she is disembodied and invisible. But in the “real world” of the Catholic Reformation, is the body male or female, temple or temptation? The failure to resolve this issue helps set the scene for a somber, if not tortured, classical spirituality.

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NOTES

1 The first edition of L’Hermitage de l’Isle Sainte (chez Antoine du Bruel et Toussaints du Bray, 1612) is in the Reserve of the Bibliothèque Nationale. The edition used in this article (Rouen: chez Nicolas Loselet, 1615) is in the collection of the Folger Library. References to L’Hermitage are drawn from the 1615 edition and will be indicated in the text by page number.

2 The juxtaposition of classical/Renaissance and religious motifs in the illustrations reinforces the opposition between world and retreat, sin and salvation; for example, in figure 2, mythological Amour nearly brushes wings with Christian angel. To distinguish them, the Angel always wears a robe while the Cupids are represented nude and carrying bows and arrows.

3 The illustrator of the 1612 edition was a certain Léonard Gaultier. I have not been able to consult this edition and do not know whether the illustrations are the same as in the 1615 Rouen edition for which the name of the illustrator is not given. Cf. Léonard Gotter, Livres à figures édités en France de 1601 à 1660 (Paris:J.Duportal,1914) 156-160.

WORKS CITED OR CONSULTED

