CONTEMPLATIVE COMMUNITIES:
ENGLISH CATHOLIC CONVENTS IN FRANCE
AND THE LOW COUNTRIES,
1598-1700

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This thesis focuses upon the English convents established on the Continent, largely in the Spanish Netherlands and in France, in the seventeenth century. Given the wealth of archival and printed material relating to the English nuns, such an analysis of the role played by these women in maintaining and promoting Catholic belief and practice is long overdue. Locating the nuns within both the Counter-Reformation Church and the English Catholic community, I examine their experiences as women seeking to restore Catholicism in their homeland.

Several critical issues are addressed in chapters which range from a demographic profile of the women and their backgrounds through to explorations of monastic government, work and spirituality. One of my principal arguments is that neither exile on the continent nor strict enclosure isolated the nuns from the political, social and economic fabric of seventeenth-century English society. They were recruited largely from English gentry families and, when they entered the cloister, they brought with them the religious and cultural norms of their social rank, together with the political allegiances of their families back in England. This even extended to the adaptation of secular family structures of authority to the institutional imperatives of the convent. Thus I conclude that the cloister provides a microcosm of seventeenth-century English society.

Besides being Englishwomen, the nuns were also members of the universal Catholic Church during a time of dynamic religious change and conflict. The dictates of the Tridentine reformers who sought to restrict women to devotional activity within the enclosure have led historians to assume that cloistered nuns were unable to contribute positively in a church fired by missionary zeal. My research concludes that this was far from the case. English nuns overcame the confines of the cloister to achieve recognition for their work as educators of the next generation of Catholic wives and mothers, as trustees of the monastic tradition, and as Catholic ambassadors for English Protestant visitors to the Continent. However, the nuns' greatest influence lay in their role as spiritual leaders. Indeed, some communities nurtured particular forms of spirituality which they upheld in the face of formidable ecclesiastical opposition. And individual women wrote devotional treatises which offered their religious sisters and the laity inspiration for praying and pursuing holy lives. More generally, through their personal religious regimes nuns redefined traditional piety to inject religious meaning into every aspect of their existence, both spiritual and temporal.

Gender provides the overarching conceptual framework for the thesis. The nuns were living and working within a patriarchal church and society, and this meant that they were subject to a religious, social and political ideology which sought to limit their
activity to areas deemed suitable for women. Some nuns overtly challenged the status quo by pursuing paths officially closed to them. The majority avoided confrontation, but none the less manipulated the terms of contemporary ideology, to forge meaningful and vital roles for nuns in early modern church and society. My thesis concludes that far from being marginalised by their exile on the Continent, the English nuns provided a vital link between the Counter-Reformation Church and the English Catholics.
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twenty-first-century successors to the early modern cloisters. Special thanks must be extended to the archivists of these houses who always answered my letters and queries promptly, unfailingly directed me to relevant material, and occasionally bent the rules by allowing me to work on manuscripts in my bedroom at night so that I could get through them all. Sister Mary Salome of the Priory, Sister Mary Austin of the Poor Clare Convent, Dame Eanswythe Edwards O.S.B. of Stanbrook Abbey, Sister Mildred Murray-Sinclair O.S.B. of the Buckfastleigh Benedictines, and Sister Mary Gregory I.B.V.M. of the Bar Convent not only provided me with manuscripts, but their interest in my research and continual encouragement has made the task much easier. I owe particular gratitude to the nuns of the Priory of Our Lady who presented me with their spare copy of the *Chronicle of St. Monica's*, and especially to Sister Mary Salome whose wealth of knowledge and friendship have been bountiful.

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ABBREVIATIONS

BL  British Library
Bodl. Bodleian Library
CRS Catholic Record Society
EE  The English Experience
ERL English Recusant Literature
HJ  The Historical Journal
I.B.V.M. Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary
P&P Past and Present
PRO Public Record Office
RH  Recusant History
SCH Studies in Church History
SP  State Papers
STC Short Title Catalogue

Note concerning dates and spellings

All dates given are New Style, with the year beginning on 1 January, not 25 March as in the Old Style Calendar.
Spellings and punctuation of original documents have been retained, but printers' errors have been corrected, i substituted for j, and the thorn eliminated.
Locations of English Contemplative Cloisters in France and the Low Countries
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION:
HISTORIOGRAPHY OF WOMEN AND EARLY MODERN CATHOLICISM

Many ladies of high birth, remarkable alike for personal and mental gifts, and not without wealth, coming here with the idea of entering religion are strengthened and their vocations matured, and then sent either to places further on, or else admitted into the convents of the city ... There was in the city a certain English virgin (who was the first to start the idea) furnished with excellent gifts both of piety, talent, and courage of heart, and entirely under the direction of Ours. Grieved that nothing was done she declared herself sent by God as an instrument to begin and carry out the work to completion.¹

Mary Ward, the Yorkshire gentlewoman who founded the Poor Clare convent in St. Omers in 1607, was one of the hundreds of English women determined to restore Catholicism in their homeland. Inspired by the piety and resistance of mothers and kin who preserved Catholic belief and practice during the difficult years of Elizabeth's reign, Mary Ward's generation of women sought to reactivate the English monastic tradition. For most, the monastery which had always provided women of high social status an alternative to marriage and motherhood was a distant goal following the dissolution in 1539. As the Jesuit writer noted above, English women who had a religious vocation could join Continental convents. By the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, however, many women deemed foreign cloisters inadequate for the needs of English Catholicism, and a number of well-connected pious women consequently decided to establish English religious communities in exile.

In 1598 a group of English gentlewomen founded a Benedictine cloister in the Flemish town of Brussels. The establishment of the Abbey of the Glorious Assumption of Our Lady heralded a renaissance in the religious and devotional lives of Catholic English women. During the next century thirty-six convents for English women mushroomed on the Continent. These comprised most of the pre-Reformation monastic orders of Benedictines, Augustinians, Franciscans and Dominicans, as well as the reformed Carmelites, and a newly created English congregation, the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Throughout the seventeenth century, a steady flow of postulants made the arduous journey across the Channel to seek places in cloisters spreading from the Spanish Netherlands through France into the German and Italian states and down into Portugal. On the whole they opted for houses in France and the Low Countries, usually those in towns with sizeable expatriate English Catholic communities.

The English nuns' contemporaries were well aware of this phenomenon. Government agents and Protestant tourists documented the location of monasteries, listed their inhabitants and described their ceremonies and ways of life. Catholics negotiated to send their daughters into the convent schools in the hope that they would discover a vocation to the religious life, and contributed financially to monasteries' upkeep by providing dowries and alms. The English laity reaped the benefits of flowering Catholic-Reformation spirituality in the form of devotional books and prayers emanating from the cloisters. Yet surprisingly, very little has been written about the English convents and the women who joined them. The existing literature is principally hagiographical in nature, written either by subsequent members of the orders, or by nineteenth and twentieth-century Catholics seeking to document the survival of their faith during 'penal times'. Serious scholarly research has registered scant interest in the English cloisters and nuns abroad, implying that their impact on events in the seventeenth century was minimal.

In this thesis I argue that despite their status as female professors of a minority faith, living beyond the seas in strictly enclosed cloisters, the English nuns participated actively in many of the religious and political events which coloured the seventeenth-century historical landscape. During the Protestant and Catholic Reformations when women's options were being limited by reformers, gender could prove a liability for those seeking to push a political or religious agenda. Nuns, traditionally viewed as conservative, have rarely been perceived as a force challenging the status quo. Yet in the turmoil of the seventeenth century, spurred on by the missionary zeal of Catholic reform, monastic women were able to assume positions of religious leadership within both Church and society. Well aware of the restrictions placed upon them by their sex, the nuns manipulated the terms of their position, sometimes operating from within the bounds of traditional roles, occasionally creating new ones.

This introductory chapter will locate the study of seventeenth-century English nuns within a historical and historiographical context. The convents were founded and sustained during the height of Catholic reform, and at a time of tumultuous political instability, both in England and across the European continent. An analysis of the religious women which seeks to understand their participation in the events of their time consequently straddles several disparate areas of historical enquiry. The first section outlines the factors governing the parameters of my research. The approach I have adopted has been governed to a large extent by the chronology, geography and surviving sources of the English convents. Sources which cover the entire seventeenth century are patchy, and monastic archives are often difficult to access. Yet the neglect of the nuns cannot be explained by the inadequacy or inaccessibility of documents relating to their activities. In the light of exciting new trends in the history of gender and religion, the experiences of English contemplative nuns on the Continent demand consideration. Their
story can add much to what is already known about women in early modern religion and society.

I. Defining the Parameters: Chronological Boundaries and Sources

I have chosen to locate the study within the seventeenth century because the hundred years following the foundation of the first cloister saw both the enthusiastic explosion of monasticism for English women, and the beginning of a decline which lasted throughout the eighteenth century. This was also the period during which the Tridentine reforms of Catholicism were consolidated, giving rise to new spiritual and jurisdictional directions within the Church. Politically the seventeenth century witnessed tremendous upheavals in both England and across the Continent. Inevitably these events impacted upon the physical situation of the convents. Changing political discourse also influenced the ways in which power and authority were perceived and wielded. One of my central arguments is that despite their removal from England and their incarceration within a monastic enclosure, the English nuns were profoundly influenced by the world beyond the convent walls. Thus secular political and social ideologies were reflected within the cloister in the ways the religious women perceived and conducted their relationships with one another, and through their obligations to friends in the world.

In many respects the dates selected to define the study, 1598 to 1700, are fluid boundaries. Although Brussels was the first post-Reformation English cloister founded, there was already one other house in existence, as well as a tradition of English women entering foreign communities. It might seem logical to end the study with the Glorious Revolution of 1688, because this event all but eliminated the nuns' optimism concerning a possible return to English soil. However, a number of English convents continued to support the Stuarts in their efforts to regain the throne. Several houses, particularly those at Paris and Pontoise, maintained close links with the exiled court at St. Germain-en-Laye. The nuns' persistent efforts to support the Stuarts, whom they believed would restore Catholicism in England in spite of increasing pessimism about this outcome both in England and in France, represented a crucial turning point in their loyalty to the crown. Before 1688, the convents had always expressed allegiance to the English monarchy. In the aftermath of James II's expulsion, the nuns came to identify more with the group of exiled Catholic notables in France than with the monarch in England. The breach between the religious communities abroad and Catholics in their homeland is illustrated by the marked decline in vocations as the century came to a close. Assessing the impact

2 A group of Bridgettine nuns from Syon Abbey in Middlesex had migrated to the Continent upon the dissolution of their monastery in 1539. See ch. 2 for an account of the Bridgettines, & for examples of English women in foreign cloisters.
of 1688 is the other principal reason for carrying the study up to the beginning of the eighteenth century.

The enclosed monastic orders will provide the focus for my analysis of women and the religious life. This might seem a strange choice, given the burgeoning female teaching congregations rejecting the contemplative life which emerged in early modern France, Italy and Spain, and the obvious example of Mary Ward who left her Poor Clare foundation to establish a missionary order for women modelled upon the Society of Jesus. However, although research is emerging on these 'active' women, there has been little interest in the contemplatives. This neglect reflects the agenda of traditional approaches to the Catholic Reformation which have focused on its crusading spirit, thus ranking action in the world more highly than prayer in the cloister. Coupled with the institutional bias is that of feminist historians who have gravitated towards those perceptibly engaging in 'radical' behaviour. While I do not deny the vital role assumed by Mary Ward and the nuns of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (I.B.V.M.) in maintaining and promoting Catholicism in England, I think that Ward's prominent public profile both in the seventeenth century and even more so in modern historiography has eclipsed the equally important part played by the enclosed monastic orders.

Excluding the houses established by the I.B.V.M., twenty of the post-Reformation English cloisters survived the seventeenth century. I will refer to most of these communities in due course, but I have chosen to focus on a smaller sample. My selection of specific houses has been predicated largely upon the availability of source material. Writing about early modern nuns from the geographic isolation of Australia has limited my access to archives. I have had to rely heavily upon edited collections of documents, in conjunction with research trips to monastic archives and libraries in England. However, despite the obvious frustrations associated with working 12,000 miles from the manuscript sources, the documents which first sparked my interest in the cloisters were all at hand, virtually unused by other historians. I am referring to the publications of the Catholic Record Society (CRS), an organisation established to provide access to sources for the history of post-Reformation English Catholicism. Founded in 1904, the Society has published a volume of records annually ever since. During the first


4 See Appendix I for a list of English convents of the 17th century. The 20 survivors were the 3 Augustinian cloisters (Bruges, Louvain, Paris); the 6 Benedictine houses (Boulogne-Pontoise, Brussels, Cambrai, Dunkirk, Ghent, Paris); the 3 Carmelite convents (Antwerp, Hoogstraeten, Lierre); the Dominicans of Vilvorde-Brussels; the 4 Poor Clare establishments (Aire, Dunkirk, Rouen, St. Omers-Gravelines); the Franciscans of Brussels-Nieuport-Bruges; the 'Blue Nuns' of Paris; and the Liège Sepulchrines. I have not included the Bridgettines of Lisbon because they were not a new foundation; nor does this figure include the Benedictine house at Ypres which became Irish in 1684.
three decades of the twentieth century, the archives of several religious communities were transcribed, published, and then all but ignored by everyone save genealogists tracing their family histories.5

The CRS volumes contain a veritable treasure chest of material relating not only to who entered the cloisters, when they did so and how long they lived, but also to daily administration and the nuns' spiritual lives. Annals, letters, obituary notices, council books, and memoranda of benefactors weave an elaborate tapestry of women's economic, political, spiritual, and personal experiences in the early modern convents. They also provide a different perspective on major political and religious events occurring in the seventeenth century. I have drawn extensively upon these edited collections of documents in every aspect of my research. They form the principal source for my demographic analysis of the convents and the women who entered them throughout the seventeenth century. I have also extracted valuable material relating to the nuns' daily lives, particularly their working, governing and spiritual regimes. No one has previously used the material in this way. Indeed the CRS volumes relating to nuns have been used very little, even by Catholic historians who have been more concerned with the clerical missions and polemical battles.

Other published material occurs largely in facsimile on microfilm, or as part of the English Recusant Literature (ERL) series. Most literature in this form is devotional in nature, but there are copies of 'rules' and 'constitutions' for some of the English cloisters. There are also biographies of individual nuns, written largely by admiring spiritual directors who were keen to advertise their part in guiding and forming their saintly subjects. These have been published in modern editions and form part of the wealth of documentation collected from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. There are also works written by the nuns themselves. These are always devotional in nature, but they offer valuable evidence of women's spiritual orientation, as well as verifying the influence nuns could have on contemporary devotional trends.

The published sources relate to the broad spectrum of early modern English cloisters. I have also worked in the archives of four individual communities: the Augustinian canonesses of St. Monica's in Louvain, the Franciscan nuns of Brussels-Nieuport-Bruges, the Benedictine community of Boulogne-Pontoise, and the Benedictines of the Abbey of Our Lady of Consolation at Cambrai. As I have suggested already, these convents were selected largely because of the availability of material. All the English religious communities were forced to flee France and the Low Countries in the 1790s. In the process of hurriedly returning to England, many valuable papers and books were lost. The fleeing nuns tended to take with them what they deemed to be most important, so that is why there are such good registers of entry and profession, obituaries and annals for most houses. What was 'lost' by the nuns were many of the council books, account books, and correspondence relating to the administration of the convent: all the things useful to the historian, but insignificant to the hagiographer. Some of these 'less vital' items were recovered later by the nuns, but on the whole they have disappeared. The CRS believes that many such missing documents may be held in municipal libraries and archives on the Continent. Indeed a few have been located already, and I have gained access to some of the French material through the generosity of monastic archivists and other scholars.

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7 Brussels-Nieuport-Bruges (like Boulogne-Pontoise) signifies the removal of a community to different locations. Founded in Brussels in 1621, the Franciscans moved to Nieuport in 1637, then to Bruges in 1662. I will refer to the specific town when discussing the experiences of the cloister in that place, but will always identify the community generally by reference to its geographic position over the century as a whole.

8 The archives are located respectively at the Priory of Our Lady of Good Counsel, Sayers Common, West Sussex; The Poor Clare Convent, Crossbush, Arundel, Sussex; Buckfast Abbey, Buckfastleigh, Devon; & Stanbrook Abbey, Callow End, Worcester. I also visited the archives of the Bar Convent in York. This I.V.B.M. house was established in 1686 & survived the years before Catholic emancipation, & into the present. The documents relating to the I.V.B.M. in the 17th century are largely copies of material from other archives, but the collection is meticulously indexed. Although I refer to the Bar Convent for comparative purposes, I have not focused on it in any depth because it was one of the I.V.B.M. foundations.
My choice of the four above-mentioned convents was based primarily upon the extent of the documents which have survived. The archives of St. Monica's, now held by the Priory of Our Lady of Good Counsel at Sayers Common in West Sussex, are by far the most extensive and the best catalogued. St. Monica's was founded in 1609 by a group of English nuns who had been members of a Flemish Augustinian cloister. The records therefore date back into the late sixteenth century, providing continuity for the entire period covered by the study. I am also interested in St. Monica's because it is deemed to have been one of the elite communities which attracted daughters from the principal Catholic families of the day. The English Augustinian archives have offered fascinating insights into women's understanding of social status, authority, revenue raising and the criteria for defining sanctity.

The records for the nuns of the Franciscan Third Order (Regular) are located at the Poor Clare monastery at Crossbush (near Arundel) in Sussex. Although not so extensive as the Augustinian material, there are excellent registers covering the entire seventeenth century from the initial foundation at Brussels in 1621. There is also a good array of official documentation for the period spent at Bruges. This is an interesting community to study because of its turbulent early years when poverty, war and disease forced it to move location on two occasions. Upon the second breakup which saw the Nieuport cloister send filiations to Bruges and Paris, the latter group later changed their 'rule' to that of the Immaculate Conception and became the famed 'Blue Nuns' of Paris. Comparison of the Franciscans (often termed the 'Rich Clares') with the Poor Clares and Benedictines reveals that austerity in the English cloisters was more likely the product of external economic and political factors than a consequence of different attitudes to wealth and comfort in religious 'rules'. Like the Augustinian documents, the Franciscan material suggests that the wide gulf between cloister and world, prescribed in monastic statutes, existed only on paper.

Two Benedictine cloisters have been included because there was a significant difference among the six English houses of the order. Brussels, Ghent, Boulogne-Pontoise and Dunkirk were all associated closely with the Society of Jesus, both administratively and spiritually. Cambrai and Paris were under the auspices of the

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9 Hereafter, simply the Franciscan nuns. Poor Clares were another female branch of the Franciscan order, & they will be identified as Poor Clares throughout the text.
11 The 'Blue Nuns' were so called because of the brilliant blue mantle which formed part of their habit. This community ran one of the leading schools for English & French girls, as well as attracting noteworthy novices. See Diary of the 'Blue Nuns'.
Throughout the seventeenth century there were battles over administration and spiritual direction in the Benedictine houses. I have selected a house from each camp in an effort to ascertain what impact, if any, affiliations with specific male orders had on government and spirituality in female cloisters. The Cambrai community is also important for the school of spirituality it sponsored and protected. Its archives have been scattered and a few documents (largely devotional treatises of Augustine Baker, Cambrai's spiritual director from 1624 to 1633), are held in England at Stanbrook Abbey, near Worcester, where the successors of the Cambrai cloister now reside, and in the male monasteries of Ampleforth and Downside. A significant proportion of Cambrai Benedictine records have been located in the Archives du Département du Nord at Lille. Photocopies of important manuscripts held in the French repository have been obtained by the archivist at Stanbrook.

The Boulogne-Pontoise records are in a similarly disjointed state. The Pontoise nuns were forced to disband prior to the French Revolution. In 1786, the abbess and six nuns joined the Dunkirk abbey, and the rest entered other English and French Benedictine cloisters. The archives were taken by the abbess to Dunkirk. Many items were lost during the French Revolution when, in 1794, the nuns were removed to Gravelines and imprisoned in the Poor Clare convent for eighteen months, until freed and allowed to return to England. Despite these problems the material which found its way back to England is rich in variety and content. Unfortunately, the Teignmouth Benedictine cloister which held the archives was recently dissolved due to decreasing numbers of nuns, and increasing old age and infirmity. The Pontoise and Dunkirk records are now located in an out-house at Buckfast Abbey in Devon, and are all but inaccessible. They are also poorly indexed. The remainder of the Boulogne-Pontoise records, consisting principally of registers, account books and official documents, are in the Archives du Seine-et-Oise at Versailles. I have microfilm and notes of the French material.

Given the wealth of archival and published sources for the seventeenth-century English convents, there is a remarkable dearth of scholarly work on this topic. Although, as I have outlined, finding good collections was difficult, the edited material alone should have generated more than one or two scholarly articles and book chapters.

12 The Paris filiation in 1651 remained under the direction of the English Benedictine Congregation until 1657 when the nuns were forced to leave it by the archbishop of Paris who insisted that they be placed under his jurisdiction.
13 Buckfast Abbey is a male monastery & women are not permitted within the enclosure, hence the location of the nuns' records in a somewhat inadequate hut. Access to the material is further limited by the need for the archivist to supervise all researchers. As she was one of the younger members of a small religious community her time was scarce, so I spent much less time with the documents than the apparent treasure trove of manuscripts (largely un-indexed) warranted.
14 Professor John Bossy collected these documents & has generously lent them to me.
15 When I commenced research in 1988, the only recent publications (i.e. post-1960) I could find which discussed the convents & nuns in some detail were Rowlands, 'Recusant Women'; Marion Norman,
There had been a reasonable amount of somewhat antiquarian research undertaken by regional Catholic history groups, and there were several rather outdated historical accounts of the English cloisters, often written by nineteenth and twentieth-century members of the religious communities. These publications have proven invaluable to my own research because they contain a wealth of primary documentation in the form of letters, nuns' writings, and excerpts from annals. However, analysis in such books is limited to observations regarding the hand of God in all convent affairs, both spiritual and temporal.

While breaking from the largely hagiographical and genealogical tenor of the Catholic material, scholarly research continued to ignore the place of the English convents in early modern Catholicism. Traditional English historiography sought the origins of the nation in the political and religious upheaval of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Catholic nuns on the Continent were deemed peripheral in the struggle to forge the English Protestant identity, and ignored entirely. Research into post-Reformation English Catholicism likewise ignored the convents. Indeed most analyses specifically focused on Elizabethan Catholicism. This sixteenth-century emphasis precluded any discussion of cloisters barely in existence by 1603. In most studies, recusancy, politics or the clerical mission predominated. Likewise, social historians have not delved


deeply into the place of the cloister in post-Reformation English society. Apart from the isolated reference to the implications the loss of the monastery had for parents with excess daughters, little interest has been expressed in the impact of the revival of monasticism for women in the early seventeenth century.\(^\text{18}\) Even feminist historians have not investigated the wealth of material available. Only very recently literary scholars and historians have begun to delve into the wide range of English Catholic women's spiritual writings in an exploration of feminine religious discourse and experience.\(^\text{19}\) Several preoccupations have therefore obscured the significance of the English convents abroad.

As a consequence, this thesis will address and attempt to correct the invisibility of the seventeenth-century contemplative nuns through an exploration of their social, political, economic and spiritual milieu. Although primarily a contribution to the study of gender and religion in early modern Europe, the scope of the topic extends also into the terrain of English social history, and the history of post-Reformation English Catholicism. I want to argue that although contemplatives were called to the invisible vocation of self-abnegation and prayer within a monastic enclosure, the English nuns none the less became active agents of Catholicism in both their homeland and abroad. Chapter two provides a demographic profile of the cloisters which details the origins of the English convents and the women who joined them, and locates the nuns' experiences within the broader religious, political and social climate of seventeenth-century Europe. Subsequent chapters focus on specific elements of the monastic experience, and examine the ways by which contemplative nuns understood and shaped their lives within their cloisters. The third chapter looks at how authority was constructed within women's religious communities, and how nuns' conceptions of power affected their relationship with one another as well as with the male clergy. In chapter four, I unravel the economic structure of convents to reveal how financial vulnerability led them to transform spiritual and domestic chores into revenue-raising ventures. Certain nuns' political aspirations form the subject of chapter five which assesses women's participation in the patronage networks of English society and politics. The final two chapters focus upon spirituality in the English convents: first I discuss the broad impact of the Catholic Reformation upon the devotional life of English convents; and second I examine individual spiritual experiences to reveal the range of activity the nuns deemed legitimate paths to sanctity.

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The remainder of this introduction will provide an overview of the historiography of early modern English Catholicism, and gender and religion. Obviously it will not be possible to cover the massive amount published about English Catholics in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, nor the burgeoning literature on women and religious experience. For this reason I will narrow my survey to those issues which relate directly to the themes informing the thesis, beginning with the book which first hinted at the potential goldmine awaiting historians of women in early modern English Catholicism.

II. Historiography

In 1975, the publication of John Bossy's influential study, *The English Catholic Community, 1570-1850* opened the way to analyses of gendered participation in English Catholic belief and practice. Drawing upon sociological and anthropological methodologies, Bossy explored the ecclesiastical and social organisation of lay Catholics. He argued that during the sixteenth century, largely as a result of the missionary input from English seminaries on the Continent, Catholicism was transformed into the status of a sect located within gentry and aristocratic households.20 The domestic nature of post-Reformation Catholicism empowered women, who presided over household piety governed by the Church calendar of feasts and fasts. Moreover, Bossy argued that the years 1580 to 1620 witnessed a 'matriarchal period' during which women played an 'active and proselytising' role. He suggested that Protestantism failed to cater for the spiritual preferences of English gentlewomen, so they fought to keep the faith alive while their husbands conformed to the Church of England. This state of affairs lasted only so long as the recusancy laws were enforced and Church Papistry existed. Thus from about 1620, when the application of anti-Catholic laws became more relaxed and there was increasing social and religious pressure for husbands and wives to practise the same faith, the 'authority of the *paterfamilias*' was restored.21

Although acclaimed as a seminal study which liberated English religious history from the endless polemical debate which had characterised post-Reformation Catholic studies, many historians have questioned Bossy's observations and conclusions.22 In an

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22 Christopher Haigh, 'The Fall of a Church or the Rise of a Sect? Post-Reformation Catholicism in England', *HJ*, 21, 1978, pp. 181-86; A.D. Wright, 'Catholic History, North and South', *Northern History*, 14, 1978, pp. 126-51; More recently, Alexandra Walsham has criticised the very narrow definition of the English Catholic community propounded by Bossy & other historians pedalling its noncomformist character after 1570. Walsham argued that the focus upon the sectarian nature of English
incisive critique, Caroline Hibbard lamented the insular direction Catholic historiography had taken in the 1970s.23 Hibbard suggested that by treating English Catholics as a sect after 1560, Bossy was ignoring entirely the influence of English exiles and religious establishments on the Continent, to say nothing of the agendas of the papacy, and French and Spanish governments. Without acknowledging Continental Catholicism, the fear of popery which erupted into semi-hysteria in 1605, the 1630s, and then in the 1670s and 1680s was simply inexplicable. More importantly, Hibbard challenged the traditional assumption that placed the English Counter-Reformation squarely within the confines of Elizabeth's reign. Using statistics of rising recusancy, the flood of priestly vocations and the phenomenal production of English Catholic literature, Hibbard suggested that far from contracting, the English Catholic community was flourishing in the early seventeenth century.24

Bossy's sectarian model is challenged further by the participation of the English convents in English Catholic affairs. Ignoring the exiled Catholics, Bossy implied that upon leaving the shores of England they played no further role in the formation and maintenance of the faith. Indeed he explicitly argued that the priests alone were important when he expressed his intention to consider 'the Continental side of English Catholicism ... only ... in so far as, in the seminaries for instance, it contributed directly to the history of the community in England'.25 I would argue that not only were the English convents a vital part of the English Catholic community, but that they also acted as significant conduits of Catholic-Reformation ideologies and spiritualities. Many of the leading recusant families sent some or all of their daughters to be educated abroad. Various Catholics also journeyed to France and the Low Countries, and visited the convents. Furthermore, a steady stream of nuns returned to England to collect money owed their monasteries, and they spent varying periods of time among family and friends in their home counties. This immediate physical contact was reinforced by regular Catholicism, typified by the identification of Catholicism with recusancy, has blinded historians to the existence of a sizeable group of Catholics who conformed to the rites of the Church of England. Church papists challenge Bossy's model of separation from the Anglican religious establishment, suggesting that English Catholics were a far more heterogeneous group than proponents of the seminarian inspired devout recusant model allow. See Alexandra Walsham, *Church Papists. Catholicism, Conformity and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England*, Woodbridge & New York, 1993, ch. 4. Walsham concurs largely with the revisionist assault on the centrality of the mission in the survival of Catholicism. The work of Christopher Haigh has been most influential in criticising Bossy's & A.G. Dickens's thesis that there was a break between Marian Catholicism & that of the later Elizabethan period. See Bossy, *Catholic Community*, esp. 'Introduction'; id., 'Catholic Community 1603-1625', p. 101; A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*, 2nd edn., London, 1989, pp. 366-67; Christopher Haigh, 'The Continuity of English Catholicism in the English Reformation', *P&P*, 93, 1981, pp. 37-69; id., 'From Monopoly to Minority: the Catholics in Early Modern England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 31, 1982, p. 132; id., 'The Recent Historiography of the English Reformation', *Historiographical Review*, 25, 1982, pp. 995-1007; id., *English Reformations. Religion, Politics and Society Under the Tudors*, Oxford, 1993, ch. 15.

24 Ibid., pp.10-14.
correspondence between kin in England and nuns across the Channel. For these reasons it is impossible to separate the exiles from the English Catholic community. Like Haigh, Hibbard and Walsham, I would posit a much broader definition of English Catholicism to include recusants and schismatics in England and abroad. One of my central arguments is that the nuns considered themselves first and foremost as English Catholics. By identifying so strongly with their co-religionists at home, their principal aim was the restoration of the faith in England through whatever means were necessary, be it prayer, education, or financial support for the Stuarts.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the sectarian model, Bossy's evaluation of the important role assumed by Catholic lay women challenged the traditional picture of a faith saved solely by heroic missionaries. Moreover, by suggesting that there was a 'matriarchal period' in which women were at the forefront of recusancy, Bossy highlighted the empowering capacity of religion in women's lives. Conviction about the veracity of a particular creed could lead women to act in ways not usually tolerated. There are obvious methodological problems with Bossy's rather loose application of the term 'matriarchy' to describe the prominence of women during this time.26 As he himself acknowledges when he posits the importance of the missionary priests, women did not wield absolute power within the 'sect'. In many instances, Catholic wives were not permitted by their husbands to undertake the politically subversive activities assumed by widows and single women like Dorothy Lawson, Viscountess Montague, Eleanor Brooksby and Anne Vaux. The inconsistencies in his terminology have led Alexandra Walsham to question the pivotal role ascribed women by Bossy. Walsham suggests instead that female recusancy was more than likely 'often a natural division of labour in the management of dissent' than it was evidence of 'matriarchy'.27

Recusancy laws necessitated pragmatic strategies for economic preservation in Catholic families, and women were prominent in defining these survival mechanisms.28 While certainly not a 'matriarchy', wives and widows seized the opportunity to lead their co-religionists through the rough waters of the 'penal times'. The zeal of women like Dorothy Lawson, who supposedly converted all of her Protestant in-laws, plus most of the tenants on the estate; and Jane Wiseman, who longed for martyrdom and came close to it after being arrested and condemned for harbouring priests; inspired later generations

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26 The OED definition of 'matriarchy' describes it as 'a form of social organization in which the mother is the head of the family and descent is reckoned through the female line'. This was certainly not true of Catholic families in Elizabethan England. Religious considerations did not overturn the gender order prescribed by society at large.
27 Walsham, *Church Papists*, p. 81.
to persist in the faith. Exemplary women had always held a prominent place in the Catholic hagiographic tradition. In the seventeenth century, biographies of Margaret Clitherow, Dorothy Lawson and Magdalen, Viscountess Montague were published and circulated along with the *vitae* of popular saints. The strong impression that assertive female faith made upon the women who established the English religious cloisters was evidenced in their chronicles which detailed at length the heroic deeds accomplished by mothers, grandmothers and kin. The revival of English monasticism for women therefore needs to be located within this tradition of powerful female religiosity which was determined to maintain the faith at any cost.

The circumstances of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries which encouraged female leadership among English Catholics gave rise to institutions in which women's power was more enduring. The daughters, grand-daughters, nieces and protégées of the Elizabethan recusant wives and widows were among the earliest women to flock to the Continent to establish English religious houses. These women continued the work of education, proselytisation, and conversion, and the patronage of priests and others deemed sympathetic to the Catholic cause. I disagree strongly with Caroline Hibbard's doubts concerning the cloisters' role in propagating the faith in England. Hibbard suggested that women who entered the enclosure were subsumed into the novitiate and therefore did not leave the cloister to become the next generation of Catholic wives and mothers. A comparison of registers of entry with profession books shows that several women who entered as postulants left either before clothing, or between taking the habit and proceeding to their final vows. Some of their names appear in other communities' registers, but many of these women returned to England. The discovery of a book of meditations in the Aston family library at Tixall in Staffordshire...

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30 E.g., the *Chronicle of St. Monica's* devoted several pages to the actions of Jane Wiseman who was the mother of the first prioress, Jane (Mary) Wiseman. See *Chronicle of St. Monica's*, vol. 1, pp. 81-84.

31 Anne Clitherow, who was left by her mother her hose & shoes 'signifying that she should serve God and follow her steps of virtue', entered St. Ursula's in Louvain in 1596, & was professsed in 1598. Frances Burrows, who grew up in the priest-harbouring household of Anne Vaux & Eleanor Brooksy, made her vows at St. Ursula's in 1597. Three of Dorothy Lawson's daughters entered monasteries: Dorothy was professed at St. Monica's in 1618, & the others joined the Ghent Benedictines. Two of Viscountess Montague's daughters became Bridgettine nuns at Lisbon. See *Chronicle of St. Monica's*, vol. 1, pp. 33-34, 175-79, vol. 2, pp. 164-68; Katharine Longley, *Saint Margaret Clitherow*, Wheathampstead, Herts., 1986, p. 155; [Thomas Robinson], *The Anatomy of the English Nunnery at Lisbon in Portugall*, London, 1622, [STC, 21123], p. 31.

32 Hibbard, 'Stuart Catholicism', pp. 18-19.
suggests that women leaving the cloisters did transmit female monastic spirituality to England. Inside the cover was written 'Gertrude Aston's book, given her by her Revd Mother and Aunt Winefrid Themelby, 1671'. Gertrude Aston was placed at St. Monica's with her sister Catherine in 1658. She left within months, but not without a book of prayers written by her aunt, the prioress of the community. The existence of several successful schools among the religious communities further bolsters my assertion that young Catholic women were returning to their homeland with some understanding of reformed Catholicism imparted to them by the nuns. Evidence that the nuns exported their own brand of prayer and devotion is further provided by the publication of nuns' devotions. So Catholic women continued to provide strong leadership throughout the seventeenth century, albeit in a different forum.

Historians of women and gender have been slow to recognise the early modern English nuns as agents of religious and political change. This neglect is surprising, given the current strength of women's studies. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed the flowering of women's studies and gave rise to increasingly sophisticated theoretical research tools to assist the historian of women in societies, past and present. Proceeding from what Gerda Lerner termed 'contribution history', in which women were slotted back into the masculine orientated historical jigsaw, through numerous debates about the causes and meaning of female oppression in the past, to the call by Joan Scott for gender to be included with race and class as a category of historical analysis, scholars have grappled with the problem of how to write about women's past. 'Gender', which describes the cultural construction of sexual difference, has become a vital tool for understanding the different historical experiences of women and men. Practitioners of women's history have also benefited from the theories and methodologies of social scientists and literary scholars. Recent historiography has accordingly acknowledged ideologies which

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33 Arthur Clifford (ed.), Tixall Letters: or the Correspondence of the Aston Family, and their Friends during the Seventeenth Century, London, 1815, pp. 3-4; Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS C 2, Chronicle: vol. 1, 1548-1837, ff. 618-19; BL, Add. MS 36,452, Aston Papers, vol. 9, Private Correspondence 1613-1703, ff. 89-95.


36 Michaela di Leonardo, 'Introduction: Gender, Culture, and Political Economy. Feminist Anthropology in Historical Perspective', in ead. (ed.), Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era, Berkeley, 1991, pp. 1-48; Lyndal Roper has questioned the utility of methodologies commonly employed to understand women's experiences in the past, including gender, in
shaped their lives: the creation of feminine spaces and meaning in otherwise masculine worlds.  

Likewise, the study of religion has undergone a renaissance as a consequence of similar scholarly interaction between historians, anthropologists and sociologists. Although Marxist interpretations of religion as a form of social control are still significant, the work of scholars, like Clifford Geertz, has broadened the terms of analysis. Geertz proposed that religious beliefs need to be considered as cultural indicators. Through an examination of the doctrines, rituals and symbols of Catholicism and Protestantism it is possible to unravel the principal ideologies underpinning the gender and social order in medieval and early modern society. Social historians have broadened the field of enquiry beyond institutional doctrines and hierarchies to look at the 'religiousness' of the believers. Examining the beliefs and practices of the faithful within a social context, it has been possible to understand how people sought meaning for their often harsh existence. Moreover, following Max Weber's premise that religion could act as a subversive as well as a conservative force, historians of early modern society have explored the links between religious belief and challenges to the political and social order. Influenced by similar theoretical approaches to those used by scholars of religion and society, social historians interested in gender have focused specifically on the place of religious belief and practice in women's lives.

During the past decade literature focusing on women and religion has been published steadily. The two most prominent fields of research have been medieval studies and Reformation history. Studies of medieval mystics and nuns have dominated the former area, while there has been a preponderance of Protestant activists and sectarian

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visionaries in the latter. The studies of medieval monasticism for women have been particularly illuminating. Following the impressive lead established by Lina Eckenstein and Eileen Power in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, medievalists have been the first to explore the experience of groups of women not under immediate patriarchal control. Power's investigation of all facets of life in the medieval English nunnery remained the standard work for much of the century. Without the insights of poststructuralism and gender theories, Power none the less initiated discussion of female power within church and society, the vexed issues of nuns' sexuality, women's education, work and poverty.

The issues raised by Power received scant attention from historians until very recently. The work of Suzanne Wemple, Penny Gold, Jane Schulenburg, Sharon Elkins and Sally Thompson has begun to investigate the participation of women in the creation of religious structures and ideologies at times of ecclesiastical expansion and change.


Indeed current research is now revising many of Power's conclusions, particularly her assessment of the poverty and impropriety apparently rife in the houses she examined. For example, Roberta Gilchrist has argued that the bias of ecclesiastical sources, intensified by a tendency to judge female cloisters according to the model of male monasticism, led Power to devalue nuns' spirituality and influence in medieval Church and society.44 By contrast, Gilchrist's archaeological analysis of women's houses suggests that nuns actually sought stricter ascetic regimes than their male counterparts.45 In her study of medieval French nuns, Penelope Johnson has evaluated the gendering of monasticism by looking at differences between nuns and monks in terms of their treatment by the Church. Johnson has also located cloisters within their social milieu by assessing the perceptions of surrounding society regarding religious women.46 All of this research shows conclusively that despite the limitations placed upon nuns' activities by an increasingly authoritarian Church, they experienced a degree of autonomy, creativity and spiritual fulfilment not possible for the majority of their contemporary sisters.

Caroline Walker Bynum's compelling study of medieval mystical experience opened new perspectives on the study of gender and religion. Not only did Bynum make us aware of the empowering quality of Christianity in women's lives, through her exploration of metaphor and ritual she also unveiled the often androgynous nature of spiritual discourse. The powerful symbol of a maternal Christ revealed fertile ground for gendered analyses of religious faith, and demanded re-evaluation of dichotomous theories regarding sexual difference.47 Religious inspiration could dissolve the apparently inflexible boundaries between masculine and feminine, thus rendering faith a radical element in women's lives. In her recent study of Quaker visionaries, Phyllis Mack emphasised the importance of belief in the soul in the mentalités of early modern men and women. The soul was an avenue through which women could transcend the fleshly trappings of the human condition and experience the divine.48 The soul was supposedly an ungendered entity (St. Paul wrote that there is neither male or female in Christ) and as such offered women an opportunity for equality with men in the single most important aspect of their lives: religious faith and practice. In reality, the soul was always referred

47 Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*.
to as feminine, thus defining a clearly gendered relationship between the divine and the believer. However, as Bynum's research and work of others in the area of spirituality has revealed, both the godhead and the male believer could assume feminine attributes in spiritual relationships. The study of religion can therefore offer infinite possibilities for an understanding of the construction and meaning of sexual difference.

The flowering of women's monasticism in medieval studies has yet to be mirrored in early modern historiography. In a recent overview of research into the history of early modern Catholicism, Kathryn Norberg acknowledged that when it comes to female religious life, 'studies are most rare'. Assumptions regarding the conservatism of the devout which stifled the study of women and religion have not been quelled in the case of sixteenth and seventeenth-century nuns. This derogation of monastic women, viewed by medievalists as the embodiment of female autonomy, is surprising. Lyndal Roper's research into the implementation of Reformation principles and practices in the German city of Augsburg has clearly indicated that many women fought to retain the independence the convent gave them, suggesting that in the sixteenth century some women still perceived the cloister as a liberating rather than repressive institution. Yet, apart from a smattering of essays and book chapters, there are few monographs focusing on contemplative women. Teresa of Avila has provided the most fertile ground for analyses of women's role as spiritual authorities in the early modern Catholic Church.

Ironically, the dearth of material regarding contemplative nuns in feminist historiography has perpetuated their marginalisation by the ecclesiastical hierarchy in the sixteenth century. The Catholic response to the Reformation has been described as a return to the crusading mentality of the middle ages. Counter-reform became a 'holy war' in the form of virulent polemical debate and intensive missionary activity. Merry Wiesner has remarked that 'even more than the medieval crusades, the fight against Protestants was to be a masculine affair'. From the eleventh century onwards, Church authorities had encouraged and, at times, forced nuns to accept enclosure. The sixteenth century saw a return to the crusading warrior bishop figure, rather than the female mystic of the 14th & 15th centuries. Donald Weinstein & Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700*, Chicago, 1982, ch. 8.

52 The crusading spirit is best illustrated by Weinstein & Bell's analysis of canonisation patterns in the medieval & early modern period. The study concluded that the Church's definition of sanctity during the Counter-Reformation was focused strongly upon the crusading warrior bishop figure, rather than the female mystic of the 14th & 15th centuries. Donald Weinstein & Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700*, Chicago, 1982, ch. 8.
century saw heightened tensions concerning religious women's apostolate. Concern about the control of female sexuality revived debate about uncloistered nuns moving freely in the local community. Thus, in the midst of Reformation missionary fervour, nuns were forced into strict claustration behind convent walls, and were unable to participate actively in the crusade at hand.

Women reacted to the Council of Trent's reaffirmation of clausura in a variety of ways. Established communities, particularly those for women of high social status, often vehemently defended their rights to interact with the world beyond the convent walls and fought Church officials who sought to restrict their sphere of activity.\textsuperscript{54} Nuns who accepted the rhetoric that the cloistered contemplative nun was the most worthy in the eyes of God succumbed to the decrees.\textsuperscript{55} Other women who were inspired by the crusading spirit energising the Church believed that they were being called to engage in missionary work, charity and education. Inevitably they came into conflict with the hierarchy and ultimately were forced to submit to some degree of claustration. Historiographically, these women who defied the Church hierarchy to pursue missionary work have received more than just the cursory acknowledgment accorded their contemplative sisters.\textsuperscript{56}

The imposition of strict enclosure on female religious became a metaphor for nuns' inability to participate formally in the very activity which epitomised reformed Catholicism - missionary work.\textsuperscript{57} However, I would suggest that by focusing almost exclusively on active piety, historians have ignored the spiritual dimension of the religious life which in the early modern mentalité was far more important. Convents had always been endowed for the purpose of prayer, and the early modern English cloisters


were no exception. Women entering the English convents believed that their prayers were efficacious in bringing about the restoration of Catholicism in their homeland. In many instances, far from meekly resigning themselves to lives of cloistered impotency in the face of counter-reform, nuns often adopted missionary rhetoric to describe their life of prayer and contemplation. Teresa of Avila spoke of making 'war on the heretics with ... prayers', and argued that her nuns were 'fighting for Him [i.e. God] even though [they] are very cloistered'. Indeed Teresa exemplified the way by which intense spiritual relationships with the Lord could earn women authority and public recognition. Ironically, in the flood of material published about Mary Ward's active religious order, it is rarely acknowledged that Ward's reputation as a mystic assisted the foundation of the I.B.V.M.

Recent feminist scholarship has deconstructed the boundaries between the public and private spheres of politics and the family in early modern Europe. The imposition of strict enclosure upon nuns by the Catholic Church would seem to undermine the argument that public and private space overlapped and intertwined in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. However, evidence that contemplative women viewed prayer as a political action, coupled with their efforts to participate in the active piety of the counter-reform movement from within the confines of cloister, support the thesis that borders between the domestic sphere and the world at large were fluid. Indeed the convents demonstrate graphically that despite the rhetoric surrounding the subservient place of the female sex in society, Church, and state, women none the less wielded power within political and governmental forums.

Rather than describe how enclosure stifled the missionary zeal of women, more attention needs to be directed towards the experience of claustration among those women who lived under its shadow. Scholars are beginning to debate the significance of clausura. Some studies have recorded an overall negative impact on both the temporal and spiritual life in the early modern convent. For example, Kathryn Norberg pinpointed enclosure as the root of many cloisters' financial troubles because women could

58 Whelan noted the central role of prayer for the restoration of Catholicism in the English cloisters, Whelan, Historic English Convents, p. 88. In 1660, Abbess Margaret (Margaret Ignatius) Bedingfield of the Poor Clares at Rouen sought the permission of the archbishop for some of the older nuns to receive the eucharist daily for the conversion of England, Forster, 'Poor Clares of Rouen - 1', p. 67.
no longer run schools and hospitals, nor could they beg for alms outside their convent walls. Likewise, Merry Wiesner attributed decreasing religious vocations and a corresponding decline in spiritual vigour in the late seventeenth century to the long-term effect of clausura. Yet the *raison d'être* for enclosure aimed to create the opposite effect. In her study of Augsburg, Lyndal Roper has argued that the city's Council enforced enclosure upon the cloisters it could not disband because the nuns' virginity constituted a civic resource - their holiness, chastity and prayer benefited the commune. My reading of clausura in the English convents acknowledges its complex and contradictory impact on monastic life. Ultimately, however, the terms of enclosure were as fluid as the boundaries between the public and private spheres in secular society.

In many respects, clausura was implemented against all women in early modern society. Protestant teaching on the ordered household intended to 'enclose' women in the domestic sphere under patriarchal control. In Italy women who had fallen into dishonour through prostitution or failed marriages were 'cloistered' in asylums resembling convents. Claustration could take on a psychological as well as a physical dimension. Mary Elizabeth Perry has shown how in Seville efforts to preserve and restore order entailed careful manipulation of symbols signifying evil and virtue. Women were dichotomised into one category or the other, providing men with a negative foil against which they could define themselves and justify their authority. However, far from becoming the victims of a male conspiracy to control them, women too participated in the honour and control system by internalising gender beliefs in what Perry terms 'a more subtle psychic enclosure in idealised expectations'. Therefore, enclosure was not an issue relating solely to nuns, although they were its most visible targets.

It can be therefore argued that the convent was a metaphor for the experience of many early modern women, both lay and religious, Protestant and Catholic. The institution and the women who inhabited it were products of a religious and secular order characterised by very particular notions of social hierarchy and gender difference. Accordingly, it is possible to view the cloister as a microcosm of early modern society. For this reason the absence of any major scholarly research on contemplative religious women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries needs to be redressed. However, for feminist scholars there is an even more compelling cause to focus on monasticism. In spite of the symbiotic relationship between cloister and world, convents were essentially

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66 Ibid., see esp. ch. 1.
places organised and ruled by women. Protestant women were denied the opportunity to seek refuge together and bypass immediate patriarchal supervision, a fact lamented by Mary Astell in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*. In an increasingly masculine world, convents provided women with their own feminine space. The process by which Catholic women created such spaces, and their reasons for doing so, will be discussed in the following chapter.

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CHAPTER 2

FEMALE MONASTICISM REVIVED:
FOUNDATIONS AND VOCATIONS

Anno Domini
1597

The persecution beeing then great against the Roman Catholicks in england The lady Mary percy Daughter to the great earle of Northumberland, with many other persons of quality, leaving theyr owne country retyreid into flanders living ther at Brussels in much retreat and Devotion; they began to think of leading a Religious life, and errecting a Monastery ... they soone resolved upon this great worke; and to undertake St Benedict his Rule & Holy order; wch of all others, had heerfore, most flourished; in that now hereticall kingdome. confiding it might happily in future times, be agayn a fit reception for them.¹

Lady Mary Percy, assisted by Fr. William Holt S.J., obtained the necessary ecclesiastical and civil approbation for her venture in 1598. Led by Joanna Berkeley, an Englishwoman who was to be the abess of the community, a few nuns from a French Benedictine house arrived in 1599, and the first postulants, including Mary Percy, were clothed. In 1600 the founder and her seven companions made their religious profession, and the Abbey of the Glorious Assumption of Our Blessed Lady had become the first post-Reformation cloister for English women. This process of foundation was to be repeated several times during the next hundred years, as one by one the old monastic orders revived across the Channel to await what the nuns believed was the inevitable return to their homeland.

In this chapter I shall examine the re-emergence of English monasticism for women during the seventeenth century. Using data relating to 1,109 women professed in ten cloisters between 1557 and 1710, I will analyse the profession patterns for these houses to discern what factors may have influenced recruitment overall; and also to chart the distinctive traits of individual houses.² However, the process of foundation and recruitment was enormously complex. To explain the phenomenal revival of convents for English women, one has to look first at the broader political, economic, and social circumstances in England and in the Catholic Church at large; and second, at the more personal issue of individual motivation on the part of the nuns and their parents. The chapter will be divided accordingly into two sections. The first part will focus upon the emergence of various cloisters during the century, the flow of women into them, and the regional and national origins of the nuns. The second will look specifically at the range

² 1557 marks the profession of Englishwoman, Margaret Clement, in the Flemish Augustinian convent of St. Ursula's in Louvain, from which the English house of St. Monica's evolved. My data includes women who took their vows in foreign houses & subsequently transferred to English convents, but the recruitment statistics exclude those professed prior to the 1590s.
of religious vocations among English nuns to ascertain whether women entered cloisters for spiritual or secular reasons.

I. Revival of Monasticism for Women: Demographic Features

The revival of English monasticism occurred during a renaissance of female religiosity across Catholic Europe. The English foundation movement and recruitment to individual houses must be placed therefore within this broader phenomenon, as well as within the political and social context of post-Reformation Catholicism in England. In this section I will explore the circumstances surrounding the re-establishment of female monasticism to ascertain why the contemplative life for women was revived. Patterns of convent foundations and recruitment offer some explanation for the burst of religious vitality. None the less, factors governing the flow and ebb of novices suggest that a complex set of issues were at play, making it difficult to attribute the revival to any one cause.

Both religious and worldly reasons lay behind the tremendous enthusiasm among English Catholics for the cloister in the seventeenth century. The convents represented determination on the part of English Catholics to preserve their faith in spite of adversity. At the very moment when recusant numbers were dwindling, English Catholics revived the quintessentially Catholic institution of the convent. The prominent part assumed by women in this revival shows clearly the leadership roles they had forged for themselves during the troubled years of Elizabethan recusancy.

I have divided the section into into four sub-sections, each of which deals with specific aspects of the foundation movement. First I will take a global look at the emergence of the various orders and houses during the century. The second part distinguishes the recruitment of choir nuns and lay sisters, and the factors influencing numbers of each. Thirdly, I will explore the regional origins of recruitment in England to assess the importance of Catholic recusancy and the missionary priests in inspiring vocations. In the final sub-section, the English cloisters' bias against professing foreign women will be analysed.

i. The Foundation Movement of the Seventeenth Century: Origins and Recruitment

The Brussels Benedictine abbey was the first post-Reformation cloister, but it was not the sole refuge for English gentlewomen who desired to take the veil. Since the dissolution of religious houses in 1539, a trickle of Catholic women and men had entered institutions on the Continent. Some former members of pre-Reformation monasteries joined houses
in French and Spanish territories. For example, in 1548, Elizabeth Woodford of Burnham Abbey, which had been suppressed in 1539, joined the Augustinian convent of St. Ursula's in Louvain. Other dispossessed nuns had banded together and travelled abroad in the hope that they might continue the contemplative life. The best known example is that of the Bridgettine nuns of Syon Abbey. A small group of them had fled to the Low Countries where they led a nomadic existence for fifty-five years, forced to and from various resting points by the Dutch revolt against Spanish rule in the Netherlands. They had been invited back to England during the reign of Mary I, but Elizabeth's accession saw them return to the Continent. Finally, in 1594, they established themselves in Lisbon. Similarly, some of the Dominican nuns from the Dartford convent suppressed in 1538 regrouped in England during the 1550s. In 1559, they travelled to the Spanish Netherlands with the Bridgettines, and ultimately sought refuge in a Flemish cloister of their order. There is also mention in an Ursuline chronicle of a small group of English Poor Clares fleeing England to Vere (Zeeland) in approximately 1572, arriving in Gravelines in 1574 or 1575, then finally joining the Flemish Poor Clare convent in St. Omers.

It was not only the former English nuns who continued the monastic tradition abroad. The daughters of English exiles in French and Flemish towns entered local cloisters. For example, Margaret Clement, whose parents had moved to Louvain during the reign of Edward VI, entered the Augustinian monastery of St. Ursula's in that town. Her sister, Dorothy, became a Poor Clare in Louvain. When the decision was made to revive the English monastic orders, founders were able to begin convents with experienced English nuns from Continental cloisters. The first abbess of the Brussels Benedictines was Joanna Berkeley, who had been professed at Rheims in 1581. Likewise, when Mary Ward established the Poor Clare convent at St. Omers in 1607, the English house poached five English choir nuns and two lay sisters from the local French cloister, much to the fury of its abbess. In 1618, the Carmelite foundation in Antwerp

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5 All were over 50 years old by then. There is record of a pension paid to the remaining nuns in 1569, but by the mid-1570s they appear to have died out. The order was not revived until 1661. See Guilday, Catholic Refugees, pp. 413-15.


7 Chronicle of St. Monica's, vol. 1, pp. 26-28; William Peryn, Spiritual exercises and goostly meditations, Caen, 1598, [ERL, 337; STC, 19785], p. 2.

attracted five English nuns from Continental Teresian houses in Antwerp, Brussels and Louvain. The Augustinians in Louvain merely transferred most of their number from the Flemish community of St. Ursula's into the new English establishment. The presence of these women in foreign cloisters indicates that the contemplative life for women had not died in English minds; it was just more difficult to pursue.

However, in Continental religious houses English nuns often encountered cultural and spiritual difficulties. Many lacked sufficient language skills to communicate with their religious sisters and their confessor. For example, Mary Ward did not speak French when she joined the St. Omers Poor Clares as an external lay sister. Ward's inability to communicate effectively led her to doubt her vocation. English nuns at St. Ursula's in Louvain were unaccustomed to the Flemish diet of coarse rye bread and herb porridge. They also found the work they were expected to undertake was too strenuous for gentlewomen. Furthermore, there were not enough places for English women in houses which had been founded ostensibly for French and Flemish nuns. In their petition to found an English cloister, the nuns of St. Ursula's in Louvain argued that many vocations were often lost because devout English women could find no convent to admit them. Finally, several women felt that in foreign contemplative communities they were on the margins of the struggle to restore the faith in their homeland. It was this conviction that led Mary Ward to leave the St. Omers Poor Clare community and found an English house of the same order. Likewise, the Englishwomen at St. Ursula's were compelled by the same desire to maintain the monastic tradition for their countrywomen, and keep alive the memory of their families' sufferings for the faith.

Abbess of the English house), professed in 1596; Margaret (Clare of St. John) Fowler, professed 1593; & Elizabeth (Lucy of St. John) Darrell, professed 1605. One of the lay sisters was French, the other was Ann Campion. Ann (Ann of St. John) Brooke, professed 1596; & Ann (Ann of St. Frances) Tholward, professed 1596 joined the new monastery in 1610 after it had moved to Gravelines.

9 Guilday, Catholic Refugees, p. 362. Several English women were resident in Continental monasteries. When in 1629, Lady Mary Lovel was attempting to establish a Carmelite house in Bruges she persuaded 'an ancient English Nun named Margaret Lin, of St. Bernard's Order, that lived in a Monastery of Walloons' to join her. (The venture was cut short by the death of Lovel.) Chronicle of St. Monica's, vol. 2, pp. 67-68.

10 Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 68-69, 77-78, 110-11, 119-20. Between 1609 & 1611, 17 English nuns left St. Ursula's for the new cloister of St. Monica's, of whom 2 were lay sisters. They were joined in 1610 by a Flemish lay sister, Frances Blase, who begged the bishop to grant her permission to do so. 4 English women remained at St. Ursula's for want of a portion. They were Frances Felton, Helen Garnett, Ann Rockwood & Anne Clitherow.

11 Chambers, Life of Mary Ward, vol. 1, pp. 128, 159. An external lay sister was responsible for conducting daily convent business in the world beyond the enclosure. The St. Omers cloister operated under a pre-Trent rule which required the nuns to live off alms collected by these sisters. The English foundations were generally not permitted to employ external sisters, although the Franciscans of Brussels-Nieuport-Bruges did have a small number who acted more in the capacity of household servants than solicitors of charity.

12 Chronicle of St. Monica's, vol. 1, pp. 34-35, 64.

13 Ibid., p. 63.
During the reign of Elizabeth I, the foundation of English seminaries and monasteries to train young men for the priesthood provided an outlet for the missionary energies of Catholic sons. However, the spiritual needs of daughters and widows were persistently overlooked by the exiled English clergy and laity. This was despite the fact that at the beginning of the seventeenth century there were two factors supporting the case for specifically English convents. First, on an optimistic note, Catholics in England and abroad were anticipating the death of Elizabeth and were hopeful that her successor would prove more lenient to their faith. Second, there was a close-knit group of English Catholic exiles in the Low Countries who could endow cloisters for their daughters and kin.

Although few expected James VI of Scotland to restore Catholicism, many believed that toleration was likely. In 1598, the Edict of Nantes had made it legally possible for Catholics and Protestants to co-exist in France, and many English Catholics believed that there was a chance that such an agreement could be struck in England by a new monarch. For example, the Catholic gentlewoman, Katharine Gawen, did not mourn the passing of Elizabeth. Gawen was indicted in 1603 for saying 'We had a late Queene and she was a blodye Queene'. She expressed confidence in James' religious orientation by declaring 'Nowe we have a Kinge whoe is of our religion and will restore us to our rights'. Thus it seemed that time was ripe to revive the contemplative life for women, so that it could be readily transported back to England, should the succession favour Catholics. The Brussels founders justified their venture in this way, as did the Augustinians in Louvain who described their newly established house in 1609 as 'a forepassage to England'.

By the early seventeenth century, there was a semi-permanent community of self-exiled English families on the Continent and they had needs of their own. As an expatriate community, the English Catholics nurtured the traditions of suffering by laity and clergy in England, and looked to their sons and daughters to maintain the faith. Colleges, like Douai and St. Omers, schooled boys for the task ahead. Gradually it was conceded that there should be similar institutions for daughters who as wives and mothers would be responsible for imparting the faith to the next generation. In addition, religious houses would provide liturgies which the English laity could attend. The extent to which convents responded to this need for a focal point for the exiled Catholics' worship and community can be seen in the high attendance of expatriates at the clothings

14 In 1605, Gawen was charged for making her displeasure with the King known. She reportedly described how upon James' accession she had paid for 'bonfires and otherwise to show joy at his coming, but it is indeed a King as good as no King'. Quoted in M.D.R. Leys, Catholics in England 1559-1829. A Social History, London, 1961, pp. 50, 54-55; David Mathew, Catholicism in England 1535-1935. Portrait of a Minority: Its Culture and Tradition, London, 1936, pp. 53, 59-61.
and professions of nuns. In 1621, the profession at St. Monica's of the widowed Lady Grace Birnand Babthorpe and her grand-daughter Frances Babthorpe, reinforced the important part convents played in generating a sense of religious and national solidarity among the exiled Catholic community. The preacher for the occasion was Ralph Babthorpe S.J., the widow's son, and the ceremony was attended by numerous English Catholics.

None the less, it still took the efforts of determined women like Lady Mary Percy and Mary Ward to persuade their compatriots that devout ladies needed English cloisters which could fulfil the needs of the exiles, and which would return to England when Catholicism was again ascendent, or at least tolerated. The early foundations of Brussels, St. Omers-Gravelines and Louvain were initiated and carried out by women from the exiled Catholic community in the Low Countries. Mary Percy and her gentlewomen friends had been living a quasi-monastic life in the Low Countries; the Brussels cloister emerged from their desire to formalise the lifestyle they had assumed. Mary Ward's unfortunate experiences in a Flemish cloister inspired her to found a Poor Clare house where devout English ladies could conduct the religious life with their compatriots. Subsequent cloisters were established by English women who were inspired by the success of the earlier houses to travel to the Continent to found their own communities. Thus the initial move to restore the English monastic ideal for women grew directly from the experiences and needs of the exiled Catholic women; but these early foundations also struck a chord with gentlewomen in England who flocked to support the re-establishment of monasticism for women.

By 1610, there were three English communities for women: the Benedictine Abbey in Brussels, the Poor Clare convent at Gravelines, and the Augustinian nuns of St. Monica's in Louvain. All were abundantly successful in attracting recruits during the first three decades of the seventeenth century. Brussels professed twenty-two nuns from its beginning in 1598 up to 1610. In the next decade, they peaked with twenty-six women making their final vows. In the same period Louvain acquired twenty-seven new nuns, and Gravelines conducted an astounding forty-one professions. This phenomenal wave of enthusiasm for the monastic life resulted in a plethora of new cloisters in the 1620s, of which the Augustinian filiation to Bruges in 1629 provides just one example. St. Monica's professed forty-five women in the 1620s, and conditions in the enclosure

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16 When a widow entered a cloister she would be referred to by either her father's or her husband's surname. To avoid confusion, wherever possible, I will use both her family & her married name: e.g., Grace Birnand Babthorpe's family name was Birnand, & she had married Sir Ralph Babthorpe.
18 The Poor Clares managed to profess 9 women between their foundation in 1607 & 1610. The Augustinians did not set up the English cloister until 1609. One of the principal reasons for doing so was the negative impact the Brussels English convent had on English recruitment to the Flemish cloister of St. Ursula's. After professing 23 women in the 1590s, professions slumped to 3 in the 1600s.
had become cramped and uncomfortable. The chronicler noted that 'we here finding our monastery so burthened with persons that we had not convenient room to receive many more, agreed in our Counsel [i.e. council] and yearly consultation to seek for to amplify our Order by setting up of another monastery, whereby sending there ten nuns we should make room here to receive more persons'. The Gravelines Poor Clares who had added another thirty-three nuns to their ranks in the 1620s did likewise and sent a filiation to the town of Aire in 1629.

The success of the initial English cloisters encouraged restoration of other contemplative orders. In 1621, two widows, Lucy (Lucy Angela) Sleford Davis and Petronilla (Petronilla Clare) Kemp Browne, began a community of Franciscan nuns of the Third Order Regular in Brussels. The male English Benedictine congregation founded a cloister of nuns which would be subject to their administrative and spiritual jurisdiction at Cambrai in 1623. Letitia (Mary) Tredway, with the assistance of the English secular clergy, located an Augustinian convent in Paris in 1634. The Canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre were revived in 1642 by Susan (Mary of the Conception) Hawley. In addition to these revived orders, 1619 had seen English members of the reformed Carmelites establish themselves in Antwerp. With the exception of the Dominicans who were refounded in 1661, the remaining seventeenth-century foundations were all offshoots from the cloisters established during the first half of the century.

Appendix 1 lists the location and date of establishment for each order's communities throughout the seventeenth century. Translated into a graph (Fig. 1), foundations peaked in the 1620s, dipped during the 1630s, rose again in the 1640s, then levelled in the 1650s and 1660s, declining into the 1670s. These English figures very

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19 *Chronicle of St. Monica's*, vol. 2, p. 68.
20 They also sent a group of nuns to Dublin in c.1625 in an effort to establish a house there. The Brussels Benedictines who were experiencing some divisions within their community, allowed a group of dissenting nuns to found a house at Ghent in 1624.
21 The Brussels cloister was administratively subject to the ordinary, & largely under Jesuit spiritual supervision.
22 Women usually changed their name upon accepting the religious habit at their clothing ceremony. It is not clear whether they chose their new name themselves, or whether it was imposed upon them by superiors. Often women's baptismal names would form part of their new form of address, but some nuns took on entirely different names. In monastic records, nuns were called mainly by their religious name. To avoid confusion I will refer to nuns by both names wherever they have been given: e.g., Letitia (Mary) Tredway was baptised 'Letitia' & clothed 'Mary'. However, when I refer frequently to a nun I will abbreviate the name after 1st citation to the one by which she was commonly known: e.g., Letitia (Mary) Tredway was called Mary by both her contemporaries & subsequent scholars, but Susan (Mary of the Conception) Hawley was known as Susan. When dealing with less familiar figures, I will cite their (shorter) baptismal names. Wherever one name only is given, I have been unable to discover the religious/baptismal name: e.g., some nuns, like Jeronima Waldegrave, only ever appear in registers under their religious names.
23 I have only included English contemplative foundations which survived into the 18th century in this table. It does not include filiations to England & Ireland which took place in the 1630s & after the Restoration. See Appendix 2 for the establishment of I.B.V.M. communities. I have not listed them here
roughly mirror a similar trend throughout Europe where the post-Tridentine reformation of Catholicism saw new religious orders and institutions for women mushroom, particularly in France, Spain and Italy. However, the English foundation movement reflected fluctuating patterns of optimism and pessimism among Catholics concerning the future of the faith in England more than it embodied the spirit of counter-reform. The convents were a vital element of English Catholics' efforts to preserve their religious practices and institutions, so foundation trends can therefore largely be attributed to the political situation in England. None the less, the cloisters were located in France and the Low Countries and they were subject accordingly to local political and economic pressures. Furthermore, as Catholic institutions, the convents were influenced by ecclesiastical procedures governing the establishment and growth of monastic houses.

Given the importance of the English political situation, slow growth of women's religious houses during the early years of the 1600s was most likely a consequence of the negative impact of the gunpowder plot. Expansion of English convents abroad between 1610 and 1629 attested to the confidence of Catholics, and less stringent application of the recusancy laws under the Stuart regime. But given the relative toleration of the 1630s, the trough in foundations of new convents for that period was more likely attributable to because they attracted & accepted Continental postulants, & I am concerned primarily with the specifically English cloisters. I have included the Ypres Benedictines which became exclusively Irish after 1684, because they figured prominently in the affairs of the Continental religious orders.

wars and plague on the Continent than a consequence of affairs in England. For example, in 1637 the Franciscans determined to move from Brussels to Nieuport because an outbreak of plague in 1634-35 had deterred any postulants from presenting themselves.25 The emergence of four new cloisters during the 1640s can be explained as the combination of over-crowding and straightened finances because of the wars in England and Flanders. The large numbers of nuns professed during the boom of the 1620s had led to inadequate accommodation in many houses at a time when income from England had all but ceased. Apart from the Sepulchrine foundation in 1642, the other three cloisters were all filiations deemed necessary to relieve the crippling financial burden experienced by the mother-houses of Gravelines, Antwerp and Cambrai.26 Cloisters of the 1650s were founded largely for the same circumstances. Founders of these new houses either obtained an endowment from a wealthy patron, or they received a pension from their original convent until they managed to secure independent means. Yet, although beneficial to the former community, many filiations simply replicated the poverty they had sought to eliminate. For example, the Benedictine foundation of Boulogne-Pontoise, which occurred in 1652 to relieve the Ghent cloister, constantly faced financial ruin.27

The story of the Franciscans of Brussels-Nieuport-Bruges graphically illustrates poverty spawning filiations. After moving in 1637 to Nieuport from Brussels to escape the high cost of living and the impact of the plague, in 1658 they were forced to abandon their monastery. Nieuport's unhealthy climate, the economic effects of the Civil War in England, and the protracted war between France and Spain brought the house to the brink of total collapse: no novices presented themselves, funds from families in England dried up, prices soared, and Nieuport itself was often threatened by the warring Spanish and French. Finally, the destruction by soldiers of the cloister's farm made their position untenable, hence the 1658 dissolution. Sickly nuns returned to their families in England; part of the community was sent into France to set up a filiation, and the remaining nuns rented a house in Bruges until the they could accrue enough money to buy a new convent there.28

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26 The houses established were the Rouen Poor Clares (1644), the Lierre Carmelites (1648) & the Paris Benedictines (1650).

27 See ch. 4 for a discussion of the Boulogne-Pontoise Benedictine's endowment & subsequent poverty.

28 The filiation to Paris was forced to change its 'rule' in 1661 by the archbishop who wanted the nuns under his jurisdiction, rather than the authority of the English Franciscan Province. They took the 'rule' of the Immaculate Conception which designated a royal blue mantle as part of their habit, & thus became known as the 'Blue Nuns'. Poor Clare Convent, Franciscan MS 'Annals', ff. 25-26, 31, 35-43; Richard Trappes-Lomax (ed.), *The English Franciscan Nuns, 1619-1821 and the Friars Minor of the Same Province 1618-1761*, [CRS, 24], London, 1925, (hereafter *English Franciscan Nuns*), pp. 6-7, 22, 35; Joseph Gillow & Richard Trappes-Lomax (eds.), *The Diary of the 'Blue Nuns' or Order of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady, at Paris, 1658-1810*, [CRS, 8], London, 1910 (hereafter *Diary of the 'Blue Nuns'*) , pp. 1-13.
By the 1660s, foundations of new convents were made for less desperate reasons. Indeed two of the three cloisters established were a consequence of rising optimism in the face of the Restoration. The Dominican nuns of Vilvorde were established in 1661 largely through the efforts of Fr. Philip (Thomas) Howard (later Cardinal Howard) who was prominent at the Court of Charles II, becoming Grand Almoner to Catherine of Braganza. The Ghent Benedictine filiation to Dunkirk in 1662 was advertised by the nuns as a 'royal foundation', although Charles II denied all such claims. Subsequently, there was a decline in new foundations which lasted during the 1670s and 1680s and this appears to reflect the Continental trend. However, in reality, English political affairs continued to govern events. The 1670s were a period of increasing tension as a result of the anti-Catholicism which erupted in the Popish Plot of 1678, whereas the 1680s were a time of renewed optimism in anticipation of the accession of James II. There were no new contemplative houses established on the Continent in the 1680s because the English cloisters were busy sending filiations to England and Ireland in preparation for their expected return under the Catholic king. The despair engendered by the events of 1688 was reflected by the absence of new houses from the 1690s into the eighteenth century.

Overall recruitment to the houses included in my statistical analysis (Fig. 2) largely confirms this trend, while conforming more closely to the English political situation. The 1620s marked the highpoint for both foundations of cloisters and the number of nuns professed. Significantly the number of professions dropped dramatically during the 1630s and 1640s, reflecting the grave difficulty of receiving women and, more importantly, obtaining their dowry money during the political turmoil. Professions began to increase again in the 1650s, peaking in the 1660s and 1680s. The final decade of the century saw a return to Civil War figures, and in the 1700s this decline continued.

29 The Ypres Benedictine house was a slightly different case. It was founded in 1665 upon the request of the Bishop of Ypres who promised to endow it from his own purse. Writing of the event, Abbess Mary (Anne) Neville of Pontoise, attributed the bishop's generosity to his high esteem for one of the Ghent Benedictine nuns, Marina Beaumont. Beaumont was fluent in French & had an excellent command of Latin, & had so impressed the prelate that he wanted her to head a cloister in his diocese. Unfortunately, his promise of liberal wealth for the house never eventuated & this community was plagued by constant financial woes. See 'Abbess Neville's Annals', pp. 42-46.
30 See ch. 5 for a discussion of the filiations in England & Ireland.
31 Fig. 2 provides information for all 10 houses in the statistical analysis (Brussels Benedictines, Louvain Augustinians, Gravelines Poor Claras, Brussels-Nieuport-Bruges Franciscans, Cambrai Benedictines, Ghent Benedictines, Bruges Augustinians, Liège Sepulchrines, Boulogne-Pontoise Benedictines, & Paris 'Blue Nuns'), & the 1,094 nuns (choir, lay & white) professed between 1590 & 1710.
32 This pattern is remarkably similar to the picture of women entering French teaching congregations for the same period described by Elizabeth Rapley. Unfortunately, Rapley did not provide an overall analysis of professions, but her graph illustrating recruitment to the novitiate peaks almost in tandem with English professions. See 'Appendix' in Rapley, The Dévotes, pp. 197-201.
Seventeenth-century convent recruitment provides a useful framework for the study of religious motivation among both the nuns and the English Catholics as a whole. The cloisters were begun by English people and were specifically for English nuns. For this reason they should be considered predominantly as part of the post-Reformation English Catholic tradition, rather than as part of Continental religious trends. None the less, because the houses were located in France and the Spanish Netherlands, they were subject to national and local religious policies in these territories. Indeed by compartmentalising the picture, looking at individual cloisters and separating choir nuns from lay sisters, slightly different patterns emerge which point to a more complex series of factors than simply events in England influencing recruitment.

ii. Choir Nuns, Lay Sisters and Factors Affecting Recruitment

Figs. 3.i and 3.ii compare professions of choir nuns with those of lay sisters. The recruitment pattern for choir nuns mirrors the trend illustrated in fig. 2, largely because

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33 Fig. 3 is based upon data from a smaller sample of houses (Louvain Augustinians, Brussels-Nieuport-Bruges Franciscans, Cambrai Benedictines, Bruges Augustinians, Liège Sepulchrines, Boulogne-Pontoise Benedictines, & Paris 'Blue Nuns'). Unfortunately the records for the Gravelines Poor Clares & the Brussels Benedictines have not differentiated between lay sisters & choir nuns; the Ghent Benedictines do not have a complete set of data for the century. Nb. the significant decrease in professions of choir nuns for the 1620s because of the exclusion of Gravelines.
there were considerably more nuns professed than lay sisters. Choir nuns were responsible for singing the canonical hours, and were required to provide a dowry upon
their religious profession. Lay sisters were accepted for a meagre dowry on the understanding that they would undertake the manual labour of the household. Admission of lay sisters was tied to the number of choir nuns in the cloister. For example, in the Cambrai 'constitutions', the nuns were advised not to take any lay sisters without adequate provision. Richard White, the confessor of St. Monica's in Louvain was more explicit, arguing that lay sisters consumed more of the convent's resources: 'as being a greater charge for cloaths, eating & drinking more by reason of their labour, & breeding, & occasioning more work, by reason they have much more to wash then an equal number of Nuns'. He suggested that an excess of lay sisters would lead to sloth and disruption, warning nuns to 'be careful not to receive more sisters then are necessary for the Convents service: who otherwise will undoe each other with idlenes; gossipp & prate away their time, medle with the Monasteries affayres & eat up your temporal means like a consumption', He accordingly advised a ratio of one lay sister to every five choir nuns. With the exception of the Franciscans, cloisters averaged a ratio of one fifth to one quarter of lay sisters to choir nuns. The correlation between numbers of choir and lay sisters generated a different recruitment pattern for the latter. Overall the number of lay sisters peaked during the decade following a high intake of choir nuns. This suggests that nuns concurred with the opinion of White and adjusted their intake of lay sisters in accordance with the size of the community as a whole.

The anomalous situation among the Franciscans of Brussels-Nieuport-Bruges where the mean proportion of lay sisters was only sixteen per cent is worth examining. The best explanation for this figure appears to lie in the extreme poverty experienced by this congregation in both Brussels and Nieuport. Although the community had some of the strongest recruitment figures for choir nuns during the 1640s, it obviously avoided accepting women with inadequate dowries. Once the nuns were established in Bruges the ratio expanded, reaching an extraordinary thirty-three per cent of lay sisters in the 1690s and 1700s. This phenomenal increase can be explained principally by greater prosperity, but also by the fact that in the 1660s members of the convent were ageing and less able to conduct some of the heavier tasks they had carried out during the lean years. Indeed during the Franciscan provincial's visit of 1664 'it was ordained, that more Lay Strs - for the service of the Community should in the future be received'. The data shows that at times of financial crisis, lay sisters were sacrificed, and the choir nuns

34 Stanbrook Abbey, Cambrai MS 'Constitutions compiled for the better observation of the holie Rule of our most glorious Fa: and Patriarch S. Bennet', 1631, f. 85.
35 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's Ms Qu 2, [Richard White (alias Johnson)], 'Instructions for a Religious Superior Penned & presented to the Rd Mother N:N upon the day she was installed Prioress of St. Monicas in Lovaine', 1668, ff. 88-89.
36 Established in 1621, the Brussels Franciscans professed 37 choir nuns during the next decade. Numbers declined to 12 during the 1630s, but rose to 20 between 1641 & 1650. In the same period (1621-1650) only 8 lay sisters were professed.
37 Poor Clare Convent, Franciscan MS 'Annals', f. 44.
forced to carry out more of the mundane household tasks than they would otherwise be expected to undertake. There is evidence that a similar regime was in place in the Flemish cloister of St. Ursula's during the 1590s and early 1600s. The house was impoverished and survived principally through the intake of English postulants. Only two lay sisters were professed in the 1590s, in contrast to twenty-one choir nuns. The gentlewomen of the choir were engaged in many of the household drudgery tasks, such as washing, weeding and sweeping. Furthermore, because of the advanced age of most of the Flemish sisters, the English also tended their cells, making their beds and cleaning the rooms.38 Once St. Monica's was on a reasonably firm footing, the intake of lay sisters rose.

Differing rates of choir nun professions among individual convents are more difficult to explain. All English cloisters were affected adversely by the civil war in their homeland; local factors, both within the cloister itself as well as economic and political circumstances in the region where it was situated, generally accounted for variations. Local wars provide a clear example of the way in which individual cloisters could suffer adversity. The Nieuport Franciscans were not the only monastery to lose their livelihood during the Thirty Years War. The Anglo-Flemish Carmelite cloister at Bois-le-Duc was forced to disband and the nuns join houses in Cologne and Alost when the Dutch captured the town in 1632.39 The Cambrai Benedictines, located in the disputed region of Artois, suffered much during the protracted war between the French and the Spanish. Not only were they in the midst of an active war zone, but the military disturbances impacted upon the value of the currency, rendering food and fuel prohibitively expensive for the nuns. Their situation was made worse by the fact that all the funds of their cloister had been invested in England in royalist hands. The victory of Parliament over Charles I left the nuns virtually bankrupt.40 Thus recruitment was pitifully low on both accounts. In the 1650s and 1660s, when houses in other regions were beginning to increase their numbers, Cambrai's profession of choir nuns slumped to its lowest point in the century.41

The local wars inadvertently led to contingent disasters for some communities, like the Gravelines Poor Clares. Before experiencing the vicissitudes of warfare, the cloister survived a fire which destroyed the refectory, dormitories, granaries and novitiate

38 Chronicle of St. Monica's, vol. 1, pp. 35-36.
39 Guilday, Catholic Refugees, pp. 365-67. This cloister is not included in my study because it was founded for English & Flemish women in 1624, & did not survive the 17th century.
40 In a Great Tradition. Tribute to Dame Laurentia McLaughlan Abbess of Stanbrook by the Benedictines of Stanbrook, London, 1956, pp. 18-19. It was in the context of this crippling poverty that the cloister sent a filiation to Paris. The nuns' financial position did not stabilise until c.1669. This was reflected by the better recruitment for the 1670s-1690s.
41 In the 1650s the house was also locked into a fierce dispute with the president of the English Benedictine congregation. But the altercation was over in 1655, so poverty appears to have been the decisive factor affecting recruitment. For a discussion of this row, see ch. 6.
of their convent in 1629. No sooner had they recovered from the extreme financial stress occasioned by rebuilding, than their town became enmeshed in the war between France and Spain which saw it fall first in 1644 to the French (who celebrated their victory with a *Te Deum* in the nuns' chapel), then returned to the Spanish in 1652, and finally back to the French in the 1659 Treaty of the Pyrenees. The greatest catastrophe occurred in 1654 when the powder arsenal in Gravelines exploded, destroying a large part of the town, including the castle, ramparts and parish church. The English Poor Clare convent was severely damaged by this blast. An account of the chaos which ensued graphically illustrated the devastation wreaked on the buildings:

The strong Gaites of our Inclosure ye Doors & windows of the house the whole Top of the Quire Carry'd off in one Clap beames & rafters with other Timber all hoysted up burst a Sunder & disjointed all the Bricks tyles & eaves of ye Gutters round the Quire & Church all about our heads & the whole House shatter'd in Pieces.  

With the assistance of grants from Louis XIV, the cloister was again rebuilt, and overall recruitment in the 1660s was restored to the levels of the early 1630s. However, data for the 1640s and 1650s shows a marked decline in professions, pointing to the devastating impact of the war which was exacerbated by the powder explosion.  

Just how badly news of misfortune could affect recruitment was evident during outbreaks of plague. Any mention of the dreaded disease and an institution would be shunned by postulants until people's memory of the contamination had dimmed. Most cloisters were affected by the pestilence at some point during the seventeenth century. The mid-1630s saw outbreaks in many parts of the Low Countries, and this contributed to the already massive odds against steady recruitment. The Augustinians in Bruges were afflicted in 1634, losing Sister Elizabeth Lovel and a scholar. Mary Trevelyan of the Ghent Benedictines died of plague during the same year. In 1635, two lay sisters at St. Monica's contracted the disease, but recovered. Mary Worthington was not so fortunate in 1636, dying soon after a lay servant of the cloister had succumbed. The Brussels Franciscans buried four of their nuns and their confessor in 1635, all of whom had acquired the fatal illness. During such outbreaks, cloisters took measures to prevent

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42 Buckfast Abbey, Boulogne-Pontoise MS 'An account of the Blowing-up and Destruction of the Town of Gravelines', f.l. None of the nuns was killed, although there had been loss of life in the town. The religious women were greatly shaken by the event: one nun who had been in the cellar drawing beer at the time of the explosion ran upstairs & upon seeing the chaos & hearing great wailing thought it was the day of judgement.

43 Overall there were 20 professions in the 1630s. This plummeted to 10 in the 1640s, & 9 in the 1650s. Figures rose to 23 professions in the 1660s.


46 *Chronicle of St. Monica's*, vol. 2, pp. 155-61.

47 *English Franciscan Nuns*, pp. 178-80. The nuns were Frances (Marie Frances) Bacon, Marie (Marie Clement) Est, Elizabeth (Elizabeth Didacus) Colwal, & Frances (Frances George) Tichborne. Frances
word of their misfortune spreading far, especially to potential recruits. For example, the nuns of St. Monica's went into a self-imposed quarantine upon the death of Mary Worthington, not writing to anyone in England.48

A bout of plague among the Poor Clares of Rouen in 1667 highlighted the recruitment-related difficulties the disease posed for English religious communities. Stringent regulations in Rouen commanded that civic authorities should be informed immediately upon the first appearance of symptoms. Plague authorities would visit the patient to diagnose the illness, and if it was indeed plague, the dwelling and all inside would be quarantined until the patient had died or recovered, and the buildings had been fumigated. Ironically the Poor Clares were struck at the moment when they were performing the forty hours devotion in gratitude for the town's deliverance from the pestilence. After the death of two children in the convent school, one of the nuns who had tended them became ill. During the children's sickness, Abbess Margaret (Margaret Ignatius) Bedingfield had agonised over whether or not to declare their affliction for fear that the house would be quarantined and its reputation would suffer. Upon the impending death of Anne (Anne Collette) Wood, the abbess was forced to inform the town's surgeon because she refused to allow one of her nuns to die without the last sacraments. As a consequence the house was sealed for two months, depriving the nuns of any contact with England, new recruits, their newly arrived confessor, and access to the sacraments.49 During the period of quarantine, many other religious communities confided in Abbess Bedingfield that they had not disclosed instances of plague in their cloisters for fear of the negative impact this would have upon the reputation of their house.50

Apart from the manifold problems arising from political instability in England and events in their local environs, English convents were also subject to the zeal of local bishops. At Trent, the Catholic Church had decreed that no cloister could accept women

(Frances Evangelist) Spurret who died 'of a burning fever' a few weeks before this string of fatalities most likely had the plague too.

50 Cloisters of women were at a greater disadvantage than male communities because nuns were unable to administer the sacraments. If Abbess Bedingfield could have provided the dying sister with the last rights without informing the authorities, she would have done so. However, as a convent of women dependent upon the clergy for sacramental support, she was forced to announce the outbreak in order to secure the sacrament for the nun. One of the priests she consulted during her days of agonising admitted to her that his 'Community has been afflicted this summer as well as yours but none knows of it, for if we should have published it our house would have been ruined, the laws are so rigorous'. The confessor advised the abbess against revealing the outbreak because it would 'disgrace her house'. Ibid., pp. 71, 79, 80, 82.
unless it had the temporal resources to support them. The Council had also placed all religious houses not governed by the general chapter of a male congregation under the jurisdiction of diocesan bishops. Many convents faced endless difficulties in obtaining permission to profess those novices they already had within the enclosure. For example, in the Bruges Augustinian cloister several women's dowries could not be secured because of the crisis in England, and the bishop steadfastly refused to sanction the final vows of novices thus affected. The flood of professions in the 1650s and 1660s was partially a consequence of the backlog accrued during the 1640s. Other communities were frustrated by individual bishop's decisions. In 1681 at St. Monica's the profession of Genevieve Sheldon, whose sister Delphina had been professed in 1678, was delayed for two years because the bishop had commanded that closely related kin could not join the same community. The final vows of several other novices also had to wait while local Church officials and the prioress argued over the issue. Eventually, with the assistance of powerful friends, St. Monica's had the decision overturned.

More dangerous to recruitment than war, disease, or over-zealous officials was internal dissension. Certain convents succumbed to infighting over the issue of spiritual direction during the early years of the foundation movement; others suffered in the latter decades of the century when Jansenism was wrenching the French Church apart. Just how devastating disunity could prove was evident in the Brussels Benedictine cloister. Unusually, the house experienced its greatest period of growth during the 1610s. Recruitment actually halved in the 1620s when other houses were booming, and fell off to only one profession for the 1630s and 1640s. While the latter decline can be explained partially by the wars, the earlier slump has to be attributed to the furore over spiritual direction. Divisions had arisen in the convent during the 1620s and 1630s.
concerning the role of the Jesuits. Disagreements between those nuns who supported the secular clergy and those who favoured the Society of Jesus split the cloister, resulting in groups of dissatisfied women separating themselves from Abbess Mary Percy and the chaplain, whose authority they refused to acknowledge. On a positive note, the dispute gave rise to the Ghent Benedictine foundation in 1624 when a group of dissident nuns set up a house under their preferred regime. However, most other exoduses were short-lived and, ultimately, unity was restored in 1636.\textsuperscript{57} Whatever the consequences of this dispute for abbatial and clerical authority, it proved disastrous to the reputation of the first post-Reformation English cloister. Numbers at Brussels never recovered; the highest intake of thirteen occurring in the 1650s, after which only twenty-three women made their vows for the next half century.

Equally damaging to the reputation of a cloister was evidence of incompetence. The Paris Augustinian community found itself deep in debt in the 1660s after engaging the services of an unscrupulous financial agent, François Petit. Petit had purchased property on behalf of the convent using fictitious rents. Although the nuns protested their ignorance of his dealings, when the news of the scandal and debt filtered through to England, the affair had a devastating impact on recruitment. Even if the nuns had not been guilty of collaborating in the dishonest business transactions, there was grave concern about their competence in managing their finances. After professing twenty women between 1656 and 1665, during the next ten years there were only six new nuns. This prolonged decline can be attributed in part to the general fall off of the 1670s. However, significantly, upon public announcement of the affair in 1666, there were no professions in 1666 or 1667, and only one in 1668.\textsuperscript{58}

Numbers of women joining the English religious communities were thus dependent upon a complex combination of external factors over which the nuns had little influence, coupled with internal issues which were (at least in theory) more within their control. However, perhaps the most essential feature of recruitment was the network of family, friends and clergy who acted as procurators in England. If convents were to be assured of the regular arrival of postulants, they had to establish and maintain clusters of these formal and informal assistants. Usually this network operated to the benefit of a cloister. Groupings of family members within specific houses attest to the success of enlisting kin as informal agents. For example, Mary & Helen Copley, professed at St. Monica’s in 1612, were the nieces of Prioress Margaret Clement. In 1624, their cousin Elizabeth (Clare) Copley made her final vows in the cloister.\textsuperscript{59} Letters from Thomas Worthington and Jane Plumpton Worthington to their four daughters at Louvain during

\textsuperscript{57} For a discussion of this dispute, see ch. 6.
\textsuperscript{59} Chronicle of St. Monica’s, vol. 1, pp. 87-92, 111-16, 121, 261-63.
the 1690s referred to relatives who were keen to settle their daughters in the house. Mary (Mary Genevieve) Worthington, the eldest sister, was procuratrice at the time, so family business was directed through her. These family networks were especially important during hard times.

Formally each house was allied with priests working in England. Recruitment for the Paris Augustinians was in the hands of the English secular clergy. Organised through the network of local vicariates and archdeaconries, the cloister's register reveals that many choir nuns came from families closely associated with leaders of the English secular clerics. Individual stories suggest that the clergy were often influential in choosing which religious order women would adopt, often sending postulants to their associated houses. Mary Thoresby, professed a lay sister in Louvain in 1619, had wanted to join Mary Ward's Institute. However, the priest accompanying her to the Low Countries took her to the Augustinian house and she finally agreed to enter there so long as she did not have to labour too hard. The four Clopton sisters who made their final vows at St. Monica's in 1622 had consulted the priests who serviced their recusant household as to which order to join, and Louvain 'was judged and thought the fittest for them'. Occasionally the nuns were dissatisfied with their clerical assistants. In 1675, the abbess and discreets of the 'Blue Nuns' in Paris withdrew from their association with the Society of Jesus. The nuns complained that the Jesuits 'did not take any Conserne in advancing the enteresse [ie. interests] of the hous'. Thus, clerical assistance could operate to the disadvantage as well as to the promotion of a convent.

The way in which this clerical and lay recruitment network operated from within England itself came to have the greatest impact upon recruitment to the convents as the seventeenth century progressed. By 1620, the majority of nuns were recruited from among Catholics in England, rather than within the exiled community in the Low Countries. In the next section I will explore the regional distribution of convent recruitment to assess which counties' daughters figured most prominently in English monasticism.

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60 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS R 16/2, Thomas & Jane Worthington to Mary & Dorothy Worthington, c. 1691, f. 1.
63 Ibid., p. 246. The sisters were Mary Clopton, Joyce (Barbara) Clopton, Jane (Lidwine) Clopton & Catherine Clopton. Joyce & Jane later joined the 1629 filiation to Bruges.
64 Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', p. 25.
Fig. 4 represents the regional distribution of women professed in the English convents. Of the total 1,109 nuns in the study, there was no clear evidence of county of origin for 316 (28.49%), and I have left these unknown values out of my analysis. Thus, the data relates to 793 nuns. There were also women who had been raised by exiled Catholic parents on the Continent. Wherever possible these women have been listed under their English region, rather than in the Low Countries category because I want to compare the geographic background of nuns with existing regional distributions of English Catholics. Certain counties were notable for their recusant populations and I was intrigued to learn whether these areas produced more religious vocations than others.

To determine the distribution of English Catholics in the seventeenth century, I have relied principally on John Bossy's calculations for the periods 1641-42 and 1715-20. Although Bossy's figures have been criticised, they show the spread of Catholic households throughout the country. Subsequent studies which have focused on smaller geographic regions did not provide the global picture necessary for comparison with convent recruitment. Therefore, although I am aware of the shortcomings of Bossy's analysis, collating the data from individual studies has not been possible. Given my own relatively small sample of 793 nuns, I intend this analysis to be considered as a preliminary investigation. For a clearer view of female monastic recruitment in the seventeenth century, I would argue that all of the cloisters need to be taken into account.

Overall recruitment for the seventeenth century confirms the importance of the north of England in maintaining the Catholic tradition. The most obvious issues raised by these figures relate to relatively low recruitment figures for counties other than Lancashire and Yorkshire. Why did regions like Northumberland, Durham, Herefordshire, Monmouth, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Leicestershire, Oxfordshire, Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Sussex generate such low numbers of nuns in proportion to their estimated Catholic population? In the earlier sample of 1641-42, Bossy's figures suggested that all of these counties contained over six per cent of

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65 John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community, 1570-1850*, London, 1975; see ch. 5 for a general discussion of distribution. Regional figures are graphically represented in Maps 1 & 2 (pp. 404-7).


67 Overall figures for these 2 counties were 13.4% from Lancashire & 11.2% from Yorkshire. Lancashire produced just under 20% of all nuns professed in the 1630s; continuing with between 10% & 20% in the 1640s, 1660s, 1690s & 1700s; but over 20% in the 1670s & 1680s (a staggering 28.4% for the 1680s). Yorkshire's recruitment was high (between 10% & 20%) in the 1610s-1630s, 1670s & 1690s, rocketing to over 23% in the 1700s.
Fig. 4. Regional Distribution of Nuns Professed, 1590-1710
Catholic households; some had greater than eleven or twenty per cent. Yet none of these areas produced more than four per cent of vocations. Furthermore, even in Lancashire, which admittedly presented extremely high recruitment, the proportion of nuns (13.4 per cent) was well below the population estimate of a fifth of all households or land in Catholic hands. And why did Kent and Suffolk send a higher percentage of daughters across the channel, than the more populous Catholic counties?

The sample is small and that might account for the extremely low figures. However, one would assume that the percentage of daughters sent to convents from each county would remain roughly the same. It is possible that Bossy's figures include a substantial proportion of plebeian Catholics. A survey of the social status of nuns reveals that women religious were drawn overwhelmingly from the social rank of gentry and above. Indeed B.G. Blackwood has revealed that although ninety-five per cent of Lancashire Catholics were plebeian between the 1660s and 1680s, fifty-eight per cent of Lancashire women entering convents were daughters of the gentry, and only twenty-seven per cent were classified as plebeian. On the other hand, Bossy's distribution was surely biased in favour the gentry population because the 1715-20 figures in particular were calculated on the basis of property held in Catholic hands. Furthermore, Bossy argued that in the seventeenth century English Catholicism gravitated towards gentry circles and control. So the anomaly between his survey of Catholic distribution and my data for geographic origin of nuns remains.

The important role of priests in recruitment may hold the answer to the disparity between cloisters and counties. Uneven distribution of clergy between north and south has been cited regularly as one of the principal limitations of the regular and secular missions to England. The figures provided by Bossy for the eve of the Civil War cast considerable light upon the issue of nuns' regional distribution. Dividing the country into two geographic regions: the south and the Midlands, and the North and the West

68 I am using this earlier figure as the bench-mark because it falls just after the period of greatest recruitment to the cloisters. For many of these counties the number remained as high for the latter sample; others declined but an average of the two figures still suggests that these counties were grossly under-represented in the cloisters.

69 B.G. Blackwood has defined 'plebeian' Catholics as 'those laymen who were not gentry', while the 'gentry' were 'all those consistently described as baronets, knights, esquires and gentlemen in official documents and recognized as such by their contemporaries'. Blackwood argued that populous Catholic counties, like Lancashire, had large numbers of plebeian Catholics. See Blackwood, 'Plebeian Catholics in Later Stuart Lancashire', pp. 154-55, 159-61; id., 'Plebeian Catholics in the 1640s and 1650s', pp. 43, 49.

70 See Table 3i. in Appendix 3.


72 Blackwood agrees largely with Bossy regarding seigneurial control of Catholicism, but points out that numerically the plebeians were dominant in all counties. Ibid., p. 173.

(including Wales), Bossy reported that there were 140 Jesuits and about 450 secular clerics in 1641-42. Of the Jesuits, sixty were in the North and West (thirty in the North, and twenty-eight in Wales and the West), and eighty were working in the South and Midlands (excluding London which tended to be anomalous, so is usually left out of calculations). In the same period, there were approximately 130-140 secular missionaries in the North and West (about seventy in the North and sixty in Wales and the West); and around 200 in the Midlands and the South. As the century progressed, this imbalance between North and South was redressed with the ratio becoming fifty-four to forty-five in favour of the North by 1700. However, there was also a marked decline in priestly numbers in Wales and the West. In 1672, Jesuit numbers in this region had slipped to seventeen. A century later, there were no more than sixteen missionaries from the Society of Jesus, and about eleven secular priests.

Priestly distribution must account partially for many of the imbalances between Catholic populations and recruitment of nuns, particularly the incredible disparity with respect to Monmouth which provided only 1.4 per cent of nuns despite Catholic ownership of over twenty per cent of households and property. If there were few priests to advertise the cloisters, there would have been even less who could arrange the passage of women to the Low Countries. Recruitment required a network of priests and lay patrons across the country, therefore families in remote areas (in terms of missionary numbers) would have had less opportunity to make contact with a convent. Women living in the four northernmost counties of England faced similar difficulties to those in Wales and the West. In the 1630s it was noted that there was a paltry total of thirty-three priests working in the combined area of Northumberland, Durham, Cumberland and Westmoreland. It is hardly surprising that these four counties, which boasted Catholic populations of eleven to twenty per cent or more, could muster only 5.6 per cent of nuns. Indeed this recruitment figure is exceptionally good, given the pitiful shortage of priests in the area.

The northernmost counties' relative success in generating vocations points to another way in which the missionary effort impacted upon recruitment. There is little doubt regarding Bossy's assertion that during the seventeenth century the mission was gentrified. Increasingly from the 1620s onwards, priestly vocations came from the gentry; and the clergy returning to England gravitated towards their own social strata because gentry households represented security and patronage. This meant that those

74 Bossy, Catholic Community, pp. 225-27, 419. Bossy does not give actual figures for the other regular clergy, but mentions that the distribution of the Benedictine missionaries virtually mirrored that of the Jesuits. Ibid., p. 226.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid., p. 227. There were 16 seculars, 15 regulars & 2 Scots friars.
77 Blackwood noted that from 1603 to 1659, 52% of Lancashire priests were of gentry stock & 33% were from plebeian backgrounds. However, between 1660 & 1714 Lancashire clerics were drawn almost
households with the benefit of a resident cleric who was in touch with a convent network were able to act as centres for recruitment to that cloister. For example, the Southcott family of Bulmer on the border of Essex and Suffolk had the Jesuit, Henry Floyd, as their chaplain from about 1597 to 1601, and then from about 1610 to 1625. Two years after his arrival in the household, the eldest daughter, Elizabeth Southcott, went overseas to the newly established Benedictine cloister in Brussels. It is likely that Floyd had played a role in arranging her vocation because Brussels had been founded with the assistance of the Jesuits. He certainly influenced the sons of neighbouring Catholics to go to school at St. Omers, and subsequently enter the Society of Jesus. The State Papers confirm that he consistently acted as procurator for Jesuit associated colleges and cloisters throughout his career. In 1633–34 he reportedly converted young boys and sent them to St. Omers, and conveyed the daughters of Henry Yaxley of Suffolk to cloisters abroad.

The influence of chaplains, like Henry Floyd, who were obviously excellent ambassadors for the cloistered religious life, could extend beyond the immediate household and into kinship and local community networks. Many of Elizabeth Southcott’s kin entered the religious life during the first decades of the seventeenth century. Mary Welch, a cousin, was professed at St. Ursula’s in 1599. Elizabeth (Clare) and Margaret Curzon, her cousins, made their vows at Brussels in 1605 and 1612 respectively. Other cousins, Appolonia and Jeronima Waldegrave, entered her own cloister and the Ghent Benedictine house in the 1620s. In 1627, Elizabeth’s niece, Mary Southcott, made her vows at Ghent, along with her cousin, Margaret Roper. There were doubtless many other cousins and distant kin whose vocations were channeled to equally from gentry & plebeian backgrounds, although sons of the gentry gravitated towards ordination among the regular clergy while plebeians more often became secular priests. It is not clear whether the plebeian priests returned to tend to the spiritual needs of their social group. Although most did not achieve prominence as martyrs, leading administrators or royal servants, a number of them obtained academic posts in the English theological colleges on the Continent. This suggests that for many the priesthood was accepted as a means of bettering one’s career, & thus precluded returning to rural Lancashire to service the needs of plebeian Catholics. Blackwood, ‘Plebeian Catholics in the 1640s and 1650s’, p. 56; id., ‘Plebeian Catholics in Later Stuart Lancashire’, pp. 171–73.

78 In the interim years he had been imprisoned at Newgate, then banished from England with other priests upon the accession of James I in 1603. The Southcott’s principal house was at Witham in Essex, but they lived at Bulmer until the 1620s.


the Low Countries via this vast family network. Throughout convent registers the same family names reappear in successive generations. The diarist Nicholas Blundell had great-aunts, aunts, sisters and cousins in the Poor Clare cloisters at Gravelines and Rouen, the Benedictine house at Ghent, and St. Monica's in Louvain. The sheer volume of Blundells alone in the English monasteries explains the prominence of specific counties. In regions like Lancashire and Yorkshire where there was a firm monastic tradition in large Catholic families, the cloisters were consistently sent one or two daughters from each generation. Access to priests was essential to establish the initial link with the Continent, but after one or two daughters had made the journey, the process could be conducted by family members. This family tradition appears to be the difference between Lancashire, Yorkshire, Suffolk and Kent, and those Catholic counties which did not subscribe so readily to the monastic life for their daughters.

Another factor which might well have contributed to certain counties' anomalous contribution of daughters to the religious life was their geographic convenience for dispatching women across the Channel. Suffolk, Essex, Kent and Hampshire, all with access to the Channel ports, provided a significantly higher proportion of nuns than other counties more renowned for their Catholic gentry. For example, Oxfordshire, with a Catholic population of approximately six to ten per cent, accounted for 3.8 per cent of nuns. This was a very respectable figure. None the less, Essex produced exactly the same number of vocations with less than five per cent of Catholics. There is an element of conjecture in this explanation because there is no archival evidence to suggest that proximity to the Channel was important. However, all other possibilities considered, the disparity between these seaboard counties and other more populous areas point explanation partially towards easy access to the means of transport.

In addition to the English and Welsh women professed in the English religious communities, there were also Scottish, Irish, French and Netherlander nuns. However, these groups formed an insignificant number within the overall picture. Before looking specifically at the bias against local French and Flemish recruits, I will attempt to make sense of the exclusion of co-religionists to the North and West of the English Catholic

82 The members of the Blundell family of Crosby at Gravelines were Margaret (Margaret Clare) Blundell, professed 1639; Anne (Clare Collette) Blundell, professed 1640; Alice (Louisa Clare) Blundell, professed 1665; Mary (Mary Bonaventure) Blundell, professed 1671; Mary (Mary Bonaventure) Blundell, professed 1696; Margaret (Collette Clare) Blundell, professed 1693; Anne (Anne Mary Joseph) Blundell, professed 1702. At Rouen, there were Jane (Agnes of the Holy Cross) Blundell, professed 1660; Clare Francis Blundell, professed c.1675; Margaret (Clare Margaret) Blundell, professed 1662. Among the Benedictines at Ghent were Winifrid Blundell & Frances Blundell, professed c.1690s; Mary Blundell, professed c.1707 (Nicholas's mother). Margaret (Winifrid) Blundell had been professed an Augustinian canoness at Louvain in 1615. There were also members of the Blundells of Ince in these cloisters, as well as other kin. See 'Poor Clare Registers', pp. 71-72, 87, 93-94, 112-13, 116, 121, 187; Ann M.C. Foster, 'The Chronicles of the English Poor Clares of Rouen - 2', RH, 18, 1986, pp. 168-69; [Nicholas Blundell], The Great Diurnal of Nicholas Blundell of Little Crosby, Lancashire, J.J. Bagley (ed.), vol. 1, Chester, n.d., pp. 105-8, 157-60; vol. 2, xii-xiii; Chronicle of St. Monica's, vol. 1, pp. 138-42, 153-54; vol. 2, p. 192.
community. Scotland produced less than one per cent of nuns. It seems that problems similar to those faced by northern English counties, such as poor priestly distribution and inaccessibility, were the principal factors limiting Scottish recruitment. The Irish representation was also extremely low being only 2.3 per cent (and most of these women were daughters of Irish peers). This remarkably poor showing can be attributed to a separate Irish Catholic community which founded its own religious houses.\textsuperscript{83} Also there were several groups of Irish nuns who managed to maintain cloisters in their homeland.\textsuperscript{84} Although Irish nuns did enter English convents, there was a degree of antipathy between them and the English. In 1629 the Irish nuns professed at Gravelines left to set up a community of their own in Dublin.\textsuperscript{85} Then in the 1680s the Ypres Benedictine cloister, which had never been successful either numerically or financially, became exclusively Irish amidst a dispute between the Irish sisters and the English nuns sent to help them from the Paris Benedictine house. Although the nuns were generally careful to avoid reporting dissension, during the Ypres affair disgruntled English nuns who felt they had been deceived by Abbess Beaumont were less than complimentary about her and her Irish confederates.\textsuperscript{86} Ultimately the English were concerned with the restoration of the faith in England; for them, Ireland was not an important concern. In the face of this disinterest, Irish nuns were drawn towards houses of their own nation.

\textit{iv. National Character}

The paucity of Scottish and Irish nuns was mirrored by numbers of Continental women in the English cloisters. Significantly, the convents relied almost entirely upon those of their own nationality to fill their institutions. Of the 1,109 nuns in the ten houses in my sample, ninety per cent were English; locally recruited women formed a mere three per cent of convent populations.\textsuperscript{87} The very limited pool from which convents drew novices was not accidental. The 'constitutions' of some houses articulated their intention to profess English women only. When in 1633 Mary Tredway secured the approbation of Louis XIII to found the Paris Augustinian convent, it was stipulated that the cloister

\textsuperscript{83} There is evidence of Irish cloisters in Lisbon. See Guilday, \textit{Catholic Refugees}, p. 30.

\textsuperscript{84} Apart from the Ypres Benedictine's foundation in Dublin, there were Poor Clares. A group of Poor Clares had also founded houses in Galway. See Basil Whelan, \textit{Historic English Convents of To-Day. The Story of the English Cloisters in France and Flanders in Penal Times}, London, 1936, pp. 54, 57-9, 66, 70.

\textsuperscript{85} In 1625, the Irish initially went to found a house in Dunkirk, but they subsequently decided to return to their homeland.


\textsuperscript{87} English women accounted for 90%; recruits from France & the Spanish Netherlands formed 3%; Irish, Scottish & Welsh numbered 2.9%; & there were 4.1% of unknown nationality.
would accept English subjects only. A Frenchwoman Anne Veauquet, who sought entry to the 'Blue Nuns', was twice refused by the abbess and council before finally taking the veil in 1668. The nuns were reluctant to admit her because she would be the only foreigner in the exclusively English cloister, and they feared she might regret not joining a house of her own country.

The decidedly nationalistic outlook of the English cloisters encapsulates the spirit within which the monasteries were founded and maintained throughout the seventeenth century. Certain that they would return to their homeland, the nuns were reluctant to accept foreign nuns. Although it is difficult to gauge the policies of French and Spanish convents, the presence of English women in Continental cloisters in the late sixteenth and into the seventeenth century suggests that they were more flexible when it came to accepting foreign women. Margaret Clement, English prioress of the Flemish house in Louvain, had 'many sorts of nations under her governement as, Duch, french, Inglish, spayneish, garmons [ie. Germans], all in one house'. The cosmopolitan nature of institutions such as this was possibly a feature of the Spanish Netherlands. However, many English cloisters were not willing to extend similar hospitality to their former hosts. Lady Mary Roper Lovel was so incensed by the infiltration of several Flemish women into the Carmelite community she had founded at Antwerp that, in 1624, the Flemish and their English supporters removed themselves to Bois-le-Duc. Evidence of this strident nationalism on the part of the nuns confirms that they saw themselves primarily as members of the English Catholic community, and only secondly as members of the universal Catholic Church. Within their enclosures they maintained scrupulous records of the sufferings of missionary priests and their kin for the faith, and they directed all their actions towards its restoration in their homeland. The contemplative cloisters set their sights on preserving the monastic tradition for English Catholics, and as a consequence, there was no place for outsiders who had little understanding of the English experience.

This was where the contemplative nuns differed markedly from Mary Ward's I.B.V.M. During the heady years of the first Institute, Mary Ward's goals encompassed areas of need across the Continent, and this comprehensive vision was preserved in the I.B.V.M.'s reincarnation in the 1630s. Although Ward focused her attention on

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88 This restriction was revised by Louis XIV in 1655, but Allison reports that between 1634 & 1700, there were only three French names in the register of professions. Whelan, *Historic English Convents*, pp. 89-90; Allison, 'English Augustinian Convent', pp. 480-81.

89 Indeed Anne Veauquet later left the house & moved to Rouen. It is not clear why she wanted to join an English community, although she had previously boarded with the 'Blue Nuns', so it is possible that familiarity with the cloister influenced her choice. *Diary of the 'Blue Nuns'* , pp. 19, 428.

90 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS Q 29, [Elizabeth Shirley], 'The Lyfe of Our Moste Reverent Mother Margrit Clement', f. 63.

missionary work in her homeland, the scope of her organisation moved beyond the Spanish Netherlands into the territory of the Empire and beyond. The I.B.V.M. opened convents and provided free education for poor children in several German and Italian towns and cities. In the process, English women were joined in large numbers by like-minded locals. The speed at which the Institute grew necessitated recruitment from all areas, and they were welcomed by Ward and the English sisters. Even when Mary Ward directed her personal energy in the latter years of her life towards the apostolate in England, the broad base from which members were drawn ensured the survival and growth of the I.B.V.M. on the Continent. The communities established in England during the 1640s, 1660s and 1680s were offshoots of the European organisation.

While the contemplative monasteries were re-established for similar reasons to those that inspired Mary Ward, there was one crucial factor which differentiated the way they operated. This was the imposition of strict enclosure upon the monastic communities. I would suggest that the physical reality of claustration encouraged a sense of isolation from the local community. Mary Ward fought to avoid this during the early years of the Institute because she believed that her sisters had just as important work to do among local townspeople as in England; missionary work knew no bounds. The English contemplative houses accepted enclosure as a condition of their vocation because contemplation required seclusion from the distractions of the world. Although to survive financially all the monastic houses acquired friends and benefactors from among the local townspeople, enclosure created a physical barrier between the English and their immediate neighbours which was not known in I.B.V.M. houses. Discouraged from attaching themselves to their immediate surroundings, the very nature of their contemplative apostolate encouraged the nuns to look inwards, and beyond to the requirements of their co-religionists in England. Thus clausura and contemplation ensured that the monasteries were insular places.

There were exceptions to the general pattern of national isolation. Insistence upon the exclusion of European sisters was not upheld so firmly in the case of lay sisters. In fact, almost seventy per cent of local townswomen professed in English convents took the vows of a lay sister. This figure is not surprising given the status of women who would undertake the apostolate of manual labour. The cost of travelling to the Continent to join a convent and, more importantly, the contacts necessary to make the journey and

93 Contemplative nuns' reluctance to associate too closely with the local community was evident in warnings given by Abbess Mary Caryll of Dunkirk to the parents of a local woman who wanted to join the English Benedictines. Caryll insisted that the cloister would not tolerate frequent family visits to the novice. Yet in the same letter to her brother in which the abbess instructed him to inform the woman's parents of these restrictions, she freely discussed family matters. BL, Add. MS, 28,226, Caryll Letters, f. 127, Abbess Mary Caryll to John Caryll, 1708.
locate a cloister, were well beyond the means of most Englishwomen socially appropriate for the position. Given the numerical supremacy of plebeian Catholics over their coreligionists among the gentry, financial considerations and contacts must have been significant elements in recruitment to the cloisters abroad. Data relating to social status of lay sisters is scarce, the absence of family details in annals and registers pointing to their lowly origins. Although my sample is too small to draw concrete conclusions, it suggests that English lay sisters were drawn principally from the ranks of impoverished gentry. Such women were often the companions of women entering the choir; or else they had served an exiled English family locally and somehow acquired a sufficient dowry to enter the cloister. For example, in 1677 Elizabeth Collingwood entered the Cambrai Benedictines with her maid, Anne Batmanson 'for a lay sister'. Collingwood decided her vocation lay elsewhere and left the cloister, but Batmanson made her vows in 1680. Ann Mortimer, professed at St. Monica's in 1620, had served her aunt since she was a young child. Upon the death of her mistress, she went to serve a gentleman in St. Omers and from there a priest obtained her a place in the Louvain cloister.

The number of low-status English women who were in a position to access the cloisters was limited, so many houses accepted locals to perform the duties which in reality amounted to housework. Indeed foreign lay sisters had often served their community as lay servants prior to their admission as professed religious. Hubart (Catherine) Noe, professed at St. Monica's in 1610, had originally come to the cloister as a lay servant. The fact that houses were prepared to accept local women as lay sisters more readily than as choir nuns points to the lowly status of the lay sister. However, it also suggests that nuns would make exceptions when it suited the house to do so. Lay sisters' duties encompassed conducting household business among the local townspeople, thus the conduct of daily business by lay sisters familiar with these merchants and artisans could prove advantageous to a convent.

Although the majority of cloisters did not profess local women as choir nuns, three houses did accept non-English novices. The Franciscans, Sepulchrines and 'Blue

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94 Of the 530 nuns for whom social status is given, only 28 (5.28%) were lay sisters. Of these women, 11 were daughters of esquires or gentlemen (all of these women were English), 5 were said to have fathers occupied in the professions, 7 were of the yeomanry, one was said to come from an artisanal family, & 4 were domestic servants. The bias towards daughters of esquires & gentlemen could be attributed to cloisters' desire to note worthy families, but it is more likely because the economic & logistical barriers of travelling across the Channel were too great for women of lower social status.

95 Joseph Gillow (ed.), 'Records of the English Benedictine Nuns at Cambrai, 1620-1793', in Miscellanea 8, [CRS, 13], London, 1912, (hereafter 'Cambrai Records'), p. 53. For other e.g.s, see English Franciscan Nuns, p. 19; Chronicle of St. Monica's, vol. 1, p. 106.

96 Chronicle of St. Monica's, vol. 1, pp. 199-200. See also ibid., pp. 188-89, 194-95, 196, 244, 258, 364-65; Guilday, Catholic Refugees, p. 169.

97 All cloisters in the study, apart from the Pontoise Benedictines & the Bruges Augustinians, professed at least one local woman. However, at Ghent, Brussels, Louvain, Cambrai, & Gravelines they were all lay sisters. It should be noted that the nationality of certain women at Louvain, Bruges, Cambrai &
Nuns' professed Flemish or French women for the choir. I have already mentioned the reluctance of the 'Blue Nuns' to admit Anne Veauquet.99 The abbess and council only did so at the insistence of advisers and friends. Significantly, they did not allow any more French women to take the veil. The Franciscans professed only two Flemish women for the choir, and both of these were at Nieuport at a time when the cloister was beginning to feel the economic pinch of local wars and political disturbances in England. Anna Maria (Anna Maria of St. Jerome) Budson was professed in 1648, and Catherine (Mary Catherine) Detill Valant made her vows in 1652. The registers hint that both women were accepted because they bestowed valuable assets upon the convent. Budson's contribution is unclear, but Valant provided the dowry of a farm. She also held the office of assistant procuratrice between 1679 and 1684 when the cloister was suffering the ill effects of the Popish Plot.100

The benefit locally born women could bring to houses at times of financial strain was recognised by the Sepulchrines. Liège professed seven such choir nuns during the course of the seventeenth century. Founded in 1642, the house accepted four locals during the next seven years.101 Given the wars and general malaise civil unrest had inflicted upon English cloisters, recruitment figures at Liège in the 1640s were not bad. However, as a new community numbering only fifteen in 1650, the prospect of a more reliable dowry from these local novices probably swayed opinion in their favour. Furthermore, Anne-Barbe (Anne Francis of the Seraphins) Plenevaux, professed in 1646, was related to the burgomaster of the town. The potential of Plenevaux to enlist patronage for the house from among the local worthies was reflected by her position as procuratrice from 1652 to 1660, and her appointment as subpriore at 1663.102

Significantly, the Sepulchrines turned again to locals when their recruitment plummeted in the aftermath of 1688. Marie-Catherine (Mary Susan) de Roveroit was the daughter of Gravelines is unknown. However, in most of the unknown cases, the question relates to Anglo-Celtic identity (i.e. were they English, Scottish, Welsh or Irish?). The names of non-Anglo-Celtic nuns usually stand out in registers. 99 See n. 89 above.

100 English Franciscan Nuns, pp. 42-45, 140, 141-42, 200. Anna Maria Budson's parents were from near Veurne in Flanders (which was not far from Nieuport). Katherine Detill Valant did not appear to be a widow - she was professed at the age of 16. In the registers there is confusion over her name; sometimes she is described as Katherine Detill, other references mention Katherine Valant, yet others cite Katherine Detill Valant. Her farm was sold in 1665 to pay the cloister's debts. By that stage the Franciscans had split into 2 groups, & the main body of nuns had moved to Bruges.

101 Anne-Marie (Mary Constantia of the Holy Sepulchre) Vanbuel, professed 1645; Anne-Barbe (Anne Francis of the Seraphins) Plenevaux, professed 1646; Jane (Jane of St. Augustine) Liverloz, professed 1649; Barbara (Agnes of St. Clare) Houthem, professed 1649; Elizabeth (Constantia) le Vrai, professed 1660; Isabelle d'Allengenne, professed 1673; Marie-Catherine (Mary Susan) de Roveroit, professed 1690.

a local aristocrat, and proceeded to the office of prioress in 1721. This particular cloister's willingness to accept non-English women was most likely a consequence of its small size. Forced from the beginning to adopt flexible recruitment strategies in order to maintain viable numbers, the Liège convent opted for the benefits local nuns would bestow. This partial rejection of the exclusive recruitment policies of the contemplative monasteries set the Sepulchrines apart from their co-religionists abroad.

The issue of nationality brings me back to the motivation behind the re-establishment of English monasticism for women. The cloisters articulated a strong desire to maintain the monastic tradition for women until such a time that the faith was restored in their homeland. The convents thus became highly significant in the long-term goals of the English Catholic gentry. Despite the problems associated with leaving England to live in often impoverished cloisters abroad, the numbers of English women entering the religious life during the seventeenth century were reasonably high. However, the personal motivation of the majority of the nuns remains unclear. The next section will address the question of individual nuns' vocations to ascertain why so many women took the veil in the seventeenth century. It will explore the extent to which parents governed their daughters' futures as nuns or wives, and the nuns' degree of consciousness about monasticism's contribution to the Catholic cause.

II. Religious Vocations

Broadly speaking there are two explanatory frameworks addressing women's religious vocations in the medieval and early modern world. Catholic hagiographical accounts almost always assume that nuns had true spiritual vocations. Historical accounts tend to be more cynical and attribute women's presence in cloisters to economic and social factors. Virtually all the literature pertaining to the English cloisters has been written in the Catholic hagiographical tradition, and the authors of community histories and lives of particular nuns were under no doubt as to the religious fervour underpinning the early modern vocations. In his 1924 preface to a history of Augustinian Canonesses in the Low Countries, Cardinal Bourne, Archbishop of Westminster, wrote that

Divine Providence so guided the steps of English maidens in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that ... they were able ... to maintain, build up, and preserve for a better future, the cloistered life of dedication to God's service...104

Likewise, Dom Basil Whelan attributed to faith the steady flow of

\[103\] Ibid., pp. 12, 60-62, 64-68, 99, 201-3, 206-16. Marie-Catherine de Roveroit held the office of procuratrice for 15 years between 1701 & her election as prioress in 1721.

\[104\] Durrant, *Flemish Mystics*, p. vi.
brave nuns [who] faced innumerable dangers and hardships in a foreign land to keep alive the flame of the true Faith, to make it possible for their compatriots to dedicate themselves to God within convent walls, and to pray with unflagging ardour for the conversion of their native land.\textsuperscript{105}

In 1976 the Carmelite nuns of Darlington wrote of their predecessors in Lierre:

Generations of heroic young women of the old Catholic families crossed to the Continent, amid manifold adventures and dangers, to serve God in the religious state, to pray for their homeland and to inspire and be inspired by the sacrifices and the martyrdom of so many of their fellow-countrymen [sic].\textsuperscript{106}

Thus, in these Catholic accounts, pious souls yearn to continue the monastic tradition in the same way that their parents were upholding the secular tradition at home. Mindful of former criticisms of women's vocations, and determined to attest to the extraordinary faith of the early modern nuns, Whelan stated categorically that

Nor was the wonderful flow of postulants to the convents in the seventeenth century comprised of mere 'superfluous daughters' driven to this step by economic necessity ... That theirs were genuine vocations is shown by the determination with which the great difficulties and dangers attendant on reaching the convents were overcome, ... by the hardships of the life led in those poverty-stricken cloisters, and by the high level of fervour maintained in them.\textsuperscript{107}

Modern scholars are more sceptical than Whelan about the true nature of religious vocations in the past. Following the argument of Eileen Power, historians have generally viewed monasteries as 'the refuge of the gently born'.\textsuperscript{108} According to Power, many nuns of the middle ages were not in the cloister of their own volition. In a recent study of nuns in medieval France, Penelope Johnson has argued that for most medieval people choice (thus vocation) did not belong to the individual. Decisions about careers depended upon the needs of the individual's family. For women the options were even more restrictive. If marriage would generate useful social and economic connections without too great a dowry, then a woman would wed. If not, she would more than likely enter the cloister. Vocation - a sincere desire to devote her life to God for spiritual reasons - did not figure in the decision.\textsuperscript{109}

The Catholic Church was not blind to the abuses to which the monastic system was open, particularly after scathing criticism by the Protestants had made a mockery of monasteries for both men and women. Sixteenth-century reformers insisted that women should not be coerced into taking the veil. At the Council of Trent it was decreed that anyone who forced a 'virgin or widow, or any other woman whatsoever, to enter a

\textsuperscript{105} Whelan, \textit{Historic English Convents}, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{106} 'The Carmelite Convent at Darlington', \textit{Northern Catholic History}, 4, 1976, p. 31.
\textsuperscript{107} Whelan, \textit{Historic English Convents}, pp. 9-10.
monastery against her will, or to take the habit of any religious order or to make profession' would be 'anathematized'. The reformers also fixed the minimum age of religious profession at sixteen, and required that the novice be examined by the bishop to ensure that the choice was her own. However, in a society where deference to the wishes of one's family was still accepted and practised, many women still found their way into a life of religious contemplation without any true desire to serve God in that way.

Family economic strategies were often behind a decision to enter the religious life. In Richard Trexler's study of nuns in Renaissance Florence, he argued that the convent was vital for Florentine families with too many daughters at a time when dowry prices were rising rapidly. Likewise, R. Burr Litchfield's study of twenty-one Florentine patrician families from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, concluded that forty-four per cent of these families' daughters entered the cloister. During the 1620s the common dowry for a middle-to-upper-range Florentine convent was approximately 200 scudi, while patrician marriage dowries reached a median of 10,000 scudi in the early seventeenth century. In her study of early modern Seville, Mary Elizabeth Perry has attributed the rise in monastic foundations for women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the population increase of the sixteenth century, which for parents made the cloister a desirable alternative to marriage for their extra daughters. Of course, convents could also provide a useful refuge for daughters who were unmarriageable through physical defect or social stigma. Sherrill Cohen has noted the additional function of the cloister as a prison for criminal women and those who lost out in disputes with powerful males over property and other issues.

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110 Schroeder, *Canons and Decrees*, pp. 226, 228-29.
111 I am yet to be completely persuaded by the arguments of Lawrence Stone & Alan Macfarlane et al. regarding choice in marriage. As my analysis of 17th-century vocations shows, many women were allowed little or no choice regarding their future.
115 For a discussion of this practice in the middle ages, see Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession*, pp. 22-3. Elizabeth Rapley has noted that in 17th-century France 14% of women in teaching communities were described as sickly. See Elizabeth Rapley, 'Women and Religious Vocation in Seventeenth-Century France', *French Historical Studies*, 18, 1994, p. 627.
The remainder of this section will evaluate both the Catholic and the historical interpretations by assessing the motivation of women entering the English convents during the seventeenth century. By looking at the broader social and economic picture, I will show how the cloister did indeed offer English parents an alternative to marriage for their daughters. Yet, it is the statements of the nuns themselves which provide the clearest evidence of what generated religious vocations among English gentlewomen. The stories of individual nuns suggest that some were in the convent because their parents or guardians had willed it; others had happily embraced the religious life of their own volition. Within these two general categories (parental pressure and women's choice), however, there were varying degrees of spiritual and worldly motivation. Monastic vocations were not viewed lightly by either parents or children. The acts of sending a daughter abroad and of taking the vows of religion were highly political in seventeenth-century England.

i. Parental Pressure

English Catholic parents, like their co-religionists on the Continent, clearly used the newly founded cloisters as refuges for extraneous daughters. In England, marriage portions increased in value throughout the seventeenth century with a rapid rise in the latter decades. Most of the studies carried out involve those at the upper echelons of English society. Lawrence Stone looked at portions among the peerage between 1475 and 1724, indicating that from 1600 onwards peers often provided in excess of £5,000 to marry their daughters. By the latter end of the century, £10,000-£15,000 was likely.117 Between the second quarter of the sixteenth and the third quarter of the seventeenth century, dowry prices for aristocratic women increased approximately ten times, substantially more than the increase of most contemporary prices.118 But what about women of a lower social status than the daughters of peers? In her study of women and property in early modern England, Amy Erickson has calculated a median portion for litigants in the court of Chancery. Although she has used a very small sample, her figures suggest that portions of daughters of the gentry, wealthy yeomanry and merchant classes rose from £200 in the late sixteenth century to £500-£600 in the second half of the seventeenth century.119

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118 Ibid., p. 641.
119 Amy Louise Erickson, Women and Property in Early Modern England, London, 1993, pp. 120-21. Erickson also generated estimates for portions along the social scale. Dividing brides into 6 social categories, she found that daughters of the aristocracy paid in excess of £5,000; the gentry, £1,000-£5,000; the county (minor) gentry, £500-£1,000; clerks, merchants, wealthy yeoman & tradesmen, £100-£500; prosperous yeomen, tradesmen & craftsmen, £50-£100; the great bulk of yeomen, husbandmen, tradesmen, craftsmen & labourers, up to £50, but generally under £30. Ibid., pp. 88-9.
An analysis of the social status of women entering the English cloisters in the seventeenth century shows that of the women whose social status is known, over ninety per cent were daughters of gentlemen, esquires, baronets, knights, and peers. This would suggest that had they remained in the world their marriage portions would have been set somewhere between £500-£15,000 in the second half of the seventeenth century (the period for which I have monastic dowry figures). For baronets, knights and especially peers, the cloister definitely represented a less expensive means of settling their daughters. However, nuns were recruited principally from that somewhat amorphous group, the gentry. By and large esquires and gentlemen were better off sending their daughters across the Channel than marrying them to their social peers, although the benefits for the lesser gentry were less obvious. Prices varied among the convents, but stipulated amounts were not in excess of £500. Benedictine houses were usually in the upper price bracket. The 1631 'constitutions' of the Cambrai Benedictines declared that no novice should be accepted with a dowry less than £400. In 1676, Abbess Mary Caryll of the Benedictine house at Dunkirk told the father of a prospective novice that the full portion was £500, and she was not permitted to accept anyone for less than £400. However, she admitted to having accepted novices for £300 during the early years of the cloister's existence.

Abbess Caryll's admission revealed the reality in numerous cloisters where the nuns were so desperate to attract novices that the dowry price was almost always negotiable. Some communities marketed themselves upon the virtue of their low prices. In 1652, the canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre at Liège published a book detailing the history and requirements of their community. Included was an outline of the dowry prices, stating that 'portions ... are no where more moderate than here'. A choir nun was expected to provide £300, which included subsistence during her year in the novitiate, and the costs incurred at her clothing and profession ceremonies. Records of dowry negotiations suggest that houses often accepted choir nuns at a discounted rate. The Sepulchrines were true to their word, extracting little more than £300. I have figures for only sixteen choir nuns professed in the community between 1677 and 1710. Their

120 See Appendix 3 for breakdown of social status of nuns. I have included women whose fathers were described as esquires & gentlemen in this category. Felicity Heal & Clive Holmes give a useful overview of the problems associated with defining the gentry in early modern England in The Gentry in England and Wales, 1500-1700, London, 1994, pp. 6-19.
121 Elizabeth Rapley has described a similar situation in France for the same period. Rapley, 'Religious Vocation', p. 618.
122 Stanbrook Abbey, Cambrai MS 'Constitutions', f. 90.
124 A Brief Relation of the Order and Institute of the English Religious Women at Liège, Liège, 1652, p. 54. In 1640, the Franciscans of Brussels-Nieuport-Bruges required postulants to provide no less than £300, plus money to cover their clothing & profession expenses. By 1698, they were demanding £400. See Poor Clare Convent, Franciscan MS 6b, Statutes and Constitutions, 1641, f. 9; MS 'Annals', ff. 24, 54.
portions averaged at £333; only three women brought in excess of £350. The Augustinian cloister of St. Monica's, which, as a successful house in terms of recruitment, could afford to be less accommodating to parental pressure during dowry negotiations, did not demand much more than the Sepulchrines. For the fifty-two choir nuns entering the house between 1671 and 1710, the average portion was £358. Prior to 1700, twenty-one per cent of the portions were over £400. After this date, the figure rose to fifty-seven per cent. Thus, it seems that at a time when marriage portions were rising, and many Catholic gentry families were feeling the pinch of the Civil War, Interregnum and sporadic levy of recusancy fines, the cloister was a more viable financial option for parents seeking to settle their daughters.

Similarly, annals and administrative documents show that the English cloisters proved attractive to parents with daughters who were unmarriageable for other reasons. Although officially most houses could not accept women who were not sound in mind and body, archives make it clear that the convent could still be used as a respectable refuge for disabled women. For example, the 'statutes' of the Dunkirk Benedictines declared that 'those who are notably defective in mind or body, may not be received'. Nevertheless, the house professed Elizabeth Boult as a lay sister in 1665, despite the fact that she was deaf and dumb. Most monasteries would accept women who were deformed or sickly; so long as they came with adequate financial compensation which would cover the cost of their care. The Sepulchrine nuns at Liège fully anticipated the entrance of handicapped women, seeking £400-£500 for a 'defective Sister', depending upon the extent of her disability. Frances Parker, the daughter of Lord Morley, became a nun at St. Monica's in 1626 'in respect that she was crooked, and therefore not so fit for the world'. She brought a portion of £1,000, which was well above the average of £358 for the later period.

Anecdotal evidence in monastic archives suggests that disabled women were not always happy with the refuge chosen by their parents. Mary Fortescue, professed as a 'white sister' at St. Monica's in 1617, was described in the cloister's annals as being 'crooked'. When her parents suggested taking her to the Low Countries, she declared she preferred to remain in England with her married sisters to enjoy the pleasures of the world. However, she obeyed her parents and subsequently decided she had a vocation to the active life of the I.B.V.M. Fortescue's parents decided that because of her disability,
St. Monica's was more suitable, and she ended up as a contemplative nun. Other parents viewed the cloister as a respectable solution to the difficulty of providing for an illegitimate daughter. The Pontoise Benedictine registers at the end of the seventeenth century include the names Fitzroy and Fitzjames, signifying the presence of royal bastards. Elizabeth Smith, professed in the Benedictine cloister at Cambrai in 1635 was the illegitimate daughter of a baronet, although she had been known in her father's household as the niece of the family's chaplain. Unfortunately for her, the baronet's eldest son fell in love with her, and she was rapidly dispatched to Cambrai to be 'educated' by the nuns. There she developed her 'vocation' for the religious life.

Another medieval tradition frowned upon by the reformers at Trent was the system of placing child oblates in a cloister at a very young age. Despite official discouragement, the tradition continued. Benedetta Carlini, the infamous lesbian nun, was dedicated to God's service upon her birth in 1590 by a father thankful for her safe delivery. Carlini entered the cloister where she would create such a scandal at the age of nine years, suggesting that she had very little choice when it came to her vocation. Likewise, the English cloisters accumulated their fair share of what Elizabeth Rapley has termed 'conditioned' vocations. Several children were sent to be educated within monastic enclosures with a view to them taking the veil when they came of age. In the seventeenth century, convent education required the pupil to remain within the cloister where she would follow a modified version of the monastic regime until the age of fourteen to fifteen, when she chose either to enter the novitiate or leave.

An analysis of women's age upon entry in English cloisters suggests that over eighteen per cent were admitted aged less than fifteen years. Indeed over five per cent of these girls were under ten years old. Mary Philpot, professed in 1636, had been at St. Monica's since she was six or seven years old. In 1648, at the age of eight years, Lucy (Lucy Laurentia) Hamilton was sent by her mother to be educated by the Bruges Augustinians, 'and afterwards to be a religious amongst us, if it please God to call her,

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132 The Pontoise house professed Dame Ignatia Fitzjames in 1690 who was James II's & Arabella Churchill's daughter. In 1691, Dame Benedict Fitzroy, daughter of Barbara Villiers, was professed in the same house. See Registers of the English Benedictine Nuns of Pontoise, Now at Teignmouth, Devonshire, 1680-1713, in Miscellanea 10, [CRS, 17], London, 1915, pp. 196, 311.
133 Cambrai Records', pp. 44, 74-5. Sadly Smith was professed upon her deathbed, after falling down some stairs & sustaining fatal injuries a month before her noviceship ended.
136 These figures relate to the 458 women in the sample for whom age at entry was given. I have used 14 years & 11 months as the cut-off point because to be professed at the legal age of 16, a woman would have to enter the novitiate at the age of 15.
137 Chronicle of St. Monica's, vol. 2, pp. 162-3.
the child herself being very much inclined to it." It seems that her inclination continued because she was professed in 1656, aged sixteen. The scholars were received on the understanding that they would become nuns only if they 'had a mind to be a religious'. In some instances the girls concerned exercised their right of choice and left the cloister in which they had been placed. However, it is likely that many women who took the veil after several years in the school did so because of a lack of worldly experience, rather than out of any deep-seated religious compulsion.

The misery which some women experienced as a consequence of this practice is typified by the experience of Lady Barbara (Melchiora) Campbell, daughter of the seventh Earl of Argyle. Placed in the Brussels Benedictine cloister in 1624, aged only three, she took her vows in 1644 at the age of twenty. The fact that she professed so late (rather than at sixteen) suggests that she was not convinced of her vocation. This was confirmed by her request in 1657 to transfer to the Benedictine cloister at Cambrai. Permission was not granted for her to enter Cambrai until twelve years later in 1669. However, no sooner had she joined the new community than she sought to return to Brussels. The abbess of Brussels refused to receive her back until she had spent at least seven years at Cambrai. Thus, in 1676, Campbell returned to her mother-house where she remained (however unhappily) until her death in 1688.

Women's stories about how they came to take the veil indicate that even those who were of mature years when they entered the convent were not necessarily there of their own volition. Mary Stonehouse, professed a lay sister at St. Monica's in 1632, lived with her brother, a priest, following the death of her parents. According to the annalist, he 'asked her if she would be a religious, that then he would seek to get her a place. She answered, Yes, although she knew not what religion was'. One questions her naivety in this matter, especially as her elder sister, Ann, was already a lay sister at St. Monica's. Nevertheless, this story takes an even more bizarre twist when one learns that their father, Christopher Stonehouse, a devout Catholic tradesman and tenant farmer, had sealed their future vocations prior to their birth when he vowed that 'if our Lord did send him two daughters he would name one Ann and the other Mary, and give them both to God'.

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139 Priory of Our Lady, Bruges MS Professions and Obits 1629-1882, f. 2.
140 *Chronicle of St. Monica's*, vol. 2, p. 61. The letters of establishment for the 'Blue Nuns' cloister in Paris declared that the nuns wanted to provide spiritual assistance to English girls who might be admitted for profession if God had graced them with a vocation. *Diary of the 'Blue Nuns*', p. 2.
141 Ibid., p. 163. Mary Philpot (n. 137 above) was placed in the house with a sister who left to return to the world.
142 'Cambrai Records', p. 50. Campbell had 2 sisters in French cloisters.
143 *Chronicle of St. Monica's*, vol. 2, p. 103.
144 Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 187-9. Christopher Stonehouse's undated will named Mary & her Jesuit brother, Andrew, as executors. Probate was granted in 1631 which suggests that Mary left for Louvain very
One of the more troubled vocations was that of Gertrude Aston. Several of her relatives were nuns, and in 1658 she entered the Sepulchrine cloister at Liège. However, she was unhappy there and returned to England the following year. The next convent she tried was St. Monica's in Louvain where her aunt was prioress. In spite of Prioress Thimbleby's efforts to encourage Aston's vocation, the reluctant novice returned to England 'having taken a dislike to the religious life'. She was finally taken under the wing of Carmelite priest, Walter Travers, who with her father's blessing took her to Lierre where there was a convent of English Carmelite nuns. After meeting the prioress and some of the nuns, and reading the life of St. Teresa, she decided to enter there and was professed in 1671. Travers later revealed that when he first met Gertrude Aston she 'was in great affliction because her parents desired her to enter a convent, whereas she herself was desirous to enter the holy state of matrimony'.

While her parents' motivation is unclear, Aston's experience indicates just how little choice a woman might have when it came to vocation.

Thus, despite the Church's recognition that families were abusing monasticism for secular purposes, it was very difficult for young women to resist the will of their parents. Catherine (Alexia) Morris, professed among the Ghent Benedictines in 1648, later admitted that she had agreed to enter the cloister to please her father. In 1663, Lucy (Mechtildis) Fortescue of the 'Blue Nuns' returned to England to claim the inheritance left to her by her father, then refused to re-enter the cloister. She told the nuns that her mother had forced her into the religious life. Likewise, Lady Anne (Anne Dominic) Howard, who broke into the Bruges Augustinian enclosure in 1692 and begged the nuns to accept her there because she did not want to enter the house chosen by her mother, later revealed that she had taken the veil not from choice but in obedience to the will of her mother, whom she feared. All these examples suggest that just as throughout Catholic Europe secular pressures filled the cloisters, family concerns in England often governed entry to religious cloisters well into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

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shortly after her father's death. See 'The Will of Christopher Stonehouse of Dunsley in the Parish of Whitby, a Noted Recusant. Circa 1564-1631', in Miscellanea 5, [CRS, 6], London, 1909, pp. 73-74.


146 'Ghent Obituary Notices', p. 67.


148 Durrant, Flemish Mystics, p. 313.
ii. Women's Choice

Despite all the evidence which suggests that women had very little choice, and most were in the cloister because their parents had put them there, this was by no means a universal picture. Some women became nuns because they had a genuine spiritual calling to the religious life. Others viewed the convent with more worldly eyes and chose it themselves as a refuge. For example, it has often been suggested that the cloister offered women a viable alternative to marriage. Monastic annals indicate that this was indeed the case for some women. Elizabeth Shirley, one of the founders of St. Monica's, opted for the cloister 'for she had never had any mind to marry'. The Benedictine, Helen (Gertrude) More, was persuaded by her religious director to become a nun because she also had little desire for the married state. Likewise, the Augustinian Mary Worthington developed her religious vocation at the age of ten when she observed the miserable life endured by one of her friends who had an untoward husband. As a consequence of his behaviour and her friend's anguish, she 'purposed with herself never to marry, but become a religious with her sister [at St. Monica's]'. Several other women similarly acknowledged a reluctance for marriage.

The most graphic example of a woman clearly opting out of the marriage market was provided by Catherine Holland who defied her Protestant father by converting to Catholicism. Realising that her father would make life as difficult as possible for her, she set out for the Continent and entered the Bruges community of Augustinian Canonesses. In the conclusion to an autobiographical account of her conversion and vocation, she revealed the attraction Catholicism held for her:

By this means I was settled, after a great deal of trouble, in the State of Life I had so long desired: In the which I live truly content, and no little satisfaction of Mind it was to me; I was out of danger of ever being in the Slavery of Marriage for which I had so great an aversion and there was no other way to avoid it, but in embracing the State of Religion.

Clearly there were women in early modern society who were not inclined to marry and who viewed the religious cloister as the simplest alternative. This suggests that the convent performed an important social role in the seventeenth century by providing English Catholic women with an alternative to marriage and motherhood not available to their Protestant sisters. Protestant women who desired to pursue a celibate life were

150 Chronicle of St. Monica's, vol. 1, p. 105.
152 Chronicle of St. Monica's, vol. 2, p. 66.
154 Catherine Holland, 'How I came to change my religion' in Durrant, Flemish Mystics, pp. 273-305.
faced with the difficulty of conversion and likely rejection by their family. Perhaps for this reason the numbers of converts entering the convents was low, none the less a large proportion of such women, like Elizabeth Shirley and Catherine Holland, claimed that they converted in order to embrace the option of monasticism.

Widows who were reluctant to remarry also sought the cloister as a refuge. They possessed independent means and, in theory, they could dispose of their personal wealth as they saw fit. In a recent essay, P. Renée Baernstein has shown how Milanese women opted to by-pass pressures from their own kin and their husbands' families to remarry or remain single by entering or endowing a religious institution. Baernstein argued that for many women in this position the convent could become an alternative 'family' which they could choose to favour with their private fortunes, sometimes to the exclusion of natural kin. Until reformers forced claustration and solemn vows upon all inmates of convents, many widows simply resided in cloisters and continued to administer their private property. After enclosure became mandatory, and individual ownership was declared illegal in religious houses, widows had to choose whether to take vows and invest their wealth in their community, or to leave. Some English widows likewise viewed the cloister as a viable alternative to remarriage. Upon the deaths of their husbands, Lucy (Lucy Angela) Sleford Davis and Petronilla (Petronilla Clare) Kemp Brown established the Franciscans of Brussels-Nieuport-Bruges in 1621. To by-pass the restriction of claustration, both founders were professed as external lay sisters whose duty was to conduct the business of the cloister beyond the enclosure. Like the Milanese widows, Davis and Brown were not keen to cut all ties with the world. The women obviously decided they could best assist the new community by negotiating on its behalf with townspeople and English Catholics outside the convent walls.

Numbers of widows entering the religious life were small, but most were drawn to the Franciscan community. The figures I have relating to marital status are limited because many clothing and profession registers which recorded the family details of women entering religious communities neglected to mention this detail. Indeed only nineteen of 1,109 women in the sample were clearly identified as widows. Although I assume a higher number of widows were professed, even houses which recorded marital status apparently never attracted large numbers of them. For example, of 142 women professed among the Franciscans between 1621 and 1710, there were merely nine widows. Interestingly, five of them entered and took their vows in the 1620s. Perhaps they were encouraged by the examples of Lucy Sleford Davis, Petronilla Kemp Brown,

156 *English Franciscan Nuns*, pp. 6-8. Petronilla Kemp Brown died in 1628. In 1630, Lucy Sleford Davis took the vow of enclosure & was brought into the enclosure to serve as a lay sister because of old age & illness. Ibid., pp. 16, 124, 133, 177, 180.
and the first abbess elected by the new cloister, Catherine (Catherine Francis) Greenbury Wilcox.\textsuperscript{157}

Many devout English Catholic widows most likely felt that in England they could do more to assist the restoration of the faith by opening their households to missionary priests. They had the role-models of Dorothy Lawson and Magdalen, Viscountess Montague, both of whom had harboured priests and maintained the faith in their own and neighbouring families. There is scattered evidence suggesting that many women continued this role. Travelling to the Continent to enter a monastery would also have required a complete break with children and kin. This did not deter some women like Lady Mary Roper Lovel who left her young children in the care of friends and patrons to seek her vocation, declaring that she was called to it by something 'more powerfull then the love of any mortall creture'.\textsuperscript{158} Predictably such behaviour was censured by the Protestants, who regarded it as dereliction of maternal duty. The English government's agent in Brussels claimed that many there were scandalised by Mary Lovel's course of action 'in respect of the great neglect which she hath shewed therein, for abandonning the care of her Children'.\textsuperscript{159}

Other widows embraced the religious life to join daughters and kin already professed as nuns. In 1674, at the age of sixty-four, Lady Elizabeth (Augustina) Bedingfield Hamilton made her vows in the Bruges Augustinian cloister where her daughter was a nun.\textsuperscript{160} Likewise, Mary Eyre Blundell joined the Benedictines in Ghent to be with her daughters, Winefrid and Frances. The Blundell family had not honoured payment of her daughters' portions so, upon the death of her husband, Mary Blundell decided to bestow her jointure on the convent in an effort to reduce the debt. Writing to Abbess Gerard in 1708, Nicholas Blundell said that his mother had been 'desirous to spend her Joyniture where her children were, that they and the House might reap the Profit of all she could spair'.\textsuperscript{161} However, the most common course of action for widows was to board in the guest house attached to their offspring's religious institute. Without taking any vows, these gentlewomen could lead a semi-monastic life in the company of kin and friends, but also retain control over their personal wealth. Hence, the arrival at Cambrai in 1674 of Anne Wintour Hall, mother of Abbess Catherine Maura Hall, to live 'a retired life'.\textsuperscript{162} These widows were then free to endow their chosen

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., pp. 7-17.
\textsuperscript{158} PRO, State Papers, Flanders: 77/9, f. 119, Lady Mary Lovel to Lord Treasurer Salisbury, August 1608.
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., ff. 106, 130. In August 1608, he noted that she had left her children in the care of the Infanta, & that he suspected the portions she had bestowed upon her daughters would lead them to nunneries also.
\textsuperscript{160} Priory of Our Lady, Bruges MS Professions and Obits, ff. 1-2; Durrant, Flemish Mystics, p. 259.
\textsuperscript{161} Great Diurnal of Nicholas Blundell, vol. 1, pp. 105-8, 157-60; vol. 2, xii-xiii. Mary Blundell decided to travel to Flanders in 1706, & was professed in 1707. She died later that year.
\textsuperscript{162} 'Cambrai Records', pp. 52-53.
refuge with alms and gifts, like 'Widow Belt' who stayed with the 'Blue Nuns' while her daughters attended their school. The widow gave her hosts twelve guineas towards the purchase of a tabernacle. The opportunities for widows to board in the cloisters perhaps explains their reluctance to give up the freedom gained upon the death of their husband by formally entering the monastic life of poverty, chastity, obedience and enclosure.

Such an argument casts doubt upon the other oft-quoted advantage of the cloister for women: the opportunity it gave them to exercise power and independence. Although nuns were not entirely free from male supervision, it is true that the convent allowed them a greater degree of autonomy than many would have experienced in the world as daughters and wives. Not only were they able to govern their own affairs within an all-female environment, it was also possible for them to achieve a notable reputation beyond the walls of the enclosure. Certain nuns in the English contemplative cloisters were renowned for their excellent government. Prioress Margaret Clement of the Louvain Augustinians was well respected by the local bishop, clergy and community. As soon as she was elected prioress, Clement reformed her cloister in accordance with the Tridentine decrees. Although initially unpopular among the Flemish nuns who were used to entertaining family and friends within the enclosure, Margaret Clement was able to persuade her sisters and the world at large that St. Ursula's was an institution where good government and sanctity went hand in hand. Likewise, Abbess Catherine Gascoigne of the Cambrai Benedictines was so famed for her prudent leadership that she and other senior nuns in her cloister were called upon to reform French Benedictine houses. However, not surprisingly, no nun ever admitted that she entered the cloister to achieve power. Indeed most did as much as possible to shun authority. So while the exercise of authority was often a consequence of taking the veil, women religious were diffident about their magisterial ambitions.

Several English nuns were acknowledged as spiritual authorities. Abbess Elizabeth (Lucy) Knatchbull of the Ghent Benedictine cloister was so renowned for her mystical abilities that her spiritual director recorded her life and visions to inspire others to devotion. Likewise, the pious writings of Helen (Gertrude) More of the Cambrai Benedictines and Lucy (Teresa Joseph) Herbert of the Bruges Augustinians were published for the edification of all good Catholics. However, it is not clear that such

163 Diary of the 'Blue Nuns,' p. 24.
164 See ch. 3 for a discussion of female authority in the English cloisters.
165 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS Q 29, ff. 29-32; Chronicle of St. Monica's, vol. 1, pp. 29-30.
166 'Benedictine Nuns of Paris', pp. 340-41, 366; In a Great Tradition, p. 20.
167 Matthew, Life of Lucy Knatchbull.
women entered the cloister with the intention of becoming spiritual authorities. Indeed Lucy Knatchbull doubted her religious vocation for several years, and wavered between rapturous mystical union and the depths of spiritual doubt. Gertrude More was a nun because she had not wanted to marry. Initially she too experienced great spiritual anguish, and her famous contemplative powers did not emerge until she had been in the community for some time.

Yet alongside the many unwilling vocations, and those who had joined convents for largely worldly reasons, there were also several women for whom spiritual fulfilment was the prime motivation. The widowed Lady Mary Roper Lovel, mentioned previously, provides an excellent example. Lovel was dismissed as a hysterical and difficult woman by her contemporaries, and in subsequent Catholic accounts of her spiritual quest. However while her chequered career as a nun demonstrates some of the problems women could experience in their choice of religious vocation, it none the less reveals something of the spirit of post-Reformation English Catholicism. Mary Roper Lovel moved to the Low Countries with the assistance of Lord Treasurer Salisbury. In 1608, she entered the Benedictine cloister in Brussels, but in the following year she decided to establish another Benedictine cloister in the same town. The plans for the new foundation did not come to fruition, nor did her alternative plan to establish a Carmelite house in Brussels. Eight years later Lady Lovel decided to persist with her plan to found a house of English Teresians and chose Liège as the site. But this plan fell through and it was not until 1619 that Lovel's Carmelite community in Antwerp finally emerged with Anne Worsley as its first prioress.

Although in all of her early efforts to join or establish cloisters, Mary Lovel was unsuccessful, she remained committed to her goal of a house under the jurisdiction of the English Jesuits. Rather than view her numerous disputes simply as the consequence of a difficult personality, they should be seen within the context of her desire for spiritual fulfilment. In an early letter to Salisbury informing him of her intention to join the Benedictines at Brussels, Lovel expressed her goal:

> I have thought it fitt to signifie to yor Lordship the Retired course I have undertaken which happily will seeme straingfe\[e] & I fere distastfull to yor opinion, but as my eand is only to seeke the glorye of god & the securitie of my soule in [that] state of life seperated from the miseries & dangers of the world soe my hope is that it shall be noe occasion to devert yor honorable favor from me or mine.

170 See p. 65 above.
171 PRO, State Papers, Flanders: 77/9, f. 119, Lady Mary Lovel to Lord Treasurer Salisbury, August 1608.
172 See Matthew, *Life of Lucy Knatchbull*, pp. 30-3 for Lucy Knatchbull's account of this affair.
173 PRO, State Papers, Flanders: 77/12, f. 432, Turnbull to Winwood, December 14, 1617.
174 See ch. 6 for a discussion of the importance of Jesuit spirituality in Lady Mary Roper Lovel's vocation.
175 PRO, State Papers, Flanders: 77/9, f. 119.
For women like Mary Lovel, the cloister was the place where they felt that they could best achieve salvation.

In conclusion, it is impossible to discuss vocations without some understanding of the economic, social and political, as well as the spiritual factors involved in monastic foundations. While there is no doubt as to the very secular reasons for many vocations, religious devotion and the desire to preserve the English monastic tradition for women were at the forefront of many women's decision to enter the cloisters in France and the Low Countries. Thus, I would argue that the picture is a complex combination of factors out of which it is difficult to discern any clear explanatory model. Ultimately one has to return to the recruitment patterns if one is to make any sense of the situation. The enthusiastic flood of foundations and vocations during the opening decades of the seventeenth century, followed by a decline in the 1630s and 1640s, then another burst of activity in the 1650s to 1680s, followed by another downturn which continued throughout the eighteenth century, seems to suggest that an explanation should be sought from within the changing mindset of the English Catholic community. Vocations peaked at moments when Catholics were most optimistic about restoration and tolerance. After 1688, hope and vocations went into a decline.176

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176 I would like to thank Joanna Innes for a discussion about English Catholics which encouraged this interpretation of the recruitment data.
CHAPTER 3

THE MONASTIC FAMILY: AUTHORITY IN THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY CLOISTER

As the wis[er]man sayth the honor of the parencs is the childrens glory, then may we truely say, we may glory for having such a worthey mother, she was the frist prioris that ren[e]wed our holy order which hath benne very famus in Inguland in foretimes but now wholy as obscured through wicked herity [i.e. heresy]. God grant we may seek to emetat her. Amen.¹

Convents have often been cited as the notable exception to the general rule of patriarchal government in pre-modern society. The female monastic institution consisted of a group of women living together under the direct authority of their abbess or prioress. Indeed the abbess/prioress's formal position of power was unique within both church and society.² Thus, the nunnery has been viewed as a refuge where women could escape the patriarchal restrictions of the world beyond the cloister to realise the organisational and educational power denied them in secular society.³ Alternatively, religious houses for women have been portrayed as scions of institutionalised patriarchal control. Female monastic government was structured according to a male model, and was based principally upon the 'rules' and 'constitutions' drawn up by and requiring approval from the clergy. Women's communities, which had always been dependant upon the male priesthood for the performance of their sacramental life, were therefore unable to escape entirely the overarching authority of clerics in their personal spirituality and in household organisation. According to this view, unwanted women could be incarcerated within the monastic enclosure where they would be under the strict supervision of the Church.⁴

The reality of female government in seventeenth-century English cloisters was that it did not fall neatly into the binary opposition of either unique independence or absolute control. The convents were located squarely within the patriarchal church and society of their time. This made them subject both to historical traditions limiting the autonomy of

¹ Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS Q 29, Elizabeth Shirley, 'The Lyfe of Our Moste Reverent Mother, Margrit Clement', 1626, f. 64.
² Abbesses ruled abbeys, & prioresses were in charge of priories. Although abbey were the more powerful of the 2 religious institutions, priorises none the less governed their communities & were recognised as powerful women by lay & ecclesiastical figures alike. I will not differentiate between the authority of the two types of female monastic superior, so will refer to abbesses/priorises collectively, & to abbesses & priorises individually when discussing the ruler of a particular house.
nuns which had been extended by the Council of Trent, as well as to social attitudes regarding appropriate female behaviour. None the less, the absence of a male figure within the enclosure, the election by the nuns themselves of an abbess/prioress to lead the community, and the fact that the religious women often reinterpreted their 'constitutions' to suit their circumstances, meant the convent did represent freedom from the immediate authority of a husband or father. Although the nuns' lives were structured according to masculine precepts of order, the internal functioning of the monasteries and the religious women's interaction with the world beyond the walls suggest different ways of perceiving and wielding power.

This chapter will investigate the reality of power in the English convents through an analysis of its conceptualisation and practice. The most obvious figure of authority in the cloister was the abbess/prioress, therefore I will focus predominantly on the power wielded by her. None the less, she did not rule in isolation, so the chapter will inevitably offer an insight into the collective power of the choir nuns and convent officers. The first part explains how seventeenth-century models of secular authority were translated into the all-female cloister, while the second section analyses the structure of monastic government to ascertain the actual degree of power wielded by the abbess/prioress vis-a-vis her nuns and the ecclesiastical hierarchy. This exegesis of the conceptualisation of women's authority, coupled with the reality of female rule in convents, will reveal the English nuns' great scope for autonomy in an intensely patriarchal Church. The ways by which cloisters and individuals were able to negotiate the terms of their government are illustrative of the innovative approach they applied to all areas of their existence - work, prayer and engagement in the political affairs of their country - which will be the subjects of subsequent chapters.

I. Conceptualising Power: Models for Female Monastic Rule

Female government was a contentious issue in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe. Queens regnant in England and Scotland sparked John Knox's furious condemnation of woman's rule in The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women (1558). In France, Catherine de' Medici and Anne of Austria provided further examples of powerful women overturning the prescribed gender order by exercising high public office. Opponents to women's rule asserted men's natural right to govern women who were the weaker sex, physically, intellectually and morally. John Knox, Thomas Becon and Christopher Goodman, who all wrote against Mary Tudor, cited female inferiority as conferred by God and justified by Aristotle and the scriptures.

Aristotle had provided the physiological basis necessary to exclude women from holding positions of authority by suggesting that nature always strove to create perfection, and when it erred, a female was produced. Medical theories about human anatomy and physiology were therefore based upon the assumption that as a mistake of nature, women's bodies were poorly designed and functioned inefficiently. Possessing a cold and moist anatomy and a highly unpredictable womb, the female sex was prone to irrational and immoral behaviour. Unable to control their own actions, women were therefore absolutely unsuited to holding positions of authority.

The bible bolstered physiological arguments against women governing others by providing another set of justifications. In Eden, Adam was created first and set to rule over Eve; after the fall, Eve's punishment was subjection to her husband. Genesis not only set the model for relations between the two sexes, but also established the criteria for government of kingdoms. In Patriarchia, Robert Filmer declared that rulers and fathers derived their authority from Adam's divine mandate. Analogies between family and state were popular. It was suggested that the structure of government, especially the responsibility of rulers to their subjects, and vice versa, was analogous with relationships within the patriarchal family. The king was vested with supreme power in the body politic and, in the domestic regime, the decisive role belonged to the father. James I commonly described his relationship with his subjects as that of a father and his children. In a speech to Parliament in 1610, James declared that in the scriptures 'kings are ... compared to fathers of families for a king is truly Parens Patriae [father of his country], the politic father of his people'. Another common metaphor for the early modern state was the human body. As the head of the household/nation, the father/king was always the head of the body in such metaphorical representations. The head was a natural image for men, the more rational of the two sexes. Men were supposedly governed by

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7 Wiesner, Women and Gender, p. 243.
10 See Sharpe, 'A Commonwealth of Meanings', pp. 9-20 for a discussion of the commonweal as an organism.
(and would presumably rule according to) reason rather than passion. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, power was represented in masculine images.

The patriarchal language of government reflected broader trends towards tighter paternal authority across Europe. Research into the family, guilds, and established churches points to a reaffirmation of patriarchy in the wake of religious reform, whether Protestant or Catholic. Lyndal Roper has written about the 'domestication of the Reformation' in Germany, which led to 'women's incorporation within the household under the leadership of their husbands'.11 Discussing the impact of the English Reformation on family life, Patricia Crawford has argued that reform 'enhanced men's needs to control women and [their] power to do so'.12 In Catholic countries, husbands' authority within the household was similarly strengthened, as it was in convents where bishops enforced clausura and conducted tighter surveillance of 'rules' and 'constitutions'.13 As Sherrill Cohen's research into asylums for ex-prostitutes and unhappily married wives has revealed, Catholic reformers conceived of two options for women: marriage under the dominion of a husband, or institutionalisation supervised by the clergy.14

However, despite evidence of intensified patriarchy, there were several chinks in the paternal armour supposedly protecting both Church and society from the dangers posed by women. Queens and regents were the most prominent examples of female potency which flew in the face of the father/king personification of authority. Theorists partially overcame the dilemma women rulers posed patriarchy by appealing to the notion of the monarch's 'two bodies'.15 Even Elizabeth I bowed to prevailing ideologies by declaring, 'I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king'.16 However, subjects' acceptance of women, like Elizabeth, as legitimate monarchs immediately called into question the assumption that authority was solely a masculine trait. Constance Jordan has suggested that some apologists for queens came close to proposing an androgynous model of power for women rulers.17

Yet others recognised that maternal power was not at odds with government authority. At least one political treatise noted that as the family was a microcosm of the state, then the skills women employed in ruling their households as wives and mothers could be applied to governing the kingdom. Writers of conduct manuals, like Gouge, might have emphasised patriarchy, but within the domestic sphere wives were none the less accorded power over children and servants. Mothers' tremendous influence over their children was recognised by religious and civil authorities. For example, some women wrote advice for their children, and published it, citing 'motherly affection' as justification for their radical behaviour. Mothers often immersed themselves in securing the best possible future for offspring, with recent research revealing the extensive patronage networks operated by women on behalf of their families.

Maternal influence was deemed to be particularly crucial in matters of religion and piety. William Gouge noted that 'if the father and mother be of divers religions, most of the children will follow the mother', attributing the phenomenon to women's prominence in nurturing children during their early years. Other Protestants agreed and intervened to prevent Catholic wives from indoctrinating their children through word and example. For example, the convert, Catherine Holland, recalled that her Protestant father forbade his Catholic wife to speak of religious matters with the children for fear she would persuade them into her faith. In 1593, Parliament was so concerned about the danger of recusant wives corrupting their children that they debated the possibility of removing offspring from the grasp of their parents. Thus, maternal power was potentially so powerful that it could prove subversive. In the home children were inculcated with the religious, political and social values which upheld the state, and mothers were responsible for instilling these principles during their offsprings' formative years.

Elizabeth Walker, a Protestant minister's wife, took the early education of her children seriously, considering them 'as the nursery of families, the church and nation'.

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22 Gouge, *Domestical Duties*, p. 546.
Beyond the court and the domestic hearth stood an autonomous group of women who had consistently ruled large and powerful institutions throughout the middle ages. Abbesses and prioresses were responsible not only for the nuns under their rule, but they also held sway over the estate workers and priests who serviced the needs of their monastery. Indeed, at certain junctures, women had ruled double-monasteries of nuns and monks. As ecclesiastical institutions, cloisters were under the supervision of bishops, but great medieval abbesses, like Hildegarde of Bingen, had none the less carved powerful positions for women in the Church. Although the Reformation swept monastic institutions from the English landscape, women's convents and abbeys remained in Catholic territory, and also in certain Protestant regions. For example, in German lands, the Reformation did not eliminate convents entirely. Some communities successfully opposed efforts to close them; others took the somewhat contradictory step of transforming themselves into Protestant establishments. In Catholic Europe, saintly nuns achieved fame beyond their cloisters, corresponding with rulers and representing puissant role-models for other women to emulate. Whether they resisted reform, or accepted it, nuns remained the visible embodiment of female autonomy in early modern Europe.

Caught between the reality of powerful women, and contemporary discourse which continued to define authority in masculine images, the English convents seemingly opted for the latter position. The seventeenth-century cloisters were most commonly described in terms of the secular family. Given that this metaphor was frequently invoked to explain hierarchies and forms of rule, it was natural for the authors of religious 'constitutions' and advice books to outline the structure of monastic government in the same way. Abbesses and prioresses were designated 'mother' and the nuns became their spiritual 'daughters', who were 'sisters' to one another. In 1668, Richard White urged Prioress Winefrid Thimbleby of St. Monica's to structure her religious household according to the familial model:


Wherefore you being the Mother of the families ought to esteem & treat the Nuns as your Children, the sisters, as yours & their servants ... so that as the Nuns must be in all things, times, & places be dutifull and respectfull to you as their mother; so must the sisters much more be dutifull, respectfull & servisable both to you & them, as their Mistresses.29

Nuns adopted the imagery with obvious enthusiasm. Upon the death in 1654 of Abbess Elizabeth (Clare Mary Anne) Tyldesley of the Poor Clare community at Gravelines, the nuns recorded their grief as her 'afflicted Children', writing that they had been 'left Orphelelines by the deprivation of so worthy a Mother'.30 The Louvain Augustinians took the maternal analogy even further, claiming kinship with the saintly Margaret Giggs, mother to their acclaimed prioress, Margaret Clement. Elizabeth Shirley described Giggs as the nuns' 'grandmother', claiming that her natural relationship with Clement who was their 'moste holy Mother' justified this title.31

The application of the familial model to the cloister had serious implications for female monastic government. In the remainder of this section I will assess the ways in which the secular imagery of patriarchal authority impacted upon the all-female household of the convent. Obviously the monastic household lacked an immediate paterfamilias. Rather than invest the abbess/prioress with masculine authority, however, 'constitutions' identified her power as maternal. Paternal authority was vested in two male figures, the ordinary and the confessor, both of whom lived outside the walls of the enclosure. The dynamics of power within the female monastery were therefore contradictory. Yet I will argue that the familial model was universally popular for this very reason. Church and society sanctioned it because it conveniently obfuscated the anomaly of female autonomy; religious women embraced it for similar reasons, but also because they well understood the potency of maternal power.

Intrinsically hierarchical in nature, monasteries mirrored social distinctions in secular society. The internal hierarchy of the convent was structured according to the type of nun, whether or not she performed an official duty, and her age of profession. Precedence within the cloister followed these three points in order of sequence. Firstly, the religious women were divided into three ranks. The choir nuns, whose primary role was the performance of the divine office, formed the premier group. The lay sisters, who undertook the manual labours of the house and who lacked a voice in government, were at the bottom of the scale. The intermediate group comprised the 'white' sisters,
elderly widows and infirm women who entered the cloister on the understanding that they would be exempt from the more rigorous aspects of the rule, although they were of a similar status to the choir sisters.\textsuperscript{32} Usually too old or too ill to participate fully in monastic life, white sisters were not often accepted by cloisters and therefore remain obscure elements of the religious family.

Secondly, within the ranks of the choir sisters there were positions of varying importance. The abbess/prioress held the supreme position, followed closely by her deputy, the vicaress/subprioress. The procuratrice who was responsible for the finances, property and provisions of the house was the third most important figure. Nuns holding the other significant offices, such as novice mistress, infirmarian, portress, chantress, sacristine, cellareress and chambress, were entitled to various dispensations and benefits by the rule, and demanded respect and obedience from those below them.\textsuperscript{33} There were also minor officers, often assistants to the principal bearers, who held some degree of responsibility which merited respect for inferiors. There was another powerful clique, comprised of the more senior nuns, which was responsible for making the decisions governing composition of the congregation and its financial position. This group was known as the council, or the discreet, of the house and its size depended upon the numbers in the community. Major officers were automatically discreet, but the council appointed those office-holders not elected by the community.\textsuperscript{34}

The third factor which determined the internal hierarchy of the convent was the age of every nun. Age usually referred to the number of years as a professed nun rather than physical years. However, natural age was also taken into account when officers were elected. The abbess had to be no younger than forty years old, and professed for at least eight years. The discreet were supposed to be nuns who had the experience of natural age and profession. If both the abbess and vicaress were absent from any community activity, their place was to be filled by the eldest (by profession) nun present. Each nun was conscious of her position in the community because during ceremonies, in the choir, and in the refectory, the nuns were seated according to their seniority. During convent elections votes were cast in rank from the youngest to the eldest. In the chapter

\textsuperscript{32} The white sisters were a very small group & did not figure prominently in statutes or religious guides. They did not even have a definite name in each order. The term 'white sister' was applied in the Augustinian cloisters. The Sepulchrines referred to them as 'defective sisters' & denied them a voice in chapter & the ability to bear office. They were expected to bring a large dowry to the cloister in order to compensate for their inability to contribute in the choir or through manual labour. See A Brief Relation of the Order and Institute of the English Religious Women at Liège, Liège, 1652, pp. 51-52, 54.

\textsuperscript{33} For an explanation of these officers' duties see the glossary.

\textsuperscript{34} Poor Clare Convent, Franciscan MS 6b, Statutes and Constitutions, 1641, ff. 59-62; St. Augustine, Rule and Constitutions of the English Canonesses Regular of Our B. Ladies of Sion in Paris, Paris, 1636, [ERL, 45], p. 121; Statutes Compiled for the Better Observation of the Holy Rule of the Most Glorious Father and Patriarch S. Benedict ... delivered to the English Religious Women of ... Bruxelles and to all their Successours, Alexia Grey (trans.), Ghent, 1632, (hereafter Brussels Benedictine Statutes), Part 2, pp. 27-29; St. Clare, The Rule of the Holy Virgin S. Clare, 1621, [ERL, 274], p. 23.
of faults those admitting misdemeanours did so according to their age, again the youngest speaking first of all. In the refectory the nuns were seated according to their rank, and the more senior nuns had the better places. The importance of the seating hierarchy in establishing status was evident in the 'constitutions' of the Franciscans. Punishment for nuns who acted without the abbess's permission was to be relegated to the 'Last place in the Communitie and acknowledge their faultes with the Novices'.

The distinctions among the various members of the monastic household were exemplified in a number of ways, and by a variety of images. The 'constitutions' of the 'Blue Nuns' maintained the convent hierarchy after death by determining the number of masses said for the repose of a dead sister's soul, according to her rank in the house. Upon the death of the abbess the community was to offer 'thrice thirty Masses'. A choir nun was entitled to receive thirty masses for her soul, while a lay sister was given fifteen. The corporeal image applied by Richard White, confessor to the Augustinian nuns at Louvain, emphasised the importance of an organic whole in which everyone knew her place for peace and stability within a religious community:

The Superior is head ordering, & governing all; the Nuns the bodie subject to the head; and the Lay-sisters hands & feet subject to both to bear their burthens, & labour to serve them, there is order: which if constant produces peace.

White's analogy echoed the popular metaphor depicting society as an organism benevolently ruled by its natural head, the king/father. Poor Clare vicaress, Margaret (Paul) Radcliffe, also invoked a secular common discourse when she outlined the privilege and obligations conferred by age:

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35 The chapter of faults met weekly to discuss the short-comings of community members & to punish transgressions. See ch. 7 for further discussion.


37 Poor Clare Convent, Franciscan MS 6b, f. 52. There were a number of ceremonial pamphlets written for use within cloisters which provide intricate details of the role of age in determining a nun's place within the hierarchy. For e.g., the Franciscans had various documents which outlined the privileges accorded senior nuns, & the respect due to them from their juniors. During jubilee ceremonies the abbess was required to bow to the jubilarian. Any nun who had achieved her jubilee (over 50 years of profession) could expect to be served by others. A young nun would be allocated to clean her cell, make her bed & do whatever other duties she required. See Poor Clare Convent, Franciscan MS 22, 'A Copy of the Privileges Granted the Jubilarians', ff. 6-7.

38 Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', p. 305.

39 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS Qu 2, f. 85. White was fond of the analogy between the human & religious body. He wrote that the disorders in government which he had observed throughout his 30 years' association with the house needed to be addressed by the prioress: 'the only means to remedy these disorders, is to begin with the superiour, as the head, & by her to cure the whol body', ibid., p.3.
In all Religious families well ordred the younger are alwayes taught and instructed to shew all respect to their elders as unto those who have received them to the holy Religion and to be readye in alle occasions to doe any thing for them that obedience will permitt which helpeth much to the conserving of peace and charitie in a Religious Com[munity].

By couching monastic relationships in familial metaphors, writers of advice books were providing nuns with easily recognisable models for behaviour.

The familial metaphor was also in tune with ecclesiastical concepts of authority. For centuries the analogy had been employed by the Church to characterise the relationship between the faithful and the heavenly hierarchy. God the father, Christ the son and the Virgin Mary were represented as members of a divine family, the latter two deferring to the authority of the father. Individual Christians related to members of the holy family from a position of dependence. Thus, the believer was either child or wife in his or her dealings with the godhead. The Church itself was viewed in terms of a family - the household of God. For those who entered the religious life, the relationship was clearly defined. Nuns exchanged secular marriage for a spiritual union in which they were deemed to become brides of Christ. Profession ceremonies were often called 'bride days' and the novices were dressed in costly and elaborate gowns reminiscent of secular brides. However, the consummation of this union with Christ could not take place until death, which was described in the death notices of the Benedictine house at Ghent as the 'eternall nuptialls'. Therefore the period of life spent in the convent represented a period of transition between the earthly wedding and the heavenly consummation. Although nuns were brides of Christ, their religious status was defined in terms of worldly women by domestic parameters. They were married to Christ and his church, and consequently they were subject to Christ and his church in the same way that secular wives were subject to their husbands.

Discussing the relationship between bishops and nuns in the late middle ages, Penelope Johnson has pointed out that the male superior embodied the personal power of men over women. During the profession ceremony of a nun at which he officiated, the prelate 'acted both as the head of her family in leading the bride to her intended and as her spouse in accepting her vows'. The Counter-Reformation bishops wielded similar institutional and personal power to their medieval predecessors. In early modern English 'rules' and 'constitutions' bishops were given paternalistic power over their religious daughters which mirrored patriarchal power of fathers over their offspring in the world beyond the cloister. Restructuring of the regulation of religious orders at Trent had

40 Poor Clare Convent, Franciscan MS 16, Miscellanea, vol. 1, 'Account of the Duties of the Vicaress by Rev. M. Margaret Paul Radcliffe', c. 1626, f. 5.
42 'Ghent Obituary Notices', p. 36.
43 Johnson, Equal in Monastic Profession, p. 86.
placed ultimate authority in the hands of the local bishop (also known as the ordinary), unless a female cloister was overseen by the male chapter of its order.44 This meant that the abbess/prioress was ultimately responsible to the external superior of the house, either the bishop, or the superior of her order. The ordinary organised annual inspections of religious houses under his control, and could depose officers, including abbesses/prioreses, who were not deemed to be ruling adequately. Convent government was therefore always under the scrutiny of a male external monitor. Yet there was more immediate clerical supervision in the person of a cloister's confessor, or vicar. In most houses he wielded considerable powers. For example, in the Cambrai 'constitutions' the vicar was wholly responsible for the spiritual well-being of the cloister, but he also played a substantial role in its temporal government. The confessor had power of veto over every decision made by the abbess and community. Should the nuns act without his consent, whatever contract they had made would be void, and they risked deposition of the abbess for disobedience. The nuns were told that they should take him 'for the chief superiour in spirituall matters, and deputy of the wholl congregation in temporall'.45 In the Cambrai 'constitutions', the vicar's position was defined as paternal; indeed the abbess was exhorted to demonstrate filial respect for him.46

In a study of nineteenth-century nuns, Susan O'Brien suggested that the title 'mother' described the status and power of the founder and indicated the manner in which a nun's authority was to be wielded.47 The authority of an abbot in his community equalled that of a bishop, but the position of an abbess/prioress was undermined by her subjection to the confessor and male superiors. Thus, the nun's mandate to rule was tempered by her gender. Prescriptive literature in the seventeenth-century English cloisters confirms O'Brien's point. 'Statutes', 'constitutions', and advice books, compiled by the clergy, reminded abbesses/prioreses that the true position of authority in fact belonged to the confessor, and that his will was to be regarded in matters of importance. Richard White of St. Monica's informed Prioress Winefrid Thimbleby that

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45 Stanbrook Abbey, Cambrai MS 'Constitutions compiled for the better observation of the holie Rule of our most glorious Fa: and Patriarch S. Bennet', 1631, ff. 62-64. In the Brussels Benedictine cloister, the abbess & community were to elect a male assistant who would advise them in matters of grave consequence. This person was to be experienced in the ways of monastic life, & he acted as an independent arbitrator. Should the abbess & nuns disagree about something pertaining to the government of the house, he would be asked to rule upon the affair. The decision made by this man would then stand unless the visitor or ordinary should ordain otherwise; see Brussels Benedictine Statutes, Part 1, pp. 47-48.
46 Stanbrook Abbey, Cambrai MS 'Constitutions', f. 64. In the 'constitutions' of the 'Blue Nuns', the confessor reigned supreme in all spiritual matters, in which the abbess was forbidden to interfere. He also played an important role in monastic decision-making procedures. The abbess was expected to confer with him about important decisions she made, & he had a voice in the council which voted on constitutional matters. See Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', p. 286.
As no greater disorder can happen to a secular familie then for the wife to govern & the husband to be subject, which is as if the head should be governed by the tongue, or reason by some sense or passion; so nothing can beget a greater traine of miseries & disorder in a cloister, then the superiours ruling the ghostly father, or labouring to bring him to her judgement & follow her advice.48

Such advice suggested that authority was vested in the confessor, rather than the abbess/prioress who was expected to assume the role of the subservient wife. If the nuns disagreed with their spiritual adviser, they only had recourse of appeal to the male hierarchy in the person of the ordinary. Thus, it appeared that the gender order was maintained within the cloister, where the abbess certainly held the highest position among women, but was ultimately compelled to submit to a man.

Although the hierarchy of authority seemed clear, in reality, the prescriptive literature was rather confused in its definition of abbatial power wielded by a woman. Leadership within the Church, as in society, was a masculine province.49 Abbots and priors derived their mandate directly from Christ. Just as the father/king was said to hold the place of Christ within the household/state, so abbots/priors were the embodiment of Christ in the monastery.50 Confusion in female houses arose partly from the fact that the major religious 'rules' had been written for male communities and had later been adapted for female use. Therefore, occasionally, translations retained the association between Christ and the abbess/prioress. For example, the 'rule' of St. Benedict, translated into English by Alexia Grey of the Ghent Benedictine house, stated that 'the Abbesse because shee is thought to beare the person of Christ must bee called Lady and Abbesse, not for any presumption of her owne, but in regard of the honour and love of Christ'.51 Other documents which were written specifically for nuns maintained the simile. The 'constitutions' of the 'Blue Nuns' exhorted the nuns to demonstrate obedience to their abbess 'who holds the place of God' within the cloister.52 Thus, in certain instances gender boundaries were blurred sufficiently to conceptualise an abbess's power as masculine by equating her formal position with that of Christ.

In practice, gender none the less proved a major stumbling block in efforts to define the extent of female abbatial authority because of the relationship between the

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48 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS Qu 2, f. 21.
52 Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', p. 291. Upon the election of the abbess in this community the ecclesiastical representative of the ordinary who presided over the ceremony presented the newly elected superior to her nuns, telling them to acknowledge & honour in her 'the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ'. Ibid., p. 289.
abbess/prioress and the male clerical overseers of the convent. For example, in the 'constitutions' of the 'Blue Nuns' the very clause which declared that the abbess was God's representative contradicted itself by also stating that in certain disciplinary matters the abbess should defer to the ordinary 'by vertue of his greater Authority'. If the abbess held the place of God among her nuns, what higher position could be possessed by the bishop? The contradiction reflected unease and uncertainty among some clerics regarding the Church's apparent disregard for gender norms. None of the Catholic reforms of the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries could disguise the fact that there were groups of semi-autonomous women within its auspices. At Trent, and during later localised reviews of monasticism, increasingly stringent regulations were imposed upon women's religious communities. Opportunities for patriarchal interference in female monastic government were gradually tightened, but abbesses/prioresses remained in positions of anomalous power.

The familial metaphor was accordingly a useful means by which the Church could obscure the reality of women's government within its domains. It did so by emphasising the over-arching authority of the ordinary and confessor, while highlighting the subservient position of the abbess/prioress through maternal imagery. Richard White exhorted Winefrid Thimbleby to govern with 'a Mothers heart & the tender love of a superior'. Similarly, the 'constitutions' of the Benedictine house at Cambrai advised an abbess to treat her nuns with 'gentlenes and motherlie affection', so that they would be able to confide in her if they were troubled in body or spirit. Even exhortations against tyrannical rule, commonly levelled at the father/king in political and domestic treatises on government, were employed to temper women's power in the cloister. Richard White told Prioress Winifred Thimbleby that she was merely the handmaid of the Lord and of her nuns. He wrote, 'some Religious Superiours are stiled Mater Ancillae, Mother & hand mayd, being to love & take care of their subjects as their Mother, and to serve them as their mayde'. Likewise the 'Constitutions' of the 'Blue Nuns' informed the abbess that she was 'not chosen to be so much the Mistresse, as the servant of her subjects'. While such advice reminded women in power of their obligations to those under their leadership, it also served to undermine the absolute authority wielded by the superior in many instances.

53 Ibid., p. 291.
54 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS Qu 2, f. 59. In the Brussels Benedictine house, the abbess was described as the 'appointed Governess over the Spouses of Jesus-Christ', but she was exhorted to rule with 'motherly affection'; see Brussels Benedictine Statutes, Part 2, pp. 18, 20.
55 Stanbrook Abbey, Cambrai MS 'Constitutions', f. 70.
56 St. Monica's MS Qu 2, f. 7.
57 Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', p. 312.
Identifying the authority of the abbess/prioress over her nuns with that of a mother over her household, advice books conveyed a clear message to both the nuns and the community at large. As a religious institution, it was natural that the convent would replicate the divinely ordained model governing the world. By likening the cloister to a secular family, theoretically at least, the gender and social order was not challenged. Within the cloister itself, by upholding social distinctions between the two principal ranks of nun, and ordering the household according to age, the abbess was appropriating acceptable paradigms of female jurisdiction which allowed women authority over their social inferiors and children. Indeed, Richard White stated that the power of abbesses/prioresses was the same as that allowed parents, saying 'What authority the law of nature gives to Parents over their children, the same have superiors by vertue of the vow of obedience made to them over their subjects'.

The English nuns did not obviously question the model of government imposed upon them which effectively upheld the patriarchal order. Rather they embraced the familial metaphor willingly. In monastic records, cloisters consistently referred to their confessors and spiritual directors as their 'ghostly father', and bishops were accorded similar paternal deference. Nuns also identified their abbesses and prioresses as maternal figures. For example, the annals of the Bruges Augustinians recorded Priorress Augustina Bedingfield's 'true motherly affection by which she endeavoured that nothing should be wanting to any of her children'. Likewise, Abbess Elizabeth (Catherine) Wigmore of Pontoise was praised by her community for displaying 'prudent Government accompany'd with a great Zeal mixt with a Mothers Compassion, together with her exactness, not only to teach, but also to do on all times and occasions the perfect will of God'. Why did the English religious women acquiesce so readily with the model which apparently limited their autonomy?

It is possible that, unlike women in France, Spain, or even Germany, Englishwomen had no immediately visible examples of powerful abbesses/prioresses. Lacking identifiable role-models, nuns accordingly found it difficult to conceive of abbatial power. Indeed evidence suggests that many English nuns felt extremely uncomfortable with the notion of female authority. For example, when senior nuns in the Flemish cloister of St. Ursula's in Louvain challenged the validity of Margaret Clement's election as prioress, Clement concurred and did all she could to be released from the

58 St. Monica's MS Qu 2, f. 62.
60 Cited in Durrant, Flemish Mystics, p. 266.
61 'Ghent Obituary Notices', p. 61.
charge of government, which she did not relish.\textsuperscript{62} Likewise, Mary Wright of the Augustinian house in Bruges shunned household offices for many years. Eventually she was persuaded to become novice mistress, and ultimately was elected to the highest position in the cloister in 1693. In her 1709 obituary, the nuns declared her main fault had been 'that in the practice of humility she seemed to abase the authority of Superior rather too much by the difficulty she had in submitting to the respect due to her in that charge'.\textsuperscript{63} Thus for many women the prospect of ruling a cloister was anathema to their religious and cultural sensibilities. The language of female monastic government therefore shrouded the obvious fact that nuns could and did wield a degree of power not shared by other women in early modern society.

Alternatively, maternal imagery could well have conjured visions of strong female leadership for the nuns. In the absence of monastic role-models, many English gentlewomen had none the less witnessed the formidable power wielded by their mothers in recusant or elite households. Prioress Jane (Mary) Wiseman of St. Monica's was the daughter of Jane Vaughan Wiseman, sentenced to death for harbouring priests.\textsuperscript{64} The four daughters of the Catholic convert Elizabeth Cary, Lady Falkland, who were all professed in 1640 at the Benedictine cloister at Cambrai, had a similarly puissant example of maternal authority. In spite of public censure, Elizabeth Cary did all she could to promote her adopted faith, translating polemical treatises into English, and maintaining a staunchly Catholic household where she worked hard to convert others, in particular, her daughters. Significantly, Anne (Clementina) Cary, the eldest, not only wrote the biography of her accomplished mother, she also compiled the Paris cloister's 'constitutions', in collaboration with the confessor.\textsuperscript{65} For these women, and indeed many other daughters of Catholic families throughout the seventeenth century, the maternal metaphor invoked powerful images of women upholding the faith, and leading their households through the tumultuous years of the 'penal times'.

Therefore, in 'rules', 'constitutions' and religious guides, the government of the abbess/prioress was couched in language and concepts with which the nuns were familiar

\textsuperscript{62} Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS Q 29, f. 28.
\textsuperscript{63} Durrant, \textit{Flemish Mystics}, pp. 335-36. For the e.g. of Abbess Anne Forster of the Brussels Benedictines, see [Anne Neville], 'Abbess Neville's Annals of Five Communities of English Benedictine Nuns in Flanders, 1598-1687', Mary J. Rumsey (ed.), in \textit{Miscellanea 5}, [CRS, 6], London, 1909, (hereafter 'Abbess Neville's Annals'), p. 17.
\textsuperscript{64} Mary Wiseman was professed in 1595, she became prioress in 1609, & died in 1633. Her sisters Anne & Barbara Wiseman, both became abbesses of the Bridgettines of Lisbon. For accounts of her mother's staunch support of the Catholic faith, see \textit{Chronicle of St. Monica's}, vol. 1, pp. 49-55, 80-84.
and comfortable. As members of a patriarchal Church and society, they accepted without question their subjection to over-arching clerical control. However, the nuns' experiences in their secular families had taught them that paternal control was often merely a formality. In reality, the power of the abbess/prioress was far more complex than the familial model suggested. The practical strengths and limitations of women's authority in the cloister will provide the focus of the next section.

II. Female Authority in the Abbey and the Priory

The picture presented of female monastic government thus far differs considerably from the image of the convent as a group of autonomous women. Far from offering an alternative model to the secular social order, theoretically the monastery replicated and emphasised the common early modern perception of a divinely ordained hierarchical universe. What was different about the cloister compared with seventeenth-century English society as a whole was the application of this model to a group consisting predominantly of women. In this section, I will explore the degree of formal power actually wielded by nuns in the seventeenth-century English convents; in particular, the authority of abbesses/prioresses vis-a-vis their nuns and the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Through an exploration of expected roles and actual incidences of conflict, dramatic differences between concepts of abbatial jurisdiction and how that command was executed become obvious. While most female monastic superiors demurred at least publicly to the higher authority of the clerics, others manipulated the terms of the relationship to challenge decisions with which they disagreed. Within the cloister and in their dealings with the world beyond the enclosure, many nuns demonstrated that they were more than capable of governing effectively; some became extremely powerful members of the exiled English Catholic community.

The abbess/prioress held a unique position in early modern society. Although her power was couched in familial terms, and there were several checks to her absolute authority, she was a woman who had a mandate to govern others. All members of a convent pledged obedience to their leader upon her election, and the abbess/prioress had far-reaching powers over her subjects as a consequence of their obligation to obey her. Responsible for the temporal welfare of the community, the female superior had jurisdiction over financial affairs and the day-to-day functioning of the house. Furthermore, her office obliged her to ensure that the cloister adhered to its 'rule' and 'constitutions'; any transgressors against these laws would be disciplined by her. The convent's officers assisted her by taking charge of the various components of household

management, but it was the superior's responsibility to oversee their performance in office. Should the convent fall upon hard times as a consequence of mismanagement, the blame lay squarely upon the abbess/prioress for failing to govern effectively. In secular households wives certainly managed their families' domestic affairs, but husbands were responsible nevertheless for overall good order. The authority vested in the position of female religious superior thus belied the maternal role attributed her in the familial analogy.

Abbesses/prioresses recognised their anomalous position and used the conflicting images of abbatial power to their advantage. Margaret Clement of St. Ursula's adopted both maternal and Christological references. When there were few vocations during the early years of her rule, she was said to have 'accounted herself a barren Mother'. However, once her successful cloister was thriving, she likened herself to the 'good shepherd'. When questioned about her great devotion during the divine office, she claimed that it was during services that she had to guard herself and her flock, 'lest the ravening wolf [i.e. the devil] should do any hurt to her little lambs.' The Benedictines of Ghent also appropriated Christological imagery for their abbess when they compared Jane (Eugenia) Poulton with 'a hen feeding and clocking them all to-gether under the wings of her tender solitude [sic ], brooding and warming them with the fervent zeal of common order and disciplin'. Christ had equated his care for Jerusalem with a hen's protection for her chicks, so the rule of Abbess Poulton was imbued with symbolism of the maternal Christ.

Yet, despite nuns' acknowledgment of the singular authority vested in the abbess/prioress, her power was limited by various factors. Firstly, she was elected to her primacy; and although in some communities the position was held for life, in others the superior was chosen for three year terms. An abbess/prioress who did not govern

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67 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS E 4, ff. 5-10; Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', pp. 287-91; Brussels Benedictine Statutes, Part 2, pp. 18-23; Poor Clare Convent, Franciscan MS 6b, ff. 53-6.

68 Chronicle of St. Monica's, vol. 1, p. 31. When vocations from England began to flow in the 1590s, the chronicler wrote 'it pleased our Lord to comfort this good Mother by sending her many happy children out of England to be religious'. Ibid., p. 32.

69 Cited in Durrant, Flemish Mystics, p. 204.

70 'Ghent Obituary Notices', p. 38.


72 The Benedictines at Brussels, Ghent, Pontoise, Dunkirk & Ypres, the Poor Clares, & the Bruges & Louvain Augustinians elected their abbesses for life, but the 'Blue Nuns', Franciscans, & Sepulchrians held triennial elections, at which it was usually possible for the same woman to be re-elected superior. The Cambrai & Paris Benedictines had quadrennial elections. The Paris Augustinian community initially elected their abbess for life. However, when the founder Abbess Mary Tredway grew too infirm to govern, the cloister took the unusual step of reducing the status of the house to that of a conventual priory under the authority of a prioress to be elected every 4 years. This measure was undertaken to avoid having a French abbess thrust upon them in commendam (i.e. nominated by the king, rather than elected by the nuns).
effectively could be deposed under both systems, either through the election of a new superior after her term in office had elapsed, or through appeal to the clerical superiors of the community in the case of a life incumbent. Furthermore, the abbess/prioress was assisted in the decision-making aspect of her rule by the senior nuns who comprised the discreets. Their role differed slightly among orders and individual houses but generally they acted as advisers in matters of serious consequence, and the abbess/prioress was compelled to meet with them on a regular basis. Dissatisfied nuns who could not confront their superior directly used these councillors as intermediaries.\(^7\)

The very fact that abbesses/prioresses were elected to office further challenged the dynamics of the familial model for monastic government. All choir nuns who had achieved four years of profession were eligible to elect their superior; the 'daughters' therefore chose their 'mother'. Monastic obedience was accordingly tempered by the fact that the authority of the abbess/prioress had been conferred by her children. The existence of several other women within the enclosure who also participated in the government of the house through exercising specific household offices and acting as advisers, further clouds any attempt to equate closely the situation in the monastery with that of the secular family.

Moreover, decisions regarding profession of novices, significant financial matters, cases of extreme misbehaviour and other issues of great importance to the reputation and well-being of the cloister were put to the professed nuns of the choir during chapter. Although the superior and her chief officers presided over the chapter which was held weekly, statutes declared that the younger nuns were to speak first so that their opinions could be expressed freely. Chapter also served as a disciplinary forum during which individual nuns were expected to confess serious transgressions against the rule committed either by themselves or by others. Hence it acted as a vital regulatory body which not only moderated the power of the abbess/prioress and her officers, but also enabled other nuns to contribute to the preservation of the 'rule' and monastic discipline.\(^7\)

Prioress Winefrid Thimbleby of the Louvain Augustinians was under no illusion regarding the extent of her authority. When asked by her brother-in-law to accept his daughters for less than the dowry stipulated by the community, Thimbleby protested she was unable to act without the consent of her council which required precise details of

\(^7\) Brussels Benedictine Statutes, Part 2, pp. 36-41; Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', pp. 292-93.

\(^7\) Chapter was not required to act as a decision-making body every time it met. The institution of weekly chapters was predominantly for the regulation of behaviour. If other matters were to be discussed the nuns had to be warned that they were pending, prior to meeting in the chapter house. Brussels Benedictine Statutes, Part 1, pp. 39-49; Poor Clare Convent, Franciscan MS 6b, f. 38; Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS E 4, ff. 69-75; Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', pp. 283, 294-95; Stanbrook Abbey, Cambrai MS 'Constitutions', ff. 54-55.
dowry arrangements. Indeed she suggested that as prioress she had to avoid any behaviour which could be construed as an attempt to influence decisions:

you may imagine I have power to diminish the rattes [i.e. rates] wch really I have not, my power is onely payne. It brings no liberty, but restraint. I am more than ever obliged to stande for the profitt of this family in spyt of [al] selfe interist.75

As prioress, Thimbleby had to place the good of her community before anything else. Although she dearly longed to see her nieces professed in her cloister, she was unwilling to compromise her position in a way that might jeopardise the financial security and reputation of St. Monica's, nor was she confident that she could override her stipulated powers outlined in the 'constitutions'.

Indeed, in other cloisters, superiors who did ignore the wishes of their nuns were forced to relinquish government. Abbess Anne (Elizabeth) Timperley of the 'Blue Nuns' in Paris quit her office in 1681 after a dispute with her discreets over the removal of their confessor. The issue arose in the aftermath of the Popish Plot which had resulted in a decline in the number of postulants joining the community, combined with the failure of revenues from England. The abbess was advised by her brother, Henry Timperley O.S.B., to replace the cloister's Irish confessor with an English priest in the hope that an Englishman might procure the necessary patronage for the house. In spite of unanimous opposition from her council, Timperley persisted with her plan. When the representative of the archbishop came later in the year to preside over the election of a new vicaress, he announced that the Irish cleric would be removed in favour of one of Catherine of Braganza's chaplains. Although the nuns submitted to the will of the ordinary and accepted the new confessor, they were evidently furious with their abbess. Nine months later Anne Timperley resigned her office. Within a couple of months of this humiliation, she and another nun were granted permission to leave the cloister to retire to a French convent.76

Internal checks and balances therefore moderated the authority of the abbess/prioress within her community. The powers of the female superior were wide-ranging, but not absolute. Participation of all choir nuns in monastic government meant that, in reality, power relationships in the cloister more closely resembled a consensual than a familial model. For an abbess/prioress to rule effectively, she needed the support of her council and the majority of the choir nuns. The above examples suggest that cloisters were often able to resolve their disputes without recourse to external arbiters, but should difficulties prove insurmountable, dissatisfied abbesses/prioresses and nuns alike

75 BL, Add. MS 36,452, Aston Papers, vol. 9, Private Correspondence 1613-1703, f. 89, Winefrid Thimbleby to Herbert Aston. The letter is not dated but was written between 1668 & 1672.
76 Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', pp. 29-31.
could appeal to their clerical superiors. For this purpose, the ordinary appointed a member of the clergy to act as 'visitor' to each cloister. This person made an annual visit during which he spoke with every nun in an effort to ascertain whether the 'rule' was being followed correctly, and to confirm that the abbess was governing a harmonious community.

The visitor appointed by the ordinary had the authority to examine everything pertaining to the spiritual and temporal well-being of the community. If in his opinion any problems were apparent, he had the power to rectify them as he saw fit. Thus, if any nuns reported contravention of the 'rule', or if his examination of the account books unearthed poor management of the land and goods of the house, the visitor could mete out the necessary penances and depose those deemed incompetent from their monastic office. On the whole, visitations were devoid of serious conflict. For example, in the annals of the 'Blue Nuns', the visitation of 1689 was described in detail, concluding with the comment that the visitor 'was much satisfyed with the peece & concord he found the community in'. In 1700, the visitor 'gave serveral ordinations for the better observation [of] Religious Discipline and observance of the Rule & consti[tuti]ons' but was otherwise satisfied with affairs. Hence, the function of the ordinary was to audit abbatial efficiency.

Nevertheless, the provision for external moderation of monastic government paved the way for unwelcome intervention. On occasions the wishes of the visitor could override those of the majority of the nuns. In 1606, upon the retirement of Prioress Margaret Clement of St. Ursula's, an Englishwoman was elected as her successor. Although Jane (Mary) Wiseman had twenty-five votes, and her Flemish rival only seven, the latter was installed because the visitor upheld the Tridentine decree which declared a female superior must have attained the age of forty years to hold office; Wiseman was thirty-six years old. When the English nuns proposed to appeal against the decision, both the visitor and the ordinary threatened excommunication. Persuaded by Margaret Clement to submit to their clerical superiors, the nuns then had to undergo the humiliation of publicly admitting their disobedience and requesting forgiveness of the visitor. Public displays such as this served to remind the nuns of their position in respect to the

77 Stanbrook Abbey, Cambrai MS 'Constitutions', ff. 97-108; Brussels Benedictine Statutes, Part 3, pp. 3-9; Poor Clare Convent, Franciscan MS 6b, ff. 66-7; Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', pp. 304-5.
78 Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', pp. 36-7, 48.
79 There had been a precedent set for disregarding the age limit in that particular cloister. When Margaret Clement had been elected prioress in 1569, her youth was ignored in favour of her capabilities. The English nuns felt that the 1606 ruling was unfair, given the eminent precedent set by the retiring prioress. However, the Clement precedent had occurred too close to the definition of the Tridentine decrees to have been affected by them. Wiseman's election in 1606 took place at a time when many Church leaders were scrupulously pursuing the reform agenda.
80 Chronicle of St. Monica's, vol. 1, pp. 56-58.
Church hierarchy, and indicated the right of veto held by the ecclesiastics over the choice of an abbess/prioress.

At times the visitor would attempt to instigate reforms which were not popular. In 1644 the Augustinians at Bruges were persuaded during a visitation to say the office of Matins when they rose in the morning at four instead of at midnight. Initially the nuns opposed the change, citing the 'ancient custom of our holy Order' as justification for their disobedience. Told that 'divers cloisters of the Order' had already adopted the change, the nuns finally agreed to a trial period. They yielded to the wishes of the visitor a year later.81

Occasionally, however, nuns were prepared to fight local Church officials to maintain autonomy. A contretemps between the Ghent Benedictines and their bishop reveals the nuns' reluctance to concede any of their formal authority to the ordinary. When, in 1641, Abbess Jane (Eugenia) Poulton sought retirement from office because of increasing senility, the house resisted attempts by the bishop to choose his assistant for the forthcoming abbatial election. The religious women opposed three successive episcopal appointees on the grounds that the bishop was contravening their 'constitutions' by imposing his choice upon them. When challenged, the nuns produced the Latin copy of their 'statutes' and pointed out the passage which confirmed their privilege to appoint the assistant. The bishop and a group of divines convened a meeting to examine the community's claims, and ruled in the nuns' favour. Mary (Anne) Neville hinted at the nuns' concern about the appropriation of their right by the ordinary:

This poynt of chusing thos that are to attend and assist the Bishope at visites and ellection of the Abbesse. is of so great importance to be mayntayned in vigor as shold it ons come to be at the Bishops appoyntment; you wold hardly find it restord agayn to its former latitude.82

Neville suggests that although nuns generally accepted the powers vested in their superiors (which of course undermined cloisters' autonomy), religious women would not tolerate any attempt by the clergy to diminish their community's prerogatives.

Abbesses and prioresses were also determined to preserve their mandate to coordinate the daily affairs of their house. Determination to do so could lead to conflict between the confessor and female superior. Although the vicar was given considerable participatory powers in the governing of monastic affairs, he remained more of an adviser to the abbess/prioress than a director. Most convents developed mutually supportive working relationships with their confessors who were often useful intermediaries between the cloister and the outside world. The partnership between the Paris

81 Durrant, Flemish Mystics, pp. 261-62.
82 'Abbess Neville's Annals', p. 29.
Augustinians and their two successive confessors reveals the extent to which priests could become essential elements of convent government because of their mobility and contacts. Without its founding chaplain Thomas Carre, who assisted Abbess Letitia (Mary) Tredway, the cloister would not have been established in 1634, nor would it have flourished during its early years. In the 1640s and 1650s Carre developed important contacts at Henrietta Maria's Paris residence and was able to secure vital patronage for the nuns. Later, in the 1670s when the house had fallen on hard times, it was assisted by the business acumen of Edward Lutton. The son of a tradesman, Lutton was an astute accountant who was adept at recovering outstanding monies owed the convent; he also regularly arranged low-interest loans whenever the nuns required additional income to survive. Without Lutton's participation in the cloister's financial affairs, the Augustinian convent may not have survived the string of economic catastrophes it encountered during the latter decades of the seventeenth century.83

In other communities, the vicar did not perhaps play such a central role, but he none the less acted as an adviser and confidant of the abbess/prioress. In an account of the gunpowder explosion which demolished part of the Gravelines Poor Clare convent in 1654 one catches a glimpse of daily monastic life. A description of the havoc wreaked by the blast revealed the activities of various nuns at the time it occurred. While most of the nuns were busy at work in the kitchens and workroom, Abbess Louisa Clare Taylor was discussing convent business with the confessor at the grate, suggesting that consultation with the chaplain was a feature of daily household business.84 Thus, many abbesses/prioresses enjoyed good associations with their clerical assistants, and consulted them on a regular basis to ensure smooth and efficient management of household affairs.

But relations between nuns and their vicar were not always amicable. In the late sixteenth century, Prioress Margaret Clement of St. Ursula's dismissed a young priest whom she viewed as 'beeing somewhat Light of behaveour' because she feared he was 'in danger to bringe the house to some discreditt'.85 When the priest disputed her decision and tried to clear his name by appealing to powerful clergy and townspeople in Brussels and Louvain, Clement refused to change her mind. A Jesuit friendly to the cloister later commented that it was 'a thing worthy of great commendations, that a woman should resist so many men, yea & thos allso of so greate account'.86 Although less controversial, the Pontoise abbess, Mary (Anne) Neville, rendered the supervisory

84 Buckfast Abbey, Boulogne-Pontoise MS 'Original Paper as to the blowing up of the town of Gravelines', f. 1.
85 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS Q 29, f. 32.
86 Ibid., ff. 32-3.
role of her cloister's confessor irrelevant when she announced her retirement in 1671. Neville declared her decision to the bishop, confessor, prioress and procuratrix during a visitation of the cloister. They were shocked by her desire to retire, but even more surprised that she had consulted no one, not even the vicar, regarding her concerns. Justifying her lack of consultation, Neville argued that 'I was not willing to dispute it with any, but to put it into the full power of my Superiour and the Com[m]unity'. In her mind, the opinions of the bishop and her nuns were of greater consequence than those of her vicar.

Some clerics acknowledged the tenuous nature of their power, despite its apparent potency in 'constitutions'. For example, Richard White of the Augustinian cloister in Louvain was well aware of his limited authority over the prioress. White employed the familial metaphor to describe the relationship of the prioress vis-à-vis the confessor, and he firmly advocated patriarchal authority in the convent. Yet the vicar was forced to concede that the ultimate power rested firmly in the hands of the prioress. Bemoaning the 'want of government' under previous prioresses, White offered Winefrid Thimbleby an advice book on how to remedy the disorders he perceived in the cloister. He admitted, however, that reform was entirely in her hands, and all he could do was offer advice and prayers. White's concession to the superior authority of the abbess/prioress over the confessor was borne out in the cloister of the 'Blue Nuns' where abbatial primacy was illustrated symbolically in the number of masses to be said for the souls of departed members of the community. While the abbess was accorded ninety masses upon her demise, the confessor was given thirty, placing him at the same level as the choir nuns.

The reality of abbatial power was thus markedly different to the implicitly subordinate maternal metaphor commonly applied to describe the authority of female religious superiors. Patriarchal supervision was an ever-present force in monastic government, but most cloisters remained relatively free of outright intervention which curbed the rule of their abbess/prioress. Evidence suggests that disputes over jurisdiction could be resolved in favour of either nuns or their clerical overseers, and many abbesses and prioresses were more than prepared to defend their prerogative. However, there was another dimension to the relationship between a cloister and its external advisers. With the respect and friendship of bishops and confessors, many convents were able to sidestep potentially damaging intervention in their affairs. Abbesses and prioresses therefore sought to impress and befriend the authorities with whom they dealt on a regular basis. By accumulating a buffer of supporters amidst the clergy, and even from among the local townspeople and English Catholics, female monastic rulers strengthened

87 'Abess Neville's Annals', p. 63.
88 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS Qu 2, ff. 2-5.
89 Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', p.305; Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS Qu 2, f. 21.
their authority and lessened the chances of external intervention. The Boulogne Benedictine nuns' tumultuous relationship with their ordinary illustrates how crucial this system was for nuns.

The foundation of the Boulogne Benedictine house reveals both negative and positive aspects of relations between Church authorities and nuns. While Bishop François de Perrochel of Boulogne represented the inflexible stance of some clerics, the outcome of his dispute with Abbess Mary Knatchbull of Ghent reveals the extent to which regulations were negotiable. The Boulogne controversy hinged upon bishops' right of veto over the foundation of religious institutions in their dioceses. When six nuns from the Ghent Benedictine house arrived in Boulogne in 1652 to establish a cloister, Perrochel ordered them home within forty-eight hours under pain of excommunication. The bishop refused to accept the Benedictines for two reasons. First, he had heard a report that the Ghent convent was in a dire state financially, so he assumed that Abbess Knatchbull had 'sent out those Religious as the Scum of their Cloyster to shift for them selves in his Dioces'. But second, and seemingly more heinous in the bishop's view, was the Ghent abbess's neglect to seek his permission for the new foundation.

Mary Knatchbull had in fact attempted seek episcopal acquiescence for the filiation, but her messenger failed to see the bishop. None the less, the six founders should not have left Ghent without formal permission from Perrochel, so technically Knatchbull was at fault. Correspondence between the abbess and the bishop graphically illustrated the unequal power relationship between them. In a letter dated 4 February, 1652, Mary Knatchbull humbly beseeched forgiveness of the bishop, citing her 'ignorance, inexperience, and want of language' as reasons for her misdemeanour. Perrochel responded sternly ten days later:

It is true that folks have not proceeded wth me in so good maner as they ought in the point wch concerns the establishment wch yo Religious pretend to make att Boulogne. You neither ought to have sent them wth out knowing first whither I would like it, and whither I were satisfied wth those condissions under wch you pretend to establish them heer. Yea and after all that you ought to have demanded my permission and that in writing, wch they ought to have had in their hands before they parted from you.

Perrochel clearly used the situation to assert his authority over the abbess. For her part, Knatchbull could not afford to antagonise the bishop further and adopted a conciliatory, even submissive, tone.

90 Buckfast Abbey, Boulogne-Pontoise MS, Mary Knatchbull, 'An Account of the Foundation of the Convent of Boulogne: First Filiation from Ghent', 1653, ff. 3-29.
91 Ibid., f. 34. Knatchbull presumably translated her correspondence with Perrochel for the chronicle account of the foundation.
92 Ibid., f. 44.
93 Ibid., f. 59.
In reality, Perrochel was abusing his position by insisting so pedantically upon the correct protocol. The case for the foundation was subsequently submitted to a council of learned divines in Paris for adjudication, and the clerics ruled in favour of the cloister, citing the persecution of Catholics in England as reason enough for bending the rules in favour of the English nuns. Yet, no sooner had the bishop begrudgingly agreed to accept the nuns, than he objected to them using the 'constitutions' they had brought from Ghent. The Ghent nuns had obtained a dispensation from rising at midnight to say matins, instead performing the office before they went to bed. Perrochel was unhappy with this modification, and ignored the nuns' pleas that uninterrupted sleep enabled them to pray and work better. Again the dispute between bishop and nuns was put to the clerics at the Sorbonne, but on this occasion the divines ruled in favour of the bishop.

Once the issues of the foundation and the 'constitutions' were resolved, Perrochel became one of the cloister's greatest allies. He extolled the sanctity of the Benedictine founders and, in particular, the virtue of Anne (Christina) Forster, one of the nuns. Significantly, in 1656, when Forster was elected abbess at the age of thirty-eight, Perrochel dispensed with the Tridentine decree concerning the minimum age for female superiors. In 1658, to his great dismay, Abbess Forster decided to move the community to Pontoise. The bishop wrote commendatory letters on their behalf to Church officials in Paris, and reportedly mourned the departure of 'such pyous deserving children'.

The bishop of Boulogne's dealings with the Benedictine nuns in his diocese reveals the complexity of relations between houses of religious women and their ecclesiastical superiors. Perrochel initially adopted a stern paternal posture in his dealings with the nuns, but subsequently cast himself as the kind father of the cloister. Significantly, the turning point in the relationship between the bishop and the nuns was Perrochel's first meeting with Christina Forster. In an hour of discussion, Forster persuaded him of the Benedictine founders' great virtue, and thus convinced him that their cloister would be a credit to his diocese rather than a burden. Perrochel's regard for the English gentlewomen subsequently increased steadily, despite the fact that the nuns were constantly in need of financial assistance. Indeed, after four years' acquaintance, he disregarded his former penchant for the canons of Trent and installed the admirable

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94 Ibid., ff. 62-63.
96 'Abbess Neville's Annals', p. 48.
97 Ibid., p. 49; Murray-Sinclair, 'Pontoise', p. 7.
Christina Forster as abbess. It appears therefore that by obtaining the respect of the bishop, nuns could manipulate the terms of the relationship to their advantage. Astute abbesses and prioresses were well aware that by befriending bishops and confessors, they could almost dictate the terms of their dealings with their clerical overseers. Thus, although couched in patriarchal language, the relationship between cloister and ordinary was negotiable.

In many respects, therefore, the situation in the monastic household resembled the secular model it supposedly imitated. Language describing the structure of conventual government and the nature of abbatial power equated the cloister with the domestic microcosm of the early modern commonweal. Yet in the face of patriarchal rhetoric which apparently diminished the autonomy of the nuns and, in particular, the authority of the abbess/prioress, the convent was none the less a community of semi-independent women, ruled by a woman they had elected. Restraints to the potency of the abbess/prioress came from her nuns as well as from the ecclesiastical administrators of the cloister. I would conclude that, in reality, the censure of the nuns was more of a threat to abbatial power than intervention from the ordinary and the confessor. Central to successful monastic government was the nuns' ability to reverse the somewhat unequal weighting of abbatial versus clerical authority outlined in the prescriptive literature. Just as secular wives could negotiate more egalitarian relations within the domestic sphere through the love and respect of their husbands, nuns were able to temper monastic patriarchy by establishing good relationships with Church officials. Ultimately, however, the most crucial aspect of monastic government were the relationships forged with the worldly community at large. The vulnerability and strength these relations engendered will form the subject of the next two chapters.
A Religious superior being to act both Maryes & Marthas part; Maryes by contemplation, & retiredness, Marthas (who was the first superiour of Religious wemen we read of) by Activity and government; it is necessary that she understand the duty of both states, & obligations of both offices. Maryes part must be her desire, Marthas her necessitie...

The complex issue of nuns' work was addressed by Eileen Power in her study of medieval nunneries. Power insisted that as monastic houses were social as well as religious units, although nuns were brides of Christ, they were no less housewives than the ladies of neighbouring manors. Thus, nuns had to combine the opposing roles of Martha and Mary in order to run the large medieval monastic estates which provided them with their daily temporal requirements and financial base. The English women who founded and joined convents on the Continent in the seventeenth century faced a similar scenario. Although they had taken the vows of contemplative monasticism, it was not possible to escape the exigencies of economic reality. Indeed the duties of Martha did not fall merely to the abbess/prioress; all sisters were required to participate in the daily toil of administration, housework and domestic industry. Without nuns' physical labour the cloisters could not have functioned from day to day, nor could they have survived financially.

Unlike their medieval predecessors, the English convents' economic infrastructure was not rooted in land ownership. Established on foreign soil under the Tridentine insistence that women's religious communities must be situated within city walls, it was impossible for the nuns to acquire manorial estates like those enjoyed by houses endowed in the middle ages. Instead the English cloisters were part of the urban landscape and economy. They drew most of their income from the dowries of their members, the charitable assistance of families and friends, and from both landed and paper investments. However, these financial sources were often inadequate, and several

1 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS Qu 2, [Richard White (alias Johnson)], 'Instructions for a Religious Superior : Penned & presented to the Rd Mother N:N: upon the day she was installed Prioress of St Monica's in Louvaine', 1668, f. 6. Martha & Mary were commonly applied metaphors for the tension between temporal & spiritual duties in the English cloisters. The actual women had been the sisters of Lazarus in the gospels (Luke 10.38; John 11. 1-2). Their association with manual labour & prayer stemmed from a visit Christ paid to their home in Bethany (Luke 10.38). Upon Christ's arrival, Mary sat at his feet & listened to him preach, while Martha busied herself with providing hospitality for their guest. Annoyed at her sister's lack of assistance, Martha complained, only to be told by Christ that Mary had indeed chosen the better part. Contemplative nuns accordingly vowed themselves to Mary's vocation of prayer & abnegation of worldly affairs.

communities faced ruin, or at least severe pecuniary hardship, at regular points throughout the seventeenth century. For this reason the nuns had to develop income-generating activities to supplement their customary revenues. And this had to be done within the narrow cultural space imposed by their gender and social status. Yet most of the convents were able to scrape together enough resources to survive into the eighteenth century.

This chapter will explore the economic realities of the monastic life for the seventeenth-century English cloisters. Maintaining solvency required careful planning by the abbess/prioress and her advisers, and hard work on the part of every member of a community. I will argue that through a mixture of alms, education, hospitality, and domestic industry, the nuns developed mechanisms for survival which were commensurate with both the monastic ideal, and prescribed gender and social roles. This strategy is best understood as a reworking of the Martha and Mary metaphor in such a way that the boundaries between religious and secular work were conveniently blurred. In the first section, I will discuss the religious and social context which both created nuns' financial problems, and shaped the strategies they adopted to alleviate their poverty. The remaining two sections will focus on income earning activities conducted by cloisters. Section two analyses the commercial value of prayer, and the way in which the English nuns adapted their contemplative vocation for financial gain. The third section assesses the more secular modes of revenue-raising undertaken by individuals and communities to supplement the income earned from dowries and alms.

I. The Ideology of Work in the English Cloisters

In the seventeenth-century English convents, work was governed by economic necessity, religious ideology and cultural expectations. Within the monastic context, manual labour was imbued with a distinctive spiritual significance which aimed to lift toil beyond mere financial necessity into the realm of religious devotion. Indeed the most vital task undertaken by nuns and monks was prayer in the form of the opus dei, literally 'the work of God'. Yet from the earliest pronouncements upon the meaning and conduct of spiritual and physical toil in monasticism, religious ideology clashed with cultural norms. The Church's solution was to retain the original spirit of monastic labour, but to practise it in cloisters which were increasingly organised according to worldly precepts. For contemplative women in the seventeenth century, tensions between the complex monastic work ethic and the realities of financial survival often resulted in pecuniary strife. This section will explain how the evolution of work in monasticism, and the concerns of the Counter-Reformation, impacted upon the early modern English women's religious communities.
The complex philosophy of labour inherent in the monastic tradition can be found in religious 'rules' which prescribed a rigid regime of spiritual and physical industry for those undertaking a coenobitic vocation. For example, St. Benedict in his regulations regarding manual labour warned against idleness which he deemed to be the enemy of the soul. As a precaution against sloth and the problems which could emanate from it, Benedict recommended fixed hours of physical labour and periods for sacred reading. In the 'Rule', monks who lived by the labour of their hands were to be praised as they followed the tradition of the apostles and fathers of the Church. Thus, two objectives of manual labour emerge in the Benedictine 'Rule'. Firstly, monks should work in order to occupy themselves and prevent idleness. Secondly, physical toil was a form of humiliation. Work in the fields had always been the task of lowly and servile social groups. Monks, who were generally recruited from the wealthy and noble classes, should undertake the positions of their inferiors as an exercise in humility. Thus, in monasticism, work had a spiritual rather than a material meaning.

Inevitably, the ideology of work prescribed in monastic 'rules' was practised more in tune with contemporary social norms than with St. Benedict's original ideals. For example, as monasticism evolved in the centuries after his death, attitudes towards physical toil were gradually transformed in accordance with the prejudices of the ruling elites from whom religious women and men were recruited. Lowly tasks in the fields and household were deemed unsuitable for nuns and monks who were daughters and sons of the aristocracy and gentry. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, many monastic orders solved the predicament by recruiting conversi, or lay sisters and brothers. These women and men of lesser birth became a kind of religious proletariat. They had fewer spiritual obligations than the other nuns or monks, so that they could undertake the burden of daily domestic chores. As a consequence of these social distinctions the status of the opus dei vastly overwhelmed the merit of manual labour. The intrusion of

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3 For a somewhat flawed analysis of the economic benefits flowing from the monastic ideology of work, see Alfred Kieser, 'From Asceticism to Administration of Wealth. Medieval Monasteries and the Pitfalls of Rationalisation', Organizational Studies, 8, 1987, pp. 103-123. Kieser's sources are limited to secondary material citing monastic 'rules'. This has led him to assume that monasteries were automatically wealthy because of the ascetic principles which underpinned their work ethic. He also fails to recognise that factors other than financial success could contribute to the good reputation of a religious house.


worldly values in the cloister therefore inscribed different meanings upon industry in the monastic economy.

Likewise, work in religious houses was gender-specific. 'Rules', like that of St. Benedict, had been written for men, but over time they were adapted for use in female religious houses.\(^7\) Theoretically the ideology underpinning monastic labour was largely the same for both women and men. None the less, while male monasteries became famous for their scriptoria and scholarship, nuns were renowned for their spinning and needlework.\(^8\) Nuns' capacity for learnedness declined following the development of university education in the twelfth century from which women were excluded.\(^9\) Instead of wielding the pen in the service of God, religious women were encouraged to take up the distaff and needle.\(^10\) The centrality of gender in defining what was appropriate work for monastic women is evident in this division of labour. While monks were offered the opportunity to pursue a scholastic career which set them apart from the pursuits of their brothers in the world, nuns were accorded the same work as their secular sisters. Moreover, religious women were allocated occupations commensurate with their social status as daughters of the gentry and aristocracy.

The moral and social considerations which underpinned nuns' labours in the work-room took little account of a convent's financial position. Should a house fall upon hard times, piecemeal embroidery would hardly fill the empty coffers. Indeed occupations like spinning received notoriously poor payment.\(^11\) Yet the difficulty of women being able to support themselves by their needles or spindles did not deter Catholic reformers from insisting upon the merits of needlework and spinning. In early modern Italian reformatory institutions for women, ex-prostitutes were put to work at spindles and looms, prompting Sherrill Cohen to conclude that 'labor was sometimes meant more to keep bodies busy than to train workers to earn a living wage'.\(^12\) Similar principles governed the prescription of work in female monastic 'constitutions' where

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\(^7\) See The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, Betty Radice (trans.), Harmondsworth, 1974, pp. 159-269, for Heloise's complaints about the inadequacies of religious 'rules', & for Abelard's modifications.
\(^8\) Power, Medieval English Nunneries, pp. 255-58.
\(^12\) Sherrill Cohen, The Evolution of Women's Asylums Since 1500. From Refuges for Ex-Prostitutes to Shelters for Battered Women, New York, 1992, pp. 120, 82-85, 130.
references to manual labour implied that nuns would be employed with their needles. That such work had a higher symbolic value than economic utility was evident in injunctions against the sale of needlework in some houses.

Scant attention was paid to the financial security of convents in 'rules' and 'constitutions' because poverty was a central pillar of the monastic ideal. Upon religious profession, nuns and monks renounced all personal entitlement to worldly possessions. However, most orders permitted convents to hold property and moveable assets in common to support the needs of the religious family. Others, like those Poor Clares who lived under St. Colette's stricter revision of Clare's rule (Colettines), were bound to absolute poverty, and depended totally upon the charity of lay folk for their sustenance. Although both male and female medieval monasteries were governed by the same ideological factors concerning poverty; in reality, women's cloisters more often found themselves in pecuniary strife. Research has shown that insufficient assets at the foundation of a cloister often dogged its subsequent financial fortunes. Furthermore, studies of medieval women's religious houses have revealed that patrons were more generous in their endowment of male institutions, making women's cloisters especially vulnerable to real, as well as ideological, poverty. For example, the thirteenth-century Norman visitation Register of Archbishop Eudes Rigaud suggests that although women's houses were generally larger than men's, the resources of nunneries stood at fifteen per cent of their male counterparts. Likewise, Claire Cross has noted that in 1536 not one of the twenty-four female monasteries in Yorkshire accrued annual revenues of even £100. Yet rather than solve the difficulties facing nuns, the Tridentine reformers actually worsened their financial plight.

The imposition of strict enclosure on houses of religious women at the Council of Trent had severe implications for nuns' economic structure. For example, Colettine

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17 Johnson, Equal in Monastic Profession, pp. 219-20.
19 H.J Schroeder (ed.), Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, St. Louis & London, 1941, pp. 220-21, 227. Earlier efforts to tighten enclosure laws had likewise impinged severely upon nuns' ability to support themselves. See Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, 'Strict Active Enclosure and Its Effects on the
Poor Clares who had formerly maintained themselves through begging were no longer permitted to do so. When Mary Ward established the Poor Clare cloister at St. Omers in 1609, the house was forced to take the 'Rule' of St. Clare promulgated by Urban IV in 1263, rather than St. Colette's stricter revision. The former version of the 'Rule' allowed the cloister to own property and goods, which meant that they should not have to beg for their living.20 Furthermore, the terms of clausura forbade charitable work in the community beyond the convent walls, and any activity which involved secular folk entering the enclosure at will. Hence the possibility of gaining alms through the performance of valuable community work in hospitals was closed to post-Tridentine female houses. Moreover, although schools were permitted within the cloister, enclosure requirements for students and nuns alike meant that convent schools were never large enough to offer complete economic security.

More serious for houses of religious women was the Catholic Reformation's gendering of spiritual labour. Monks were able to perform missionary work; nuns could only pray for the conversion of the heathen and heretic. Yet at the very moment that the Church restricted nuns to the spiritual labour of prayer, it promoted salvation through regular attendance at the sacraments, especially the mass.21 Nuns, who had always been barred from conducting the eucharist, accordingly had to pay priests to say increasing numbers of masses for benefactors who believed in the primacy of the sacraments over the prayers of nuns.22 Catholic reform therefore realigned the status of spiritual labour in a way that had severe economic implications for houses of religious women.

The Church did recognise the financial problems it had created for nuns, and its solution flouted centuries of ecclesiastical law. In the aftermath of Trent, ecclesiastical authorities sanctioned the dowry system for religious women to compensate for any monetary shortfalls caused by claustration. In previous centuries, the payment of a monastic dowry had been tarnished by hints of simony. Pragmatic sixteenth and seventeenth-century bishops reinterpreted Tridentine law, which permitted houses to accept boarding fees for women in the noviciate, to allow the payment of a sum of money upon profession.23 Settlement of a dowry upon making their final vows ultimately became mandatory for nuns, and convents were not permitted to profess anyone whose

21 For a discussion of this point, see ch. 6.
portion was in doubt. This requirement meant that a nun, like secular women, was dependent for her future upon securing a sum of money that reflected her social status. Impoverished gentlewomen might well have to take the vows of a lay sister if they were unable to pay the choir nun's portion.

By contrast, monks and priests were not required to provide a dowry when they entered a monastery or college. It was assumed that men would be in control of some property and goods, so 'constitutions' advised the best means of disposal. For example, Jesuit novices could choose to bestow their worldly wealth on the Society, but they were encouraged to give it to the poor. The English men's houses certainly faced similar financial constraints to the nuns'. However, monks and priests achieved a higher public profile through missionary work, teaching in colleges and seminaries, and their capacity to receive payment for performance of the sacraments. It was assumed that this work would secure them sufficient wages and alms to survive. So the hierarchy's tacit acceptance of dowries for nuns was a direct consequence of the Tridentine-inspired gendered division of spiritual labour.

Although, nuns' financial capacity had never been especially strong, their tenuous pecuniary existence worsened in the post-Reformation era. Religious reforms, coupled with increasingly rigid notions of appropriate gender roles, limited convents' capacity to generate income at a time when prices were beginning to spiral in the European economy. To survive in the harsh economic climate religious houses had to be flexible in both the interpretation of their 'constitutions' and their response to seemingly insurmountable budgetary problems. Before detailing the strategies adopted by cloisters to overcome their monetary difficulties, I will outline the common financial basis upon which English houses were established, and existed during the seventeenth century.

Medieval women's religious houses had been granted estates, feudal dues, tithes, tolls and rents by their founders which, however inadequate, at least provided a regular form of income. By contrast, the English convents of the seventeenth century were endowed largely with promises of pensions, dowries, investments and alms, many of which were never realised. The foundation of St. Monica's proceeded largely upon the strength of a £500 bequest from a pious English Catholic gentleman. To this sum were added various pensions scraped together by the founding nuns, plus promises of

charitable assistance from the exiled English Catholics in Louvain. With such a small and unstable endowment, the Augustinian nuns purchased their house and set up their monastic regimen of prayer. Financial hardship was inevitable and, a few months into the venture, the procuratrice was convinced that the archbishop would dissolve the cloister upon the grounds that it was not a viable foundation. Of course St. Monica's survived, principally because, as one of the earliest foundations, it managed to secure a steady stream of novices as well as attracting generous benefactors. These were the two key elements of economic survival for the English nuns. If there was a decline in recruitment, or patrons were lost, then a house could face extreme hardship. At such junctures, it was often the assistance of a benefactor which stood between the nuns' survival or demise.

In the second chapter I outlined the fluctuations in professions throughout the century, and pointed to the political, social and economic factors which caused these peaks and troughs. In most instances, periods of low admissions were also times of financial insecurity. Given that dowries provided the main source of regular income for the convents, and also that almost all cloisters recruited from the English Catholics, the nuns were vulnerable to the situation in their homeland. Strife in England often meant not only fewer postulants, it could also lead to the cessation of dowry payments for existing members of a community. Many portions were paid as rents from family estates. For example, the dowry of Anne Constable, professed at St. Monica's in 1672 was left in the hands of her father 'att Rent, and lande bounde for itt'. Income from dowries, like Constable's, was therefore never as regular or secure as abbesses and prioresses required.

Dependent upon such uncertain revenues, the English nuns needed considerable business acumen. To guard against budgetary shortfalls when monies from England failed, the nuns invested locally to reap the rewards of regular interest payments (annuities). For example, in 1699, Abbess Mary Caryll of the Dunkirk Benedictines placed 5,000 livres in the hôtel de ville at Paris. Caryll also toyed with investing smaller amounts in Dunkirk's hôtel de ville, but she was concerned about the security of the institution. Mary Caryll had a reliable adviser in John Caryll, her brother who was

26 Chronicle of St. Monica's, vol. 1, pp. 75-76.
27 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS M 1, Council Book, 1669-1874, f. 3.
29 BL, Add. MS 28,226, Caryll Letters, f. 117, Abbess Mary Caryll to John Caryll, 1699.
30 Ibid., ff. 114, 117.
a member of Mary of Modena's household at St. Germain. The abbess's brother helped her to invest her cloister's assets prudently in secure institutions. Other nuns, however, were not so fortunate in their choice of financial assistants, sometimes placing their trust and their cloister's assets in unscrupulous hands. In the mid-1660s, the Paris Augustinians found themselves in severe debt after their banker dishonestly invested funds on their behalf. The nuns not only lost considerable money, but the cloister's reputation also suffered greatly.31

The experience of the Paris convent shows graphically the English houses' vulnerability. As daughters of the English gentry and aristocracy, nuns had little formal business knowledge to assist them in their selection of investments, so they were forced to rely upon the mercantile knowledge of family and friends. At least priests could assess the merits of the merchants and financiers with whom they did business. The immobility imposed by the terms of enclosure led nuns to depend upon others' advice, whether sound or otherwise. Added to convents' difficulties was their geographic isolation from the very people who provided them with alms and postulants. For this reason, the nuns employed agents to conduct their business affairs in England. Cloisters lacking competent assistants often found that their poverty was exacerbated rather than alleviated by their agents.

The various economic disasters experienced by English convents show the extent to which female religious communities were reliant upon others. 'Constitutions' might include provision for a financial adviser, or else nuns employed kin or acquaintances to pursue their cloister's business interests. Should these administrators fail, convents were forced to rely yet again on their friends in the world. In spite of all communities experiencing bouts of severe poverty during the seventeenth century, none of the houses was forced to disband, although some came close to it.32 Benefactors were the key to survival in all instances, bailing the nuns out of their budgetary predicaments and restoring public confidence in a convent by virtue of their patronage. The story of the Benedictines of Boulogne-Pontoise provides clear evidence of how, almost miraculously, some houses were able to survive in spite of crippling economic liabilities.

From the outset, this community was beset with difficulties. As explained, the initial filiation from Ghent to Boulogne in 1652 was vehemently opposed by the Bishop of Boulogne, who recognised its impecunious financial grounding. The prelate's eventual acquiescence was based more upon his perception of the nuns' religious virtue

31 Allison, 'English Augustinian Convent', p. 468. See ch. 2 for a discussion of the impact of this affair on recruitment.
32 Notably, the Franciscans in 1658, & Ypres in the 1680s & 1690s. See Whelan, *Historic English Convents*, pp. 54-60, 101-3, 128.
than satisfaction that they could support themselves. Abbess Mary Knatchbull of Ghent, who had initiated the filiation, solicited the support of English merchants in Antwerp to provide Boulogne with annual pensions. However, the expectations of the house were vested principally in the dowries of prospective novices. When permission was finally granted for the Benedictines to set up their cloister, the nuns were well aware of their inadequate funding. Christina Forster, later the second abbess of the community, wrote constantly to her father requesting that he 'take seriously to hart this Foundation'. Although Sir Richard Forster had already invested greatly in the Poor Clare cloister at Rouen, his daughter persuaded him to endow her convent also.

Soon after she became abbess, Christina Forster decided that the climate of Boulogne was too unhealthy for the English nuns, so they moved to Pontoise in 1658. The Benedictines purchased their new house with money given by Sir Richard Forster, and the dowries of several novices awaiting profession. Unfortunately, the premises were too small and required extending. The already straitened community was forced to borrow money at a high rate of interest in order to cover the costs incurred by the building programme. This initial foray into debt began the interminable cycle of borrowing on future expectations which led to the decades of debt evident in the account book. Furthermore, the Pontoise nuns had limited land and could produce very little for their own needs because their convent was located close to the river which regularly overflowed its banks, sweeping away their enclosure wall and vegetable garden. The sorry tale of Pontoise's slide into insolvency was recorded in the community's annual accounts tallied by the procuratrice and signed by the abbess.

The account book which recorded annual income and expenditure reveals that even when the nuns broke even, they never accumulated enough capital to carry them through bad years. For example, in 1659, the procuratrice recorded a considerable loss of 3,049 livres. The following year's profit of a few hundred livres could not cover the 1659 debacle. This pattern of high debits which could not be covered by ordinary income continued for the remainder of the century. Between 1680 and 1702 expenditure

33 Buckfast Abbey, Boulogne-Pontoise MS Mary Knatchbull, 'An Account of the Foundation of the Convent of Boulogne: First Filiation from Ghent', ff. 27-68.
34 Ibid., ff. 47-51. The merchants subsequently reneged on their promises & Abbess Knatchbull lost much of her proposed income for Boulogne.
35 Ibid., f. 94.
36 Forster was treasurer to Henrietta Maria, & he had used his influence to persuade the authorities to allow the Poor Clare filiation to Rouen in 1644. He also contributed to the Poor Clare venture, giving the nuns 1,000-1,500 pistoles towards the building of their convent church. See Ann M.C. Forster, 'The Chronicles of the English Poor Clares of Rouen - 2', RH, 18, 1986, p. 189; [Anne Neville], 'Abbess Neville's Annals of Five Communities of English Benedictine Nuns in Flanders, 1598-1687', Mary J. Rumsey (ed.), in Miscellanea 5, [CRS, 6], London, 1909, (hereafter 'Abbess Neville's Annals'), p. 49.
38 Murray-Sinclair, 'Pontoise', pp. 8, 10.
39 Archives Départementales du Seine-et-Oise, MS 68 H 5, Account Book 1653-1703, ff. [36-48].
constantly outweighed income. In the 1680s and 1690s, the Pontoise annual debt fluctuated, occasionally rising above 10,000 livres. Somehow the cloister struggled through much of the eighteenth century, until a final chapter meeting in 1786 when the community voted to disband. The abbess reportedly commented that 'the frightful list of our enormous debts on the one hand and the hopeless sight of our scanty income, so inadequate to meet our expenses on the other, seem not to leave us any option'. Given the perilous state of finances in 1702, the survival of the house until this juncture is amazing. Prior to the eighteenth century, it seems most likely that it was the alms and influence wielded by powerful patrons which protected the convent from closure.

Pontoise's principal benefactors in the seventeenth century were the aforementioned Sir Richard Forster, and Abbot Montague. Walter Montague had been almoner to Henrietta Maria, and he was commendatory abbot of St. Martin, near Pontoise. In 1672, Montague's concern for the plight of the nuns led him to invest 10,000 livres on their behalf which would earn 500 livres per annum. However, given the ever-accumulating debts, this amount did little to return the convent to solvency. Nevertheless, for the remaining five years of his life, Montague did all he could to sustain the cloister. Abbess Anne Neville noted that while the nuns were unsuccessful in their endeavours to generate extra income, 'ether by work or address to frends all our supplys were from my lord who never seemed weary of releeving his poore children'. The Pontoise sisters greatly lamented his death in 1677. Significantly, the demise of Montague saw the cloister slide into the decades of almost permanent annual deficit.

The financial basis of the English cloisters was thus allied predominantly with the fortunes of the English Catholics. Portions and donations formed the principal sources of monastic income. This money was usually given in the form of pensions and rents on investments, thus making it extremely tenuous. Without sound economic knowledge or advice, convents often descended into debt and insolvency. Throughout the seventeenth century, houses survived largely through the generosity and aid of their benefactors. The terms of this relationship were not new; the ground-rules for monastic alms-giving had been forged during the middle ages. The next section will explore the basis and realities of the traffic in spiritual and temporal alms carried on by the English convents.

40 Apart from in 1697. 1702 is the last date for which I have complete figures. Details are missing for the years 1687-91.
41 The annual losses between 1680 & 1703 were as follows: 1680, 9,097 livres; 1681, 10,029 livres; 1682, 6,803 livres; 1683, 10,269 livres; 1684, 6,444 livres; 1685, 5,038 livres; 1686, 9,844 livres; 1692, 5,394 livres; 1693, 11,906 livres; 1694, 379 livres; 1695, 4,091 livres; 1696, 1,586 livres; 1698, 3,596 livres; 1699, 4,844 livres; 1700, 8,614 livres; 1701, 10,816 livres; 1702, 5,844 livres; 1703, 2,531 livres. There was only 1 year when the house was in credit: 1697, 4,618 livres credit.
43 'Abbess Neville's Annals', pp. 64-65.
Since the early days of monasticism, the primary function of the religious person, whether nun or monk, was to perform the opus dei. Monasteries had always performed a vital social and penitential function in society. During the middle ages they were founded by kings and nobles too busy with secular concerns to undertake the hours of prayer the Church told them were necessary for their personal salvation. The nuns and monks became intercessors for their founders and patrons, and monasteries were recognised as the power-houses of prayer which would protect society from supernatural forces. In her study of medieval English nuns, Sally Thompson has argued that the desire to enlist the spiritual assistance of nuns for family members, alive and deceased, was a significant motivation for the establishment of numerous post-Conquest cloisters.44

Ludo J.R. Milis has termed the relationship between medieval nuns and monks and their patrons 'functional reciprocity'. According to Milis, the way in which the partnership operated was simple: 'We look after you on earth, you look after us in heaven'.45 The 'spiritual labour' of the religious person repaid the financial gifts given by the benefactor to the monastery. The bond between medieval patrons and their monasteries has to be understood within the context of feudalism. Nuns and monks were allocated fiefs in return for spiritual, rather than military, services. For example, a fifteenth-century document detailing the treatment to be accorded the patron of Marrick Priory by its nuns reveals the feudal relationship between a monastic house and its founder. Marrick had been founded in Yorkshire in the twelfth century by Roger de Aske, a Richmondshire knight. The descendants of Aske were bound to provide protection and support for the nuns in all their affairs, 'not onelie in worde or counsell gyffing butt as well in effect and dede'. In return they reaped the spiritual rewards inherent in the nuns' 'prayers, suffragys, and good deds done and to be done, not olie in this place but allso in all places of owr ordre'.46

The endowment of the English cloisters in the seventeenth century was conducted on similar terms. Although the feudal exchange of land for service was not possible, prayers were accorded benefactors in recompense for rents, icons, household goods, or whatever the nuns received from their supporters. For example, in 1658 when the filiation of Franciscans from Nieuport (later the 'Blue Nuns') arrived in Paris, they rented a baker's house in the suburb of St. Jacques. The nuns' poverty became known

throughout the area and they survived largely through the charity of a few devout French
gentlewomen who provided them with food and fuel. In order to repay the kindness of
these benefactors, Abbess Angela Jerningham established the practice of saying a Te
Deum and Salve Regina for the charitable person, no matter how small the gift. This
spiritual recompense was continued by subsequent superiors. 47

Practices and payments varied from house to house, none the less all cloisters
acknowledged their debt to helpers, both ordinary and extraordinary. Although the aid
provided by Sir Richard Forster and Abbot Walter Montague never lifted the Pontoise
Benedictine convent entirely out of the financial mire into which it had fallen at its outset,
the Pontoise nuns gratefully acknowledged their endowments. 48 Forster was recognised
as a founder of the community, and the nuns bestowed upon him all the entitlements due
to a founding benefactor: once a year the convent would say or sing a dirge on his behalf
and offer a mass for his soul. 49 Montague, described as 'both our frend, father and
benefactor', received the same anniversary dirge and mass. However, in recognition of
his phenomenal financial contributions, there were also monthly masses said on his
behalf which were to be attended by all members of the community for the duration of
Abbess Neville's lifetime. 50 The additional devotions offered for Montague, who had
provided a greater financial contribution than Forster, suggest that functional reciprocity
in English convents operated on a carefully graduated scale.

Documents detailing the complex rules and regulations governing the receipt of
temporal assistance and repayment to benefactors indicate that this was indeed the case.
The Pontoise Benedictine community had memoranda which detailed the criteria for
repaying temporal assistance with spiritual mediation. The religious women were
reminded that it was their duty to render 'a just return agayn of spirituall Almes, of
prayers pious labours and austerities' to those who blessed the community with
'temporall almes'. 51 In fact, the convent was scrupulous in determining the spiritual
payment necessary for each gift, believing that their livelihood depended upon the
goodwill of the giver and God:

47 Joseph Gillow & Richard Trappes-Lomax (eds.), The Diary of the 'Blue Nuns' or Order of the
Immaculate Conception of Our Lady, at Paris, 1658-1810, [CRS, 8], London, 1910 (hereafter Diary of
the 'Blue Nuns'), pp. 9-10.
48 Anne Neville calculated the total of Forster's charity at 41,000 livres. Income generated from
Montague's investments was 64,150 livres. However, Neville declared that additional money Montague
contributed towards debts, renovations & the dowries of two nuns came to 76,219 livres. See 'Abbess
Neville's Annals', p. 51; 'Registers of the English Benedictine Nuns of Pontoise, Now at Teignmouth,
Devonshire, 1680-1713', in Miscellanea 10. [CRS, 17], London, 1915, (hereafter 'Pontoise Registers'),
p. 254.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., pp. 254-55.
51 Ibid., p. 250.
Now as almes is one of the greatest benefits and advantages that we can give or receive, so there must be singular care taken that those that gives almes to us may not be frustrated of their expectation by it, but that according to the measure of the charity we receive, we endeavour to render a competent return, of prayers and other pious good works by which we shall both pay the duty of gratitude, which we owe to our Benefactors and take the best course we can in our power to oblige Almighty God, to inspire his Servants in the world to be bountiful to his Servants in Religion, to assist them to support and carry on a Religious state by their liberality.52

The status of a benefactor was judged according to the amount of money or goods he or she donated. The Pontoise nuns then calculated what spiritual recompense was necessary for the gift.

In 1682, George Slaughter and his wife, Bridget Fielding, made their will, citing the Pontoise community as beneficiaries of 6,000 livres. In gratitude, the abbess and nuns offered prayers for the couple's longevity and prosperity. Each nun was required to hear mass, communicate and recite the rosary twice, once for George Slaughter and once for Bridget Fielding. Upon the death of each benefactor a solemn mass would be sung for them after the office of the dead. These memorial masses would be repeated on the third, seventh and thirtieth day. Additional devotions in memory of the pair would be left to the discretion of the abbess of the day.53 In order to remember the ever-increasing list of spiritual payments, the nuns had to note the schedule in their annals. It was the weekly duty of the chantress to put up a list of obligations for the following week and to ensure that the community adhered to its spiritual duties.54

Without material means to reward benefactors, the nuns adapted the traditional framework of monastic functional reciprocity to repay the generosity of friends. Like any other business arrangement, the terms of the contract were listed and signed by the parties involved. For example, the negotiations between the Pontoise nuns and George Slaughter and Bridget Fielding were noted and signed by the Abbess Anne Neville, her prioress and four senior nuns.55 Likewise, in 1708, the English Poor Clares of Gravelines were given a grant by the mayor of Calais for which they were required to fulfil two conditions. Firstly, the nuns were to have a solemn requiem mass on the anniversary of his death. Secondly, the convent was to receive, without dowries, two poor girls from England, Scotland, or Ireland who would invoke prayer for the conversion of England. The conditions were written into a contract between the nuns and the mayor.56

52 Ibid., p. 251.
53 Ibid., p. 266.
54 Ibid., p. 261.
55 Ibid., p. 266. Although it is not clear in the document, the 4 nuns were most likely council sisters.
However, nuns did not merely proffer prayers in exchange for charitable bequests. The process could be extended to include payment for goods and services provided by local tradesmen and merchants. In 1690, the French architect who had built the 'Blue Nuns' church and extended part of their cloister waived the debt of 10,000 livres due to him, provided that the nuns would say a weekly *de Profundis* for deceased members of his family and a yearly requiem mass. For the 'Blue Nuns' in a time of severe financial crisis this deal was vital, as they were able to pay for the services of their architect with spiritual alms rather than money they did not possess in their near empty coffers. The use of a notary made the arrangement between the nuns and architect legally binding. The English nuns were therefore well aware of the commercial value of their prayers. Transactions such as this one suggest that medieval 'functional reciprocity' had been adapted to the conditions of the early modern market economy.

Closer examination of the feudal scheme reveals continuing similarities. Ludo Milis argued that in medieval Europe patronage of cloisters represented a survival strategy on the part of the elite feudal clans. Although monasticism was imbued with feudal notions of loyalty and service, Milis argued that through the endowment of religious houses aristocratic families profited not only in heaven, but also on earth. He pointed to bargains struck between cloisters and patrons regarding the acceptance of family members, and noted that benefactors often retained some control over the financial interests of their investment. For example, in the ninth century, Count Rudolf of Aquitaine and his wife set aside part of their lands for a nunnery to be headed by their daughter, Immena. The nuns were to intercede for family members, and the Count intended to be buried in the convent. The foundation was therefore a family asset which would reap spiritual rewards for Immena's parents and their heirs, but also remained within the clan's demesne.

The relationship between patrons and cloisters meant that the feudal reciprocity of monastic prayers in return for benefactors' financial support could be undermined by kinship obligations and bonds. Even if a convent achieved financial independence through returns from its lands and rents, it might remain subject to the whims and machinations of family supporters. For example, Immena's foundation was ultimately dissolved and her lands subsumed into a male house founded by her brother.

57 *Diary of the 'Blue Nuns*', p. 38.
58 Milis, *Angellic Monks*, pp. 87-9. The daughters of Roger de Aske entered Marrick Priory, see Tillotson, *Marrick Priory*, p. 4. For other e.g.s, see Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession*, pp. 41-46.
60 Ibid., pp. 32-38. Immena's brother was consecrated to God at the same time, & he proceeded to become archbishop of Bourges. Immena subsequently sold him part of her property (presumably her convent lands) & after her death, he dissolved the community of nuns & used the lands to found the male
Economic dependency encouraged lay interference in monastic affairs. This situation arose more frequently in female institutions which, as I have already noted, were often endowed with the slenderest means. Poverty made cloisters susceptible to grasping financial opportunities which were contrary to their 'rule', such as accepting the unwanted or disabled children of patrons for large sums of money.61

The extreme poverty of many seventeenth-century English cloisters inevitably led to similarly exploitative relationships. The Paris architect, who accepted prayers in recompense for his buildings, required the 'Blue Nuns' to allow his female relatives to board at the convent whenever they wished to enter the enclosure.62 Although this clause contravened clausura, the debt-ridden community had little choice other than to accept it. Other houses accepted novices under conditions which were illegal in Tridentine law. In 1688, anticipating future financial benefits, St. Monica's accepted Elizabeth and Catherine Radcliffe, daughters of the newly created earl of Derwentwater. Described as 'weake' in physical capacity, the sisters received dispensations from regular attendance at the divine office and other formal religious obligations. In recompense for their inability to participate fully in the opus dei, their father dowered each of them with a £100 annuity. However, even this generous portion was accepted at a price. Under the terms of the dowry agreement the Radcliffes were each entitled to £40 of the annuity for their personal use, although the private use of property had been declared unacceptable at Trent.63

The example of the Radcliffes indicates the extent to which cash-strapped nuns were prepared to manipulate the terms of functional reciprocity. Apart from the generous annuity, they could expect considerable alms from the sisters' family. In fact, the convent did not have to wait long for the benefits of the dowry agreement. Elizabeth and Catherine Radcliffe's father died in 1696 leaving St. Monica's a legacy of 4,000 guilders on behalf of his daughters.64 Although the nuns had agreed to the earl's terms when they accepted the Radcliffe sisters, they gained considerably from the transaction. What is more, the prioress ensured that Elizabeth and Catherine did not misuse their private income from the annuity, by insisting that the £80 could only be used with the permission of the superior. In 1690, the Radcliffe sisters donated part of it to the novice, Barbara Constable, for her religious habit.65 The earl had also benefited from the deal. He had disposed of two perhaps unmarriageable daughters relatively cheaply. The Radcliffe family also obtained the prayers of their professed kin, as well as those of the convent as a whole. Weighing the advantages attained by both parties, it seems that the arrangement

Benedictine monastery of Beaulieu. This foundation was lavishly patronised by his kin who ensured that the memorial services for Count Rudolph & his heirs (initially entrusted to Immena) were maintained.

62 *Diary of the 'Blue Nuns*', p. 38. See section 3 below for a discussion of convent boarding facilities.
63 Schroeder, *Canons and Decrees*, p. 218; Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS M 1, ff. 11-12.
64 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS P 1, f. 83.
65 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS M 1, ff. 9, 12.
was of mutual benefit. The same could be said for the deal between the 'Blue Nuns' and their architect. Functional reciprocity as practised in the seventeenth-century women's convents might have contravened the decrees of Trent, but it was essential for the economic survival of the nuns.

The traffic in spiritual alms in the English convents belies the argument that the coenobitic life was largely irrelevant in early modern Church and society. It has been suggested that devotional trends during the late middle ages were commensurate with changes in the medieval economic structure. As a consequence, individuals began to take personal responsibility for their own salvation. For example, Ludo Milis has claimed that as the new religious orders of the thirteenth century emerged in response to economic and social change, 'one's own good works, one's own moral life-style, according to the value system formulated and imposed by the Church, finally led the monastery to disappear as the kindred's insurance contract'.66 This process of disintegration supposedly reached its zenith during the seventeenth century with the Catholic Reformation's emphasis on the apostolic life over the contemplative. Women and men alike gravitated towards the active religious orders because they believed more in the efficacy of charitable works over prayer.67

It is true that during the late middle ages and Catholic Reformation monastic prayer was devalued in favour of the sacraments offered by clerics, in particular by the rising popularity of the mass. There is also considerable evidence which points to the popularity of the apostolic orders.68 However, I do not agree with Milis that people no longer had any use for monasticism. Not only did the coenobitic life continue, it underwent a tremendous revival during the seventeenth century, although individualism was taking an even firmer hold in the early modern mentalité. Parents still settled their daughters in monastic houses; and benefactors' books reveal that many Catholics were prepared to invest in the afterlife by donating money and goods to contemplative nuns. Lay folk thus continued to consider religious women as holy and powerful intercessors.

In the seventeenth century changing economic and religious conditions had perhaps made the terms of functional reciprocity more commercial, but the feudal notion of spiritual returns for financial support remained. Convents were able to exploit this centuries-old relationship to their economic advantage. The terms of the Council of Trent concerning strict monastic enclosure insisted that religious women specialise in the contemplative life. Male contemplative life had been largely sacrificed to the missionary

66 Milis, Angelic Monks, p. 91.
67 Wiesner, Women and Gender, pp. 196-98.
ideal, leaving prayer for the conversion of England principally to the nuns. Thus, within the English Catholic community, the enclosed nuns had the monopoly on prayer. In this position they were able to attract the attention and financial assistance of their co-religionists who adhered to the traditional method of achieving salvation by using intercessors.

III. Domestic Work for Payment

Dowries, investments and alms might have formed the principal income of the English convents, but as the example of Pontoise demonstrated, this revenue was barely sufficient. The threat of insolvency forced all of the cloisters to seek alternative means of making money. In the nuns' quest for viable industries, they yet again came up against the religious, social and gender barriers which condemned them to actual as well as theoretical poverty. The Counter-Reformation enclosure laws, choir nuns' status as gentlewomen, and cultural considerations about the nature of women's work combined to limit religious women's capacity to earn their living. Before the Tridentine reforms had filtered through to religious communities in the late sixteenth century, some of the English nuns at St. Ursula's in Louvain had been sent to a warehouse where they were put to work at weaving. Such a strategy to supplement monastic income was unthinkable by the time St. Monica's was founded in 1609. Strict clausura eliminated the possibility of wages accrued from undertaking external jobs. Furthermore, notions about what constituted suitable work for gentlewomen led the chronicler to disparage the former practice on the grounds that weaving 'was indeed a man's work, and very hard for tender, weak women'.

As a consequence of social and gender-related obstacles to work, the nuns resorted to their familiar tactic of operating from within the confines of their cloister, and in accordance with their position as daughters of the English gentry and aristocracy. Many houses therefore undertook small-scale commercial ventures which were extensions of everyday household occupations. So in convent annals there are references to needlework, embroidery, craft work and other typically feminine occupations. In addition, religious houses took in secular boarders and young girls for education. The presence of lay sisters in the cloister enabled certain communities to establish small industries, such as laundries, in order to supplement their meagre income. Lay sisters, as women of lower social status, could carry out menial and physically demanding tasks deemed unsuitable for the choir nuns. In addition to fulfilling gender and social criteria, these forms of work were largely extensions of the domestic chores necessary for the

69 Chronicle of St. Monica's, vol. 1, pp. 35-36.
daily operation of the monastic household. Given the limited time allotted for manual labour in 'rules' and 'constitutions', versatility was crucial.

This section will explore the kinds of tasks undertaken by convents to supplement their revenue. Firstly, I will locate income-earning activities within the broader framework of the daily household regime to assess the status of manual labour in the monastery. Examples of the kinds of work undertaken by choir nuns and lay sisters will demonstrate both the social considerations governing the allocation of work, and the remuneration such labour could generate for the religious community. I will argue that economic necessity forced the nuns to develop new and ingenious ways of earning money. Just as the cloisters exploited the position of 'Mary' to gain income through the opus dei, so did they adapt Martha's housewifely concerns to generate payment for domestic chores.

Monastic 'rules' and 'constitutions' provided a detailed account of how every waking hour should be employed by members of the religious community. From dawn until dusk the nuns were expected to adhere to a rigid schedule of formal and private prayer, manual labour, recreation and religious obligations. Of all these activities, prayer dominated the daily agenda, at times overlapping with the periods of work and recreation.\(^7^0\) The most vital formal religious observances were attendance at the divine office and at mass. At seven intervals during the day and night, the nuns would be called from their chores or their beds to sing or read their religious office.\(^7^1\) In most cloisters there were one or two household masses per day, according to the liturgical calendar. Attendance was compulsory for all able-bodied members of a community. The Rouen Poor Clares were reminded that no sister, whatever her status, 'shall be excused from the Quire, eyther by night or day, but all sisters are bound to come unto Masse, and unto all the Canonickall houres'.\(^7^2\)

The extent to which the opus dei dominated nuns' daily lives was evident in household timetables. The daily regime of the 'Blue Nuns' was typical. During the summer months the nuns rose at five o'clock and at half past five were required to assemble in the choir for an hour of mental prayer.\(^7^3\) Following the office of prime,\(^7^4\)

\(^{70}\) Ch. 7 will discuss in greater detail the intrusion of prayer into apparently secular activities.

\(^{71}\) Not all cloisters adhered to the nocturnal hour for matins. See the e.g. of the 'Blue Nuns' below. In 1644, the Bruges Augustinians were persuaded by their bishop to change their hour of rising for matins from midnight to 4am. See C.S. Durrant, *A Link Between Flemish Mystics and English Martyrs*, London, 1925, pp. 261-62. Often the decision as to when matins should be said was influenced by the status of the cloister. For e.g., when the Augustinian founders of St. Monica's first moved to their new convent, there were so few nuns that it was decided not to rise at midnight, thus 4am became the hour for matins; *Chronicle of St. Monica's*, vol. 1, p. 71.

\(^{72}\) St. Colette, *Declarations and Ordinances*, p. 40.

\(^{73}\) During winter they rose at 5.30am. The day of other orders followed a similar pattern but there were variations regarding the time of offices & secular activities. E.g., a stricter order, like the English Benedictines of Cambrai, adhered to the practice of rising to matins at midnight. Stanbrook Abbey,
which took place at six-thirty, the nuns either attended the first mass of the day (if there were to be two masses) or returned to their cells 'to make their Beds, look after their little necessities, and work there' until the bell for tierce. The normal daily (or on special days the second) mass was held after this office. The community was then summoned to the work room by a bell where they worked quietly until half past ten. The next half hour was occupied with the office of sext and examination of conscience. At eleven they went to the refectory for their dinner, after which they were allocated recreation time until one o'clock when the bell called them to none. Following this office, they were required to retire to their cells and engage in spiritual reading until two o'clock when they returned to the work room for another hour and a half of manual labour. This ended with the office of vespers at three-thirty. The period after this office until supper at half past five was designated free time when each nun could choose to occupy herself in a number of ways including private prayer, work, reading or silent walking in the garden. After supper they were permitted another period of recreation until compline at seven o'clock. All nuns were admonished to be present at the examination of conscience following this office at seven-thirty. From then until matins at eight o'clock, the nuns retired, presumably to their cells. Everyone was expected to be in their beds half an hour following the final office.74

To accommodate the heavy round of formal and private religious observances, nuns undertook profitable operations which were natural extensions of the normal daily functioning of the monastic household. Of these tasks, paid prayers were the most obvious. As the primary vocation of the choir nun, it was natural that the opus dei should be adapted to earn money in the form of alms. However, choir nuns were also responsible for managing the temporal side of monastic life. In the hours when they were not attending formal devotions, nuns conducted household business, received visitors, taught novices and pupils, and engaged in myriad other domestic chores. Inevitably for some women these worldly duties impinged upon time supposedly spent in the choir. 'Rules' reluctantly acknowledged that household officers might require dispensations from attendance at every canonical hour. In reality, this loop-hole gave nuns an opportunity to exploit their domestic chores to the economic advantage of the cloister. The most obvious examples of this manipulation of household activities were the schools and boarding facilities operated by English convents in the seventeenth century.

74 Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', pp. 282-82.
Not every religious community had an official school, but all cloisters accepted young girls as monastic scholars. These convictresses, as they were called, were expected to take the veil when they came of age. In preparation for their future life as professed nuns, the young women attended lessons and were inducted into the rigours of the monastic regime. Parents paid the nuns an annual pension for the children's temporal requirements, and the nuns were expected to provide the spiritual necessities. The fees obviously accounted for more than just the convictress's subsistence because cloisters took in substantially more girls than they could hope to profess. It is possible that the nuns merely wanted to secure sufficient postulants by accepting so many convictresses, but the youthfulness of the entrants suggests otherwise. Although girls entering the cloister under this system should have been aged fourteen or fifteen years (they could not take their final vows until they were sixteen), often much younger children were accepted. For example, among a group of eight girls who entered the Cambrai Benedictine cloister in 1625 were Anne Frere, aged thirteen, and Jane Howard, aged eleven. Boarding facilities for convictresses obviously served the joint purposes of enticing women to enter the novitiate, and earning some additional income for the Cambrai nuns.

Other cloisters moved beyond simply providing board for young women to establish convent schools which taught girls aged as young as three and four years old the skills desirable in a gentlewoman. Although most houses never managed to cope with many more than a dozen pupils, a few convent schools operated on a larger scale. The Augustinians in Bruges and Paris, and the 'Blue Nuns' were renowned as popular educational institutions among English and French parents, and these schools each accommodated between fifteen and thirty students. The Franciscans in Bruges also had a prosperous school and, in 1668, the annals noted that the nuns taught fifteen students. One of the smaller schools was run by the Poor Clares in Rouen where, in

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75 Whelan claimed that only 11 of the cloisters had schools, & suggested that the Augustinians, Franciscans, Sepulchrines & I.B.V.M. were mainly concerned with education. Whelan, Historic English Convents, pp. 253-56.

76 Joseph Gillow (ed.), 'Records of the English Benedictine Nuns at Cambrai, 1620-1793', in Miscellanea 8, [CRS, 13], London, 1912, (hereafter 'Cambrai Records'), pp. 41-42. Other e.g.s: Frances Stourton (1638) aged 12; Catherine Hall (1646) aged 12; Elizabeth Shelton (1666) aged 11; Mary Conquest (1670) aged 11; Betty Farmer (1676) aged 10; Margaret & Anne Harrington (1695) aged 11 & 12 respectively; Elizabeth Kenket (1697) aged 12; Anne Houghton (1698) aged 12; Mary Houghton (1701) aged 9; Mary Butler (1708) aged 9; & twins, Jane & Cecilia Plumpton (1709) aged 9. Of these women, 6 proceeded to take final vows. Ibid., pp. 45, 47, 49, 51, 53, 57-59, 62, 63. See section II. i in ch. 2. for further figures.

77 In 1670 the 'Blue Nuns' admitted a 4 year-old child into their school. Other schools accepted similarly youthful pupils. In 1660, the Bruges Augustinians took in Ursula Babthorpe at the tender age of 8 years. In 1701, Bruges acquired 'little Miss Petre', aged 5; &1710 witnessed the arrival of Mary Gifford who was only 4 years of age. Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', p. 21; Durrant, Flemish Mystics, pp. 256-57, 433.

78 Guilday, Catholic Refugees, p. 305; Whelan, Historic English Convents, pp. 88, 90, 106, 259.

79 Poor Clare Convent, Franciscan MS 'Annals of the Religious of the 3rd Order of St. Francis of the Province of England from the year 1621 to (1893)', f. 44.
1652 there were only eight pupils.\(^80\) There is evidence that certain convents actively sought pupils by advertising their school's curriculum and fees. For example, the Sepulchrine nuns at Liège promoted the education they provided children and young gentlewomen:

These [girls] they bring up until they be ripe enough to choose some state of life. They teach them all qualities befitting their sex, as writing, reading, needle-work, French, Musick.\(^81\)

In 1652, the yearly fee charged by the nuns for this service was fifteen pounds if the pupil's garments were provided by parents, and twenty pounds if the cloister had to outfit the scholar.\(^82\) By the mid-eighteenth century, parents would pay as much as £100 per annum for a good school.\(^83\) Indeed many cloisters, like the 'Blue Nuns' of Paris, survived largely through the proceeds of their school in the eighteenth century when donations and postulants were low.

The financial rewards reaped by convents for their educative work far exceeded the price they exacted for the task. The annual schooling and boarding fee paid by the parents of the inmates was often supplemented by further donations and gifts to the house. The first pupil to join the Poor Clare convent school in Rouen was Cecily Arundell who arrived in 1646, aged eleven. Lord Arundell paid the nuns £20 a year for his daughter, and he provided her clothing and other necessities. In addition, he purchased lavish furnishings for the nuns' chapel, including an extravagant gold monstrance and a painting of the crucifixion. When, after rejecting a suitor, Cecily chose to enter the novitiate, Lord Arundell continued his munificent patronage to the house by bestowing a portion of £1,000 on his daughter.\(^84\) Not surprisingly, cloisters strove to attract girls like Cecily Arundell to reap the financial benefits such an association would bring. In 1680, Cardinal Philip Howard asked his brother Henry, Duke of Norfolk, to send his daughters to the Dominican nuns' school in Brussels in the hope that pupils from such an illustrious family would assist the establishment's prospects.\(^85\)

Similar financial considerations led the convents to open their boarding facilities to mature gentlewomen who had no intention of taking the veil. The Sepulchrines referred to these guests as 'Retired Dames'. The boarders were women of quality, often widows, who desired to live a life of religious observance without taking monastic vows.

\(^81\) A Brief Relation of the Order and Institute of the English Religious Women at Liège, Liège, 1652, p. 54.
\(^82\) Ibid.
\(^84\) This money was used to extend the nuns' church. Cecily (Cecily Clare) Arundell was professed in 1663 & died in 1717. Forster, 'Poor Clares of Rouen - 2', pp. 168, 182, 190.
\(^85\) Guilday, Catholic Refugees, p. 417.
The rooms which housed such lay pensioners were located inside the enclosure, although they were set apart from the nuns' chambers. The widows could wear whatever modest garments they so desired, but it was necessary to place the 'double-silk Red Cross', which was the distinctive feature of the Sepulchrine habit, on the bodice. To maintain their usual standard of personal comfort, the gentlewomen were permitted to keep a maid with them, so long as the servant was 'peaceable and modest'. Interaction with the nuns was possible. The widows were able to converse with members of the religious community, and on certain occasions they could dine with them and communicate with them in the chapel. In 1652, this retired religious lifestyle was available to suitable candidates for the sum of £26 per annum.86

Gentlewomen boarders provided convents with a steady source of revenue. Times of political crisis in England impacted severely upon houses dependent on English Catholics for their regular income, but fortuitously at such junctures the number of exiles fleeing to the Continent increased sharply. Many communities accepted extra secular lodgers to recoup their lost revenue. For example, during the Catholic scares of the 1670s, the Pontoise Benedictines were inundated with exiles seeking shelter. The demand for beds became so great that the younger nuns and novices often had to give up their cells to the secular boarders.87 Likewise, the Poor Clares of Rouen were overwhelmed with English Catholic visitors during the Popish Plot, and after the events of 1688.88 During the English Civil War the Louvain Augustinians had even accepted male boarders. These men were generally English exiles who lodged with the community's confessor in the priests' house.89 The venture must have been successful because it was maintained by the nuns after the financial crisis had passed. In 1712, Sir Edmund Prideaux and his companions spent some pleasant evenings with the English students who lodged at St. Monica's.90 While such practices inevitably disrupted the daily routine of the monastery concerned, they were essential for maximising income.

Again, convents sought not simply revenue but patronage also. In addition to paying their boarding fee, pensioners invariably proffered their hosts lucrative gifts. In 1699, the Hon. Jane Widdrington entered the Cambrai cloister, where her sister was a

86 Brief Relation, pp. 52-54. The fee did not necessarily cover meals. Many pensioners provided their own food, furnishings & other requirements.
87 'Pontoise Registers', p. 324.
88 Forster, 'Poor Clares of Rouen - 1', p. 96.
nun, to lead a 'retired life'. Widdrington subsequently assisted the community by paying for the construction of the house's crypt.\textsuperscript{91} Likewise Barbara Villiers, duchess of Cleveland, who temporarily retreated to the cloister of the 'Blue Nuns' in 1675, became one of that community's principal benefactors. During 1676, the duchess paid for alterations to the monastery which included the erection of a new staircase, renovations to the refectory and kitchen and wainscoting the refectory. The following year she gave the nuns £1,000 which they put towards building a new church. Her daughter, Barbara Fitzroy, entered the school in 1677, further assisting the community's reputation as a suitable place for well-connected gentlewomen.\textsuperscript{92} Thus, by accepting gentlewomen boarders, the English convents could not only procure a source of regular income in the form of rent paid for the rooms and services required by the pensioner, they were also open to gifts and preferment from those women who lodged with them.

Although convent schools and guest houses within the enclosure directly contravened the terms of clausura, the nuns justified their actions as necessitated by the situation of Catholics in England. Moreover, their activities were in line with traditional roles for gentlewomen. Women had always been responsible for the care and education of young girls, just as they were in charge of hospitality within secular households. The presence of young girls and lay boarders within the cloister was not at odds with the regular monastic routine. In most circumstances the lay women and pupils fitted into the daily schedule by following the canonical hours and leading lives of prayer. Many of the gentlewomen boarders organised their own meals and often brought maids and attendants to serve them.

Nuns also generated revenue through the traditionally female occupations of needle and craft work. 'Rules' and 'constitutions' advocated sewing and embroidery as suitable occupations during periods of manual labour in the work room. The prescriptive material implied that this stitching was necessary to maintain the clothes, linen and vestments of the cloister, emphasising both the utilitarian and moral aspects of needlework. For example, the 'Blue Nuns' were advised to 'employ the time of work faithfully, profitably, and for the good of the Community, and not lose their time in frivolous Trifling'.\textsuperscript{93} The 'constitutions' of the Paris Augustinians were more explicit, noting that all nuns should take up the needle to avoid idleness which was 'the enemy of the soule, and mother of all vice'.\textsuperscript{94} A large proportion of the needlework undertaken by religious communities was no doubt for their own use. For example, the Augustinian

\textsuperscript{91} 'Cambrai Records', p. 59. Jane Widdrington had been a maid of honour to Catherine of Braganza.
\textsuperscript{92} Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', pp. 25-26. The 'Blue Nuns' were apparently unconcerned about Villiers' dubious reputation, choosing instead to capitalise on her associations with the English Court.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., p. 296.
\textsuperscript{94} St. Augustine, Rule with the Constitutions of Our B. Ladies of Sion in Paris, pp. 279-82; St. Benedict, The Rule of the Most Blissed Father Saint Benedict Patriarke of all Munkes, Alexia Grey (trans.), Ghent, 1632, [ERL, 278], pp. 72-75.
canonesses in Louvain were adept at transforming the elaborate and costly gowns worn by women at their clothing ceremony into vestments and ornaments for the chapel.95

However, despite constitutional injunctions against selling the products of their needles, cloisters inevitably found ways to generate income from this intrinsically moral activity. Indeed several English religious houses developed a reputation for their craft work. Apart from church decorations and vestments, the nuns produced trinkets of a more worldly nature. Many of these ornaments were sold to visitors and friends. English tourists travelling on the Continent in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries noted in their journals the purchase of souvenirs from religious houses. For example, in 1712, John Leake bought 'pictures, flowers and purses' from the Carmelites in Antwerp as well as some 'fine works' from the Benedictine nuns at Brussels. In 1707, Joseph Taylor had purchased 'a heart cut curiously in vellum with wreaths of flowers painted by herself in proper colours' from one of the Howard sisters in the Dominican house at Brussels.96

The Ghent Benedictines operated their craft work on a more commercial footing. After a lay sister, Catherine (Teresa) Matlock, had a vision detailing the procedure necessary to fashion silk leaves, the community specialised in making artificial flowers.97 According to Anne Neville of Pontoise, the convent had shifts of weekly workers who would forgo the divine office to produce the flowers. For eight hours a day, breaking only for dinner, these nuns would labour in the work-room, saying the rosary and listening to readings from religious books. Although the community was fearful for the choir nuns' physical and spiritual health, the industry continued because it proved so lucrative. The flowers were sold by local merchants, and individual consignments could earn up to £30. Anne Neville acknowledged the pitfalls of operating a convent industry, but justified it as essential for the survival of the cloister.98 Indeed all members of the community recognised the economic value of their flower-making. When Catherine Matlock lay dying in 1650, her religious sisters willed her to recover, saying 'we cannot Spare you[,] Who shall Do the silk work when you'r Dead. You know what a help it is in those hard times for Supplys to the Community'.99 Alas, their worldly pleas failed to save her, but the silk flower industry nevertheless survived. In 1663, during a tour of

95 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS M 1, ff. 14-15. Clothing gowns were not only recycled into 'Church stuff by the canonesses. Many gowns found their way into the 'Imbrodured sute' made by the nuns for Prioress Marina Plowden's jubilee in 1704. Ibid., ff. 17-18.
96 van Strien, 'Recusant Houses', p. 505.
98 'Abbess Neville's Annals', p. 25.
99 'Ghent Obituary Notices', p. 52.
the convent, Sir Philip Skippon was shown some of the nuns' work 'which was an imitation of flowers and greens in a pot'.

Other monasteries established similar industries. The Benedictine filiation from Ghent to Boulogne-Pontoise set up its own craft production; the Pontoise account book noted purchase of 'flax and things for the silke worke'. While Pontoise was not so successful as its mother-house in using the silk flowers to stave off financial ruin, other cloisters did apply their needles effectively to make ends meet. In the *Laity's Directory* for 1796, Bishop Milner outlined the activities for which the Cambrai Benedictine nuns were noted. They were renowned for their method of education and 'for their performances in fine needle-work and artificial flowers, and for cutting out upon vellum various ornaments and devices with the most exquisite taste and execution'. According to Milner, the nuns were able to support themselves with these and other resources and had been an asset rather than a burden to the citizens of Cambrai.

Given constitutional injunctions against the sale of monastic craft work, applause from a bishop is rather odd. However, the economic necessity which forced convents to engage in domestic industry was acknowledged by local bishops and clergy. Clerics apparently sanctioned the contravention of monastic statutes in women's communities, so that the cloisters would not become a burden upon the resources of the diocese. Indeed, several 'constitutions' actually contained an escape-clause which allowed the sale of goods during times of financial distress. Moreover, the nuns were adept at developing operations which were above question. Exhorted to wield the needle and distaff in order to keep idle hands and minds busy, religious women were merely performing tasks lying well within their province as gentlewomen and nuns. In the case of the Ghent work-room, the prayerful accompaniments to manual labour emphasised that the work was conducted not only for the well-being of the cloister, but also for the glory of God.

Yet convents had the potential to develop larger-scale enterprises than those conducted by the choir nuns. I have already noted that social status was a significant factor in monastic work. The presence of lay sisters in the English cloisters persuaded some houses to develop a variety of ambitious commercial ventures. In 1645, the

101 Archives du Seine-et-Oise, MS 68 H 5, ff. [5, 12]. From 1654 onwards the silk work was not specifically mentioned in the accounts. However, the cloister always paid substantial bills for cloth, thread & other craft-related items which suggests that the work did proceed. During an episcopal visitation in the 18th century, the abbess noted that the nuns often rose early to spend an extra hour or 2 making silk flowers for sale. Murray-Sinclair, 'Pontoise', p. 8.
102 *Cambrai Records*, pp. 35-36.
104 See ch. 7 for a discussion of the spiritual dimension of manual labour.
Augustinians in Louvain established a laundry to bleach linen. It was operated by the lay sisters who earned 200 to 500 florins for the community through their labours. Lay sisters in the Liège Sepulchrine community operated a malt-making business. In 1680, the money they had earned helped to finance renovation of the cloister's dormitory and kitchen. Other cloisters recognised the financial potential of brewing. In the 1620s, the canonesses of St. Monica's planned to establish a brew-house. The prioress wrote to the community's agents in England seeking 'some good strong maid' who would enter as a lay sister to operate the new venture. The woman chosen for the job was Elizabeth (Alexia) Hobdy who was professed in 1624, despite the fact that plans for the brewing project had by that stage fallen through. The scheme was resurrected in 1672 when the prioress and her council decided to use the dowry of a deceased nun to build a brew-house.

While all of these operations could prove valuable to the financial status of a convent, they necessitated hard physical toil. Lay sisters were of course taken into religious houses to conduct the drudgery of housework, and they were exempt from many monastic observances by reason of their servile vocation. Already engaged in bleaching and starching their sisters' linen, and working in the kitchens, the industries operated by lay sisters were simply commercial extensions of their daily chores. However, there was a danger that production for an external market might prove too onerous for the women. Although they were deemed more capable of heavy physical jobs than choir nuns, most communities did not have large numbers of lay sisters. Conducting a business in addition to regular household duties could well prove too much, as was the case with the Augustinians' laundry, which was eventually abandoned. The annals recorded that the toil was too great even for the sturdy lay sisters.

The crucial point to be made about English lay sisters' enterprises was that, like choir nuns' work, they were strictly in line with prescribed gender and social expectations. For several centuries brewing had been one occupation by which women were able to supplement household income. Likewise, laundry work was another

108 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS M 1, f. 4.
109 See section I. ii in ch. 2 for factors influencing the number of lay sisters.
110 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS C 2, ff. 499-500. But, the annals noted that 'we still continued our Charity to wash & starch the good Cappuchins Church linnen who were our Neighbours'.
commercial activity which women had undertaken within the domestic realm.\textsuperscript{112} Both jobs were the province of women of low social status. Just as the rank of women who became lay sisters determined their position within the convent hierarchy, and their vocation of manual labour, so did it govern the methods they adopted to supplement convent income.

The cloisters' willingness to exploit the talents of women recruited from specific social backgrounds was illustrated by an agreement between the 'Blue Nuns' of Paris and two postulants who entered in 1689. The daughters of a craftsman, Anne (Anne Teresa) and Elizabeth (Elizabeth Clare) Adamson were skilled watch-makers. Anne made the watches, and her elder sister was accomplished in the art of studding the cases. The sisters were accepted for a reduced dowry because the nuns believed Anne and Elizabeth were 'likely to be a great advantage to the hous'. However, the postulants were well aware of the nuns' intentions concerning their skills. Upon entering the monastery the Adamsons insisted that they should not be expected to work any more than the other nuns were required to labour. Nor was their craft work to interfere with their religious obligations.\textsuperscript{113}

Unfortunately, the records for the cloister do not offer any account of the success or failure of the Adamsons' work. Indeed it is unlikely that the watch-making developed into an important form of revenue for the house, because both sisters played prominent roles in the cloister as office bearers.\textsuperscript{114} None the less, at a time of financial hardship, the council's acceptance of the sisters for a combined portion of merely £200 shows how vital their skills were deemed by the nuns. Convents evidently adopted recruitment strategies aimed at bolstering monastic coffers. The example of the Adamsons, and also that of Elizabeth (Alexia) Hobdy of St. Monica's who was sought for the proposed brewing venture, show that financial considerations were at the forefront of almost every aspect of monastic government. The need to remain solvent meant that essentially secular considerations crept into the enclosure. Social status determined the manual labour undertaken by different members of the household, and religious houses were willing to exploit members' talents gained in the world in an effort to make ends meet.\textsuperscript{115}


\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Diary of the 'Blue Nuns'}, pp. 36, 38.

\textsuperscript{114} Anne Adamson held the important position of vicaress in the 1720s which would have taken up much of her time.

\textsuperscript{115} In the Benedictine 'rule' abbesses were exhorted to encourage nuns with particular skills to use them for the good of the community, so long as the nun in question did not 'wax proude of her cunning'. See St. Benedict, \textit{Rule}, pp. 80-81.
In conclusion, an analysis of the sources of income indicates that the English nuns supplemented their dowry money and donations largely by occupations traditionally designated as women's work. Mirroring gentry wives and mothers in the world, the English choir nuns cared for and educated young children, offered hospitality to visitors, and created articles of embroidery and needlework. Lay sisters performed the tasks of domestic drudgery which could be extended to generate additional revenue for the household. Occasionally specialist industries could be undertaken by nuns who came from craft backgrounds. On the whole, the income-earning activities of cloisters fitted neatly into the daily schedule of work and prayer. However, economic necessity sometimes required that manual labour overtake the opus dei.

When Richard White wrote his 'Instructions for a Religious Superior' in 1668, he acknowledged the contradiction inherent in the monastic vocation of prayer: 'Maries part must be her desire, Marthas her necessitie'. Prioresses and indeed all sisters of the choir were called to the contemplative life, but in reality, the role of 'Mary' was the unrealistic ideal of 'rules', 'constitutions' and advice manuals. Early modern cloisters, like their medieval predecessors, were tied firmly to the economic, social, political and religious conditions of their day. In their daily existence, the English nuns had to negotiate an obstacle course of financial duress, created by both the prevailing economic climate and their position as religious exiles, but intensified by ecclesiastical policy on women's role in the Church. Survival required nuns to embrace rather than reject the ways of the world; and even the opus dei took on a commercial aspect as prayers earned food and payed for buildings. Likewise, social status pursued women into the cloister, defining them as 'Marys' of the choir and 'Marthas' of manual labour. Yet in the seventeenth-century convents every nun was both Mary and Martha whether she was abbess/prioress, officer, choir nun or lay sister. She had qualified for the former by virtue of her religious profession; the latter was bestowed by the religious and cultural consequences of her gender.
CHAPTER 5

BEYOND THE CLOISTER:
PATRONAGE, POLITICS AND SOCIETY

Doe not suppose me a well mortifyed Nun dead to the world for alas tis not so, I am alive and ... as nearly concern’d for thos I love as if I had never left them and must shar in all ther fortunes wither good or bad.¹

Prioress Winefrid Thimbleby of St. Monica’s articulated sentiments shared by many of her countrywomen in the cloisters abroad when she confessed her continuing attachment to family and friends in England. Letters, like those of Thimbleby to her brother-in-law, show that correspondence and contact between nuns and their kin was not conducted only for the financial benefit of convents. Isolated from their homeland by the physical barriers of sea and enclosure walls, the nuns thirsted for information about families and acquaintances, and they sought knowledge of the changing political situation in England and its impact upon their co-religionists. Just as worldly ideologies permeated the structure of government and the allocation of work within the cloister, and economic imperatives forced the nuns to modify the terms of clausura and manual labour to survive, so the desire of many nuns to participate actively in affairs at home drew several convents firmly into the secular realm of English politics and society. This foray into the domestic and political concerns of family and state did not require any extraordinary departure from daily monastic discourse with the world. Instead nuns simply realigned their prayer, work and administrative procedures to accommodate their activities as important power brokers in the English Catholic community.

The ways in which the English nuns wielded power in early modern English society will provide the focus of this chapter. Although denied a public role in the formal governing structures of Church and society, women were able to exercise authority through myriad different channels. Here I will explore the ways by which nuns were able to by-pass structures and strictures designed to limit their activity. Efforts to ensure the survival of their cloisters, coupled with the belief that as women they could actively participate in the religious and political work necessary for the conversion of England, led them to resist the restrictions placed upon their sphere of activity. Without posing a direct challenge to religious and gender ideologies governing their place within Church and society, the English nuns none the less manipulated the conduits of informal power used by secular women of their own social status. Through the daily conduct of household business, hospitality and patronage the English convents played a significant part in the mission to restore Catholicism in their homeland.

¹ BL, Add. MS 36,452, Aston Papers, vol. 9, Private Correspondence, 1613-1703, f. 78, Winefrid Thimbleby to Herbert Aston, [c. 1660s].
The first section will outline the framework within which nuns' power can best be understood. In the remainder of the chapter, I will examine the two arenas of power explored and operated by the English nuns. The second section continues the theme of the cloister as an aristocratic/gentry household in which the nuns exercised influence similar to that of their mothers and female kin in the world. Then, in the third section, I will look specifically at the political dimension of the nuns' various activities to assess just how far they were able to impinge upon the political affairs of seventeenth-century England.

I. The Empowerment of Women: Spheres of Influence

Women were often involved in political matters in the past, although their involvement has usually remained invisible. Here I will discuss the context in which specific women were able to wield power while remaining within their typical domain of family and household. Seventeenth-century nuns were well aware of the strategies open to women of their social status, and the religious women adapted the mechanisms of their secular sisters to participate in the politics of family and state in England.

In traditional histories public authority conferred power, so kings, bishops, ministers, administrators, generals and merchants crowded the historical stage. Power was seen as the province of elite men in the past because women did not participate fully in public office and institutions, unless they were queens. In political theory, this gendering of power was described as a dichotomy between the private and the public. Theorists argued that women whose primary concerns were family and household inhabited the domestic domain, while men occupied the realm of real power: the world of politics, economics and religion. Feminist scholars have challenged the assumptions upon which the separate spheres ideology was predicated. Furthermore, influenced by post-structuralist theories which question the notion that power is vested only in the dominant ideologies and institutions of a society, historians have reviewed the assumption that power can only be equated with public authority. The work of Michel Foucault in particular has demonstrated the diffuse nature of power which, he has argued, runs unevenly through the whole of society in the form of an ever-changing

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grid. Conceptualising power in this way suggests that every level of society participates at some stage in its creation and exercise. Moving away from definitions that posit a single source, such as patriarchy or economic determinism, it becomes possible to explain power in broader terms, such as 'the ability to act effectively, to influence people or decisions, and to achieve goals'. This kind of definition opens the door to manifold possibilities for the exercise of power by women. While some women, for example, queens and abbesses, could participate in formal power structures, those who did not wield direct authority were by no means powerless.

This framework is supported by recent research into the structure of early modern society which indicates that although gender divisions were sharpening, the public and the private were not clearly separated. In the spheres of politics, economics and religion, the categories of public and private were still permeable. Religious authorities, governments and householders were aware that the home was never an entirely private place because it was a microcosm of the ordered state where the husband/father instilled precepts of order in his subordinate family members, and was responsible for ensuring their conformity in all matters of Church and state. As such the domestic sphere was open to the public scrutiny of neighbours and officials who informally monitored the father's rule. Moreover, women's domestic duties often took them abroad, selling produce or labouring outside the home. They had obligations to attend Church ceremonies in the local parish, and to perform charitable deeds in their neighbourhood. Thus, the boundaries between public and private were only loosely drawn.

Acknowledgment of the fluidity of public and private spheres in early modern society has resulted in a broader definition of power itself, and a new understanding of the way in which it was distributed. Economic, religious and political power were not restricted solely within those institutions which wielded it formally. All kinds of power were dispersed unevenly throughout society, and could be appropriated by individuals and groups formally excluded from official repositories of authority. Thus, within the household economy women who did not contribute directly in the form of wages or participation in domestic industry, none the less wielded indirect power through the vital


support they provided their family in the form of housework and other domestic servicing functions.7 Within the Catholic Church, women were denied an official role in the decision-making hierarchies, but they could achieve considerable authority through the pursuit of mysticism and piety.8 And in matters of state, the structure of early modern political systems enabled women to frequent circles of government, often performing decisively powerful roles.9

Scholars are only beginning to explore the dimensions of female power in early modern English society. Research continues to focus upon women's influence within the household, but recognition that the household was a public place has revealed the extent to which many aristocratic and gentry women participated in family, regional and national politics. Gentlewomen in the counties and at the court were key participants in the commerce of patronage, arguably the most common method of exercising power and authority at a time when the public and the private were not clearly separated.10 In the previous chapter I described the importance of patrons for the financial survival of the English cloisters. Here I want to explore the way patronage operated in English government, administration and society, and the ways by which it filtered through to the English cloisters abroad.

Put simply, patronage was a symbiotic alliance between patron and client. The patron assisted his/her client materially by arranging marriages, providing offices, finding places for children and kin, assisting in lawsuits and providing protection. In return the client repaid his/her patron with loyalty and service in the form of providing information, assisting through office, securing places for dependents, and providing access to areas inaccessible to the patron. Therefore it was essentially a reciprocal relationship predicated on the basis of a direct transaction. However, there could be a third person involved in the exchange when someone mediated between parties separated by physical or personal distance. Patronage in such instances became a three-way relationship between patron,

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client and the mediator, termed the broker. Of course a person could be both patron and client at the same time in dealings with people above and below him/her on the social spectrum. Thus, patronage involved a complex web of relations between individuals of all backgrounds. However, patrons and brokers were more likely to reside at the upper echelons of court or county society. And indeed those at court who had access to high ranking royal officials and the monarch were the most powerful components in this grid of inter-connections.

In this patronage network, women often participated equally with men. For example, royal households were places inhabited by women as well as men, so it was possible for women to exercise the various kinds of power open to male attendants. Female courtiers held offices in the households of both the queens regnant and consort, and their proximity to the royal person meant that they became the focus of petitioners and clients seeking favours from the monarch. Similarly the country estates of the aristocracy and gentry functioned much like the court on a regional level, and acted as intermediate contact points between centre and periphery. And, significantly, patron-client relationships were commonly generated through social intercourse, using kin and mutual acquaintances to forge bonds of patronage which were subsequently maintained through hospitality, gift-giving and correspondence. The creation and maintenance of patron-broker-client networks therefore overlapped with spaces and duties traditionally deemed to be the province of women, making the household a site for political commerce. Recent feminist scholarship offers evidence of the ways in which women moved within this system and the degree of power it offered them.

Honor, Lady Lisle, wife of the deputy of Calais, Arthur Plantagenet, Viscount Lisle, provides a clear example of the household's role in the broader commerce of power. Lady Lisle was at the centre of an extraordinary patronage network which obtained privileges and positions for a broad spectrum of family, servants and acquaintances. Furthermore, she engaged in difficult negotiations with Thomas Cromwell over her own jointure and her son's inheritance. She also acted as an intermediary to petitioners who sought access to the public authority wielded by her husband, and she counselled him on matters of political importance. On the surface

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Honor Lisle worked within acceptable parameters of wifely support and household affairs. But in order to secure the successful career of her husband, and to protect the interests of their children and kin, she created elaborate patronage networks. The initiation and maintenance of influential contacts required a substantial effort of extending hospitality, exchanging gifts, receiving and bestowing favours, and generated voluminous correspondence. In such instances women's family concerns took them into the wider political sphere.\textsuperscript{16}

The English cloisters in France and the Spanish Netherlands offer a good example of the many ways in which women could wield influence during the seventeenth century. The monastery was a household inhabited by women from gentle and noble backgrounds. Like their secular counterparts, religious families needed to secure an alliance of well-connected patrons to ensure that suitable 'marriages' (i.e. those which brought good dowries) were negotiated for the future wealth and security of the convent. Nuns engaged in similar activities to those carried out by lay women in their efforts to obtain and maintain the prosperity of their religious family.

II. Patronage: Maintaining the Monastic Household

Patronage networks were vital in daily monastic life. Patrons had to be accessed through friends of the cloister, so the process began with the acquisition of well-connected novices who might persuade their kin to bestow favours upon their chosen convent. Alternatively, nuns allied their monasteries to priests and prominent lay folk who would be able to incorporate the religious house within their spheres of patrons. All cloisters aspired to obtain royal patronage which could open doors to further benefactors from the Court, as well as generating particular kudos for a community. Convents expended considerable time and energy in the creation of these elaborate webs of potent assistants. However, they not only sought patronage, but often became dispensers of it, working as both patrons and brokers among the stream of clients who recognised the nuns as powerful agents in the broader network. This section will explore the process by which many cloisters constructed and dispensed power.

In a recent study of the Florentine Benedictine convent of Le Murate in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, K.J.P. Lowe has argued that in order to prosper, the nuns had to 'mobilize support from every sector of the population, regardless of sex,

\textsuperscript{16} For an analysis of the activities of Lady Lisle's contemporaries, see Harris, 'Women and Politics', pp. 259-81. For the power achieved by Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough, see Frances Harris, \textit{A Passion for Government: The Life of Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough}, Oxford, 1991.
social group, income, political hue, or place of origin'.

Lowe argued that developing good relationships with powerful Florentine families was crucial to the success of Le Murate. Pragmatic abbesses made excellent use of patronage networks, enlisting the approbation and support of a wide range of family, friends and patrons, to sidestep restrictions imposed by the Church upon female religious activities. The close bonds forged with secular Florentine society enabled the nuns to develop and market particular 'cottage industries', such as embroidery. Le Murate's famous choir provided another means of enhancing the reputation of the cloister and attracting patronage. This combination of nurturing existing contacts with the world beyond the cloister, and exploiting the creative talents of community members to attract further money and admiration was also the secret to success for the English cloisters over one hundred years later.

As daughters of the Catholic gentry and aristocracy, the English nuns had been raised in a domestic environment which centred upon the preservation of both faith and family fortune. Many women entering the cloisters would have experienced first-hand the prominence of mothers and female kin in supervising household religion. Such an upbringing provided them with vital role models of powerful women. It also taught them the social, political and economic skills necessary for the survival of their religious houses. Just as their mothers had manipulated traditional female roles of child raising, charity, piety and local patronage to proselytise and to protect the family's property from recusancy fines, so did the nuns preserve their faith and livelihood through the similarly feminine acts of teaching, hospitality and craftwork. In this instance, gender became as potent a factor in nuns' success as it could play in their failure.

Like secular families, the monastic family sought to advance its interests through alliances with people and institutions most likely to improve the convent's fortunes. In the world, aristocratic and gentry families expanded and secured their estates by forging lucrative marriage alliances. Ancient and noble families could demand sizeable portions from women marrying their heirs. Similarly, convents sought well-endowed 'brides' with good family connections by emphasising the impeccable lineage of their monastic family. For example, in a 1652 publication which aimed to attract novices to the Sepulchrine cloister at Liège, the nuns chose to highlight the genealogy of their order, tracing its origins back to James, the apostle. Hinting that the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Martha were possible early members of the Sepulchrines, the Brief

19 For examples of powerful laywomen whose daughters or kin became nuns, see the biographies & family histories of Dorothy Lawson, Margaret Clitherow, Jane Vaughan Wiseman, the Vaux sisters, & Margaret Giggs.
Relation was at pains to establish good family credentials. In a similar vein, when the Augustinians of Louvain were conducting a recruitment drive in the early eighteenth century, they circulated an account of their cloister's origins and lineage among visitors and friends in the hope that copies would find their way back to England. During the seventeenth century, St. Monica's had attracted daughters from many stalwart recusant families. In an effort to endorse the house's glorious ancestry, the advertisement listed renowned nuns and benefactors associated with the community. The effort employed by cloisters in the delineation of their ancestry suggests that 'marriage' played as important a role in the construction and operation of monastic patronage, as it did in its secular form.

The centrality of patronage in monastic economic and political affairs was exemplified in the competition among cloisters for well-connected novices. In 1667, Mary (Anne) Neville, the daughter of Henry, Baron Abergavenny, who had been professed among the Ghent Benedictines, was sought by the Benedictine abbesses of more recently established Dunkirk and Pontoise houses who recognised her potential for drawing patronage to their cloisters. She was 'much prest by my Lady Carrill', the abbess of Dunkirk, but instead of acceding to Mary Caryll's pressure, Neville sought permission from the abbess of Ghent to join the Pontoise Benedictines. Ghent was reluctant to lose one of its esteemed sisters and it was only after a paper war among the three abbesses that Neville was allowed her choice. A year after her arrival, Neville was elected abbess and held the position for twenty-two years. Similarly, when in 1692 Lady Lucy (Teresa Joseph) Herbert, daughter of the earl of Powis, decided to enter the religious life, she was feted as 'a lady of Quality' in an effort to entice her to join the various cloisters she visited. Astute abbesses and prioresses were well aware of the vital patronage she could generate for their cloister through her family association with the exiled Stuart court at St. Germain. Like Anne Neville, Lucy Herbert was soon elected prioress of the Bruges Augustinian community. The value of securing a lady of such distinction is evidenced by the great expansion of Bruges under Herbert's priorate.

20 A Brief Relation of the Order and Institute of the English Religious Women at Liège, Liège, 1652, pp. 6-16. Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha, was often mistakenly identified as Mary Magdalene, hence mention of them both in this genealogy. Bruce M. Metzger & Michael D. Coogan (eds.), The Oxford Companion to the Bible, New York & Oxford, 1993, p. 499.
21 BL, Add. MS 5,813, 'An Account of the Nunnery of St. Monica in Lovain', ff. 31-34.
24 Ibid., pp. 324-25.
Another vital source of patronage was the English clerical network. Through the clergy the nuns were able to gain access to higher bodies within the Church itself as well as to lay patrons. As religious exiles unencumbered by the restrictions of clausura, English priests had developed personal patronage systems throughout the exiled English community, local dignitaries and nobility, and Catholic royalty. When Lady Mary Percy founded the first post-Reformation Benedictine cloister for women she chose Brussels, one of the main centres of exiled English Catholics. Assisted by William Holt S.J., former rector of the English College in Rome and agent of Phillip II in Brussels, Percy gained access to Robert Persons in Rome and the archdukes of the Spanish Netherlands. Through Persons the necessary papal briefs were secured, and Holt obtained episcopal sanction and the permission and financial support of Albert and Isabella. He also arranged for the transfer of Dame Joanna Berkeley of St. Peter's in Rheims to be abbess, and for two other English nuns of the same community to join the new house.25

The founders of the Ghent Benedictine house relied upon the powerful network summoned by John Knatchbull S.J. when they approached the archbishop of Mechelen with a proposal to establish the cloister. The brother of the first abbess, Lucy Knatchbull, he spoke Spanish and was able to lobby several powerful clergy and lay folk in Flanders to persuade the archbishop, governors, and magistrates to permit the English filiation from Brussels.26 In 1660, the English Dominican convent at Vilvorde (later Brussels) was established by Philip Howard, later chaplain to Catherine of Braganza, subsequently grand almoner, and finally created a cardinal in 1675. Beside his political associations, Howard’s position as brother to the duke of Norfolk ensured the Dominican nuns a valuable fount of beneficence. Both the Howards and the English royal family were generous to the cloister.27

Access to royal patrons was important for English cloisters because of the obvious financial benefits, but also for the social prestige relationships with royalty could bestow upon a house. Following the Restoration the English monarchs were most commonly approached as patrons, but before 1660 benefactors were cultivated from among the Spanish and French kings and princes, and their consorts. The clothing ceremony of the first eight postulants for the English Benedictine cloister at Brussels was conducted in the presence of the Infanta Isabella, the Archduke Albert and all their court, plus the papal nuncio. Isabella played a prominent part in the ceremony, leading Mary Percy and Dorothy Arundel into the church and providing a banquet for the newly clothed novices and local worthies following the solemnities, declaring herself a ‘mother’ to the

community. Albert bolstered his wife's commitments to the house by promising the nuns whatever assistance he could offer. The consolidation of royal and ecclesiastical support embodied by the ceremony was vital for the new community. Not only did the house gain the promise of patronage from these influential people, it also advertised its credentials to the English Catholic community. The elaborate display of puissant backing aimed to encourage further patronage in the form of money, gifts and postulants.

Visual displays of munificence might have been useful in nuns' quest to secure patronage but they were not sufficient to secure permanent support. The process of maintaining networks involved an array of social activities and tasks. Hospitality was commonly at the crux of nuns' efforts to sustain profitable relationships with benefactors. Accommodating boarders, entertaining visitors at the grate, conducting musical recitals in the chapel, and permitting the public to attend church services were actions not strictly in line with the terms of clausura, but they were essential for the provision of patronage. The aforementioned income-generating practice of taking in wealthy lady pensioners and the daughters of notable Catholic families was common, and prominent personages were eagerly welcomed by convents. For example, the Ghent Benedictines accommodated Katharine Manners, duchess of Buckingham, for fifteen months during the Civil War. The duchess reportedly declared that nowhere had she been happier or better looked after than during her time in the company of Abbess Lucy Knatchbull and the Ghent sisters.

Other visitors were entertained at the grate and in the chapel. In 1660, when Anne of Austria briefly visited the Pontoise Benedictine abbey, the regent was so enchanted by Abbess Christina Forster's command of the French language and her 'very gayning behaviour' that she immediately offered the house anything it needed. In 1694, the Catholic earl of Perth passed by the Bruges Augustinian convent where he and his wife attended compline in the chapel, and then were entertained by the nuns at the grate 'with a fine collation of milks, fruits, and sweetmeats'. Significantly the nuns who joined them at the grate, Catherine and Anne Howard, and Lucy Herbert, were all from noble

28 PRO, SP Flanders: 77/6, f. 73. See PRO SP Flanders: 77/8, f. 275 for an account of a similar clothing ceremony at the convent in 1607. Again the infanta, archduke & nuncio played prominent roles.
29 Matthew, Life of Lucy Knatchbull, pp. 216-17; 'Abbess Neville's Annals', p. 31. After her sojourn at Ghent, the duchess sought to found a Benedictine cloister in Ireland with nuns from the community; see section III below. The Benedictines of Cambrai took in several well-connected ladies who desired to lead 'retired lives' within the enclosure. See Joseph Gillow (ed.), 'Records of the English Benedictine Nuns at Cambrai, 1620-1793', in Miscellanea 8, [CRS, 13], London, 1912, pp. 52-3, 56, 59. E.g.s of notable boarders in the cloister of the 'Blue Nuns': Lady Frances Howard (daughter of the duke of Norfolk), the duchess of Cleveland, Lady Huddleston, Countess Hamilton, Lady Elizabeth Gage, & the duchess of Tyrconnel. See Joseph Gillow & Richard Trappes-Lomax (eds.), The Diary of the 'Blue Nuns' or Order of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady, at Paris, 1658-1810, [CRS, 8], London, 1910 (hereafter Diary of the 'Blue Nuns'), pp. 19, 25, 29-32, 35-37, 38, 46.
30 'Abbess Neville's Annals', pp. 49-50. Abbess Forster's charm as a hostess was supplemented by a 'little present of silk flowers'.
Like the nuns of Le Murate in Florence, English cloisters also strove to impress potential patrons with their singing. The choir of the Paris Augustinians saved the community from ruin in the 1650s. Upon attending evensong at the convent, the French chancellor, Charles Séguié, was so impressed by the nuns’ singing and sanctity that, upon learning of their severe financial troubles, he instantly sent them 1,000 livres. The sum of alms had reached 4,000 livres by the end of the year, and the Séguié family subsequently became staunch supporters of the English cloister. By 1664, the confessor of the convent was estimating that patronage from the chancellor and his family totalled more than 10,000 livres.32

Maintaining kin and patronage networks commonly entailed regular exchange of gifts and letters.33 Although discouraged from engaging in copious correspondence by confessors who feared that frequent letters between England and the Continent would prove a distraction from the spiritual business of monastic life, the exchange of mail and presents between cloisters and their assistants, families, and benefactors was an important feature of convent government.34 At the request of her sister with whom she corresponded regularly, Winefrid Thimbleby of St. Monica’s arranged to have her portrait painted and sent to England. The two sisters also exchanged locks of hair.35 Several relatives of John Caryll, secretary to Mary of Modena at the exiled Stuart Court at St. Germain-en-Laye, were in the Benedictine cloister at Dunkirk. Encouraged by Abbess Mary Caryll, who was the courtier’s sister, the nuns sent a steady stream of gifts and messages to their kinsman. When he was ill, Mary Caryll sent him herbal remedies which she declared she had found to be most effective. Later she sent tobacco. In 1699, John Caryll wrote to the abbess thanking her for the waters and other gifts which had arrived safely. He asked his sister to thank their niece for her present of roasted apples

31 [James, Earl of Perth], *Letters from James Earl of Perth, to his Sister, The Countess of Erroll*, William Jerdan (ed.), [Camden Society, 23], London, 1845, p. 43. The Howards were daughters of the duke of Norfolk & Lady Anne Somerset, while Lucy Herbert was their cousin - daughter of the earl of Powis & Lady Elizabeth Somerset. Similarly the English Franciscans in Bruges treated the earl & countess to 'an entertainment of musick ... a hymn and a motette, (although it was not an hour of prayer), with the organ, Violes, and violines, and voices'. Ibid., p. 44.
33 For a discussion of the political significance of gift-giving see, Harris, 'Women and Polities', pp. 265-68.
34 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS Qu 2, [Richard White (alias Johnson)], 'Instructions for a Religious Superior : Penned & presented to the Rd Mother N:N: upon the day she was installed Prioress of St Monica's in Louvaine', 1668, ff. 92-93.
35 BL, Add MS 36,452, ff. 61-62, 64, 65, 67. The portrait of Winefrid Thimbleby appears to have been lost by her family. However, portraits were apparently a popular form of exchange in the 17th & 18th centuries. There are doubtless several nuns’ images contained in family collections. At Ripley Castle in Yorkshire, a portrait of Elizabeth Inglby who was a Ghent Benedictine (d. 1662) hangs in the Tower room. Others have been purchased by galleries. Elizabeth Throckmorton of the Paris Augustinians was painted in 1729 by Nicolas de Largillière, & her likeness hangs in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Throckmorton’s cousin Frances Woolasocot for Largillière at the same time, & her portrait is part of the Art Gallery of South Australia’s collection. Other portraits were retained (or recovered) by the modern descendants of the Continental convents. E.g., the English Convent in Bruges has portraits of Margaret Clement, & all the Bruges prioresses of the 17th & 18th centuries.
which he had interpreted as an 'Embleme of the fallacious outside of this world, best
express in an apple which first deceived our mother Eve'. Nuns could also remind their
patrons of the prayers the convent offered on their behalf. Mary Caryll constantly
informed her brother that the Dunkirk Benedictines prayed for his health and longevity.
In a letter of 1711, she remarked that she believed he owed his life to the many prayers
said for him by her nuns.36

Patrons of the English convents were not only providers of much needed income. They also played a significant part in recruitment and on-going business concerns. Although many nuns did in fact defy enclosure restrictions and travel to England on business trips to obtain novices, and to secure dowries and legacies, these tasks were more commonly undertaken by friends of the house. This role could be formalised with the friend acting as an agent for the cloister. Often monastic agents were members of the clergy who in the course of their ministry would encounter prospective postulants and then negotiate with parents regarding dowries.37 The 'Council Book' for the Louvain Augustinians outlines the role played by Mr Foster, the agent in England. He was to negotiate the portions of prospective nuns, and receive payment of the dowries. All documentation and money was then to be forwarded to the prioress and procuratrice in Louvain.38 Other houses sought more powerful deputies. In 1662, Abbess Elizabeth Timperley of the 'Blue Nuns' arranged for the Charles II's cousin, Louis Stewart, Seigneur d'Aubigny to act as the community's temporal superior in England.39 In most instances it seems that cloisters relied upon a combination of friends and assistants in England and on the Continent to conduct their business for them, rather than placing it all in the hands of one agent. Thus the operation of patronage networks for the day-to-day functioning of a monastery was a complex web of family and business associations.

Some idea of the way family networks operated in early eighteenth century can be gleaned from the diary of Nicholas Blundell. Blundell had several aunts and sisters in religious communities in Flanders for whose dowry agreements he was responsible. Although under great financial duress which often delayed his payments to the Dunkirk Poor Clares and Ghent Benedictines, he none the less appeared to act as an informal agent for the Gravelines Poor Clare cloister where his aunts, Louisa and Alice Blundell, and his sister Anne were nuns. Correspondence between Blundell and Abbess Gerard of the Ghent Benedictines concerning late payment of portions for his sisters, Frances and Winefrid, suggests that the nuns themselves often negotiated directly with kin regarding

36 BL, Add MS 28,226, Caryll Letters, ff. 104, 114, 117, 121, 139.
37 Allison, 'English Augustinian Convent', p. 474; Bodl., MS Rawlinson A.36, Thurloe Papers, ff. 89-90. For a more detailed explanation of this system, see ch. 2.
38 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS M 1, Council Book, 1669-1874, ff. 5-6.
39 Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', p. 14
financial matters. However, convents were dependent upon their agents for collection and dispatch of monies owing them. Nicholas Blundell noted sending money to the Low Countries through the various cloisters' agents. For example, in June 1704, in both his diary and disbursement book he recorded sending a bill for £30 for his aunt, Margaret Blundell, to the Poor Clares in Rouen, via Mr Cole, the agent for the community. In May 1709, he alleviated part of his debt to the Ghent Benedictines by giving bills to the value of £103 15s to Mr Tempest 'for the use of Sister Winny'. On other occasions he mentioned collecting money on behalf of the Gravelines monastery. Between January 1709 and May 1711, Blundell noted collecting alms money for Gravelines from Edmund Tristram, a yeoman of Ince Blundell. Although it is not clear what part Nicholas played in the arrangements, Tristram's daughter left for the Continent in May 1611, and Ann (Ann Joseph) Tristram was professed in the Poor Clare cloister in December 1712. It is apparent from Blundell's account that the kin of English nuns operated in formal and informal networks to obtain and send money for both dowries and charity.

In the operation of their extensive patronage network, the nuns' most essential tools were the quill, ink and paper. Abbesses and priores engaged in often lengthy and heated postal exchanges with the families of their sisters over the sum and payment (more often non-payment) of portions. Nicholas Blundell was not alone in falling behind in his obligations. Much surviving correspondence deals principally with the thorny issue of remuneration. The correspondence of two superiors, Prioress Winefrid Thimbleby of the Louvain Augustinians and Abbess Mary Caryll of the Dunkirk Benedictines, illustrates graphically the place of family correspondence in monastic affairs.

Prioress Thimbleby's letters were written principally to her brother-in-law, Herbert Aston. Upon her sister's death, Winefrid Thimbleby maintained regular correspondence with Aston in an effort to retain links with her family at home. News about nieces and nephews was eagerly exchanged between the pair. In earlier letters to her sister, Catherine Thimbleby Aston, the prioress had broached the subject of her nieces being sent to Louvain for education in the hope that one or more might discover a

40 [Nicholas Blundell], The Great Diurnal of Nicholas Blundell of Little Crosby, Lancashire, J.J. Bagley (ed.), Chester, n.d., vol. 2, p. xiii. Thanks to Professor John Bossy for drawing my attention to this material.
41 Ibid., vol. 1, p. 60.
42 Ibid., p. 215.
religious vocation.\textsuperscript{45} In the years following her sister's death, Thimbleby pleaded with Herbert Aston to fulfil this wish. Subsequently, both Katharine and Gertrude Aston were sent to pension at St. Monica's in the 1660s. Thimbleby's letters to her brother during this period reflected her fluctuating hopes regarding their vocations.\textsuperscript{46} Obviously their father was keen to settle them within the cloister. Aware of the prioress's desire to have the girls, he even attempted to persuade his sister-in-law to accept Gertrude for the less than the usual dowry.\textsuperscript{47} Ultimately, Katharine was professed in 1668. Gertrude, despite pressure from her aunt, sister and members of the Louvain convent, chose not to become a nun.\textsuperscript{48} The Thimbleby-Aston letters illustrate vividly the overlap between family and business correspondence. While her letters were personal communications, Prioress Thimbleby nevertheless used her kin in England to expand the monastic family in Louvain.

Correspondence between Abbess Caryll and her brother at St. Germain suggests that John Caryll fulfilled the role of ex-officio agent for the Dunkirk community, providing money and financial advice, negotiating vocations and dowries, as well as acting as a broker between the nuns and the exiled Stuart court. Abbess Caryll appealed to her brother to resolve financial disputes over dowries and investments. Her letters suggest that the cloister's official agent, Mr Whitford, was not competent at extracting portions from reluctant parents. In a letter of 1697, the abbess thanked her brother for securing a sum which had been outstanding for seven years, saying 'if all such mistakes fell into your hands, ther would be noe daunger of banckaroupt [sic]... I wish such a pay maister as your self to all my desperate ones'.\textsuperscript{49} Obviously she considered her brother was better able than her agent to advance the interests of the house because she sought his assistance on several other similar occasions.\textsuperscript{50} John Caryll's connections at both St. Germain and Versailles meant that he was well-placed to advise his sister about the best investment opportunities for the cloister. Several letters confirm his role as financial adviser to the nuns.\textsuperscript{51} He was also able to draw upon his patrons to assist the house in conflicts with ecclesiastical bodies. In 1697, during a dispute with the local Jesuits over a piece of land adjoining the monastery garden, Abbess Caryll pressed him to intercede on the nuns' behalf with Mary of Modena.\textsuperscript{52} In all of these instances, John Caryll

\textsuperscript{45} BL, Add. MS 36,452, ff. 62, 63.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., ff. 66, 68, 70, 71, 75, 76, 78, 88, 90.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., f. 89.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., ff. 90, 92, 93, 95.
\textsuperscript{49} BL, Add. MS 28,226, f. 114. Again, in 1699, Mary Caryll complained of Mr Whitford's tardiness in crediting the rent from another nun's dowry to the monastery, complaining that she suspected the agent 'does not well under stand that part wch belongs to this familly'. Ibid., f. 118.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., ff. 113, 117, 121, 122, 128.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., f. 114, 118.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., f. 113.
appears as a powerful patron who wielded considerable authority in the convent by virtue of his consanguinity with the abbess and his position at the Jacobite Court.

However, the prominence of kinship ties within monastic patronage networks meant that the process worked both ways and many nuns became important patrons within their secular families. Not only did Mary Caryll rely upon her brother's access to Mary of Modena and other prominent Court officials to conduct convent business, she also used her secular and monastic family network to secure vocations and dowries for relatives and friends. Kin who could not afford to dower their daughters appealed to her to petition John Caryll on their behalf. Inevitably she tried to settle these nieces within her own cloister. On other occasions the abbess acted as a broker between other monasteries and her brother. For example, Mary negotiated possible portions for her two young nieces, Catherine and Barbara Caryll, with Prioress Margaret Mostyn Fettiplace of the English Carmelites at Lierre. Other impecunious relatives used her to plead their case, or to seek preferment at the exiled Court. Within the Aston-Thimbleby families, Winefrid Thimbleby performed a similar role. When Walter, Lord Aston provided his widowed aunt, Mary Tateman Aston, with a portion to enter the Liège Sepulchrines, the Augustinian prioress acted as an intermediary. It is not clear whether Winefrid Thimbleby negotiated with Prioress Susan (Mary of the Conception) Hawley over dowry details. None the less, an account book noted that the expenses for Mary Tateman before her profession in 1685 were paid through the Louvain prioress, suggesting that Thimbleby's kin in England used her as an important broker in their dealings on the Continent.

Priests were often assisted in matters of preferment by friends and benefactors from among the English convents. Evidence of their gratitude to monastic patrons appears in numerous dedications to nuns in recusant literature published throughout the seventeenth century. For example, the Jesuit translator of Francis Borgia's *Practise of Christian Workes* dedicated his 1620 publication to Abbess Elizabeth (Clare Mary Ann) Tyldesley of the Gravelines Poor Clare cloister. In the preface he noted, 'how far my selfe am growne endebted, for the many benefits I have receaved from your selfe, and your holy Family ... and so am forced to excuse my selfe, by paying this interest, until I may be better able to discharge the principall'. Similarly the translator of Vincent

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53 Ibid., ff. 122, 125, 127, 133.
54 Ibid., ff. 124, 125.
55 Ibid., ff. 124, 129, 130, 132, 139.
Puccini's biography of Florentine Carmelite, Maria Maddalena de Patsi, expressed his enormous debt to Abbess Mary Percy of the Brussels Benedictines.\textsuperscript{58}

Augustinian abbess, Letitia (Mary) Tredway of the Augustinian nuns of Paris, showed both the strength nuns wielded as patrons and the symbiotic nature of patronage when she established a college for English secular priests. Bishop Richard Smith had acted as a useful patron when the Augustinian convent was established in Paris in 1634. A member of Richelieu's household, Smith secured the necessary royal approbation for the new cloister. More importantly, with the assistance of the Cardinal, objections of the Archbishop of Paris and the Parlement to the foundation were overturned.\textsuperscript{59} After Richelieu's death in 1642, the situation was reversed and the abbess provided Smith with accommodation in a house adjoining the convent. Abbess Tredway later succeeded in achieving the bishop's ambition of founding a community for English secular priests pursuing higher studies at the Sorbonne. In 1667, twelve years after Smith's death, she and Thomas Carre, the confessor of the Augustinian house, established St. Gregory's College. The convent provided some land, and Tredway worked tirelessly to secure the political and financial support of English clergy associated with Henrietta Maria in Paris. She later did all she could to enhance the reputation of her clerical foundation, inviting the fathers to preach in the convent church on public occasions when large numbers of English people would be present to hear them.\textsuperscript{60} Thus, the clerical network established by nuns could be used for wider purposes than simply assisting their own convent. Those houses which had secured particularly influential patrons could often intercede on behalf of others, even priests, illustrating the truly symbiotic nature of many nun/cleric relationships.

The examples of Mary Tredway, Winefrid Thimbleby and Mary Caryll suggest that nuns participated not only in the politics of their monastic communities, but also in a wider sphere beyond the confines of the monastic enclosure. Although through their profession nuns became members of religious households, they enthusiastically maintained close ties with their kindred in England. By no means 'dead to the world', the religious women continued to further the interests of their secular as well as their monastic families. However, for many convents sharing the 'fortunes wither good or bad' of loved ones in England necessitated much more than the arrangement of vocations, and the conduct of family news and business. Many nuns believed that they were well-placed to restore Catholicism in their homeland. In the next section I shall explore the

\textsuperscript{58} Vincent Puccini, \textit{The Life of the Holy and Venerable Mother Suor Maria Maddalena de Patsi, A Florentine Lady, & Religious of the Order of the Carmelites}, G.B. (trans.), 1619, [ERL, 33; STC, 20483], pp. 3-4.

\textsuperscript{59} Allison, 'English Augustinian Convent', p. 458.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., pp. 468-69; For a fuller account of Mary Tredway's patronage of St. Gregory's College, see Antony F. Allison, 'The Origins of St. Gregory's, Paris', \textit{RH}, 21, 1992, pp. 14-20.
ways by which the English convents engaged in activities which were overtly political and highly controversial. Under the guise of patronage obligations, convent business, and monastic piety, the English nuns worked to further the religious and political causes of the English Catholic gentry.

III. Politics and the Monastic Household

By the very fact of their existence, the convents entered the public domain of English politics. Through their religious profession nuns defied English laws prohibiting exile into cloisters abroad; and monastic performance of the *opus dei* was political in the sense that the divine office was offered for the conversion of England. But the convents conducted additional activities which directly contributed to the preservation of Catholicism. Within their monastic enclosures, nuns provided refuge for exiled compatriots, and they educated the next generation of English Catholics. Cloisters also collected, copied and circulated recusant literature. Some nuns even travelled to England where they both covertly and openly engaged in illegal missionary activity. However, pragmatic nuns realised that simply preserving the faith would not necessarily entail its restoration. Political action from within England, or intervention by foreign Catholic powers, were the only means by which Protestant ascendancy would crumble. Throughout the seventeenth century, a number of cloisters therefore sought alliances with royalty at home and abroad. Initially the nuns garnered support from the Spanish and French courts but, as the century progressed, they turned increasingly to the Stuarts, seeking patronage when the monarchy's fortunes were secure, and offering it when the royal family's circumstances were bleak.

Political work undertaken by religious women in the seventeenth century potentially took them into conflict with the Catholic hierarchy and the English government. The position of the Catholic Church vis-a-vis Catholic women was ambivalent. On the one hand it insisted upon the claustration of all nuns into a purely contemplative apostolate within the distinct borders of the enclosure. On the other hand, priests encouraged lay women to assume active participation in the struggle against Protestantism through their support of the itinerant clergy. For the Church, therefore, the boundaries between secular household and the world could be far more permeable than those between cloister and world. This apparent contradiction hinged upon the issues of power and control. Cloisters located on the Continent in territory under Catholic rule were far easier to regulate than gentry wives in Protestant England. In any case, the missionary priests were dependent upon the protection and financial support of English gentry households. Censuring the hands that fed them would have been a foolhardy strategy, so the overtly political actions of lay women were tolerated, even encouraged.
Alternatively, it could be argued that the Church and, importantly, the cloistered nuns believed firmly in the potency of prayer. Their devotions and masses were offered on a constant basis in support of those Catholics, lay and religious, struggling to preserve the faith in England. Thus, contemplation was an acceptable, even desirable form of political action by nuns.

The Protestants might not have appreciated the efficacy of papist prayers, especially the petitions of nuns whom many viewed as 'silly seduced women'. The English government, however, treated the exodus of women across the Channel as a threat. Furthermore, agents in the Low Countries and in France frequently reported the involvement of English nuns in the political manoeuvres of the exiled Catholic community. This section explores the political significance of the cloisters' actions in terms of both the Catholic Church and English government. As I argued in the case of patronage, the nuns were not acting differently from their mothers and kinswomen in England. They employed the very same strategies of nurturing, teaching and hospitality to preserve Catholic traditions, to support the clergy and lay agitators, and to ensure that the next generation of Catholic women adhered as strongly to the faith as their mothers had done. Furthermore, many convents engaged directly in the political affairs of their homeland by offering financial support for the Stuart monarchy. Like their secular counterparts in England, the nuns demonstrated that politics was not solely a masculine domain which took place outside the ostensibly private sphere of the household.

Before detailing the ways in which the contemplative nuns were able to engage actively in the preservation of their faith, I will discuss the actions of mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts and other female kin who constituted their role-models. Although more is known about the Elizabethan recusant wives described by John Bossy as 'matriarchs', Catholic lay women remained prominent in the struggle to keep their families within the Catholic fold and to win more converts to the faith throughout the seventeenth century. As I suggested in the second chapter, the cloisters need to be located within this tradition of strong female religiosity and action of the part of Catholic wives and mothers. By exploring the work of lay women, the causes and methods espoused by the nuns becomes clearer.

Elizabethan lay women in gentry and aristocratic households were notorious for their support of missionary priests and successful proselytising. Their prominence as harbourers was exemplified by the Vaux sisters who provided accommodation and financial support for the Jesuit clergy in England, and by Viscountess Montague who

maintained no less than three priests in her house during the 1590s. Indeed, letters exchanged between Anne Vaux and Henry Garnett while the Jesuit was in prison demonstrate just how important a patron Vaux was to the priest. Garnet offered Vaux advice of a spiritual nature, but also asked her to pass on messages to other members of the Society and to arrange for his debts to be paid. The extent of female patronage was revealed in the experiences of Fr. Anthony Sherlock whose 1606 confession to the authorities indicted no less than seven women with whom he had stayed during almost ten years of missionary work.

Maintained within recusant households, post-Reformation English Catholicism inevitably opened the domestic arrangements of Catholic women to public scrutiny. Recusancy legislation for the 1590s and 1600s increasingly targeted the activities of women who would otherwise have remained protected by their legal anonymity as daughters and wives. Protestant authorities described these women's activities as politically subversive. In 1585, the bishop of Winchester argued strongly in favour of retaining the 'most obstinate' sister of Nicholas Saunders in prison because if released she 'would do more harm than ten sermons do good'. During the trial of Yorkshire woman, Margaret Clitherow, one of the judges urged her execution because, if set free, she would 'undo a great many'. Yet efforts to stem women's actions were never entirely successful. In the early eighteenth century, a converted seamstress, Mary Shepherd, was described by authorities as 'so very zealous for the Romish Religion' that she made it 'her principall Study and great merit to gain Proselites'. Shepherd had made great gains for Catholicism by converting the apprentices, seamstresses and serving girls with whom she worked.

Ironically it was notoriously difficult for local officials to curtail the actions of these proselytising wives and widows. Catholic women were successful ambassadors for the faith because they carried out their 'subversive' work under the guise of everyday pious activities. The influence mothers could wield over their children's religious

65 Rowlands, 'Recusant Women', pp. 150-56.
orientation was evident in the statements of men entering the English College at Rome. Several students attributed their Catholicism and subsequent vocation to the priesthood to maternal example and teaching.\(^6^9\) In 1593, Parliament debated a recusancy bill which would have resulted in children being removed from Catholic parents at the age of seven. Members were uncomfortable about intruding quite so decisively into family life, so the bill was dropped.\(^7^0\) However, its existence indicates just how real the threat of proselytising mothers had come to be perceived by the government. In any case, children were not the only relatives targeted by zealous Catholic women. The conversion of Olive Porter, the wife of Caroline courtier, Endymion Porter caused scandal enough during the 1630s. Olive's subsequent proselytising at the Court saw her bring about the conversions of her father and her sister, and several others.\(^7^1\) Other women carried their missionary work into the wider sphere of neighbourly charity. Ursula Middleton was renowned for her success in curing rickets. Whenever a Protestant child was brought for treatment, she would have it baptised by the household chaplain, or perform the task herself if he was unavailable.\(^7^2\) Dorothy Lawson of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne reportedly reconciled over one hundred people to the faith through her charitable ministry among neighbours.\(^7^3\)

Gentlewomen and aristocratic women were especially adept at manipulating the rituals of hospitality for religious and political purposes.\(^7^4\) In the late sixteenth century maintaining a recusant household was a subversive practice. Women like Magdalen, Viscountess Montague and Dorothy Lawson carried the act of defiance further by inviting Catholics into their houses on important liturgical feasts for religious ceremonies. Dorothy Lawson took the opportunity on such occasions to provide catechism for the children of her own and neighbouring households, distributing medals and *Agnus Dei* to those who answered best.\(^7^5\) Lady Montague maintained a household of eighty Catholics, providing them with food and wages, plus access to the word of God.\(^7^6\) Both women were able to work within the auspices of Catholic ritual and female domestic care to challenge the Protestant Church and state. Although the Catholic Church was averse to women engaging in missionary activity, hospitality provided them with the opportunity to proselytise. In the seventeenth century, Elizabeth Cary, Viscountess Falkland, who had

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\(^7^0\) Rowlands, 'Recusant Women', p. 154.


\(^7^2\) Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS C 2, Chronicle: vol. 1, 1548-1837, ff. 587-88.


\(^7^5\) Palmes, *Life of Dorothy Lawson*, pp. 43.

scandalised her husband and the Court by her conversion to Catholicism, used the dinner table to persuade her Protestant children of the veracity of her faith. Lady Falkland encouraged her children to dine at home where she could surreptitiously guide their diet according to the Catholic calendar, and provide them with the chance of discussions about the Catholic faith.\(^77\) For gentry wives and mothers, hospitality was the most obvious means by which to influence the faith of those within and outside the immediate family circle.

While Protestants attempted to stem the tide of conversions inspired by Catholic wives and mothers, the Catholic Church applauded the zeal of its womenfolk. Priests wrote hagiographical accounts of the exploits of women like Magdalen, Viscountess Montague, Dorothy Lawson and Margaret Clitherow, praising the overtly political activities of harbouring priests and conversion. In the preface to his biography of Margaret Clitherow which was dedicated to her daughter, an Augustinian nun in Louvain, John Mush described the martyr as an exemplar to all women:

Before woemen you may advance this royall standard of your victorious Mother, inviting them like stoute Amazons, to bidde batayle unto the world, & their spirituall enemies.\(^78\)

Just over ten years later, Mary Ward and the nuns of her Institute were censured by Rome for engaging in exactly the same activities. The papal bull for the suppression of the I.B.V.M. condemned the sisters for

not being bound by the laws of enclosure to wander about at their pleasure, and under the appearance of promoting the salvation of souls to attempt and perform many other works unbecoming to the weakness of their sex and understanding as well as to womanly modesty and virgin bashfulness.\(^79\)

The experience of Mary Ward suggests that the Church would only permit female proselytisation within the traditional sphere of household and neighbourhood. In this sense, wives had greater liberty than their professed religious sisters for whom the cloister was the clearly defined domain for all spiritual and pious action.\(^80\)

Yet, as I have argued in the previous section on patronage, the imposition of strict clausura did not entail complete withdrawal from families and friends in the world beyond the enclosure. Mirroring the recusant household which could be a site for overt political action, the English cloisters in France and the Low Countries assumed

\(^78\) Mush, *Life of Margaret Clitherowe*, sig. A2v.
\(^80\) I discussed this point in some depth in Claire Walker, "Of Feminine Sexe, but Masculine Virtue": Catholic Women and the Preservation of the Faith in England, 1558-1640', unpub. honours dissertation, University of Western Australia, 1986, pp. 50-63.
prominence in the battle against Protestantism. Just as hospitality provided the framework within which lay women could proselytise and nuns could court patrons, so too did it offer enclosed nuns the opportunity to engage in the kind of work laid out for the women of Mary Ward's Institute. For example, many convents accepted Protestant lay women into their schools, several of whom converted to Catholicism as a consequence of their experience in the enclosure. Between 1672 and 1678, the 'Blue Nuns' successfully converted Phoebe Palmer, Anne Browne, Ann Hancock and Elizabeth Davis all of whom were all scholars.81 Other Protestant gentlewomen were drawn towards Catholicism by their contact with the English nuns whilst living abroad. As a child, Catherine Holland lived briefly in Bruges. When she converted against the wishes of her father, she chose to seek refuge as a nun in the Augustinian cloister she remembered from her childhood.82

Protestants were concerned about the power nuns had to subvert the children sent to their schools. Rising fears concerning the subversive power of education in cloisters led to the calls in 1593 for Catholic children to be schooled by Protestants. This plea was echoed in the 'Commons Petition' of 1621 which also demanded the return of all Catholic offspring being educated abroad. In 1642, Parliament's 'Nineteen Propositions' to the King stated that the children of known recusants should be educated by Protestants.83 Protestant divines warned against the perfidy of convent education. In a sermon of 1623, William Gouge related the case of a young girl who had drowned on her way to one of 'those superstitious places' abroad. Gouge concluded the tale by asking parents whether this story was a sign: 'Judge hereby (O Parents) whether God be well pleased with committing your children to Papists for education'.84

On occasions, legislation was invoked against those caught sending youths across the Channel. In 1698, a Middlesex painter, William Seeks, his wife Mary Brittell, and Elizabeth Hollingshead were indicted for sending a nine year old girl 'beyond the seas out of the obedience of his Matv into the Kingdome of ffrance with an intent and on purpose to have the said Child remaine and be trained up in a Nunnery ... to be instructed and strengthened in the popish Religion agst the forme of the statute'.85 The case was removed from the Middlesex Sessions Court at Clerkenwell to the court of King's Bench, but ultimately the accused were found not guilty. Although the basis for the verdict is not clear from the documents, it is likely that the courts were persuaded that

81 Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', pp. 15, 22, 23, 27, 46.
82 Durrant, Flemish Mystics, pp. 276-78, 290, 297-98, 302-5.
85 Middlesex County Record Office, M SP/Feb 1699, no. 31, quoted in Edward S. Worrall, 'What May Happen to a Second-Class Citizen 1', London Recusant, 2, 1972, p. 70.
Weeks was sending the girl to her father who lived in Paris. None the less, concern about the subversive nature of a convent education was apparent in a King's Bench record which declared that sending a child abroad to a cloister was 'in contempt of the king and his laws'. Indeed, in 1700 the English government reaffirmed the Elizabethan and Jacobean anti-Catholic legislation in 'An act for the further preventing the growth of popery' which rewarded informants who reported the dispatch of children overseas for the purpose of a Catholic education.

Nuns could also exert influence over those who did not enter the enclosure. Social intercourse with visitors at the grate provided nuns with ample opportunity to catechise Protestants. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, young men passing through Flanders on their 'Grand Tour' often included English monasteries in their list of sights to visit. They commonly attended public services in convent chapels, and then talked at the grate with a few members of the community. Some were even treated to special musical performances. In 1671, when John Walker visited the Franciscan house in Bruges, he was introduced to several nuns by the abbess. Later the nuns sang for the visitors. Walker described the experience in glowing terms: 'We heard a most harmonious consort of viols and violins with the organ. Then a ravishing voice of a nun singing in Italian a treble part alone; the rest now and then keeping the chorus'.

The nuns could not expect such visitors to act as patrons, so the trouble to which they went in this case and in similar instances suggests they had other motives.

When in 1687 Thomas Penson visited the Carmelite convent in Antwerp he had a discussion about religion at the grate with one of the older nuns. It is clear from his account of their discussion that she was aiming to persuade him of the veracity of the Catholic faith. She was obviously heartened when he confided that he had spoken to several Catholics about religion during his trip and that he intended to pursue the subject further upon his return to England. Almost as if to tempt him with what delights Catholicism held, she called for a novice to come to the grate. Penson was overcome by this future nun:

There soon appeared (as an angel of light) a delicate, proper, young, beautiful lady, all in white garments and barefaced, whose graceful presence was delightful to behold and yet struck an awful reverence, considering she was devout and religious. And having paid my respects and fed my greedy eye a short moment on this lovely creature, I thus spoke: 'Madam, may heaven bless and enable you in your undertakings, which to us that are abroad in the world seem so hard and difficult. For we account it no less than being buried alive to be immured within the confines of these walls.' To which she answered: 'Sir, the world is much mistaken in their harsh censures of these religious houses, not considering the

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86 PRO, K.B. 27/2132, case xi, quoted in ibid.
felicities we here enjoy in the service of God ... I would not change conditions with any princess or noble lady in the world'.

Penson was clearly impressed by these nuns, as well as being dazzled by the youth and beauty of the novice. Upon his departure, they assured him that they would pray for him, a fact he faithfully recorded. Although it is difficult to prove without any mention of such practices in the records of the monastery, the incident suggests that the nuns hoped to secure conversions to Catholicism by such meetings at the grate. In his travel memoirs of 1718, Lord Egmont commented that nuns were more inclined to discuss religious controversy than the monks and priests he had encountered. Some cloisters recorded successful conversions in obituaries and hagiographical accounts of their members. Abbess Mary Roper of Ghent was renowned for convincing Protestants of the veracity of her faith by conversing with them at the grate.

Other nuns were able to engage in missionary work outside the confines of the enclosure. Despite the stringent laws of clausura, under certain circumstances women could leave the cloister. Apart from the obvious occasions necessitated by wars, natural disasters, and the need to establish new houses, with a permit from the bishop nuns could break enclosure to retrieve dowries or collect other monies owing them. The precarious financial position of many convents enabled the religious women to take advantage of this provision and return to England to conduct what they termed 'convent business'. The 'Blue Nuns' spent inordinate amounts of time in England in this way. For example, Abbess Anne (Elizabeth) Timperley went to England 'about some business for the good of the hous' three times during her twenty year period of rule. On one occasion she was absent for eighteen months. At times communities stationed nuns in London to conduct business. In 1662 the Benedictines Mary Caryll of Dunkirk and Mary (Anne) Neville of Ghent were sent to England to secure money promised by Charles II to the Dunkirk cloister. The king admitted he was unable to give them the pledged £2,000, but offered instead a yearly pension of £500. Abbess Mary Knatchbull of Ghent decided to leave Anne Neville in London to ensure regular payment of this revenue. In 1663,
Neville was joined by Paula Knatchbull and they lived in London for four years until a change of chancellor saw payment of the income cease.94

When in England nuns stayed with kin and elicited as many alms, scholars and postulants for their cloister as were possible. Abbess Anne Neville's account of the time in London suggests that the nuns lived as secular gentlewomen in order to escape too much attention from Protestants. This was the strategy which had been employed by Mary Ward's nuns. Living as women of their own social rank, the sisters of the I.B.V.M. had carried out the same kind of work as Dorothy Lawson and Anne Vaux. Although greatly criticised for their 'worldliness', Ward's nuns were effective in gaining converts to the faith. The narrative of Sister Dorothea of the I.B.V.M. demonstrates the ease with which women could proselytise under the guise of teaching children and practising herbal medicine. Disguised as the kinswoman of the Suffolk gentlewoman with whom she lived, Sister Dorothea was able to convert several people. In the account of her endeavours, she claimed that 'I never gain one alone, but more'.95 Yet ultimately Ward and her nuns were censured for working in this way. Their manner of living incited their detractors to refer to them as the 'galloping girls'. The activities in England of contemplative nuns, like Anne Neville, soon elicited similar concern. The Benedictines, in particular, must have been prominent at the Court because both Charles II and then Catherine of Braganza complained to Philip Howard, the queen's almoner, of the scandal which could ensue from 'nuns gadding about ... in these parts'.96

The cloistered English nuns made their missionary intentions most explicit in various efforts to establish religious houses and schools in England and Ireland during the seventeenth century. Encouraged by the apparent success of Mary Ward's Institute and the marriage of Charles I to Henrietta Maria, the Poor Clares of Gravelines sent a filiation to Dublin in 1625. This community collapsed in 1649 upon Cromwell's entry into Ireland.97 In 1639, the poverty-stricken Franciscan nuns of Nieuport sent three sisters to England 'for the setting up of a Seminary in our native Soyle of England, of Yong Gentlewomen'. In spite of the Civil War, the nuns remained in their homeland until 1650, when they were finally forced to abandon their cloister and return to the Continent.98 In the 1640s, the duchess of Buckingham obtained permission to sponsor a

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94 'Abbess Neville's Annals', pp. 40-42.
97 'Poor Clare Registers', pp. 34-35. Peter Guilday has suggested that although most of the nuns returned to the Continent, a small group remained & later re-established the house in Dublin. Peter Guilday, The English Catholic Refugees on the Continent 1558-1795, London, 1914, pp. 297-98.
Benedictine filiation to Ireland, and asked for three or four nuns from the Ghent monastery to undertake the work. The fate of these early attempts became entangled with the political upheavals of the 1640s and 1650s. Possibly some of the failed settlements spawned nuns who continued educative and missionary work on their own. However, they apparently lost contact with their mother-houses abroad, so it is difficult to trace the impact they had in England.

The restoration of the monarchy in 1660 encouraged English Catholics to hope that their faith would be recognised by the king for whose father so many families had fought and lost their estates. The contemplative women on the Continent were particularly hopeful that they might soon return to England. Despite Charles II's inability to repay the expectations of his Catholic subjects, and increasing anti-Catholic sentiment as his reign proceeded, the 1660s to 1680s saw a revival of foundations in England. The best known are the I.B.V.M.'s schools in Hammersmith and York. The succession of James II encouraged the Benedictines and the 'Blue Nuns' to send filiations to Britain. In 1686, the king wrote to the abbess of Ghent thanking her for all her support and prayers, and reminding her that he intended 'to have your cloyster, our Darling monastery, the first in my kingdom'. None the less, it was the Irish Benedictines of Ypres who received the first invitation to relocate their cloister which James styled 'Our chief and first Royal Monastery of Gratia Dei'. Unfortunately the transfer from the Continent to Dublin took place in 1688. While James sought refuge in Ireland, the nuns were confident of his restoration. The Battle of the Boyne in 1690 saw them flee back to Ypres. The 'Blue Nuns' fared no better. They chose April 1688 to send Frances (Clare) Crane to England in the company of a French lady 'who designed to sett up a scoole for us in England'. They were forced to abandon the scheme. In September, Jane

Enclosed Franciscan Community 1621-1971, Glasgow, 1971, pp. 11-12. The location of the English convent is not clear in the archives, but it is believed to have been in Yorkshire.

99 'Abbess Neville's Annals', p. 31.
100 Little more is known about the I.B.V.M.'s schools. After the suppression of the Institute & formation of the revised organisation, Mary Ward continued to implement her vision of English schools to assist the mission. Under the auspices of the 1632 reformed I.B.V.M., Ward is thought to have set up a house in the Strand in 1639. This community might well have survived the Civil War & Interregnum to close in 1688 or 1689. Another house also existed in London, but it is not clear where it was located. Ward moved to Yorkshire in 1642 where she worked in the environs of York until her death in 1645. In 1650, the remaining nuns of her community were forced to leave England for Paris. See [Mary Catherine Elizabeth Chambers], St. Mary's Convent Micklegate Bar York [1686-1887], Henry James Coleridge (ed.), London, 1887, pp. 5-8; Denis Evison, 'The Catholic Revival in Hammersmith', London Recusant, 7, 1977, pp. 21, 25-26.

102 Ibid. Although founded by English nuns from Ghent in 1665, the Ypres cloister had become exclusively Irish in 1684.
103 The Ypres nuns were not alone in Ireland. Dame Joseph O'Ryan of the Dunkirk Benedictines had been there since 1686 on a recruitment drive for Ypres. Although in Dublin to assist the Ypres house, she had in fact opened a convent there which then rivalled the Ypres foundation of 1688. The ensuing dispute soured relationships between the Ypres, Dunkirk & Pontoise houses for several years.
(Francis) Sanders set out to establish a house in Ireland, but the Revolution ensured that she proceeded no further than England before the plan had to be abandoned.104

Although most attempts were unsuccessful, the fact that foundations were even considered is significant. The English cloisters firmly believed that they could contribute actively to the mission. Establishing small communities in England was seen as an extension of the work they carried out within the confines of the enclosure. Apart from Cardinal Howard's concern about the numbers of nuns in London during the 1660s, the Church did not attempt to curtail the missionary work of the cloisters. Given the furore Mary Ward generated in the 1620s, it is difficult to explain the apparent blind eye accorded the filiations of the monastic orders. Although in theory they would have perpetuated the cloistered lifestyle in their homeland, in reality it was impossible that they would ever be able to maintain a traditional religious regime. One explanation may be that by the post-Restoration period nuns had powerful royal patrons which earlier pioneering nuns had lacked. By the 1660s several convents had acquired puissant benefactors from among the English royal family. There is evidence to suggest that many nuns believed that monasticism would be restored with the monarchy, and the ecclesiastical authorities no doubt concurred. However, at a time when other religious minorities, such as the Quakers, were limiting women's opportunities to participate actively in their organisations, the apparent tolerance of the Catholic Church is out of character with its previous position and indeed with prevailing social trends.

Whatever the reaction of the Church, sending filiations to Britain was an overtly political act. The nuns' actions need to be located within the context of Catholic optimism that their position could only improve under the son of Catholic Henrietta Maria, and his brother. The English cloisters were royalists throughout the Civil War and Interregnum. Indeed some houses had provided financial assistance to the Stuarts. The Augustinians of Bruges had frequently entertained Charles II during his exile, and in 1656 they gave the prince 1,000 florins to further his cause.105 The Ghent Benedictines were also staunch allies. In 1650, Charles visited Abbess Mary Roper and requested the nuns' prayers. He was so impressed by the cloister that he reportedly told the bishop of Ghent 'that if ever God restorde him to his kingdome this Comunity shold ever find the effects of his favour'.106 Under Abbess Mary Knatchbull the Ghent Benedictines provided even greater assistance. In 1658, Knatchbull wrote to Sir Edward Nicholas, Prince Charles's secretary, offering to relay whatever news she might hear, and pledging her support to Charles and his cause.107 The abbess arranged for the dispatch of the prince's letters,

104 Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', p. 35.
105 Durrant, Flemish Mystics, pp. 262-63; Whelan, Historic English Convents, pp. 87-88.
106 'Abbess Neville's Annals', pp. 31-32.
107 PRO, SP 77/32, f. 41, Abbess Mary Knatchbull to Sir Edward Nicholas, 1658.
and she negotiated loans on his behalf with merchants and financiers. Therefore, the Restoration was the cause of much celebration in the convents. At Ghent there were three days of feasting which included a high mass with trumpet fanfares at which the bishop officiated, bonfires, music, and many toasts to the king's health. Abbess Knatchbull wrote to congratulate Charles, and received a reply acknowledging his obligations to the Ghent nuns and promising the immediate gift of 400 English gold pieces.

Although the cloisters abroad were persistently disappointed by Charles II, the nuns did not lose hope in their eventual return to England. Even the rising anti-Catholic sentiment of the 1670s and 1680s was assuaged by the belief that James II would certainly welcome the convents back on to English soil. Prior to 1685 the Brussels Benedictines entertained James II and Mary of Modena upon several occasions. According to the Abbess of Pontoise, during the years leading up to James' accession his wife reminded him that 'wth time may be proper, for monasteryes of woemen to setle in our Nation, to have that holy Comunity in du season cald in'. James attempted to make good his promises to some of the cloisters, but the events of 1688 overtook his endeavours. The English nuns refused to acknowledge William and Mary as legitimate monarchs and supported the exiled Stuarts. Several cloisters, particularly those in France which were relatively near St. Germain-en-Laye, became ardent Jacobite centres. Indeed many of the women entering these houses were from Jacobite families who had followed James to the Continent. The Augustinians of Paris were close enough to the exiled court to maintain regular social intercourse. The annals spoke reverently of 'Holy King James II, ... [who] was by the perfidious, undutiful and unnatural baseness of his son-in-law and nephew, the Prince of Orange, dethroned and driven out of the kingdom; that detestable Prince joining with the treacherous defection of the Protestant subjects of England, and a malevolent party which were the dregs of the Cromwells Vipers blood'. In the eighteenth century the Augustinians regularly entertained Mary of Modena and her children.

In return for their loyalty, the English convents could rely upon the royal family for patronage. Beginning with Henrietta Maria in the 1630s, many houses described the consorts and, in the case of Charles II and James II, their husbands as friends and benefactors. The Poor Clare cloister in Rouen was founded in 1644 largely through the

108 'Abbess Neville's Annals', p. 36.
109 Ibid., p. 39; Whelan, Historic English Convents, p. 47.
111 Ibid., pp. 17-18.
112 Quoted in Allison, 'English Augustinian Convent', p. 484.
113 Ibid. Other cloisters continued to support 'James III' & his party. In 1708, the Bruges Augustinians entertained the 'king' & his attendants within their enclosure, see Durrant, Flemish Mystics, pp. 316-17. The Pontoise Benedictines were ardent Jacobites. Guilday claims the nuns' connections with the Stuart risings of 1715 & 1745 led Catholics in England to withdraw their children from the Pontoise school for fear of reprisal. Guilday, Catholic Refugees, p. 271.
generosity of Henrietta Maria, as was the Benedictine house in Paris in 1651. When Abbess Mary Knatchbull travelled to England in 1661 to secure a filiation of Benedictines to the English territory of Dunkirk, she obtained the promise of £3,000 from Charles II. In the spring 1662, the new cloister was erected and viewed by the Catholics as a 'royal foundation'. Monasteries in financial difficulty often appealed to their royal benefactors. When the Ypres community returned from its abortive attempt to settle in Ireland, it went through several years of financial uncertainty. Abbess Mary Caryll of Dunkirk believed that the house survived solely upon the assistance of Mary of Modena. Other abbesses/prioresses used their royal patrons to intercede on their behalf to the ecclesiastical authorities. In 1637, during the dispute over spiritual and temporal jurisdiction in the Brussels Benedictine community, Abbess Mary Percy garnered the support of Henrietta Maria. The abbess petitioned the queen to help her overturn the ruling that she should accept rebel nuns back into her cloister. Positive responses to these requests for aid, and gratuitous alms led the nuns to believe that they could rely upon the Stuarts for support in the common cause. Such faith was bolstered by both Charles II and James II permitting some of their illegitimate daughters to take the veil in English communities, further strengthening the bonds of kinship and patronage.

The political intrigues into which abbesses and their nuns entered for the Stuart cause did not escape the attention of the Protestant authorities in England. Throughout the seventeenth century spies on the Continent consistently detailed public ceremonies and notable events occurring in the cloisters. Dispatches to Whitehall usually did not credit the nuns with independent action; rather the cloisters were presented as the deluded pawns of the Jesuits, or of the Spanish and French governments. When Lady Mary Lovel entered the Brussels Benedictine cloister in 1608, the English agent in the town described her as 'the most passyonate besotted poore woman that ever was wth the opinyons of the Jesuitts'. Some agents warned that at times gossiping women could

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114 Whelan, *Historic English Convents*, pp. 62-63, 67-69. The Cambrai Benedictine filiation in 1651 chose Paris in expectation of the Queen Mother's patronage. One of the founders, Anne (Clementina) Cary, the daughter of Viscount Falkland, had been a maid of honour to Henrietta Maria, & the nuns relied upon Cary's former connection to secure assistance in their endeavour.

115 'Abbess Neville's Annals', p. 40; Evinson, 'Catholic Revival in Hammersmith', p. 35; [McCarty], *Benedictine Nuns of Dunkirk*, pp. 6-7, 10-11. There is some confusion over the permission given by Charles for the house at Dunkirk. In her annals, Abbess Neville wrote that the king & council signed the letters patent to found the monastery. However, in September 1662 Charles denied giving his consent to Abbess Knatchbull, writing that 'it would be very mischievous to have an English convent there where the Papists could preach in English'. See [McCarty], *Benedictine Nuns of Dunkirk*, p. 10.


117 PRO, SP 77/27, f. 195, Abbess Mary Percy to Gerbier, 29 May 1637.

118 At the Dunkirk Benedictine house there was Dame Cecily Fitzroy. Pontoise professed Dame Benedict Fitzroy in 1691, & Dame Ignatia Fitzjames in 1690.

119 For e.g.s of the foundation of monasteries, clothing & profession ceremonies see, PRO, SP 77/6, f. 73; SP 77/8, f. 275; SP 77/17, f. 2.

120 PRO, SP 77/9, f. 106.
prove dangerous to both sides. In a letter from Le Brun of 1717, the spy targeted the activities of Poor Clare abbess, Catherine (Catherine Dominic) Bagnall, of Gravelines, whom he accused of revealing Catholic plans to anyone who would listen. He wrote, 'you can judge what secretaries nuns are, but more particularly my Lady Abbess, who can keep nothing longer than she can find occasion to tell it'.

Nevertheless, lists of Catholics abroad always noted the convents and their inhabitants. In the hysteria of the Popish Plot, a letter to a member of the House of Commons detailed all monasteries for English women, along with the seminaries and colleges for priests. The purpose of the list was 'to inform the People of England of the Measures taken by the Popish Party for the Re-establishing of Popery in these Nations'. Convents did indeed present a political challenge to Protestantism and, after 1688, to the Crown.

In conclusion, it can be said that although they were often on the periphery of events in England, the nuns participated in the political manoeuvres of the English Catholic minority. The convents were prominent meeting centres for English exiles on the Continent, and as such attracted the patronage of those who sought the restoration of both the Catholic faith and the Stuart monarchy in their homeland. The extent of the nuns' involvement in such affairs inevitably caught the attention of the Protestants who derided them as ineffectual players but nevertheless carefully noted all their activities. The nuns achieved their prominence as a consequence of the successful patronage networks they established. The power some abbesses/prioresses achieved as patrons and brokers was recognised in the highest circles. Charles II clearly respected the stature of certain nuns, like Abbess Mary Knatchbull of Ghent, to whom he entrusted the dispatch of letters and messages. Knatchbull manipulated the clients and patrons she had gathered to assist the convent in its day-to-day functioning to conduct the royal correspondence. Similarly the contemplatives were able to adapt their traditional apostolate of prayer, education and hospitality to political ends. Despite the strictures of enclosure, they were

121 Letter from Le Brun (Capt. J. Ogilvie) to the Duke of Mar, Dunkirk, 10 Aug. 1717. Quoted in 'Poor Clare Registers', p. 115.

122 E.g. PRO, SP 77/8, 'A List of the Seminaries, Monasteries, Cloisters, and Colleges of his Mats Subjects in the Provinces of the Netherlands, under the king of Spaines obedience and the Dioces of the Bishopp of Lige', ff. 417-18; SP 77/11, 'The Names of Certaine Principall men of Englishe and Scottish nations, now resideing in the Archd. Provinces', ff. 26-26; Lewis Owen, Running Register, recording a true relation of the State of the English Colleges, seminaries and cloysters in all forraine parts. Together with a brefe and compendious discourse of the lives, Practices, Cozenage, Impostures and Deceits of all our English Monks, Friers, Jesuites, and seminarie Priests in generall, London, 1626, pp. 100-108; John Gee, 'A Catalogue of the names of such young women as to this author's knowledge have been within two or three yeares last past transported to the nunneries beyond the seas', in New Shreds of the Old Snare, London, 1624, pp. 119-20, (there is also a list of those conveying women beyond the seas, p. 121); [Thomas Robinson], The Nunnes of the House, in Anatomy of the English Nunnery at Lisbon, pp. 31-32. Various lists are repr. in Guilday, Catholic Refugees, pp. 14-18, 28-33, 35-36.

123 Printed in Harleian Miscellany, vol. 1, pp. 437-39; repr. in Guilday, Catholic Refugees, pp. 30-32. Amazingly the I.B.V.M. house at Hammersmith remained in London during height of the plot. In 1680, Oates himself led a gang which surrounded the convent, but they were unable to prove that the inhabitants of the house were conducting illegal business there. See Kenyon, The Popish Plot, pp. 253-54.
still able to exert considerable influence over those who came to their schools or grates. As I have argued, the methods employed by the nuns were the very ones learned from mothers and female kin who presided over recusant households. The experience of the English nuns in this respect demonstrates graphically the channels of informal power which women could tap and dispense.
CHAPTER 6

ENGLISH CLOISTERS AND
CATHOLIC-REFORMATION SPIRITUALITY

Where as the cheifest scope and end of Every Religious Order is to advance the Professours there of to the Salvation and Spiritual perfection of their Soules, therefore all that enter this Congregation, must diligently apply themselves, that by meete and convenient, meanes, they may attayne to the proposed end of thier Vocation: the cheife meanes where of are, the exercises of true piety, and devotion, as often prayer, meditation, confession of their Sinnes, the holy Communion, and the Mortification of themselves.¹

Personal salvation and a responsibility to lobby for the deliverance of others through prayer and participation in the sacraments formed the *raison d'être* of the English nuns' lives. Thus, for them, spirituality constituted the nucleus of monastic experience. Monastic 'rules' outlined rigorous regimes of formally prescribed communal worship and personal meditation which occupied approximately a third of the nuns' waking hours. However, within the cloisters women's spirituality was not merely limited to the recitation of the divine office punctuated by periods of individual prayer. It extended far beyond the formal manifestations of devotion into every aspect of daily life from what clothes a nun wore and how she put them on, to her behaviour towards her sisters, and to the way she conducted her secular activities. Thus, when discussing nuns' spirituality, I am referring to the religious meaning which permeated all monastic activities and experiences: it is an all-encompassing term.

In the aftermath of the Reformation, the Catholic hierarchy moved to tighten its surveillance over all aspects of faith, including individual and communal worship and prayer. Emphasis was placed upon a more personal piety centred around frequent examination of conscience and the sacraments. This immediately entailed greater involvement of the clergy who were responsible for instilling the principles of Catholic reform into every soul, whether secular or religious. They did this by officiating at communal celebration of sacraments, acting as confessors, and through the guidance of personal devotional regimes. The Church also stringently defined the focal points for communal and individual piety, jettisoning local cults in favour of universally-practised feasts and rituals. Scholars of gender and religion have begun to research the impact of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Catholic reform on religious women's spirituality, but the role of the spiritual director and the emphasis on specific devotions in the lives of English contemplatives has yet to be assessed. This chapter represents an initial survey

¹ *Statutes Compyled for the Better Observation of the Holy Rule of the Most Glorious Father and Patriarch S. Benedict ... delivered to the English Religious Woemen of ... Bruxelles and to all their Successours*, Alexia Grey (trans.), Ghent, 1632, [ERL, 278], (hereafter *Brussels Benedictine Statutes*), Part 1, pp. 3-4.
of a few cloisters' spiritual preferences, and the potential conflict which could arise from nuns asserting their independence from officially-prescribed devotions.

First I will look at the role of the clergy in detailing the agenda for nuns' devotional lives, by analysing the two forms of spiritual direction which were important in English Benedictine cloisters, namely Jesuit prayer and Bakerism. Both generated considerable tension among nuns who found their principles either helpful, or an obstacle to spiritual satisfaction. The disputes which arose over both Jesuit prayer and the methods taught by the Benedictine mystic, Father Augustine Baker, reveal the inflexibility of some clerics who refused to acknowledge the spiritual diversity of nuns under their direction. The sometimes acrimonious discourse concerning matters spiritual also reveals the willingness of nuns to challenge their confessor in the one area he was supposed to rule supreme. The second part of the chapter addresses the reforming agenda of the Catholic Church with respect to piety and spirituality. Using spiritual diaries, biographies and obituaries, I will assess the response of the English nuns to the devotions advocated by the hierarchy as efficacious.

I. Finding the Right Path: Spiritual Direction & Benedictine Nuns

The spirituality of religious women within the Catholic Church was profoundly affected by the limitations imposed upon their ministry at the Council of Trent. The imposition of strict enclosure on all female religious orders clearly defined their apostolate as contemplative at the very moment when many in the Church were fired by crusading zeal to win back the souls of Protestants and schismatics, and to educate the faithful in the teachings and devotions of reformed Catholicism. Coupled with this restriction was the determination of the Church to enforce orthodoxy in all areas of belief and devotion. Personal spiritual directors and confessors were recruited to monitor the spiritual lives of the laity and those living under monastic vows. This spiritual police force was commissioned to detect heretical leanings, and to channel the faithful into officially-sanctioned religious observances.

Both the missionary and reformatory agendas were imbued by the ideology of the influential Society of Jesus. Founded in 1540 by Ignatius Loyola as a missionary force to convert the heathen, the Society had been embraced by the papacy as the answer to halting the spread of Protestantism in Europe. Loyola had rejected contemplative monasticism with its daily round of canonical prayer in favour of what was termed
'contemplative in action'. Thus, the Society operated on the principle of an active pastoral ministry, inspired by a similarly exertive regime of mental prayer: the Spiritual Exercises. The objective of the Exercises was to 'convert' the person undergoing them to a reformation of spirit and purpose. They constituted a series of meditations in which the person undertaking them used his or her imagination and emotions to identify with the joy or suffering of the contemplated event, usually taken from the life of Christ. This procedure is known variously as 'affective piety', or 'sensible devotion'. Although initially prescribed for potential missionaries, the Exercises' systematic approach to meditation was embraced by a much wider audience. They were flexible enough to be adapted for individual preferences, so were ideal for religious cloisters where spiritual capabilities were diverse.

The 'Christianisation' of Catholic Europe by Jesuits and other missionary orders was conducted at several levels. Mass movements of preaching, the foundation of confraternities, and emphasis on the sacraments were all aimed at channelling the devotion of the broader populace within acceptable parameters. Personal spiritual direction became a vital element in the struggle for conformity of the more devout members of the laity, and for monks and nuns. While formal worship could be monitored through attendance at the sacraments and membership of confraternities, individual contemplation did not lend itself easily to regulation. Only through close observation and guidance of private prayer could the Church maintain absolute orthodoxy. As a consequence of their missionary ventures and the utility of the Spiritual Exercises, Jesuits dominated this ministry. Although forbidden by their 'constitutions' to provide formal jurisdiction over women's communities, Jesuits could act as directors of individual nuns and could hear confessions. In this guise they infiltrated most cloisters, teaching and recommending Ignatian spirituality as the most efficacious path to union with the divine.

Convents of religious women were deemed to be in special need of a competent director who would guide and moderate individual spiritual progress. Early modern assumptions about the nature of women characterised the female sex as physically, intellectually and morally weaker than men. This meant that women were more susceptible to the arguments of heretics. Ironically, the same traits predisposed women to become vessels for supernatural inspiration, both diabolic and divine. As confessions of demonic possession swept across many parts of Europe during the sixteenth and

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seventeenth centuries in the 'witch-craze', there were also many women who claimed visions of Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints. This era witnessed a tremendous surge in mystical activity, particularly among women in religious communities. Mysticism had always been an acceptable part of Catholic faith but, during the Counter-Reformation, it threatened efforts to regulate devotion. Mystics, who sought to transcend themselves and achieve direct union with the divine, often by-passed the sacramental system and the clergy to commune directly with Christ. Unchecked, a mystic might well deny the mediatory role of the Church and establish her own following. The Church believed that Jesuit direction was the best guard against such a subversive outcome. Although it was possible to achieve a mystical state by following the Jesuit spiritual regime, all experiences could be filtered through the director who would judge their orthodoxy.

More dangerous to the mediatory authority of the Church were spiritual movements, like Jansenism, which it viewed as heretical. Jansenism taught a form of predestination where few members of universally corrupt humankind would be saved although, unlike the Calvinist elect, Jansenists would be justified through the combination of faith and good works. Some of the school's most prominent advocates were the French nuns of Port-Royal in Paris. By the late seventeenth century, the cloister had come to embody Jansenist spirituality, and the nuns' refusal to denounce Jansenist belief and practice culminated in their expulsion from their monastery. The Church was also concerned about other post-Reformation spiritual movements, like Illuminism and Quietism, because they were thought to encourage a direct interaction with the divine. As was the case with mysticism, a Jesuit spiritual regime complete with the Exercises and personal direction was believed to be the best measure against such heresies. To prevent illegitimate mystical experiences and heretical deviations, the majority of English nuns either chose or found themselves under Jesuit direction. Indeed the Society became so popular that the order's injunction against its priests assuming the role of formal director was often ignored.

However, the prominence of the Jesuits within the English cloisters should not be viewed simply as an issue of clerical control. Although the Church was determined to

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superintend houses of religious women, all the English convents were founded by
gentlewomen who allied themselves with specific clerical friends. In most cases, the
spiritual bent of a community was the choice of its founders, rather than an imposition by
the hierarchy. Furthermore, women were encouraged to choose their own spiritual
directors, allowing cloisters to appoint sympathetic priests. Thus, the Society's
prominence in the spiritual direction of the women's cloisters can be viewed as a
consequence of their success as confessors and chaplains among the laity on the English
mission. For example, Mary Ward grew up in houses served by Jesuits, and she found
solace in the spiritual regimes they recommended. The devotional influences of her
childhood and adolescence were to govern Ward's adult life. Upon the foundation of her
English Poor Clare house at St. Omers, Ward and the other postulants undertook the
Spiritual Exercises. Indeed, Ward was so concerned that the women gain a good
grounding in matters of the spirit that she procured an English Jesuit to conduct the
Exercises and to act subsequently as the nuns' confessor.

Mary Ward's commitment to the ideals and spirit of the Society of Jesus led her to
believe that she was called to undertake 'contemplative in action' in its fullest apostolic
sense. Other nuns adapted Jesuit spirituality to the contemplative life. Elizabeth (Lucy)
Knatchbull undertook the Spiritual Exercises as a postulant at a time when she doubted
her religious vocation. As a consequence, she not only resigned herself to the will of
God, but she also began to experience the visions that were to characterise her
subsequent devotional life. Although the resolve to persevere with her troubled vocation
soon faltered, Knatchbull remained convinced that the Society's direction was essential
to her spiritual progress. In 1609, when it was mooted that the abbess might withdraw
the house from Jesuit influence, Lucy Knatchbull joined others who left the Brussels
cloister to found a new convent which would be subject to the Society's jurisdiction.
This venture failed and the troubled postulant was eventually clothed and professed in
her original monastery. Gradually, with the assistance of the Exercises and other forms
of Jesuit prayer, Knatchbull's mystical experiences returned and she achieved spiritual
satisfaction as well as a reputation for sanctity. However, dissension within the Brussels
community over the issue of Jesuit influence continued and, in 1624, Knatchbull was
one of the four founders of the Ghent filiation which was to ally itself firmly to the
techniques of Loyola.

Other women went to similar lengths to secure the Society's direction. Lady
Mary Roper Lovel, whose controversial vocation I have already discussed, loomed large

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9 Ranft, 'Key to Women's Activism', pp. 18-19.
10 M. Emmanuel Orchard (ed.), Till God Will. Mary Ward through her Writings, London, 1985, pp. 10,
22.
11 Sir Tobie Matthew, The Life of Lady Lucy Knatchbull, [1642], David Knowles (ed.), London, 1931,
pp. 28-49, 83-95.
in the annals of several early English cloisters. In 1608, Lovel had joined the Brussels Benedictines, but in the following year she headed an ill-fated attempt to found the separate house under Jesuit jurisdiction which Lucy Knatchbull had joined. Lovel had disagreed with Mary Percy and Abbess Joanna Berkeley over their move to exclude the Society. Unlike Knatchbull, she did not return to the Benedictines. She investigated the likelihood of founding a Carmelite cloister in Liège, and a Bernardine house at Bruges, but it was not until 1619 that she finally achieved her goal of a Teresian convent in Antwerp. Yet her firm adherence to Ignatian spirituality led to further dissension. Lovel had endowed Antwerp on the provision that the nuns would enjoy the privilege of choosing their confessors. She did so because she knew that the Belgian Carmelite fathers who had overall jurisdiction of her foundation would oppose Jesuit direction. When Anne (Anne of the Ascension) Worsely, the first prioress of the new community, appointed a Jesuit spiritual director, the Belgian superiors commenced a campaign which was to beset the convent with problems for its first five years until the pope intervened and placed the nuns under the jurisdiction of the local bishop, making Jesuit direction possible.

Although there were several other women like Lucy Knatchbull and Mary Lovel who found Ignatian spirituality the best path to communicating with the divine, there were others who were not so convinced. During the 1620s and 1630s several English convents were divided over the issue of Jesuit direction. The Brussels Benedictines represented the most serious case. However, the Poor Clares at Gravelines were also struck by similar strife, occasioned by those nuns who supported the Society's methods refusing to submit to the direction of any other regular or secular cleric, and vice versa. Historians who have attempted to unravel the complex tensions underlying these disputes attributed them to the wider battle between the English Jesuits and secular clergy which was raging at the time. For example, Peter Guilday recognised the vital part played by spirituality in the Brussels fracas, but none the less argued that it was simply another instance in which 'the dissensions which separated Seculars and Regulars were re-echoed'. Likewise Placid Spearritt, who suspected that differing perceptions of spirituality were at the root of the Brussels dilemma, ultimately concluded that the nuns

12 See section II. ii in ch. 2.
13 Matthew, Life of Lucy Knatchbull, pp. 30-3; PRO, SP Flanders: 77/9-2, ff. 245-47, Edmondes to Salisbury, April 13, 1609.
15 Whelan, Historic English Convents, pp. 94-5; Guilday, Catholic Refugees, pp. 362-65.
16 Guilday, Catholic Refugees, pp. 298-99n.
17 Ibid., pp. 257-59.
were caught in the political struggles of the clergy.\textsuperscript{18} More recently, David Lunn has explained the furore as 'a sidelight on the conflict between Bishop Richard Smith and the Regulars, then raging'. However, he does suggest later that the rebellious nuns who opposed their abbess in their quest for Jesuit direction seem to have been fighting for Teresa of Avila's principle of free access to confessors.\textsuperscript{19}

My reading of the events at Brussels acknowledges the degree of loyalty to the Jesuit mission felt by many English nuns. However, to suggest that they were merely acting out clerical tensions is to deny the women concerned any agency in affairs which very nearly derailed the female monastic foundation movement. Several nuns were passionate in their defense of Jesuit direction to the extent that they were willing either to leave or be expelled from their communities. Lucy Knatchbull and Margaret (Magdalen) Digby articulated their confidence in the Society when they left Brussels temporarily in 1609 with Mary Lovel, and subsequently in their removal to Ghent in 1624. In the 1630s, when the Brussels dispute flared again, the nuns advocating the right to Jesuit spiritual direction were expelled by their abbess, and had to be placed in a neighbouring house by the archbishop of Mechelen.\textsuperscript{20}

Documents generated by the principal protagonists suggest that the focus of the dispute was blurred by the anti-Jesuit camp in such a way that the question of spiritual direction was obscured by broader issues of authority and power. The official correspondence of Abbess Mary Percy, who supported the secular confessor and wanted to disassociate the house from all ties with the Society, shows how she characterised the dispute as a matter of monastic obedience, rather than as a question of spiritual guidance. In letters to ecclesiastical authorities in Rome, Mary Percy argued that the dissident nuns were contravening not only their vow of obedience to her as their abbess, but also the dictates of Trent which had placed the monastery under the jurisdiction of the archbishop of Mechelen.\textsuperscript{21} Archbishop Jacques Boonen supported Abbess Percy. In the opposite camp, the dissenting nuns acquired the vital support of the papal nuncio in Brussels. Thus, the issue evolved into a question of monastic government and obedience which had to be dealt with by the ecclesiastical authorities, and was largely taken out of the nuns' hands. Beyond the convent walls, the rhetoric of both sides inevitably reflected

\textsuperscript{18} Placid Spearritt O.S.B., 'Prayer and Politics among the English Benedictines of Brussels', unpublished paper.
\textsuperscript{19} David Lunn, \textit{The English Benedictines, 1540-1688. From Reformation to Revolution}, London & New York, 1980, p. 201. For a discussion of Teresa's battle to choose her directors, see Ranft, 'Key to Women's Activism', pp. 18-19, 22-23.
\textsuperscript{20} Guilday, \textit{Catholic Refugees}, pp. 262-63n.
the Jesuit/secular debate and entered the purely political realm, obscuring entirely its spiritual origin.22

Ironically, at the outset of the dispute Abbess Percy blamed the fracas on the freedom of choice and variety of spiritual direction permitted her nuns during the early years of the foundation.23 The first abbess, Joanna Berkeley, had allowed nuns the option of a Jesuit confessor if they did not want the services of the house's appointed secular chaplain. There is ample evidence to confirm that many nuns took advantage of this option. When the Cambrai Benedictine convent was founded in 1623, the three nuns sent by Brussels to govern the fledgling community and train the founders in the monastic life were all staunch believers in Jesuit prayer.24 Indeed, in 1612, Mary Percy and Anthony Hopkins S.J. had co-translated a prayer manual written by an Italian mystic and her Jesuit director.25 Other members of the community gravitated towards different spiritual methodologies. The 1609 mystical treatise of an English Capuchin friar, William (Benet) Canfield, was dedicated to his cousin, Winefrid (Agatha) Wiseman of the Brussels Benedictines.26 Canfield's, The Rule of Perfection, was of the Benedictine school.27 Thus, in its early years, the Brussels Benedictine nuns demonstrated an eclectic mix of Jesuit, Benedictine, and other spiritual trends of the Catholic Reformation. Mary Percy viewed this diversity as divisive and she moved to introduce spiritual conformity, thus sparking the acrimonious dispute which was to plague the reputation of Brussels for several decades.

What features of Ignatian spirituality made it so controversial? Its supposed flexibility had been the reason for its tremendous appeal and widespread application by reforming Catholics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The main difficulty with the Jesuit school lay in differing interpretations of how the faithful should meditate. Loyola's original schema offered a methodical procedure for praying which allowed for a

22 In an essay on Gertrude More & dissension in the Cambrai Benedictine cloister, Sylvia Bowerbank has argued that conflict over mystical activity became politicised as an issue of obedience to superiors. See Sylvia Bowerbank, 'Gertrude More and the Mystical Perspective', Studia Mystica, 9, 1986, pp. 38-41.
23 Marie Percy à la Propagande, 1629, 8 décembre, in Pasture, 'Documents Concernant quelques Monastères Anglais', p. 159.
26 Benoit de Canfield, The Rule of Perfection, Rouen, 1609 [ERL, 40; STC, 10928]. Canfield dedicated this book not only to to the Brussels Benedictines, but to the Louvain Augustinians & the Bridgettine cloister in Lisbon as well. Winefrid (Agatha) Wiseman, along with Jane (Mary) Wiseman of St. Monica's, & Barbara & Anne Wiseman of St. Bridget's, were singled out for special dedication. It is perhaps significant that Jane, Barbara & Anne Wiseman were selected as patrons. Jane was prioress at St. Monica's, Barbara was abbess of St. Bridget's & Anne was the prioress there. In high office all 3 could be expected to promote Canfield's technique in their cloisters. St. Monica's had been heavily influenced by the Jesuits, so this is another example of spiritual diversity in a house.
broad range of experiences, from simple meditation on the scriptures to mystical contemplation. Subsequent Jesuits modified the founder's regimen in accordance with their personal preferences, and in response to specific clerical fears about spiritual independence. Proponents of the later school believed that visions, revelations and raptures were dangerous because they took the mystic beyond the controlling influence of the Church. They accordingly adopted a cautious approach to the spiritual life which focused on good works, attendance at the sacraments, frequent confession, and set meditations which precluded the possibility of any contemplative activity which might encourage mysticism. One of the best proponents of this school was Alonso Rodríguez whose Ejercicio de Perfección y Virtutes Cristianas reduced Loyola's spirituality to conventional practicality.28

In cloisters, where the primary goal was the contemplative rather than the active life, reductive treatises like that of Rodríguez alienated many nuns for whom mysticism was the ultimate spiritual experience. Obviously not all women felt constrained by the evolution of a more rigid Jesuit regime. Elizabeth (Lucy) Knatchbull combined a mystical career with ardent support of the Society's methods. However, it is significant that Mary Percy, who had been an advocate of the Society during her cloister's early years, subsequently tried to disassociate the community from any Jesuit influence. The abbess's translation of the Breve Compendio placed her firmly within the school of broader Ignatian spirituality which encompassed mystical activity. Evidence that some within her house were adherents of the reductionist school of Rodríguez and his ilk can be found in a copy of his Ejercicio which was sent to the Cambrai Benedictines.29 Significantly, this occurred in the 1620s, when the abbess was beginning her campaign against the Society.

It is highly probable that tensions had arisen in the convent not simply between those who favoured Benedictine and others who preferred Jesuit spiritual methods, but also among those in the Ignatian camp. When the abbess complained to Cardinal Ludovisi of the two causes of the dispute, she noted firstly the variety and number of spiritual directions, and secondly the part played by the Jesuits in fostering discord.30 Mary Percy's rejection of the Society can perhaps best be understood as a reaction against the narrowed focus of particular Jesuits who refused to allow the full range of contemplative activity. She may have reasoned that a secular chaplain was more likely to permit individuals their spiritual preferences than Jesuits of the Rodríguez school, and that unity would be restored once the divisive internal Ignatian debate had been removed.

29 Lunn, English Benedictines, p. 199.
Mary Percy was not the only person concerned about the limitations of Ignatian spirituality. Letitia (Mary) Tredway was adamant that the Society would have nothing to do with her cloister when she founded the Augustinian convent in Paris in 1634. Similarly, in 1633, the Cambrai Benedictine foundation had been placed under the jurisdiction of the English Benedictine congregation. However, three nuns were sent from Brussels to assist the new house until such a time as the founders could govern the convent themselves. Abbess Frances Gawen, Novice Mistress Viviana Yaxley, and Potentiana Deacon had all been schooled in Jesuit spirituality, and they attempted to train the Cambrai novices in the way of prayer they found profitable. Significantly, before the nine founders had been in the habit six months, they begged the president of the English Benedictines to send them someone qualified in their own order's spirituality. Catherine Gascoigne, who later became abbess, wrote of the spiritual desolation she experienced under the Jesuit regime: 'My soul was as it were ready to starve with hunger and want of nourishment and now became methought more cold and frozen in my interior than I was in the world'. The monk sent to Cambrai to assist the young novices was Augustine Baker.

Baker was a convert and had found his vocation to Benedictine monasticism relatively late, at the age of thirty. The initial years of his religious profession were spent employing his skills as a common lawyer in the post-Reformation revival of the English Benedictine Congregation. However, Baker is best remembered for reviving and teaching a particular brand of mysticism. The nine years he spent with the Cambrai nuns was a period of mutual benefit. The religious women, dissatisfied with Ignatian prayer, were attracted by Baker's non-interventionist approach to spiritual direction. Rather than impose a specific meditational regimen, the monk encouraged individuals to pursue the devotional path which best suited their ability and temperament. Seeking suitable spiritual writings to assist the nuns, Baker turned to the great late-medieval mystics. He translated into English the fourteenth and fifteenth-century works of John Ruysbroeck, Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, Thomas à Kempis, Julian of Norwich, and the anonymous Cloud of Unknowing. In addition, he wrote devotional treatises and prayer manuals in response to problems experienced by the nuns. In so doing, he modified established spiritual courses in accordance with his observation of the nuns' experiences. Together Baker and the Cambrai sisters fostered an alternative spirituality.

32 In a Great Tradition, pp. 9-10.
33 Cited in ibid., p. 10.
to that of Loyola which was based firmly in the English medieval mystical tradition, and the *devotio moderna* of the Low Countries.\(^{35}\)

Although Ignatian devotion had been influenced by the same medieval traditions, subsequent modifications by the Rodriguez school had all but stifled such elements. Baker was scathing about the misapplication of Jesuit prayer, particularly in monastic houses. He believed that, unless directed with great care, Ignatian piety was unsuited to enclosed religious. Souls residing in the quiet of the cloister were open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and could often attain the most suitable mode of prayer without the heavy-handed guidance of a director. He wrote:

The director ... should advise according to the character of each soul, remembering that his office is not to teach his own way of prayer, nor any definite way, but to instruct his penitents how to discover their way for themselves by observing what is profitable and what harmful. In a word, he should know that he is God's instrument, and must lead souls in God's way, and not in his own.\(^{36}\)

For those members of the Cambrai community who had suffered a spiritual void under the Jesuit-inspired ministrations of the official confessor, Augustine Baker's methods offered liberation. Although Baker guided his pupils towards certain spiritual books and methods of prayer, he allowed them to choose which was most efficacious. Thus, nuns like Abbess Catherine Gascoigne and Helen (Gertrude) More became their own spiritual directors, governing private prayer regimes, and relying on priests only for ministration of the sacraments.

In her spiritual writings, later published in 1658 as *Confessiones Amantis; or, The Confessions of a Loving Soul*, Gertrude More wrote of her close relationship with the Lord.\(^{37}\) The success of the spiritual course which More had discovered was evident at her death from smallpox in 1633. Several accounts of her last days by nuns of her community attest to the close relationship she had developed with God.\(^{38}\) The night before she died, Augustine Baker arrived in Cambrai. More was asked if she would like to speak with Baker, or with the former confessor of the house who had arrived with him. She reportedly declined to see either of them saying,


Inevitably members of the clergy became disturbed by Augustine Baker's influence on the Cambrai nuns. At a time when strict ecclesiastical control of personal spirituality was advocated, he was encouraging women to assert their spiritual independence. In fact, shortly before Gertrude More's illness and death, Baker had been removed from Cambrai because of a dispute within the cloister over the old thorny issue of direction. The majority of the nuns were his disciples, but a small number preferred the set meditations and devotions advocated by Francis Hull O.S.B., the official chaplain of the house. Tension between Hull and Baker led to open conflict. Hull accused the mystic of preaching anti-authoritarian doctrines, and the charge brought Baker before the General Chapter of the Benedictine congregation. Both Gertrude More and Abbess Catherine Gascoigne wrote eloquent defenses in support of Baker for the Chapter. Despite being cleared of heretical leanings, Baker was removed from the Cambrai monastery to St. Gregory's College in Douai. From Douai he was sent on the English mission in 1638, and he died three years later.

Baker's associates at Cambrai were assiduous in preserving and circulating his teachings. During nine years with the nuns he had written numerous treatises on prayer and religious life for the community, and there was widespread demand for copies of his works. The Cambrai nuns were largely responsible for copying the Baker manuscripts for their own use, and for distribution among other religious congregations, monks on the English mission, and the Catholic laity. The late 1640s witnessed a vast increase in copying to supply Cambrai's proposed daughter-house in Paris with a complete set of Baker's writings. One of the most prolific copyists was Barbara Constable who had joined the monastery in 1645. A large proportion of surviving copies are in her distinctive hand, although numerous other nuns joined the great copying project during the seventeenth century, as did several monks of Douai.
The Cambrai nuns who collected and copied Baker's works were largely responsible for the survival of his spiritual guidelines; so much so that his contemplative method has been termed the 'Cambrai school'.45 It is possible that the nuns were working towards the canonisation of their former spiritual director, for they referred to him as 'the Venerable Father Augustine Baker' as if the canonisation process was under way.46 That the nuns themselves understood their role as guardians of Baker's works was evidenced by their battle with superiors over possession of the original manuscripts.

In 1655, Claude White, the president of the English Benedictine Congregation attempted to force Abbess Catherine Gascoigne to relinquish the original Baker treatises. White argued that Baker's writings contained 'poisonous, pernicious and diabolical doctrine' and therefore demanded to be given the manuscripts in order to expunge them of all erroneous teaching.47 This was a reference to the old doubts about the orthodoxy of Baker's teaching on divine inspiration. By advocating the independence of the soul from the intervention of spiritual directors in its quest to communicate with the divine, Baker posed a serious challenge to the authority of superiors:

In all good actions, and especially in the internal ways of the spirit which conduct to contemplation and perfection, God alone is our only master and director; and creatures, when He is pleased to use them, are only His instruments. So that all other teachers whatsoever, whether the light of reason, or external directors, or rules prescribed in books, &c, are no further or otherwise to be followed of harkened to, than as they are subordinate and conformable to the internal directions and inspirations of God's Holy Spirit ...

Claude White, and others sceptical of Bakerism, pointed to such passages as evidence of Baker's heretical leanings towards Illuminism and Quietism. In the dispute which ensued, White couched the disagreement in terms of monastic obedience. Submission to the authority of superiors was one of the cornerstones of St. Benedict's 'rule'. The abbess pledged her obedience to the president upon her election, and the nuns were expected to accept reverently whatever the president or his deputy ordained during the four-yearly visitation of the house.49 At the height of the dispute, White threatened the nuns that to persist in their opposition to his wishes regarding the manuscripts was 'absolut disobedience'. When Abbess Gascoigne staunchly maintained her position, he announced that she was 'in a damnable way running to perdition'.50 Thus, the

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46 In a Great Tradition, p. 24.
47 Bodl., MS Rawlinson A.36, Thurloe Papers, f. 45, Catherine Gascoigne to Father Augustine Conyers, 3 March 1655.
48 Sancta Sophia, Treatise 1, section 2, ch. 1, #5, quoted in Spearritt, 'Survival of Medieval Spirituality', pp. 300-301.
49 Stanbrook Abbey, Cambrai MS 'Constitutions compiled for the better observation of the holy Rule of our most glorious Fa: and Patriarch S. Bennet',1631, ff. 66-68; St. Benedict, The Rule of the Most Blessed Father Saint Benedict Patriarke of all Munkes, Alexia Grey (trans.), Ghent, 1632, [ERL, 278], pp. 34-36.
50 Bodl., MS Rawlinson A.36, ff. 45, 49, Catherine Gascoigne to Fr. Augustine Conyers, 3 March, 1655; Catherine Gascoigne to Fr. Anselm Crowder, 1655.
implication was that although heretical in themselves, the writings of Baker were doubly subversive in that they encouraged nuns to assert their independence in other areas of monastic life too.

In this respect White was correct. The Cambrai nuns were secure in the knowledge that it was possible to combine spiritual independence with monastic discipline, and they were prepared to fight for the writings that they and Baker had generated. Abbess Gascoigne appealed to other members of the English Congregation for support, arguing that the issue concerned all English Benedictines, not merely the nuns:

I humbly beseech you therefore to looke upon this affaire, not as a thing only concerning our house, but the whole Congregation, which indeed is interested in it, both in respect of the Bookes, and the proceedings of our V.R. Father President against us, upon such grounds, which may be the case of any other house of the Congregation upon every difference betwixt the President and the superior of it, to the prejudice of their spirituall and temporall good, and the unmeasurable disturbance of their peace so much desired and regarded by all.51

So like the dispute regarding spiritual direction at Brussels, the Cambrai affair was linked inextricably with issues of obedience, power and authority. In Counter-Reformation monasticism tight control of spirituality was imperative in the eyes of the Church. Yet for women living the contemplative life spiritual contentment was paramount. Once they had discovered the best route to religious satisfaction, nuns were determined to uphold their right to pursue it.

Spirituality in the English convents therefore encompassed the wider issues of monastic jurisdiction and authority, as well as personal interaction with the divine. The Jesuit injunction against administration of women's cloisters placed many English communities in an impossible position regarding spiritual direction. Ignatian spirituality dominated Counter-Reformation Europe, but there was often a conflict of interest between a convent's official chaplain, and Jesuits overseeing specific nuns' pious programmes. The problem of spiritual direction, however, was not limited to conflict between Jesuits and the secular clergy. As events in the Cambrai house showed, disputes over devotional methodology could still arise among those of the same order.

II. Counter-Reformation Devotions

The over-arching supervision of a personal spiritual director was only one factor in Counter-Reformation regulation of individual piety. Such clerical overseers were expected to channel the devotions of their pupils towards the images and rituals promoted

51 Ibid., f. 50.
by the Church. Tighter control of piety led to the redefinition of orthodox religious symbols to eliminate those that were not acceptable. Officials, local saints were sacrificed in favour of those who characterised the goals of reform. Martyrs, missionaries, reforming bishops, and the founders of new religious congregations dedicated to spreading the message of the Counter-Reformation were canonised hastily to provide the faithful with compatible role-models. To compensate for the loss of former rituals and devotions, those deemed benign were widely encouraged. The Virgin Mary, under attack from the Protestants, became a focal point for devotion, with rosary confraternities proliferating all over Europe, particularly in Italy. But even more significant was the renewed accent upon Christ himself, typified by the affirmation of the mass as the central form of worship. This led to an outburst in vitality and variety of eucharistic devotions.

How did this Catholic reformation of piety impact upon women, who traditionally constituted a significant proportion of the ranks of the faithful? At first glance, it seems that the official policies pursued by the ecclesiastical hierarchy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries brought about a 'masculinisation' of the Catholic faith. Greater emphasis on the authority of the papacy and clergy in matters concerning church government and guidance of the faithful, coupled with the spiritual orientation towards the sacraments and the figure of Christ, suggest that the outlook became very bleak for women. However, in spite of the increasingly patriarchal framework imposed upon them in all areas of their existence, lay and religious women were able to adapt the potential restrictions in ways that enriched rather than impoverished their spiritual lives. Through eucharistic devotion, the manipulation of saintly cults, overwhelming endorsement of the Virgin Mary's power, practical piety, and personal mystical experiences, nuns in the English convents carved a niche in Counter-Reformation spirituality. Their piety not only earned them praise from the Church, the laity and one another, but more importantly, enabled them to lead fulfilling lives within the confines of the cloister.

'Constitutions', convent annals, and prayer manuals all offer evidence of the formal institution of Counter-Reformation worship in particular houses. Supplementing these official sources with evidence from nuns' personal spiritual writings, biographies, and obituary notices, it is possible to ascertain the extent to which individuals subscribed to devotional regimes prescribed from above. There were three common areas of communal and personal devotion in cloisters: the eucharist, the Virgin Mary, and saintly

cults. Sources indicate that the contemplative women adopted the sacred figures and rituals which best suited their needs as celibate women in a patriarchal Church. Thus, as brides of Christ, nuns favoured Christological devotions, many of which centred upon the eucharist, the central symbol of Christian faith and ritual.

The eucharist's appeal lay in the broad range of devotions it inspired. The sacrifice of the mass was a vital element in the formal religious observance of every cloister, so nuns had access to the host on a daily basis. Yet the mass was not the only forum in which veneration of the consecrated wafer could occur. A variety of feasts and rituals which revered aspects of Christ's life and death had evolved in late-medieval and counter-reformation Catholicism, and these focused on the eucharist.54 Furthermore, the Tridentine reformers' insistence that the host conferred redemptive grace persuaded the faithful of its supernatural powers. Accessing the eucharist directly through communion, or indirectly by praying in its presence, became important elements in individual as well as communal piety. From choir nuns who could attain the heights of mystical contemplation, to lay sisters who followed set devotional procedures, the eucharist figured prominently in several English nuns' devotional regimes.

Caroline Walker Bynum's work on the symbolism of food in the lives of medieval religious women has demonstrated that the mass, particularly elevation of the host and its consumption by the believer, was the occasion for numerous mystical experiences.55 In the sixteenth century, many of Teresa of Avila's visions had occurred during mass, and poignant moments of spiritual union with Christ were stimulated by the sight and reception of the host.56 The eucharist continued to inspire visions, raptts and trances in the spiritual lives of seventeenth-century nuns, including those in the English cloisters. Daily mass was celebrated in all the religious houses, although the nuns were not permitted to receive the host every day. Generally they would communicate each Sunday and on holy days. However, there were numerous other feasts upon which they could take communion if they so wished. Such days included the feasts of saints associated with the order, their own saint's day, at occasions of clothings and professions, the anniversary of both their own profession and that of the abbess, and any other time deemed fit by the abbess and confessor. Apart from special days, certain communities were given the opportunity to communicate three times a week. For

56 *The Life of Teresa of Avila by Herself*, J.M. Cohen, (trans.) Harmondsworth, 1957, see pp. 196, 205-7, 237, 246-48, 291-94, 303-5, for e.g.s of visions inspired by the eucharist.
example, the 'Blue Nuns' could receive communion on Thursdays during those weeks in which there were no communion days other than Saturday and Sunday.57

There is considerable evidence to suggest that for certain English nuns the mass and reception of the consecrated wafer initiated mystical experiences. The Franciscan, Anne (Felicitas Anne) Prince of Bruges, had a vision of the infant Christ when the priest elevated the host during mass one day.58 Most of Lucy Knatchbull's mystical unions with Christ occurred after she had taken holy communion. Speaking of the moment when the Lord revealed to her that she would suffer on his behalf, she wrote, 'after I had received the Blessed Body of our Lord Jesus, he filled my Soul with unspeakable sweetness'.59 Carmelite visionaries, Margaret (Margaret of Jesus) Mostyn and Catherine (Xaveria of the Angels) Burton, were also inflamed with divine love during mass. Although many of Margaret Mostyn's experiences with Christ and the Virgin happened during divine service and prayer, she had several during the celebration of the eucharist: 'At the Elevation, all the altar seemed to be encompassed round with Heaven, and the mysteries of our Blessed Lord and all His Sacred Passion were represented to her most clearly'.60 Likewise, receipt of the blessed sacrament formed one of the arenas in which Catherine Burton interacted with Christ. One Christmas, when she was sub prioress, the infant Jesus gave her 'a kiss of His mouth' after she had received him in the host which she interpreted as 'a strict union with God'.61 Thus, the focus of Counter-Reformation spirituality upon the mass and the eucharist continued to offer nuns a forum in which they could engage in mystical activities.62

However, eucharistic devotion did not necessarily entail supernatural consequences. Obituaries of seventeenth-century English nuns suggest that for most nuns the mass and its various components simply provided focal points for personal worship. Throughout the century several treatises appeared in English translation which aimed to assist the faithful to obtain spiritual satisfaction from the ceremony by meditating before, during and after mass on the various Christian mysteries associated

59 Matthew, Life of Lucy Knatchbull, p. 48. Ch. 7 discusses Knatchbull's visions in more detail, but for accounts of her numerous eucharistic visions see Matthew, Life, pp. 41-9, 146-67.
62 I will discuss this issue in greater detail in ch. 7.
with its ritual. In procedures which mirrored the 'sensible' prayer advocated by the Jesuits, participants were encouraged to link certain aspects of the ritual with incidents in the life of Christ. This enabled them to focus clearly on what was taking place at the altar by informing the liturgy with meaning. Lucy (Teresa Joseph) Herbert of the Augustinian cloister in Bruges wrote a prayer manual which was published after her death. Noted as having 'a most ardent devotion to our Redeemer in the Holy Sacrament of the Altar', Herbert's *Devotions* contains several reflections on the mass and eucharist. For example, she suggested that one should spend the time between the *Sanctus* and the elevation taking the part of the Virgin:

To obey Christ's orders in commemorating His death and Passion, accompany our Lady in spirit, and remain with her at the foot of the Cross ... Who can express what she suffered when she heard her Divine Son complain of being abandoned by His Eternal Father? ... Here we must humble ourselves and beg pardon, acknowledging we are the unhappy cause of the suffering, both of the Son and of the Mother, begging our Lady to obtain that the merit of those sufferings may be now applied to our souls, to make them fitter habitations for her Divine Son.

This was the procedure commonly prescribed by the Jesuits for prayer before images, and for the great devotional cult of the late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: the rosary. It appears to have been especially successful when applied to the mass, as attested by the large numbers of nuns who were listed as having revered the sacrament of the altar.

During the liturgy there were occasions of special intensity when prayer was deemed particularly effective. Such junctures were always associated with the sight and reception of the eucharist. Elevation of the host and physical union with it through communion were emotionally charged moments for many nuns. In the Ghent Benedictine cloister, Isabella (Benedicta) Richardson Corby was noted for her attachment to the mass. Corby had entered religion late in life and, as a concession to her age, she was permitted to attend as many masses as she desired. In her obituary it was remarked

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63 [Matthew Kellison], *Meditations and Devout Discourses upon the B. Sacrament*, 1639 [ERL, 20; STC, 17128]; Fulvio Androzzi, *Certayne Devout Considerations of Frequenting the Blessed Sacrament*, 1606 [ERL, 23; STC, 632]; John Heigham, *Devout Exposition of the Holie Masse*, 1622 [ERL, 205].


that 'as for Masses she never would be absent from any though very many were said of a Day and her custome was ever to adore our Lord att the elevations on her bare knees'. Margaret (Magdalen) Digby of the same community was so attached to the mass and blessed sacrament that when she was nearing death and too ill to attend conventual services she re-created the ritual mentally. Digby told one of the nuns that she was 'present at many masses in a Day yea and at many elevations in an hower as knowing that att all moments both Day & night the most blessed sacrifice of holy mass is offered up to Allmighty God at one place or other in the world'. In the Franciscan community at Bruges the elevation was deemed significant enough to mark a noteworthy time of death. In 1635 Frances (George) Tichborne passed away 'at the Elevation of the high mass'. Likewise, in 1674, Anne (Constantia Francis) Masey expired at the same critical moment.

For other nuns, the reception of the eucharist was significant. Dorothy Hammerton of the Pontoise Benedictines was so devoted to the sacrament that she never missed ordinary communion days, even when very ill. For Dorothy (Bridget) Dorvolie Gildridge of the Ghent Benedictines, communion and confession were so important that she never emerged from either sacrament with dry eyes. The 'Blue Nun' lay sister, Margaret (Felix) Pidgeon, spent her lengthy illness in prayer and devotion, communicating frequently. Dorothy Barefoot of the Ghent cloister received similar succour during periods of physical suffering and mental anguish. She believed that her only comfort came from her confessor and the blessed sacrament. However, her scrupulous conscience eventually led her to suppose that her appetite for the host was inordinate. To curb her immoderate desire for reception of communion, she sought to tend a nun ill with smallpox in the infirmary where she would be denied access both to confessor and sacrament. The Carmelite prioress, Catherine Burton, who was permitted daily communion by her superiors, also believed in its sustaining powers: 'the chief strength I find as to my body and soul is from my frequent communions'. When she wondered whether she should abstain as an act of humility, she was told that such action was not necessary. Thus, for many nuns communion provided tangible evidence of Christ's comfort, and they longed to receive the host as often as possible.

67 Ibid., pp. 76-7.
68 English Franciscan Nuns, pp. 179, 191.
69 'Pontoise Registers', p. 301. Ordinary communion days were the regular days, i.e. Sundays & holy days.
70 'Ghent Obituary Notices', p. 42.
71 Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', p. 258.
72 Matthew, Life of Lucy Knatchbull, pp. 190-91.
73 Hunter, Life of Catherine Burton, pp. 128-29.
In addition to experience of the eucharist during celebration of the mass, the nuns also had visual access to it during periods when the blessed sacrament was exposed, such as benediction. Exposition of the sacrament, which had developed in the fourteenth century, was advanced in the late sixteenth century by the popularity of the Forty Hours devotion which involved a three-day vigil before the host. Like the highly visual display of the mass, this public showing of the eucharist could be similarly theatrical. The consecrated wafer would be displayed on the richly decorated altar in an elaborate monstrance surrounded by flickering candles, a setting designed to heighten the mysterious powers attributed to the eucharist. There is evidence to suggest that exposition formed an important part of devotional life in several English convents. In 1667, the 'Blue Nuns' received permission to expose the sacrament every Friday before mass, and to have Benediction both after mass and then again in the evening. In the Sepulchrines' 'Benefactors' Book', there are several references to money donated for the purpose of buying candles to burn before the sacrament whenever it was exposed. Likewise, the benefactors of St. Monica's contributed to the 'ritch silver and gilt Monstrantia' obtained during the office of Prioress Magdalen Throckmorton. In 1658, a devout woman gave the cloister a gilded crown to hang over the host when it was exposed. A few years later, when Ursula Stafford was sent a jewel worth 500 gilders and two rubies, they were hung upon the monstrance, adding to its already sumptuous appearance.

Nuns could spend time in the presence of the blessed sacrament no matter what the hour. Once a convent was established with a serviceable chapel or church, the consecrated wafers were kept there and it was possible for nuns to visit the divine presence whenever they had a free moment. Lucy Herbert advocated the practice of spending time in God's presence outside the hours of formal devotion:

As there is nothing more beneficial to us than frequently to visit the Blessed Sacrament, so there is no devotion more pleasing to Almighty God than our coming to visit and adore Him in that His throne of love ....

75 Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', p. 18. This devotion was directed towards the conversion of Charles II & of England. Upon the reported deathbed conversion of Charles, the nuns congratulated themselves for playing some part, arguing that their devotion had taken place on Fridays & the king had converted & died on a Friday.
77 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS P 1, Benefactors' Book, 1699-1970, [addendum].
78 Ibid., f. 52.
79 Ibid., [addendum].
80 Devotions of Lucy Herbert, p. 53.
Several nuns agreed with her that prayer in the presence of Christ was especially satisfying. It was said of the Ghent Benedictine, Margaret (Mary Ignatia) Corham Coningsby, that 'her hearts content was to be perseverently before the blessed sacrament'. She visited the chapel as often as obedience permitted her free time, and could be seen there kneeling on her bare knees in spite of her advanced years.81 As Augustina Bruning of the Pontoise cloister grew older, she was said to have become more closely united to the Lord in prayer, spending several hours of the day before the eucharist.82 Belief in the greater efficacy of petitions made in the presence of the consecrated host is evident in the plea for absolution made by Clare Vaughan to her sisters at Pontoise. Especially devoted to the eucharist, she wrote, 'I humbly beg for charityes sake, to be remembered in the holy prayers, at the howre and after death especially in holy Mass and w\textit{n} you are before the Most B\textit{d} Sacrament'.83

A corollary of the renewed focus on the mass was the proliferation of confraternities dedicated to the holy sacrament, the rise of observances such as Corpus Christi, the Forty Hours devotion, and Perpetual Adoration of the Holy Sacrament, as well as veneration of the infant Jesus and, in the late seventeenth century, the Sacred Heart.84 Although they were established principally with the laity in mind, cloisters and individual nuns became members of specific devotional societies.85 Advanced by the Church to remind Catholics of the pivotal role commanded by Christ in the salvation process, Christological and eucharistic devotion also served to highlight the humanity of Christ. The celebration of the sacrament of the eucharist reminded the faithful of Christ's suffering on the way to Calvary and on the cross. Commemoration of the passion was located within the penitential and holy cross confraternities of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It also found its way into personal devotions in the English convents.

The humanity of Christ formed a central pillar in the spiritual experiences of religious women during this period with nuns gravitating towards specific aspects of Christ's life and crucifixion. Christological emphases, coupled with renewed interest in the holy family, gave rise to a fascination with Christ's infancy and childhood. Frances

81 'Ghent Obituary Notices', p. 65.
82 'Pontoise Registers', p.306.
83 Ibid., p. 281.
85 Some of the Ghent Benedictines were noted in their obituaries as members of sodalities; see 'Ghent Obituary Notices', pp. 19, 36.
(Francis of the Holy Cross) Towers of the Poor Clares at Gravelines was noted in her 1684 obituary for a special reverence for the infancy of Christ. Ann (Clare Mary Ann) Clifton of the same house had such an ardent regard for the infant Jesus that at Christmas she was ecstatic as she contemplated his birth.86 In the visions of Carmelitan, Margaret Mostyn, the Christ-child played so prominent a role that Christ himself urged Mostyn to consider him as more than an infant. He showed her his wounds, saying 'do not always consider Me in My Mother's arms, but frequently accompany her under the Cross'.87

The foot of the cross provided the other common focal point for homage to Christ. Several nuns engaged in veneration of Christ's path to Calvary and his death on the cross. Mary (Mary Ignatius) Jerningham of the Franciscans who died in 1662 was acclaimed for having been 'singularly devout to the Passion'.88 Every evening after vespers, the Sepulchrines at Liège were required to contemplate a Station of the Cross in memory of Christ's Passion. Each day of the week was accorded a different stage on the path to Calvary. For example, on Mondays they were to meditate on the Garden of Gethsemane, 'visiting in spirit our dear Lord in his Bloody Sweat, &c'. At the end of their prayer each nun was to stretch out her arms in the shape of a cross for the space of an act of devotion to the Lord.89 Individual nuns performed private acts in commemoration of the Passion. Abbess Catherine Wigmore of Pontoise adapted her devotion to fit into her busy schedule as superior. She kept an hour glass in her pocket which she turned every hour 'renewing acts of vertue & memory of our Saviour's passion, with an invocation to the nine quires of angels & orders of Saints'.90 When in charge of the newly professed nuns, Mary Southcote of Ghent encouraged her young charges to follow a similar regime. By structuring the day around the various mysteries of the Passion, the nuns would be reminded constantly of their formal religious obligations as well as of their duties to Christ their saviour.91

The pious regimes of women like Catherine Wigmore and Mary Southcote point again to the impact of 'sensible' devotion on seventeenth-century spirituality. Apportioning the day according to a sequence of events in Christ's life calls to mind the procedures implemented for prayer during mass, or for private meditation. Contemplation of mysteries like the Passion were popular because they provided tangible subjects on which to focus. Nuns had easy access to accounts in devotional books, there

86 'Poor Clare Registers', pp. 79, 85.
88 *English Franciscan Nuns*, p. 188. For e.g.s of other nuns devoted to the same object, see obituaries for Mary (Mary Bernard) Brooke in 'Pontoise Registers', p. 300; Margaret (Mary Ignatia) Corham Coningsby in 'Ghent Obituary Notices', p. 66; Anne (Matilda of the Passion) Finch, & Mary (Paschalis) Gerard in 'Poor Clare Registers', pp. 81, 122.
89 *Brief Relation*, pp. 43-44.
90 'Ghent Obituary Notices', p. 62.
91 Ibid., p. 29.
was considerable iconography devoted to the subject, the crucifix was an ever present reminder of Christ's suffering on the cross, and all this was reinforced with the daily recitation of the ritual commemorating the Lord's death and resurrection, the mass. Adding to the attraction of the passion as a devotional focal point was the fact that the suffering Christ was an image with whom nuns could readily identify. Any pain or hardship they underwent could be shared with the divine figure who had undergone the anguish and torments of earthly existence. For this reason, women like the Franciscan, Elizabeth (Elizabeth Didacus) Colwall, who died in 1635 as a result of catching the plague from two sisters she was nursing, recited upon her deathbed 'Contenually the houres and misteries of our Saviours passion with the desire of Conformity thereto'. And Elizabeth (Magdalen) Digby, who endured an excruciating death from cancer at Ghent in 1659, was able to equate the five lesions in her breast with the five wounds of Christ. I would argue that this notion of the humanity of the divine was also responsible for the other singularly popular devotional focal point in the English convents, the Virgin Mary.

Marian devotion flourished in the post-Reformation era. Although Catholic reformers of the sixteenth century created a Church structure and ethos which was so clearly 'masculine' in orientation, they did not jettison the female face of Catholicism, the Virgin Mary. On the contrary, the seventeenth century witnessed the expansion of Marian devotion beyond the perimeters of late medieval veneration into a cult which seriously rivalled that of her son. The virginal mother of God had always been a potent symbol of what women could achieve if they overcame the supposed limitations of their gender. Furthermore, she had always been an ambiguous figure: virgin, but mother of Christ; handmaid of the Lord, but queen of heaven. The Counter-Reformation Church did little to resolve the Marian enigma. Instead it encouraged the image of Mary as 'glorious queen of heaven' by sanctioning, or at least tolerating, the development of mariological feasts. The Immaculate Conception, the Assumption, the rosary and numerous other devotions emphasised the power and glory of Mary, propelling her into a quasi-divine status. The Augustinian prioress, Lucy Herbert, wrote that the Virgin had 'none above her but God Himself, and all that is not God is below her'.

92 English Franciscan Nuns, p. 179.
93 'Ghent Obituary Notices', p. 78. Digby's religious sisters interpreted her wounds as supernatural favours. 2 of the wounds had 'several Great fountains (as it were) of blood that came guishing [i.e. gushing] out in a strange & extraordinary manner, as if a spear had been thrust into her side. [This] Caused in many a reflection that as she had obtained this exteriour sign, by way of feavour [i.e. favour] from God, so it remain'd to the very Last a kind of supernaturall wonder as a Dart where with the Divine Archer had wounded and made a conquest of her Love'. Ibid. For a discussion of evolving devotion to the wounds of Christ, see Rubin, Corpus Christi, pp. 302-6.
95 Devotions of Lucy Herbert, p. 103.
The potency of Marian symbolism is apparent in the very ambivalence of her persona. On earth she had epitomised true feminine humility, virtue and passivity by accepting God's will and fulfilling her motherly duties; yet in heaven she had become a dynamic activist on behalf of humanity, just as capable of crushing the enemies of the Church as she was of securing the salvation of individual penitents. For the faithful her dual nature as human mother and queen of heaven proved irresistible. Mary had experienced the tortuous existence of life on earth and therefore constituted a figure sympathetic to human suffering. Indeed she had achieved her exalted state by bearing and raising a child, something with which most women were able to identify. What set her apart from other human mothers was that she had borne the son of God. This made her 'adopted daughter of God the Father, Mother of God the Son, and Spouse of God the Holy Ghost' and thus intimately related to the Trinity. Just as the humanity of Christ (God) attracted ardent devotees to Christological piety, so the 'divinity' of Mary (human) drew thousands of Catholics into Marian sodalities.

Studies of iconography reveal that despite the elevation of Mary in sixteenth and seventeenth-century piety, she was frequently depicted as a passive figure: as a young girl, or sorrowing mother. These changing representations mirrored universal trends towards a more masculine godhead, and the patriarchal family. So although the Church affirmed the validity of mariolatry, it sought to bring the status of the Virgin into line with prevailing ideologies. The advance of devotions like the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption stressed the perfection of the Virgin, and therefore her superiority over all humanity, but she was also presented as a mediator who could intercede on the behalf of the faithful. In this intermediary role she proved acceptable in the eyes of the Catholic hierarchy. The Virgin did not grant favours in her own right. Instead she interceded with her son on behalf of the petitioner. Helen (Gertrude) More encapsulated the essence of Mary's power when she wrote:

All Hail, O Virgin, crowned with stars,
The moon beneath thy feet!
Obtain us pardon of our sins
Of Christ, our Saviour sweet . . .
And though my sins me terrify,
Yet, hoping still in thee,
I find my soul's refreshed much
When I unto thee flee.
For thou most willingly to God
Petitions dost present,
And dost obtain much grace for us
In this our banishment.98

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96 Ibid., pp. 113, 109.
Thus, officially in the Counter-Reformation Church, the Virgin's power was limited to that of an efficacious lobbyist. However, her symbolism was much broader in the piety of the seventeenth-century English nuns.

Monastic archives suggest that the Virgin Mary was a popular figure in communal and personal devotions. Of the 155 women professed in the Poor Clare community at Gravelines between 1609 and 1700, thirty-two were said in their obituaries to have shown a particular regard for Mary. And of the thirty-three obituary notices extant for professed members of the Ghent Benedictine community between its foundation in 1624 and 1659, fifteen of the nuns were noted for special veneration of Mary. Furthermore, several English convents were named after the Virgin, and were thus placed under her patronage. Her multifaceted symbolism is exemplified by two contrasting images chosen by houses: the mother and the queen. On the one hand, nuns appealed to her as 'comforting mother' in the hope that she would guide them through whatever troubles their cloister encountered. For example, the two Benedictine houses under the jurisdiction of the English Benedictine Congregation at Cambrai and Paris were placed under the patronage of 'Our Lady of Consolation' and 'Our Lady of Good Hope' respectively. The alternative image was that of the triumphant 'queen of heaven', typified by the orientation of the Benedictine house at Brussels, named the 'Abbey of the Glorious Assumption of Our Lady'. Its Ghent filiation was dedicated to the Immaculate Conception. The Franciscans who set out from Nieuport in 1658 to ease the financial woes of that cloister by establishing a new filiation in France, ultimately changed their 'rule' to that of the Order of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady. However, the image of Mary triumphant is most obvious in the 'coat of arms' adopted by the Benedictines at Dunkirk in 1662:

It carried a field of gold, charged with a figure of the Holy Virgin, with hands clasped before her breast, robed in silver and blue, crowned with a crown of gold, and having under her feet a crescent of silver: the whole surrounded with rays of gold, three of which, the three being on the right side of the head of the Holy Virgin, are surrounded by a star, also of gold.
The symbolic power of the Virgin implicit in this image is perhaps best illustrated by the name given to Mary Ward's apostolic religious order: the Institute of Mary. 104

Conventual iconography reinforced such perceptions of the Virgin's power with images of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption proliferating in chapels dedicated to Mary. In 1663, Elizabeth (Aloysia) Chichester gave money towards the purchase of a picture of the Immaculate Conception for the Canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre in Liège. 105 The potency of Mary as 'queen of heaven' was visually represented by ornaments decorating her statue. In 1663, the Sepulchrines were also given a crown and silver sceptre for their icon of the Virgin in the choir. Three years later she was ornamented further with a gold cross. 106 The nuns of St. Monica's were given an elaborate ebony and silver reliquary which was adorned with a figure of the Virgin at the top in the mid 1630s. 107 Upon their change of rule in 1661, the English Franciscan nuns in Paris were the recipients of numerous Marian icons. A Franciscan priest who was very devout towards the Virgin organised the blue cloth for their mantles and fourteen silver images of the Immaculate Conception for their cloister. 108 Blue was the Virgin's colour, so in adopting the 'rule' and its habit, the nuns were themselves becoming living embodiments of their patron's iconography. Many of their buildings and belongings were stamped with reminders of her cult. The foundation stone of their church, laid in 1672, was engraved with her likeness; and during the previous year they had been given a silver chalice and paten etched with her image. 109 Such visual representations reinforced the powerful place given to the Virgin Mary within the Catholic pantheon and encouraged the nuns to venerate her as a puissant helper in times of trouble.

Individual nuns selected the manifestation of Mary which best suited their own needs. For some she appeared in her most earthly guise as a comforting mother. Jane (Monica) Hatton, professed at St. Monica's in 1612, was a convert. The youngest of ten children, Hatton had lost her mother while still an infant, so she was attracted to the Virgin whom she hoped 'would be her Mother'. She converted against her father's

104 It is believed that the original name was 'Institute of Mary' because 'Instituto Maria' is found on an old seal of the Institute. When the reformed Institute received papal approbation in 1703, it was still called 'Institute of Mary'. It is thought that the name 'Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary' did not come into use until the mid-18th century when confusion over the legitimacy of the 2nd Institute (approved in 1703) resulted in the new name, to dissociate the order from the original 'Jesuitesses' condemned by Urban IX in 1631. Bar Convent, MS 1/12C, Name of the Institute.

105 'Sepulchrine Records', p. 33.

106 Ibid., pp. 32, 35.

107 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS P 1, [Addendum].

108 Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', p. 12. He also procured for them a copy of the 'Rule of the Immaculate Conception'.

109 Ibid., pp. 21, 22.
wishes, and upon his death, used her portion to enter the religious life. Others looked to the Virgin as comforter and intercessor. Lucy Herbert wrote, 'The most powerful helps of human misery are to be had by having recourse and devotion to our Lady'. Gertrude More saw her as the mother of God who could be called upon to seek favours from Christ. However, the Carmelite prioress Catherine Burton had a more complex view of the Virgin Mary. Burton perceived her as a caring mother and nurse during periods of violent illness, but 'at other times she appeared to her with that wonderful grace, modest beauty, and majesty which becomes the Mother of God, and which struck her with reverence and respect'. Catherine Burton's apparent confusion in her visions of the Virgin highlights the paradoxical nature of Mary's persona in the seventeenth century, for on another occasion when she appeared to Burton, the nun wrote:

Our Blessed Lady appeared to me with our Saviour in her arms. She did not seem so resplendent as a glorified body, but rather as she was conversant in the world, in an unusual dress, such as I suppose she wore. But there appeared in her face a wonderful grace, modesty, and beauty, beyond that of an angel, which struck a great reverence into my soul far beyond the apparition of any other saint.

It is clear that Burton, familiar with the iconography, anticipated a Mary from the Immaculate Conception or Assumption paintings to materialise. Instead her vision was of the human mother, dressed in a humble fashion. The fact that Burton expressed surprise at this image implies that despite efforts to subdue the power of Mary, there remained an overwhelming predominance of the 'queen of heaven' imagery in seventeenth-century representations of the Virgin. None the less, it was the humanity of Mary that surfaced in Burton's vision.

However, for most nuns Mary was a symbol of power who proved efficacious in solving a variety of problems. The Pontoise Benedictines implemented a number of public services in honour of the Virgin who had assisted them during the early days of the initial foundation at Boulogne. When the bishop of Boulogne had refused to give them permission to establish a monastery in the town, the nuns sought the intercession of Mary, St. Joseph, St. Anne and St. Joachim. The subsequent capitulation of the bishop, and financial assistance from the father of one of the nuns, was viewed as 'clear evidens of the powr o[u]r Bd Lady, & thos perticuler saynts had wth Allty God'. So in the year

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111 Devotions of Lucy Herbert, p. 104.
112 More, 'To Our Blessed Lady', p. 179. More seemed to imagine the Virgin more as a mother than as a powerful member of the heavenly hierarchy. She wrote, 'Thy Mother hath been indeed a mother to me ... she vouchsafing to take pity on me, poor miserable sinner'. Gertrude More, Confessiones Amantis, in Benedict Weld-Blundell (ed.), The Inner Life and Writings of Dame Gertrude More, vol. 2, London, 1911, p. 79.
113 Hunter, Life of Catherine Burton, p. 237.
114 Ibid., p. 148.
of the foundation, Abbess Catherine Wigmore instituted a set of formal observances to the Virgin, St. Joseph, and St. Anne out of gratitude for their assistance. The feast days of each saint were nominated as specific holy days in the community which would entail singing a special mass and receiving communion. In 1676, the nuns consolidated their particular regard for the mother of God by seeking admission to a rosary confraternity. The grant permitted them to set up a rosary chapel or altar within the cloister, and entitled them to all the privileges and indulgences attached to membership of the confraternity.

Proof of the Virgin's power, such as the successful petition of the Pontoise nuns to Mary, encouraged her veneration. A number of nuns attributed their conversion from the Protestant faith, and subsequent religious vocation, to her miraculous intervention. Jane (Teresa) Bream Gardiner, professed at Ghent in 1642, had been raised in the Church of England and was forced to marry a Protestant knight whom she detested. Upon the death of her parents, she fled from her husband to France where she became acquainted with a convent of Bernardine nuns. Attracted to Catholicism by their devotions, she was especially drawn by their praise of the Virgin. However, her path to conversion was halted temporarily by a Protestant divine who ridiculed those aspects of the Catholic faith which she found most appealing, particularly the place of Mary. In great spiritual anguish she appealed to the Virgin to enlighten her concerning the true religion. Almost immediately, 'she saw a most excellent and beautiful Lady in the midst of the rome [i.e. room], which as soon as She beheld 'twas Given her clearly to und Stand that it was the Mother of God'. This vision convinced her of the truth of Catholicism and she converted soon after. Upon the death of her despised husband, she wasted no time in dedicating herself 'to God and the Glorious Virgin his Immaculate Mother' by entering a monastery. The part played by the Virgin in the conversion and vocation of Jane Gardiner provides evidence of her appeal to women. Attracted to Catholicism by Marian devotions, it was to Mary that she turned for comfort and confirmation of the truth when confused. Thus for many women, it was the female figure of the Virgin who drew them to the Catholic faith.

Miraculous icons and reports of the power of prayers like the rosary also inspired devotion to the mother of God. Elizabeth Godwin of St. Monica's reported a story

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115 The nuns apparently forgot St. Joachim's assistance because he was not honoured in their observances.
116 'Pontoise Registers', pp. 262-63.
117 Ibid., p. 265.
118 'Ghent Obituary Notices', pp. 47-9. Other nuns claimed Mary's intervention in their conversion experiences. Elizabeth Shirley of St. Monica's was first drawn to Catholicism by a story detailing the miraculous assistance of the Virgin to a woman in childbirth; *Chronicle of St. Monica's*, vol. 1, pp. 102-4; Margaret (Magdalen) Throckmorton of the same house obtained the courage to put into action her plan to enter the religious life when she was visiting the shrine of Our Lady of Sichem; ibid., pp. 120-21.
related to her by a priest when she was planning to enter the religious life 'because it shows the power of beads ... against the devil'. The priest told her about an incident in which he had seen a devil in the likeness of a black crow. Stones thrown at the fiend had no effect. The evil spirit flew away only when he flung his rosary beads at it. When Sir Philip Skippon visited the Ghent Benedictine cloister in 1663, one of the nuns gave him a printed account which detailed how she had regained the use of her legs after applying some of the oil in a lamp before the altar of 'Our Lady of Succour' in Brussels. Tales such as this encouraged nuns to believe in the power of the Virgin. Furthermore, those women who claimed personal assistance from Mary themselves achieved a degree of spiritual kudos from their association with her. They were able to use their privileged position to promote her cult within their community and, as the incident related by Philip Skippon indicates, beyond the walls of the enclosure.

Of all the formal devotions directed towards the Virgin, the most popular was the rosary. In her Devotions, Lucy Herbert declared that the rosary should be highly esteemed because it was the prayer most pleasing to the mother of God. The recitation of the rosary, which had been affirmed as a powerful form of prayer by Pope Pius V in 1571, was encouraged by the Jesuits as an efficacious devotion for the laity, and especially for women, because of its strictly organised meditative procedure. It could be adapted to suit differing levels of literacy, and used either as a form of vocal prayer, or as a structure for systematic meditation. Within the religious communities there was a vast range of ability when it came to prayer, from women who were mystics to those who could not meditate. Nevertheless, no matter how proficient individual women were in the art of meditation and contemplation, they often recited the rosary as part of their pious regime. Margaret Mostyn, the Carmelite prioress whose life had been filled with mystical experiences, always said her beads during mass.

The repetitive nature of the rosary meant that nuns could adapt it for use in numerous situations. During the final years of her life, Bridget Wiseman of St. Monica's was so ill that she could not rise until the afternoon, and even then she had to remain in the dark because the light hurt her eyes. She would spend her waking hours sitting in a corner quietly saying her beads. Anne Bromfield of the same community found similar solace in her beads. Throughout her years in the cloister, she suffered

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119 Ibid., pp. 251-52.
121 Devotions of Lucy Herbert, p. 103.
123 Bedingfield, Life of Margaret Mostyn, pp. 268-69.
spiritual anguish and doubts about her salvation. Never able to obtain satisfaction through meditation, she found vocal prayer, in particular the rosary, helpful in overcoming fearful thoughts. For other nuns, recitation of the rosary demonstrated their great reverence for the mother of God. Upon the death in 1722 of Ann (Clare Mary Ann) Clifton, who had been professed at Gravelines in 1663, her obituary claimed that Clifton had been 'a chief promotress of devotion in [the Virgin's] honour, especially the Rosary & Scapular'. Isabella (Benedicta) Richardson Corby of Ghent would repay favours done for her by others by offering the recitation of her beads for their intentions. Thus, the rosary played a prominent part in the pious regimes of several English nuns. Its versatility meant that it could be used as a form of meditation in its own right, or to focus the mind during times of formal worship, or as a solace for those who lacked the gift of prayer, or merely to fill in the long hours of the day for the sick and infirm. The broadness of application ensured its popularity.

In addition to the rosary, there is considerable evidence of many other acts of piety towards the Virgin Mary, both communal and private. To signify their homage to Christ and the Virgin, the Sepulchrines of Liege wore two bracelets made of little brass chains consisting of different colours. Potential novices were informed that the nuns wore these bracelets 'about their arm, and kiss them often, especially morning and evening, expressing themselves from their hart, to be bondslaves of JESUS and MARIA'. In detailing the particular devotions of the Ghent Benedictine community, Tobie Matthew asserted that all the nuns there were inclined towards the Virgin because their house had been consecrated in her honour. For example the observances of Helen (Aloysia) Beaumont, who had made her vows in 1631, were recorded in her 1635 death notice:

She was singularly devouted to the mother of God; one of her practices in her honnour was often to visit every Image of our blessed lady [i]n the whole monastry kneeling at every one's cell door whilst she exhibited some pious salutation prayr and petition. [A]nd this was (if not every day) at least, every saturday & Our Blessed Lady's eves.

Gravelines Poor Clare, Ann (Ann Michel) Berington, who was professed in 1646, was said to have been 'Singularly devout to our Bd Lady, & to her holy Mother'. For many

125 C.S. Durrant, *A Link Between Flemish Mystics and English Martyrs*, London, 1925, pp. 235-36; In another e.g. of the comforting nature of the rosary, Catherine Holland of the Bruges Augustinians described how she had said her beads while considering converting to Catholicism against the wishes of her father: 'I got a pair of Tens, which I ty'd next me, and kept very secret, and at Night would say them on my Knees before I went to Bed, with much Satisfaction but I knew not with what Intention'; ibid., p. 277.
126 'Poor Clare Registers', p. 85.
128 *Brief Relation*, p. 50.
130 'Ghent Obituary Notices', p. 20.
years Berington had been the sacristine responsible for the altar dedicated to the Virgin in the convent church, and in her 1687 obituary, she was commended for 'Keeping with great neatness her Altar'.

Nuns could therefore venerate the Virgin in a variety of ways which were not limited to the confines of formal prayer. The reason for Mary's widespread popularity lay in the complexity of her persona and in the versatility of devotional practices directed towards her. The faithful found in the iconography surrounding her images of both power and maternal comfort. Through Mary, a woman and mother, a nun could access Christ. In the rosary with its fifteen decades of *Aves* dedicated to the joyful, sorrowful and glorious mysteries of the Virgin, she could be experienced in all her guises. More importantly, identification with Mary during those crucial events in her son's life enabled the believer to approach Christ from a different perspective to that of spouse. The praying nun could become sorrowing mother.

If religious women were attracted to Christ and Mary because of their complex divine-human natures, then nuns were drawn into saintly cults for similar reasons. Saints had always been accorded an intermediary role within Christian theology and as such were tolerated by the ecclesiastical hierarchy. However, the middle ages witnessed the emergence of specific cults which implied worship of the saint's personal power. The importance attached to particular saints in popular devotion is evident in the proliferation of chapels, altars, rood screens and images dedicated to them from the fourteenth to the early sixteenth century in England. Eamon Duffy has explained the seemingly morbid interest in those figures who had suffered horrific deaths in terms of their perceived efficacy in the minds of the faithful. St. Erasmus, a bishop martyred during the reign of Diocletian, was just one of a growing number of fast-growing cults in the century before the Reformation. The horrific tortures and death he suffered reflected those of Christ himself. Hence a fascination with saints who were scourged, pierced and mutilated accompanied the expanding devotion of Christ's passion.

Martyrdom had not been restricted to men, particularly during the early years of Christianity. The early Roman virgin martyrs were well represented in the esteemed assembly of late medieval saints. Saints Katherine of Alexandria, Margaret and Barbara were joined by an abundance of women who had encountered similar horrors. Duffy has noted that Cecilia, Dorothy, Sitha, Petronella, Agnes, Christina, Ethelreda, Juliana, Bridget, Apollonia, Helena, Ursula and the 11,000 virgins, Anne, Faith, Elizabeth and

131 'Poor Clare Registers', pp. 76-7.
132 I will discuss this point further in ch. 7.
Mary Magdalene all appear on surviving East Anglian rood screens. Correlating saints' iconographical representations with their place in devotional literature, references to them in wills, and the popularity of their names among the faithful, Duffy argued that their attraction for the faithful may have been more as powerful helpers in times of distress than as exemplars to be imitated. The suffering of a particular martyr was deemed to render that religious figure sensitive to similar pain and anguish experienced by the average Christian. So Apollonia whose teeth had been smashed with a club was appealed to in times of toothache; and Margaret, Katherine and Barbara patronised women in childbirth. Thus a feminine symbol was believed able to mitigate the effect of adversity in the lives of the faithful and could replicate Christ's suffering.

While it did not eliminate these focal points of late medieval piety, the Church of the post-Reformation era was sensitive enough to Protestant derision to attempt to redirect devotion to a smaller group of holy figures who, on the whole, mirrored the objectives of Catholic reform. Thus, there was a concerted effort to promote newly canonised figures like Ignatius Loyola, Francis Xavier, Francis de Sales and Charles Borromeo. Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell have argued in their analysis of saints that this period of missionaries, reformers and the apostolic life saw masculine qualities favoured over feminine in terms of canonisation. If we accept their argument that sanctity is a cultural indicator, then the outlook was bleak for religious women during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Statistical data collected by Weinstein and Bell present the archetypal saints of this period as reforming bishops, missionaries and martyrs more often than mystics who combined ecstatic experience with service to the Church. However, what was dictated by the hierarchy was not necessarily accepted by its flock. Weinstein and Bell studied canonisations to determine the official standpoint of the Church. Analyses of lay piety suggest that the faithful were not looking for the exemplary role models promoted by the hierarchy. Rather, they continued to seek powerful intercessors to assist them through the trials of daily life.

None the less, the Church was successful in its promotion of certain holy patrons. Characters who were associated with the life of Christ on earth were advanced by Catholic reformers and became extremely popular, especially St. Anne and St. Joseph. St. Anne was venerated as the Virgin's mother and Christ's grandmother, and accordingly enjoyed flourishing devotion during the late middle ages. She was an especially important figure for wives and mothers because she was one of the few

134 Ibid., pp. 169-83.
popular female saints remembered as having been married. The extension of the holy family during the medieval period to include the figures of Anne and Joachim, her husband, reflected devotional trends focussed upon the humanity of Christ. Christological emphases in Counter-Reformation spirituality served to reinforce the importance of Christ's incarnation. Devotion to the infancy of Christ resulted in renewed interest in his childhood and those who lived with him. One of the more spectacular regenerations occurred in the reputation of St. Joseph. The image of the cuckolded husband of the middle ages gave way to that of a role-model for all Christian fathers. Merry Wiesner has argued that the iconographical transformation of Joseph into protector and provider for Mary and Jesus reflected and reinforced the copious literature extolling the virtues of the patriarchal family in the early modern period. The holy family therefore became an archetype for seculars to imitate. In addition, those saints who formed part of Christ's kin were believed to have his ear in heaven. This meant that members of the holy family were viewed as powerful intercessors.

Within the English convents communal and personal piety surrounding the saints focused principally on two groups: the holy family, and saints associated with the house's monastic order. Of course individual nuns sometimes venerated other holy men and women beyond these circles for whom they had always cherished a special regard. A number of the popular late-medieval saints were represented in monastic chapels and private devotion. For example, in 1674, the Sepulchrines at Liège were given a picture of St. Cecilia by a benefactor. Mary Pease, who died in 1643 in the Benedictine community at Ghent had been a member of the confraternity of St. Barbara, indicating her devotion to that particular saint. The Benedictine house at Brussels had a collection of relics: alongside images of St. Anne, the Virgin (complete with a vial of her milk and a piece of her veil), crucifixes and a piece of the true cross, were 'several heads of the 11000-virgins; with a large relique of St Ursula'. Nevertheless, although there was a broad sweep of sanctified men and women to whom individuals were particularly devoted, there was a core of popular saints who were venerated by the majority of nuns.

138 Wiesner, Women and Gender, p. 201. Wiesner suggested that the rise of Joseph was mirrored by the decline of St. Anne, marking a de-feminisation of Catholic worship which echoed Protestant moves towards a purely masculine deity. Ibid. See also Brandenbarg, 'St. Anne and her Family', pp. 120-24; Merry Wiesner, 'Luther and Women: The Death of Two Marys', in Jim Obelkevich, Lyndal Roper, & Raphael Samuel (eds.), Disciplines of Faith. Studies in Religion, Politics and Patriarchy, London, 1987, pp. 295-308.
139 'Sepulchrine Records', p. 40.
140 'Ghent Obituary Notices', p. 36.
141 [Anne Neville], 'Abbess Neville's Annals of Five Communities of English Benedictine Nuns in Flanders, 1598-1687', Mary J. Rumsey (ed.), in Miscellanea 5, [CRS, 6], London, 1909, p. 5. For the assortment of relics given to the Pontoise cloister, see 'Pontoise Registers', pp. 264-65.
By looking at the patronage of certain cloisters, it is possible to discern the tenor of female monastic piety with regard to the saints. After the Virgin Mary, the holy family and patrons of their order dominated the nomenclature of the seventeenth-century convents. The Augustinian house established at Bruges in 1629 was named the cloister of Nazareth after the town where Christ grew up. Nazareth convent accordingly had Christocentric connotations, as well as pointing to the holy family. The Poor Clares of Gravelines adopted the same name for their monastery, founded in 1609. The filiations sent from Gravelines to Rouen in 1644, and Dunkirk in 1652, maintained the emphasis of the mother house. Rouen was dedicated to Jesus, Mary and Joseph; Dunkirk was named the Convent of Bethlehem. Other cloisters were consecrated in the names of saints associated with their religious order. The Augustinian house in Louvain was St. Monica's, after the mother of St. Augustine. The initial foundation of the Franciscans at Brussels in 1621 was called St. Elizabeth's, in honour of the great Franciscan saint, Elizabeth of Hungary. Therefore, the consecration of the various convents suggests that the holy family and patron saints of particular orders were the most popular focus of devotion.

An analysis of patterns of veneration within the Ghent Benedictine cloister confirms the assumption drawn from nomenclature. After the Virgin, who was by far the most popular figure in personal piety, St. Joseph was the figure commonly cited in obituaries. The Ghent nuns' partiality towards Joseph could be attributed to the part he was believed to have played in establishing the filiation from Brussels. Magdalen Digby, one of the founders of the house, applied to him for assistance when she and her three cohorts planned the new foundation. Her obituary describes how she wholly addressed to Glorious St. Joseph telling him with a most affectionate confidence, that this affair must be wholly his trust, and with all gave him to understand, that she would not have the Least distrust in his power to accomplis it. In regard she besought this of him, in honour of his pure spouse the Immaculate Virgin; as a satisfactory work for the affliction and Grief he caus'd her at his suspition ...

The nuns believed that the saint responded to Digby's plea because the house was established soon afterwards. Abbess Mary Roper chose St. Joseph as the 'common patron, and steward' of the house 'for the advancement also and for the good progress both in perfection, and necessary temporality'. As 'provider' for the Virgin and the child Jesus, Joseph was deemed a powerful intercessor in times of need within the community.

St. Joseph's popularity in convents can be understood also in terms of his association with Mary and Christ. At a time when nuns conceptualised their

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142 'Ghent Obituary Notices', p. 73.  
143 Ibid., p. 44.
relationships with one another and the Church hierarchy within the framework of the patriarchal family, the 'holy family' was not complete without the masculine authority and support of its 'father'.\(^{144}\) In addition, by virtue of his close association with both Christ and the Virgin, Joseph was perceived as a powerful saint who could secure aid for the faithful more readily than others further removed from the centre of supernatural power. Significantly, a number of nuns who were devoted to Joseph were also attracted to the other saints who formed Christ's immediate and extended family. For example, Mary Southcote, who died in 1641, was noted for 'addicting her Self to Reverence and Serve all the Glorious Virgins particular friends, as St Joseph, St Joachim, St Ann, St John the Baptist & his holy Parents'.\(^{145}\)

The other popular saint among members of the Ghent cloister was St. Benedict. Benedict was revered by the nuns of his order for giving them the pattern by which they would attain salvation. But, more importantly, he was located within the monastic family as a paternal figure. Communities referred to him as 'our holy father', implying the authoritative role he maintained as founder and 'father' of the order. Many nuns were like the lay sister, Jane (Cecily) Price, who was 'a great lover and honourer of her glorious Patriarch St. Benet, and a most high esteemer of her holy Rule and Statutes'.\(^{146}\) Mary Digby, who died in 1641, was said to have been 'peculiarly Devout to our holy father St Benedict, highly praising even the Least particular in his rule'.\(^{147}\) In accordance with the notion of the Benedictine 'family', other saints associated with the order were incorporated in this devotion. When Mary Roper was abbess of the Ghent community, she instituted the celebration of the feast of the Benedictine saints on 13 November. Roper encouraged young nuns to pray to the order's saints 'to gett a constant & affectionate devotion to our holy father and his blessed children in heaven; that by their intercession, they might be true observers of his holy rule'.\(^{148}\) Upon her deathbed in 1657, Catherine (Alexia) Morris responded to a recitation of the litany of the saints by bowing her head at the mention of those figures to whom she was especially attracted. Benedict and Scholastica were two of her particular favourites. Another was St. Alexius, her namesake.\(^{149}\) Nuns were often devoted to the holy men and women after whom they had been named. Magdalen Digby had St. Peter, St. Benedict, St. Scholastica and St. Magdalen (i.e. Mary Magdalen) as her patrons. St. Benedict was the

\(^{144}\) See ch. 3; also Brandenbarg, 'St. Anne and her Family', pp. 120-24.

\(^{145}\) 'Ghent Obituary Notices', p. 29. Upon her deathbed in 1657, Cornelia Corham cried out to the Virgin & her family in pain: 'o my Lady, holy Mary: o Blessed St Joachim, St Ann, St Joseph, St Elizabeth, St John baptist, St Casimirus, now help me, now pray for me, o all you dear friends of our blessed Lady assist me in this extreamity'. Ibid., p. 64.

\(^{146}\) Cecily Price's obituary is incomplete in 'Ghent Obituary Notices', but Tobie Matthew used the original version when he wrote of her virtues; see Matthew, *Life of Lucy Knatchbull*, p. 195.

\(^{147}\) 'Ghent Obituary Notices', p. 31

\(^{148}\) Ibid., p. 44.

\(^{149}\) Ibid., p. 69.
obvious saint to inspire the devotion of Isabella (Benedicta) Richardson Corby, who died in 1652. Named after the founder of her religious community, Benedicta Corby revered him as both father and namesake.

Devotion to the saints in other English convents followed a pattern similar to that in the Ghent Benedictine cloister. Alice (Louisa Clare) Blundell, professed in the Gravelines Poor Clare cloister in 1665, was devoted to the holy family and the saints of the Franciscan order. In the 1692 obituary of Abbess Clare Francis Rookwood of the Poor Clare community in Dunkirk, it was said that the nun had emulated her namesake in all aspects of her life: 'she adopted in herself the name of Clare, truly imitating her glorious mother St Clare'. Indeed, another indicator of saint-related piety in religious communities is the pattern of names given to the women who entered them. Upon clothing, the novice would be given a saint's name to signify her entry into the religious family of the monastery. Like members of secular families, nuns were often given the names of their religious ancestors. In Franciscan convents Clare, Francis and Collette were most common, while Augustine and Monica appeared frequently in Augustinian communities. The Benedictines favoured Benedict, Scholastica and the names borne by other great medieval nuns and monks of the order who achieved saintly status, like St. Gertrude.

So the English nuns' attraction to specific saintly cults was predicated on the same principles as those that influenced their attraction to eucharistic devotion and mariolatry. As members of a monastic community, who had ostensibly repudiated ties with their natural kin, nuns appeared to be drawn irresistibly to familial imagery. They gravitated towards parental iconography: either comforting mothers, or patriarchal authority, or sometimes both representations. Furthermore, they couched their relationships with these saintly figures in familial terms. In doing so the English nuns did not reject outright the orientation of the Counter-Reformation Church. Instead they appropriated and adapted those images which best suited their preferences and needs as contemplative nuns in a patriarchal institution.

150 Ibid., pp. 77, 55.
151 'Poor Clare Registers', pp. 87, 77.
152 The naming of nuns was not restricted to saints of the particular monastic order. Nomenclature also reflected general devotional trends of the Counter-Reformation period, such as eucharistic piety, feasts associated with the Virgin, & cults of popular saints. Thus the Poor Clares included Mary of the Assumption Cannell, Ann of the Conception Wright, Mary of St. Joseph Cotton, Barbara Xaveria Hobert, Mary Magdalen Patterson, & Christina of the Holy Cross Morley, to name a few. Ibid., pp. 87, 60, 42, 65, 59, 71. In the Sepulchrine community at Liège, there was Anne Margaret of the Blessed Trinity Hildesley, Paula of the Passion Green & Helen Ignatius Billings. 'Sepulchrine Records', pp. 4, 2, 11. N.b. Xaveria & Ignatius were both Jesuit saints (Francis Xavier & Ignatius Loyola).
No one spiritual path dominated the monastic life of all English women. The selective nature of the English nuns' spirituality was reflected in individual nuns' and cloisters' support of particular devotional schools. Ignatian piety, Bakerism, and an eclectic combination of various trends, including the heretical Jansenism, can be found in specific convents. Although certain members of the clergy did not accept the need for individual choice when it came to contemplative prayer regimes, the nuns themselves were adamant that they had a right to follow the method which best suited their needs and ability. Indeed the spiritual arena was the one area in which it was possible for nuns to express openly their power and authority. In spite of attempts by the hierarchy to control the potentially disruptive spectre of mysticism through clerical mediation and Jesuit prayer, many nuns attained intense mystical relationships with the divine. Others were unable to achieve the height of contemplative prayer, and sought instead to channel their spirituality into their daily chores and actions. The lived experience of Catholic-Reformation spirituality in English convents will be the focus of the next chapter.
CHAPTER 7

PATHS TO SANCTITY: MORTIFICATION, PIETY & MYSTICISM

Anno Domini 1682 [Sister Ann (Seraphia of St. Winefrid) Garnons] departed this life ... [S]he was most exempler in her life, never absent from the quire night nor day, & given much to mental prayer. [S]he was Mistres of the Musick many yeares, being a perfect mrs upon the Organ, Leeravay [i.e. lyra viol] & violin, & Bas viol ... & the best workwoman that ever this Monistary had for imbrodry & Imagry work, wth all other varietyes that a nidel was capable of. [S]hee died in offis of MRS of the Novices; wch shee performed very Laudablye, & wth great zeall, shee was very strickt in holy silence, & so diligent in spending her time that shee lost no moment. [W]ee remane confident her soule went presently to an Eternall repose. R.I.P.¹

Contemplative prayer and devotion to specific feasts and holy figures formed only part of the English nuns' spirituality. This chapter focuses upon the spectrum of women's religiosity in the cloister, from prescriptions in 'rules' and 'constitutions', through day-to-day piety, to the heights of mystical contemplation. Nuns sought to subdue their wills through monasticism's strict regulation of behaviour. This programme of 'mortification', outlined at length in 'rules' and advice books, was more flexible than its censorious treatment of the slightest human frailty suggests. First and foremost, 'mortification' trained novices in the basic precepts of monastic asceticism and obedience. More importantly, it provided nuns with the tools necessary to inject religious meaning into every aspect of their daily lives. Ultimately, certain women were able to use the techniques of 'mortification' to attain the pinnacle of spiritual activity: mysticism. Yet no matter what the outcome, the regime provided a framework within which nuns could construct models of sanctity. As the obituary of Ann Garnons (above) suggests, sanctity in the English cloisters encompassed a broad range of activities from success in prayer to competent conduct of offices.

The source material pertaining to the impact of 'mortification' on nuns' lives is rich. 'Rules' and 'constitutions', combined with a plethora of conduct manuals and religious treatises, provide evidence of the behavioural framework within which nuns conducted their lives. Obviously these sources are prescriptive and on their own are not sufficient to ascertain whether religious women adhered to ascetic principles. Furthermore, the documents were all products of Church authorities and, as such, bespeak clerical regulation and control of women. However, such sources are supplemented with a wealth of material generated by the nuns which pertained to their own and their sisters' spirituality. A community's devotional life legitimated its existence as a religious institution, so the spiritual experiences of nuns were carefully

collected. Diaries, letters, treatises on prayer and obituaries attest to the application of
'mortification' in individual and communal life. Written for members of their own
convent and for friends in the world beyond the cloister, these documents articulate the
English nuns' understanding of their vocation as contemplatives in the Catholic-
Reformation Church.\(^2\)

Like vocations, government, and work, the pursuit of spiritual perfection also
revealed the extent to which worldly values intruded into the cloister. The ascetic
ideology which underpinned 'mortification' was gendered in women's houses, for
monastic prescriptive literature often conflated the ideal nun with the archetypal good
woman of secular society. The practice of piety indicates how nuns who obediently
performed their household chores with a modest demeanour could become exemplars.
Yet even nuns who fashioned successful spiritual lives through meditation were not
immune from worldly pressures and influences. For example, mystics could not escape
the terrestrial sphere to commune solely with heavenly bodies because sanctity conferred
high household office on such nuns. Furthermore, the language of mysticism shows
that many nuns constructed their relationship with the divine according to family
experiences in the world. The tension between monastic ideology and secular values will
run through each section. First I will outline the process by which nuns sought to
reshape their lives within the enclosure. The second and third sections evaluate the
application of 'mortification' in the practice of piety and mysticism.

I. 'Mortification': Constructing the Ideal Nun

Seventeenth-century people lived in a structured and public cultural environment where
everything individuals did, from what they wore to whom they married, was determined
by family standing, social status and political ideology. This was especially true when it
came to gender roles. Early modern society had clearly defined notions of what
constituted masculine and feminine behaviour. Men and women were expected to act
according to their prescribed gender roles, those who did not subscribe to them were

\(^2\) For evidence regarding the cloisters' publication of certain sisters' lives, see the death notice for Jane
(Cecily) Price in 'Obituary Notices of the Nuns of the English Benedictine Abbey of Ghent, 1627-1811',
comes to an abrupt conclusion with the words, 'The latter part of this Holy Religious woman's life was
unluckily lost by some seculars who for their edification Desir'd the reading of it'. Much of the missing
material is in Tobie Matthew's account of Price in his biography of Lucy Knatchbull. See Sir Tobie
For a discussion of the intention & dissemination of nuns' biographical material in the 15th century, see
Wybren Scheepsma, "'For Hereby I Hope to Rouse Some to Piety': Books of Sisters From Convents and
Sister-Houses Associated with the *Devotio Moderna* in the Low Countries", in Lesley Smith & Jane
considered socially and politically dangerous.³ The most obvious example of this system in operation is the Catholic Church's definition of what constituted acceptable female religious activity. Nuns, like Mary Ward who rejected contemplation within an enclosure in favour of an apostolic life in the world, were castigated by the ecclesiastical authorities, and were ridiculed by the clergy and laity alike, earning the uncomplimentary label of 'galloping girls'.⁴

Conduct manuals described the qualities sought in the 'good woman'. Published biographies, funeral sermons and obituaries attested to the successes of those women who dutifully pursued their roles as daughters, wives, mothers or nuns. In accordance with the model advocated in prescriptive literature, the greatest compliment that a woman could receive posthumously was that she had led a virtuous life. Virtue entailed several demanding character traits, of which chastity, modesty, humility, charity, obedience and patience were the principal features.⁵ Although geographic and confessional variations skewed the focus of womanly perfection towards slightly different attributes, there was surprising unanimity of opinion among Catholic and Protestant commentators.⁶ Describing Renaissance advice regarding suitable female behaviour, Margaret King concluded that the 'injunctions of preachers and humanists alike restricted woman to the home, to silence, to plainness; they required a total flattening of her expressive will, her body, her voice, her ornament'.⁷

Nuns were subjected to even more rigorous programmes of self-denial than their secular sisters. In monasteries, 'mortification' provided a blue-print for socialising women into the gender roles expected of them by the Church and society at large. Its purpose was to instil the qualities of humility, modesty, charity and obedience into the nun through a strict routine of self-denial. Yet, in spite of its apparent social agenda, the process was directed towards a spiritual goal. Intensive periods of prayer, fasting,

⁴ PRO, SP Flanders: 77/8, f. 418; M. Emmanuel Orchard, Till God Will. Mary Ward Through Her Writings, London, 1985, p. 50.
chastisement of the flesh, and public humiliation enabled the nun to 'die to the world' so that she could access the divine unhindered by worldly matters. Phyllis Mack described a similar process followed by Quakers as the attempt to dissolve the habits, passions, gestures, and little secret sins that made them who they were; to expose themselves as creatures without status, without intelligence, without gender; to become blank.\(^8\)

Belief in the soul as something distinct from the flesh meant that early modern Christians strove to transcend the cultural norms which defined their place within society. In other words, spiritual activity was the one area by which women could legitimately override constrictions of gender and fashion meaningful lives for themselves. For contemplative nuns, 'mortification' became the tool for carving saintly lives.

This section focuses on the construction of 'mortification' in early modern English convents. I will look at the principles it aimed to instil in novices and young nuns, and at how the women internalised and redefined various elements of the regime. The primary goal of the process was to construct the ideal nun, but in reality there was no such woman. Women either found it difficult or impossible to adopt all aspects of the programme, and this paved the way for a diverse range of responses. Nuns' choice of specific elements from the prescribed schedule provides evidence of how they defined spirituality and piety, and the virtues they deemed important.

Monastic 'constitutions' ascertained the goals of 'mortification', and outlined the regime itself. The Statutes of the Benedictine community at Brussels, confirmed by the archbishop of Mechelen in 1612, opened with chapters on piety, poverty, chastity, obedience, enclosure and silence.\(^9\) Published in combination with the Rule of St. Benedict, the Statutes delineated the desirable traits of the perfect nun in practical terms. In the Rule, the imposition of these traits was justified by making it clear that all these qualities were directed towards one end - humility. Anyone who could place her will under the authority of superiors, demonstrated conformity to the divine will and thus the humility to forsake her own inclinations and aspirations. Based upon the principle that those who were humble would be exalted in the afterlife, the Rule described the path to perfect humility in terms of Jacob's Ladder. Linking heaven and earth, the ladder was a metaphor for life; the nun's soul and body were the sides of the ladder, along which various degrees of humility represented the rungs by which the faithful could ascend to

\(^8\) Mack, *Visionary Women*, p. 7.
\(^9\) Statutes Compiled for the Better Observation of the Holy Rule of the Most Glorious Father and Patriarch S. Benedict ... delivered to the Religious Woemen of ... Bruxelles and to all their Successours, Alexia Grey (trans.), Ghent, 1632, [ERL, 278], (hereafter *Brussels Benedictine Statutes*), Part 1, pp. 3-30.
Each of the twelve rungs, or degrees, of humility encompassed the other virtues deemed essential in a truly religious person. Chastity, obedience, patience, resignation, self-abnegation, silence and modesty were all components of the humbling experience which if pursued would culminate in the crowning glory of true virtue - charity. Nuns who possessed charity signified their successful progress up the ladder because their behaviour demonstrated that they had humbled themselves sufficiently to place others' desires and needs before their own.11

There is clear evidence that most Benedictine nuns internalised this model presented in their Rule and set out in their Statutes. The obituary notices of the Ghent community consistently list humility and charity as admirable qualities in the death notices of nuns from all ranks. Of the thirty-three professed members of the community, twenty-one were noted for their humility, and fifteen were acknowledged for charitable behaviour.12 Those nuns who were not specifically credited with these primary virtues were praised for characteristics which were encompassed by humility and charity. Modesty, obedience, silence and poverty were all listed in the obituaries on a regular basis. The breakdown of characteristics among the various ranks of nun was also consistent in the obituaries, with similar virtues applauded in lay and choir nuns alike. For example, the most remarkable virtues of Abbess Mary Roper, who died at Ghent in 1650, were said to have been 'Prudence, Modesty, Zeal, Gravity, recollection, silence, Devotion and Charity to all, especially to the poor'.13 The lay sister Jane (Cecily) Price, who died in 1630, was remembered for her 'Humility, poverty, Great Zeal and self contempt'.14

Obedience ranked particularly highly on the table of important virtues. In the Rule of St. Benedict, it was stated that 'Obedience without delay is the first degree of humilitie'.15 Thus, one of the principal duties of the nun was to display prompt obedience to all superiors, whether abbess, male superiors, household officers or more senior sisters. Dorothy (Bridget) Dorvolie Gildrige (hereafter Bridget Gildrige), who became a Benedictine nun at Ghent after many years of marriage and widowhood, was applauded in her obituary for excelling in this virtue so late in her life. It was said that she 'submitted her neck to the Yoake of holy obedience, in which vertue to her dying Day she excell'd in, her superiour saying of her (as a high praise) after her Death that she

11 Ibid., pp. 31-40.
12 'Ghent Obituary Notices', pp. 3-80. Tobie Matthew included charity among the qualities of 3 further nuns in his sketches of the Ghent community. See Matthew, Life of Lucy Knatchbull, pp. 187, 192, 199.
13 'Ghent Obituary Notices', p. 43.
14 Ibid., p. 13.
15 St. Benedict, Rule, p. 27.
was as submis and tractable as a child in every occasion'.

Mary Trevelyan, who died in 1634, was said to have followed every rule and regulation set by her superiors to the letter. It was forbidden to pass through the dormitory during periods of silence or at prayer times. Despite the fact that her duties often required her to visit rooms beyond this area, she steadfastly refused to infringe the regulation, choosing instead to take the much longer route through the kitchen.

Firm adherence to orders could be extended to obedience to the 'rule' itself. Richard White, the confessor of St. Monica's, told Prioress Winefrid Thimbleby that in order to receive the obedience of her nuns she had to ensure that the 'rule' and 'statutes' of the house were followed assiduously. This meant that all members of the community had to study them carefully. In the 'Constitutions' of St. Monica's, it was stated that the 'Rule' had to be read once a year to the whole community, and those sisters who could read were required to peruse it in private every twelve months. The preface to the 'Rule' of the 'Blue Nuns' advised that because the statutes were necessary to preserve 'peace quiet, & good order in Religion' and, as they were necessary for the successful pursuit of religious perfection, they should be read in the refectory every three months to allow the nuns to engrave them upon their memories. A number of nuns took such advice to heart. Elizabeth Bradbury of the Ghent Benedictine community was noted for her 'high esteem of Religion, and of every Rule and constitution'. Likewise, Catherine (Teresa) Matlock was credited upon her death in 1650 with 'having the Rule in perfection'. Margaret (Alexia) Grey of the same house esteemed the Rule so highly that she undertook to translate it and the Statutes into English so that 'none might be ignorant of the excellent perfections Contain'd in this rule of ruls'. The extent to which obedience could become an all-encompassing virtue, like humility and charity, when applied to the official regulations of the Order and community, can be seen in the obituary of Mary Mounson, who passed away in 1658:

In a word her life was a rule of vertue, exactly observing our holy rule both in exercising the instruments of Good works and 12 degrees of humility included therein, punctuall in the Chapters of silence never detracting or speaking a miss of any.

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16 'Ghent Obituary Notices', p. 41.
17 Ibid., p. 17.
18 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS Qu 2, [Richard White (alias Johnson)], 'Instructions for a Religious Superior : Penned & presented to the Rd Mother N:N: upon the day she was installed Prioress of St Monica's in Louvaine', 1668, f. 17.
19 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS E 4, Constitutions, 1609, f. 3. The prioress of the house was expected to know the 'constitutions' of the house by heart; see ibid., f. 4.
22 Ibid., p. 50.
24 Ibid., p. 71.
Training nuns in obedience and humility was one of the primary tasks of the novice mistress. During the Augustinian clothing ceremony a prospective novice was warned about the strictness of the life she was about to undertake, and what difficulties and temptations that she must expect to suffer and to pass through in a religious life, in the overcoming of her owne will, and judgment, & in giving her to the practise of Obedience.25

In the novitiate the novice was provided with ample opportunity to practise humility and obedience. Under the guidance of the novice mistress she laboured to overcome worldly manners and unacceptable behaviour through a regime of penance, confession and physical chastisement. In an effort to break her will, she was advised to undertake willingly whatever task was allotted her, no matter how menial or humiliating.26 The 'Constitutions' of the 'Blue Nuns' outlined the 'work of humility' which involved mundane chores, like sweeping and washing dishes, and was directed towards humbling the novice.27 The success of this technique can be evaluated by the extent to which some nuns equated humble housework with the virtues of obedience and humility. In every community there were members who achieved prominence for embracing the lowliest duties with great joy and fervour. In the obituary of Margaret (Teresa Joseph) Osbaldeston of the Poor Clares in Gravelines, the nun was praised for giving her religious sisters 'great examples of humility, ever Embracing the most abject, & Laborious Employments, [and] was remarkable for her Respect and Obedience to Sup.rs.28 Mary Welch of St. Monica's was noted for her 'very hasty and choleric nature' which she made every effort to bridle. When she died in 1624 it was noted that she had always been very humble, undertaking laborious tasks such as sweeping and washing.29 Welch clearly recalled her training in the novitiate throughout her life and used the mortifying techniques prescribed for novices to overcome her volatile temper. For those women whose vocation centred upon physical toil, the emphasis on humility was even more poignant.

25 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS E 4, f. 60.
26 Ibid., f. 63.
27 Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', pp. 297-98.
29 Dom. Adam Hamilton, The Chronicle of the English Augustinian Canoneses Regular of the Lateran, at St. Monica's in Louvain (now at St. Augustine's Priory, Newton Abbot, Devon) 1548-1644, London, 1904, (hereafter Chronicle of St. Monica's), vol. 1, pp. 260-61. Mary Welch had been professed at St. Ursula's in 1599. Nuns in other cloisters used similar techniques to overcome their shortcomings, e.g., Joanna Widowfield, a lay sister in the Pontoise Benedictine community (prof. in 1686 & died. in 1709), sought to curb her violent temper by physically chastising her flesh. See 'Pontoise Registers', pp. 324-25.
Lay sisters were required to perform the lowliest tasks as a matter of course, so those who excelled in the virtue of humility often went to extreme lengths in order to achieve acclaim. Elizabeth (Martha Alexious) Unsworth of the Poor Clares at Gravelines faithfully undertook all the humble jobs associated with her vocation. She was so devoted to her apostolate that she was always 'ready to load herself, whom she call'd the Ass of the Convent with each one's burdens of Laborious works'.

Catherine Curtis of St. Monica's took her duties so seriously that upon her death in 1675 at the age of 46, it was thought that 'indiscreet labour', coupled with other ascetic practices, had shortened her life. Similarly the Pontoise Benedictines noted that the lay sister, Dorothy Walton, who died in 1711, 'seem'd Cruell to her Self by charging her Little proportion'd body with more austerity and Labor than it was able to suport'. For Dorothy Barefoot of the Ghent Benedictine house, the menial tasks which constituted her vocation were not humiliating enough. Three years after her profession, she begged to be treated like a novice in order to exercise greater humility. Her superiors acceded to her plea and she subsequently wore a novice's veil and was subject to a junior sister for six months.

As the example of Dorothy Barefoot shows, the process of 'mortification' did not end with the novice proceeding to her final vows. Throughout her years of profession the nun was expected to continue the punishing physical and mental regime in both communal and private forums. There were formal instances, such as the chapter of faults, and the weekly communal discipline and fasts. There was also provision for individuals to carry out their own supplementary regime (with the approval of the abbess and confessor). In the chapter of faults which generally took place once a week, nuns were invited to confess their shortcomings to their religious sisters and then accept whatever punishment was meted out by the abbess. Transgressions varied, but the nuns were encouraged to chastise themselves for the slightest omission. For example, in the 'Constitutions' of the 'Blue Nuns', those who were absent from the divine offices of matins or vespers without prior permission had to 'during the time of the following meal say five Pater's, & five Ave's, with their arms either a Cross, or extended in the form of a Cross, and eat their portions upon the Earth'. For more serious misdemeanours, such as imparting negative gossip about the community to someone at the grate, the guilty nun could be forced to take extra discipline and to fast upon bread and water. The weekly communal 'discipline' was aimed at chastising the flesh through physical

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30 'Poor Clare Registers', p. 80.
31 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS C 2, Chronicle: vol. 1, 1548-1837, [addendum, f. 2].
32 'Pontoise Registers', p. 321. Walton had been professed in 1671. Choir nuns also embraced 'mortification', although it often took the form of excessive devotion to religious offices. See ibid., p. 285; 'Poor Clare Registers', p. 119.
33 'Ghent Obituary Notices', p. 19.
34 Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', p. 294.
35 Ibid. For other e.g.s, see Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS E 4, ff. 69-72.
pain. Sir Philip Skippon noted the practice of the Poor Clares at Dunkirk when he visited them in 1663, saying 'They wear a cord around their waist with which they discipline themselves'. The 'Blue Nuns' engaged in this activity for the space of a *Miserere* followed by a versicle and prayer.

Private penitential regimes were often more punishing physically than the weekly communal flagellation. Although individuals were expected to obtain permission from their abbess/prioress and the confessor for extra austerities, some women clearly progressed beyond the permitted discipline. Susan Brooke of St. Monica's in Louvain constantly sought extra penances to mortify her flesh and spirit. Physical tortures, such as hanging from the rail of her bed for the space of five *Paters* and five *Aves*, ultimately took their toll. Upon her death in 1658, Brooke's sisters conceded that the exacting punishments she had constantly inflicted upon her body had led to the loss of her beautiful singing voice, and probably to the heart tremor which ultimately killed her. Lucy Knatchbull of Ghent practised 'exceeding austerities' on herself, 'thrice a week wearing Iron Chains, Hair Girdles Disciplin and the like Standing in a tub of Cold Water'. Margaret (Mary Ignatia) Corham Coningsby of the same cloister (hereafter Margaret Coningsby) was said to have always been 'crucifying herself upon one cross or other'. In prayer she would contort her body to maximise the pain of kneeling, adding to the discomfort by squeezing blunt iron nails into her palms. The compiler of her obituary declared that for Coningsby prayer and mortification were 'the very meat and drink that feed her happy soul'.

Spiritual sustenance could also be gained through communal and personal fasting. All religious houses exercised days of additional fasting to those prescribed by the Church. The times and severity of abstinence varied from one religious order to the other, but the detailed instructions in 'constitutions' point to the importance of the common fasts in monastic life. At St. Monica's, nuns regularly fasted upon one day of the week, but additional restrictions concerning the consumption of meat applied to a

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37 *Diary of the 'Blue Nuns*', p. 295. For the Franciscan & Augustinian practices, see Poor Clare Convent, Franciscan MS 6b, Statutes and Constitutions, 1641, f. 29; Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS E 4, f. 75.


39 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS C 2, ff. 596-97. Elizabeth Dumford of the same house was noted for using 'cruel disciplines with pins'; see *Chronicle of St. Monica's*, vol. 1, p. 164; Cornelia Corham of Ghent (died in 1657), practised 'bloody disciplines' in the privacy of her own cell. Similarly, Cecily Price was 'mortife'd (by the rigour of austerities, fasting, chain bracelets hair cloath and the like)'. See *Ghent Obituary Notices*, pp. 63, 14.

40 Ibid., p. 10.

41 Ibid., pp. 65-66.
large number of feasts and liturgical seasons. Individuals were permitted to undertake further deprivations with the permission of their superior. Obituaries suggest that fasting was central in some nuns regimes of 'mortification'. For example, 'Blue Nun' lay sister, Fides (Fides Beatrice) Smith, was praised in her 1694 obituary for having excelled in the 'mortification of her appetit'. Likewise, Xaveria Stanley of the Bruges Augustinians constantly mortified her body through an inadequate diet. Stanley ate only scraps of food, pretending that they nourished her sufficiently. Margaret (Winefrid) Blundell of the Louvain Augustinians was overstrict with herself, scrupling that she ate too much. The chronicler noted that within the cloister Blundell's tiny appetite was attributed to her small size when, in reality, her skinny frame and constant illnesses were a consequence of the 'vertue'.

Abstaining from food had always played a prominent role in Christian piety. Stories about the early desert fathers offered the faithful examples of extreme food asceticism, coupled with excessive reverence of the eucharist. Originally fasting was based upon a pretext that equated consumption of meat and wine with gluttony which it was assumed would inevitably lead to sexual lust. By the high middle ages, fasting and eucharistic devotion were deemed indicators of holiness, especially in the lives of women. Rudolph Bell interpreted the food asceticism of women in terms of their need for control of their own body and desires. He has claimed that 'to obliterate every human feeling of pain, fatigue, sexual desire, and hunger is to be master of oneself'. However, in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, Caroline Bynum has argued that during the middle ages eating and not eating evolved to take on new meanings which extended well beyond control of bodily urges. In the lives of medieval holy women food was a polysemous symbol of suffering and fertility which lay at the core of their piety.

In the previous chapter, I suggested that the English nuns were drawn towards devotions, such as the eucharist, the passion, and the sorrowing Virgin because they identified with the suffering of the human Christ and Mary. Nuns who humbly submitted to the will of superiors, fasting and inflicting physical punishment upon their bodies, were imitating the hardships endured by Christ. For example, Abbess Elizabeth (Catherine) Wigmore of the Boulogne Benedictine foundation was particularly devoted to

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42 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS E 4, f. 25. Similar regimes were advised in other 'constitutions'. See Brussels Benedictine Statutes, Part 1, pp. 30-33; St. Augustine, Rule with the Constitutions of Our B. Ladies of Sion in Paris, pp. 304-6.
43 Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', p. 255.
45 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS C 2, f. 505. Blundell was professed in 1615 & died in 1647. Other e.g.s: Chronicle of St. Monica's, vol. 1, pp. 163-64, vol. 2, pp. 15, 44-45, 106-7; Durrant, Flemish Mystics, p. 259; 'Pontoise Registers', pp. 300-1; 'Poor Clare Registers', pp. 86-7, 92, 93.
the eucharist. Her sisters noted that on occasions she seemed to enter a mystical trance upon witnessing the elevation of the host during mass. Yet the abbess used many of the techniques of 'mortification' to identify more closely with the suffering of Christ. She was renowned for embracing humble chores, such as sweeping and washing the dishes, as acts of self-effacement. However, upon feasts associated with the eucharist, Wigmore used humiliating manual labour to chastise her flesh. In her obituary, the nuns reported that

always against the feast of Corpus Christi, she would steal the performance of some extrem labourious and abject imployment, having been sometimes seen (though against her will) all inflamed with heat coming out of the Hogstie or Cowhouse, where she had been making those places clean with a Great ... fork & a broom [and] frequently washing and sweeping other little places.

The obituary equated Wigmore's efforts to mortify her flesh and spirit with her intense spiritual relationship with God. The abbess used hard physical labour as a living embodiment of her devotion to the passion of Christ. Thus, the very regime designed to subjugate the will into unquestioning obedience could be appropriated by nuns, like Abbess Wigmore, who were liberated by their understanding of 'mortification' as the key to all spiritual activity. 'Mortification' could be applied to make every aspect of nuns' daily existence into a form of religious devotion. The practice of piety provides the focus for the next section.

II. 'Contemplative in Action': the Pursuit of Piety

The imposition of strict enclosure upon women religious by the Council of Trent has been viewed as a severe limitation on their apostolate. At a time when the Society of Jesus was inspiring missionary work in all corners of the known world, women were confined to contemplation behind convent walls. However, nuns found that the Jesuit maxim of 'contemplative in action' was not restricted to the apostolic vocation of proselytising the heretic and heathen. Like much of Ignatius Loyola's spirituality, 'contemplative in action' could be pursued just as effectively within the environs of the

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49 'Ghent Obituary Notices', p. 60.

cloister. Using the techniques and goals of 'mortification', the English nuns promoted piety as a vital element of their spirituality.

In this respect they were adhering to traditions already established by medieval saints. Caroline Bynum has argued that the piety of medieval women united action and contemplation in both intention and nature. Questioning the conclusions of Weinstein and Bell, who suggested that northern European female saints were more frequently mystical nuns, while southern women were typically tertiaries engaged in charitable works, Bynum found that nuns and beguines in north and south often combined mystical activity with good works in the community:

And the more I study the lives of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century women, the more I find that, in the women's own self-understanding, there is in general no contrast between action in the world and contemplation (or discipline) that flees the world.51

I will discuss the experience of mysticism in the next section; here I want to make the point that in the seventeenth-century English cloisters, piety was defined in such broad terms that every action was accorded religious significance. A nun could be considered pious by others in the cloister without having achieved close communion with the Lord through prayer. Thus, alongside women like the Poor Clare, Ann (Ann Didacus) Clark, who died at Gravelines in 1664, and was praised for her 'assiduous Application to Holy Pray' and Zeal for Religious Observances', were nuns such as Frances (Frances Collette) Gerard who passed away in 1661 after a life of rendering 'singular Service to holy Religion, by her humble & faithful Labours'.52 In effect, piety encompassed the successful application of the principles of 'mortification' in every aspect of daily life. The pious nun injected religious significance into the most mundane of domestic chores, and transformed all the actions of her waking hours into acts of devotion.

Like the process of 'mortification', piety operated at two levels in the convent. Formal elements, which were to be followed by all members of the community, were identified in 'rules' and 'constitutions'. However, there was also tremendous scope for cloisters and individuals to construct their own meanings of what constituted piety. In this section, I will outline some of the pious regimes detailed in the prescriptive literature. Then I will describe the ways in which the religious women themselves conceptualised and practised 'contemplative in action'.

In 'rules' and 'constitutions' the boundaries between temporal and spiritual affairs in the monastery were blurred. For example, the seemingly banal actions of dressing,

52 'Poor Clare Registers', pp. 45-6, 69-70.
eating, and working could be awarded spiritual standing if prefaced and concluded with a prayer, and conducted in a devout manner. Putting on one's clothes was translated into a devotional act through the recitation of certain invocations. A Franciscan ceremonial manual of 1648 described the order in which nuns were to put on their clothes, offering a pious aspiration for every stage. While tying the cord around their waists, the nuns were told to say, 'Garde me o lord with the girdle of fortitude that manfully I may persevere in thy service'. The scapular was invoked as a reminder of Christ's passion. Washing symbolised the cleansing of all sin from their souls. Protection against the deceits of the devil was sought when placing the kerchief on their heads. The veil was to be regarded as a sign of their complete separation from the world and its affairs to become committed spouses of Christ. Finally, the nuns' cloaks marked their physical separation from the world and their union with the Lord. In drawing the cloak around their shoulders each was to say, 'Our Lord cover me with the cloake of puritye and chastitye that no lover but Jesus I may admitt Amen'.

Likewise, partaking of daily bodily sustenance took on a religious character. In each house there was a rigid procedure to be observed in the refectory. Nuns were seated according to their rank in the community, and were served their meals in order of seniority. Dining commenced and ended with prayer, and during the meal one nun read aloud a devotional treatise to focus the attention of all diners on the Lord, and guard against idle chatter. Finally, even the menu and number of meals varied according to the liturgical calendar of feasts and fasts. The ritual of the refectory reveals the extent to which piety could permeate every nun's life. The sisters were reminded of their place in the convent hierarchy, and the fact that even the simplest bodily need was governed according to the religious season. It was possible too for individuals to practise self-denial by refusing to eat their portion; or, like Catherine Frances Fox of the Gravelines Poor Clares, by picking at the left-overs. However, the conduct of monastic offices and manual labour provided the greatest scope for 'contemplative in action'.

Household work was essential for the material benefit of the congregation and, apart from periods of formal prayer, it occupied much of the monastery's waking hours. Convent business had the potential to avert nuns' eyes and minds from matters heavenly to earthly distractions because it often entailed interaction with the world beyond the

53 Poor Clare Convent, Franciscan MS (Statutes and Constitutions 1641), 'Generall Cerimonies to be observed throughout the whole yeare unless it be otherwise appointed for speciall feasts', ff. 55-56. In the archives, this ms is listed as the 2nd copy of the 2nd revision of the 1641 statutes. However, by comparing it with the 1738 ceremonial manuscript, I identified it as the 1648 book of ceremonies. I will hereafter refer to it as: Poor Clare Convent, Franciscan MS 'Generall Cerimonies'.

54 For procedures in different houses, see Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS E 4, ff. 22-26; Poor Clare Convent, Franciscan MS 'Generall Cerimonies', ff. [46-47], Stanbrook MS 'Constitutions compiled for the better observation of the holie Rule of our most glorious Fa: and Patriarch S. Bennet', 1631, ff. 34-40; Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', pp. 287, 315; St. Benedict, Rule, pp. 44-64.

55 'Poor Clare Registers', p. 92.
enclosure. In addition, the communal performance of work, like spinning, needlework and washing, provided scope for socialising. For this reason, the prescriptive literature advised a tightly structured environment for the conduct of work. The 'Blue Nuns' were reminded in their 'Constitutions' that they should 'employ the time of work faithfully, profitably, and for the good of the Community, and not lose their time in frivolous Trifling, but carefully perform whatever the Mistress of the Manual works shall appoint'. In order to assist the nuns to turn their minds to the purpose at hand, each work session commenced with the recitation of the Veni Creator by those present, and during the first quarter of an hour someone would read to them a 'pious Lecture'. At the end of the session in the work room, proceedings would close with a Te Deum. Apart from formally allotted prayers and reading, the Franciscan nuns were admonished to maintain silence while they worked, unless permitted recreation when they could discourse modestly with one another. The Liège Sepulchrines were permitted to speak softly during their afternoon session in the workroom. However, to avoid boredom which might lead to idle gossip, the canonesses were advised to listen to a pious reading or sing a 'devout motetto' together as they worked.

Even workers in the kitchens, laundry and infirmary were exhorted to pray while they conducted their chores. In a ceremonial manual, the Franciscans were given detailed instructions regarding the best way to conduct their housework. The fiftieth chapter was devoted to the arduous task of washing the dishes of the entire community. While cleaning the crockery, the nuns were advised to recite a Miserere and a de Profundis. Although it was the place of the youngest sister present to undertake the distasteful duty of scrubbing the pots, the others were exhorted to assist her charitably. At the conclusion of every week, the dish-washers were reminded to kneel bare-headed together and beg forgiveness of each other's faults. In this way manual labour was ritualised in the same way as dressing, eating and needlework.

Annals do not record the actual performance of mundane everyday tasks, but it is likely that convents followed these formal injunctions to contain all domestic activities within devotional parameters. Obituaries sometimes reveal glimpses of particular nuns adhering to the devotional principles outlined in 'constitutions' while going about their daily business. To guard against idle chatter while tending to temporal affairs, Abbess Mary Roper of the Ghent Benedictines would murmur a de Profundis for the souls of the

56 Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', p. 296.
57 Poor Clare Convent, Franciscan MS 6b, ff. 39-41. The Cambrai Benedictines & Paris Augustinians were given similar instructions for their work periods. See Stanbrook Abbey, Cambrai MS 'Constitutions', ff. 46-47; St. Augustine, Rule with the Constitutions of Our B. Ladies of Sion in Paris, pp. 279-83.
59 Poor Clare Convent, Franciscan MS 'Generall Cerimonies', f. 47.
faithful departed as she passed through the monastic buildings. Gildrige of the same community memorised part of her morning meditation and recited it during the afternoon work session. Gildrige also exemplified the exhortation to spend time profitably for the good of the monastery. Although blind she would never allow herself to sit idle, 'knowing it to be an enemy to the soule'. Instead she learned to knit in her old age and occupied her hours in that 'humble work in Doing charitie' for the other nuns. The retired prioress, Margaret Clement of St. Monica's, could not abide idleness, and although blind, she would spend most of her day in the chapel meditating, and the rest of the time 'she did some little work only by feeling, such as winding of thread or suchlike thing'.

The satisfactory performance of all spiritual and temporal duties was often noted as a religious virtue. Frances (Frances Clare) Massey of the Franciscans at Nieuport, who died aged thirty in 1654, was praised for her constant devotion and contribution to the divine office. Angela Riddell of the Pontoise Benedictines received the ultimate accolade for her singular regard for the choir. In her 1709 obituary, Riddell was held up to the other nuns as a 'mirror of Religious perfection, for all actions the most ordinary apear'd extraordinary in her by her fidelity and zeal being as exact as the Bell that cal'd her'. Catherine (Dorothy) Carey of the Ghent Benedictines, who died in 1653, presented a good example of the nun who 'addicted herself to piety and Zeal of her state & being very expert both at her needle & pen she did very much service by a singular industry both to God & the community'. The obituary of Abbess Elizabeth (Elizabeth Mary) Walton of the Franciscans recorded that she had been a talented musician and skilled with her pen, as well as conducting the temporal concerns of the house in a capable fashion. Martina Decken, a lay sister with the Ghent Benedictines, was commended for the zeal with which she approached her secular labours. Employed in the external affairs of the house, which included buying provisions and dealing with tradespeople, she would also assist those sisters who were in charge of the physically demanding jobs, such as washing, scouring and cleaning out buildings. Such tasks were not strictly her concern, but she considered it her duty out of charity to the other sisters.

Certain nuns were said to have transformed their work into a kind of religious observance that incited others to devotion. Elizabeth Bradbury of Ghent was esteemed

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60 'Ghent Obituary Notices', pp. 43-6.
61 Ibid., p. 41. Gildrige was professed in 1640 aged 60 years, & died in 1647.
62 Chronicle of St. Monica's, vol. 1, p. 73.
63 English Franciscan Nuns, pp. 185-86. For further e.g.s, see ibid., pp. 181, 184, 185, 186, 199, 200.
64 'Pontoise Registers', pp. 284, 290.
65 'Ghent Obituary Notices', p. 56. See also 'Poor Clare Registers', p. 113; 'Pontoise Registers', p. 307.
66 English Franciscan Nuns, p. 191. Walton was professed in 1635 & died in 1676.
67 'Ghent Obituary Notices', pp. 57-58.
for her admirable work as grate sister and sacristine. Bradbury disliked her duties at the grate which involved interaction with the outside world, but her quiet and efficient manner so impressed the lay people with whom she dealt that she was deemed a saint by them.68 In addition, Bradbury's work in the chapel was praised by the nuns:

She order'd all things with Exquisite nateness, concerning her office of sacristine and such pritty and curious works for the sepulcher in tenebre times accommodating the Alter and all pertaining to the church, so clean, Desent and handsome, that it moved to Devotion.69

Through the meticulous performance of her offices a nun like Elizabeth Bradbury could therefore obtain a reputation for sanctity. The manner in which Bradbury applied herself to her business in the chapel not only earned her praise, it went so far as to move her religious sisters to devotion. Careful performance of monastic housework not only ensured success in the daily temporal functioning of the cloister. The nun who excelled at her daily chores was working towards her personal salvation and very often that of her sisters also.

Nowhere was the identification of work with sanctity so crucial as it was for those women who had entered religious life with physical, rather than spiritual, labour as their main vocation. Lay sisters, who entered with little or no dowry on the understanding that they would earn their keep by the fruits of their labour, held an ambiguous status within monastic life. While they were required to make exactly the same vows and live under the same 'rule' as the choir nuns, they were reminded that 'they are taken into Religion to assist the Quire-Sisters by their work'.70 Ascribing religious meaning to all their duties was a vital aspect of their devotion. Scholastica Higginson of the Pontoise Benedictine cloister was applauded for 'having a marvelous art att mingling Martha & Mary together' in her daily duties.71 Likewise, Gravelines' Poor Clare, Helen Bernard Lasley, was remembered for 'her diligent employing each moment ... in the service of holy Religion, perseverantly joining prayer with Labour, & never making a reply to what was required of her'.72

The link between manual labour and devotion was discovered by Dorothy Skrimshaw who was professed in the Ghent cloister in 1642. Skrimshaw was addicted to prayer and, prior to entering the religious life, had imagined that nuns did little other than pray. She joined the convent as a lay sister and was horrified to discover the tasks this vocation required of her. However, she persevered with her duties, stealing as much

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68 Ibid., p. 15.
69 Ibid. Tenebrae was the ritual of successively extinguishing the candles during matins and lauds upon the last 3 days of holy week.
70 Diary of the 'Blue Nuns', p. 296.
71 'Pontoise Registers', p. 320. See also English Franciscan Nuns, p. 201.
72 'Poor Clare Registers', p. 103.
time as possible from work to spend in the chapel. The reluctant lay sister continued in the same way for three years until she underwent the Spiritual Exercises. During this time of retreat she realised that 'it was an error not to find God and his holy will in every thing ordain'd by superiours' and repented her former behaviour. Suddenly she transformed herself from a sister unwilling to engage in any manual labour that might limit her hours of prayer, to one for whom work had become the principal form of devotion. Skrimshaw's complete and utter commitment to her humble duties was held up to the rest of the nuns as an edifying example of monastic obedience. Skrimshaw's story reveals the combined impact of Jesuit spirituality and 'mortification' in the cloister. Almost any act which was performed in the right spirit could constitute devotion within the framework provided by piety.

Identification of the holy in secular affairs was vital too for those who lacked the ability to pray. Choir nuns who found it difficult to meditate, and those who were suffering periods of spiritual desolation, needed some other means by which to achieve spiritual fulfilment. Obituaries and nuns' devotional writings reveal a recognition in the cloisters that not all sisters were able to attain the high levels of spiritual communion with the Lord with which others were blessed. Acceptance of differing capacities for religious expression and satisfaction led nuns to identify piety as a vital indicator of religiosity. For example, Margaret Tremayne of St. Monica's, who died in 1624, was much beloved by her sisters for her excellence in temporal duties. Tremayne had channelled her energies into 'exterior things' because throughout her twenty-six years of profession she had never been able to attain 'the gift of prayer'. Similarly when Mary Clopton died in 1653, the chronicler reported that she too had not been graced with 'so great a gift in prayer'. Clopton was none the less employed in several offices in the convent for which she was praised, including that of sacristine. For her this particular role had been especially important as a way of compensating for her spiritual desolation. Clopton had remarked that as she could not pray effectively, it was good to be able to work for the Lord in the very place where his presence was most certain.

Pious regimes were also effective in combating scruples and doubts about salvation. Several nuns experienced periods of uncertainty about their state of grace. While prayer was prescribed for such troubled souls, many also turned to the more tangible acts of piety to overcome their fears. Catherine Sheldon of the Cambrai Benedictines, who died in 1650, had suffered 'many interior conflicts & temptations' which she was able to overcome by her adherence to the religious virtues outlined in the

73 'Ghent Obituary Notices', pp. 36-37.
74 See below section III for further development of this point.
75 Chronicle of St. Monica's, vol. 1, p. 265.
76 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS C 2, f. 540.
'Rule', coupled with the great love she had for regular observances. Even nuns who had attained close union with the divine through meditation could be afflicted with doubts. The Benedictine, Clare Vaughan of Pontoise, was described in her obituary as 'a Soule greatly Illuminated'. In spite of her intense spiritual relationship with God, Vaughan suffered endless scruples about her commitment to him, and despaired of ever adhering perfectly to the 'Rule'. Her fears led her to pursue a regime of such intense pious activity that she was often given important offices within the community, like novice mistress, because it was believed that her example would incite others to imitate her. Obituaries suggest therefore that action could be just as valuable as meditation in a nun. The pursuit of piety was an important means by which those women who were barren spiritually could achieve both acclaim from their peers, and their own satisfaction.

Even nuns who were unable to fulfil the requirements of their vocation as either choir nuns or lay sisters were able to attain grace. Women who through illness or old age could not carry out their duties adequately could excel in other ways. Frances Burrows of St. Monica's, who had been sickly all her life, possessed a weak voice and was not able to contribute adequately to the choir. Nevertheless, she compensated for her shortcomings in this area by doing 'willingly what she could in the service of the convents [sic], as looking to the workmen or such like employments'. Another Augustinian, Susan Layborne, received similar praise. Layborne was unable to undertake heavy manual labour due to her ill health, but she none the less was 'very diligent to do some profitable thing, as writing of good things and working some fine thing for the Church, having skill in many fine works, [because she] could not abide idleness'. Similarly, the efforts of women like Anne Xaveria Berrington, a lay sister in the Pontoise Benedictine house between 1670 and 1690, were not discounted. Aged sixty-eight when she made her vow of profession, Berrington was too elderly to undertake the vigorous labour inherent in her vocation. None the less, she was able to serve the monastery by ringing the early morning bell at five o'clock each day to rouse the nuns to prayer.

Emphasis on nuns' contribution to their religious community allowed piety to encompass even personal attributes and talents. The death in 1672 of Mary Coyney was lamented by the canonesses of St. Monica's. Coyney had possessed the best and

78 'Pontoise Registers', pp. 277-82.
79 Chronicle of St. Monica's, vol. 2, pp. 164, 168.
81 'Pontoise Registers', p. 320. Similarly Catherine (Catherine Teresa) Bryers of the Poor Clares at Gravelines, who died in 1713 after a lifetime of ill health, was praised for having rung for 15 years the bell which called the convent to matins. See 'Poor Clare Registers', pp. 105-6.
strongest singing voice in the house and, consequently, the choir suffered from her absence.\textsuperscript{82} The voice of Anne (Cecilia Mark) Smith of Bruges not only assisted the Franciscan choir, it also drew lay people to attend the community's services. Clothed in 1664 at the age of sixteen, Smith was accepted by the convent for her 'most delicat Voice, and Excellent skill to teach'.\textsuperscript{83} Following her profession the next year, Anne Smith served the musical needs of the house for the next fifty years. Accompanied by other talented musicians in the cloister, like the sisters Anne (Seraphia of St. Winefrid) and Frances (Frances Henrietta Stephen) Garnons, who between them played the organ, violin, viol de gamba and sea trumpet, Smith enhanced the reputation of the cloister through her singing in divine services and special performances for visitors. In 1671, an English tourist, John Walker was treated to a recital by the Franciscan choir. He described Anne Smith's voice as 'ravishing', while Frances Garnons played the sea trumpet 'to admiration'.\textsuperscript{84} By the time the earl of Perth visited the convent in 1694, the Garnons sisters had died. However, he and his wife were the private audience for a hymn and motet sung by the choir with Anne Smith as soloist. Perth wrote in his diary that she 'sung the best of any woman I have heard in these Countries'.\textsuperscript{85} Upon her death in 1715, Smith was said to have 'render'd by her voice so greate honf to God & service to this holy Community that the like hath never preceded her'.\textsuperscript{86} Women like Anne Smith, Mary Coyney and the Garnons sisters were given spiritual credit for applying their musical talents to the needs of their communities. They not only assisted communal worship with their skills, they also used music as a form of religious expression and prayer.

By injecting spiritual meaning into every aspect of daily life, the English nuns successfully translated 'contemplative in action' into a monastic context. But the question remains as to whether or not the religious women's pious regimes were gender specific. In a Church fired by missionary zeal, could the qualities of a nun like Mary Stanislaus Culcheth of the Pontoise Benedictines be attributed to a monk or priest? Professed in 1677, Culcheth was said to be a model of female humility and modesty. She always chose the worst food, and refused to wear anything but the oldest clothes. Her silence was so exact that she refused to complain about her final illness and died without warning. In Culcheth's 1704 obituary her religious sisters professed certainty regarding her salvation:

\textsuperscript{82} Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS C 2 [addendum, f. 1].
\textsuperscript{83} English Franciscan Nuns, p. 37. Although it is not clear in the clothing entry, the wording implies that Smith was admitted with little or no dowry.
\textsuperscript{85} [James, Earl of Perth], Letters from James Earl of Perth to his Sister, The Countess of Erroll, W. Jerdan (ed.), [Camden Society, 33], London, 1845, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{86} English Franciscan Nuns, p. 204. For another e.g., see 'Pontoise Registers', p. 307.
w^n she was summon'd to the nuptiall super [she] needed not to borrow oyle of others [because] her lamp was ever ready & had been resplendent in this our Comunity from the time of her entrance into religion ...

By comparing Culcheth with one of the wise virgins of parable fame, the Pontoise nuns clearly identified her as an ideal nun and, indeed, a perfect woman. It is true that male monastics were expected to perform many duties similar to those carried out by their female counterparts, and to conduct themselves with religious propriety. However, action was the epitome of a clerical vocation, and male obituaries focused upon monks' scholastic achievements in the Continental colleges and seminaries, their ministry as priests on the English mission, and their martyrdoms. Thus, despite the supposed universality of religious virtue, the apostolic orientation of male spirituality during the Counter-Reformation left modesty, silence, humility and chastity more closely aligned with the female sphere.

Ironically, the shared experience of gender transcended the confessional divide. Elements of monastic 'mortification' can be identified in the piety of English lay women, both Catholic and Protestant. Comparing the daily rituals of the Catholic martyr, Margaret Clitherow, and the wife of a Protestant minister, Elizabeth Walker, Patricia Crawford concluded that 'both women shared a desire to express their spirituality in their family and household routines'. These similarities suggest that the nuns' piety emanated essentially from their experiences as women in early modern society. Just as they were able to engage in political activity under the guise of hospitality, they were able to blur the boundaries between secular and spiritual to create their own version of 'contemplative in action'. This characterised many of the nuns' activities. However, the one arena in which they could compete directly with their male counterparts was mysticism. Widely acknowledged as a position attained by only a few believers especially favoured by God, true mystics were accepted as religious authorities no matter what their gender.

87 'Pontoise Registers', p. 303. See 'Poor Clare Registers', p. 92 for e.g. of Catherine Frances Fox who likewise always chose the worst of everything, especially in clothes & diet.


III. Mysticism: Humility and Authority

As women, and as contemplatives pursuing 'mortification', enclosed nuns were particularly well-placed to engage in mystical relationships with the divine. Early modern understandings of female physiology, combined with the common belief that women were the more devout sex, made all women potential mystics. Enclosed nuns were better able to attain mystical union because strict clausura theoretically removed them from the distractions of the world. Yet, as Caroline Bynum has argued, piety did not necessitate rejection of the world, indeed medieval women's mysticism was 'historical and incarnational', reflecting their experience as women.90 Likewise links between the spiritual and temporal worlds were prominent in the religiosity of seventeenth-century English nuns. Although they tried hard to reject worldly associations and habits by embracing 'mortification', secular images none the less surfaced in their visions and devotional writings. Ultimately the sanctity a nun gained through mysticism threatened the very basis of anonymity and humility which had propelled her into heavenly discourse. Nuns renowned for intense spiritual relationships often had their biographies and spiritual writings published, thus becoming exemplars for monastic and lay folk; and many mystics achieved unwelcome secular power in the form of election to high conventual office.

In early modern England, Protestants and Catholics alike believed that women were more devout than men. The Elizabethan divine Richard Hooker observed that as the weaker sex women were naturally 'propense and inclinable to holiness'.91 Augustine Baker, who directed the spiritual lives of the Cambrai Benedictine community, explained the phenomenon in physiological terms:

Women in their verie nature are more religious then men. This is verified not onlie ... in the Catholick church where you see farre more women then men to frequent the sacraments but alalso in false religions ... And though we cannot enter into all the reasons of nature, yet we maie conjecture ... that women being of a colder complexion are more fearefull and have lesse confidence in themselves wch urgeth them uppon occasions of feare ... to recurre unto God for help as by the verie instinct of nature ... And thus in the verie course of nature have they some advantage over men; for the divine grace finding a better disposition in nature commonlie worketh her effect the more effecaciously.92

Although early modern people attributed the greater religiosity of women to nature, it can better be understood as a cultural and social construction. While both men and women operated regimes of personal piety, women had more time to devote to religious activities than men who were often caught up with matters of business.93 Nevertheless, the belief

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90 Bynum, 'Mysticism and Asceticism', p. 66.
93 Crawford, Women and Religion, pp. 73-75.
that women's physiology somehow predisposed them to devotion, coupled with nuns' pursuit of regimes like 'mortification', paved the way for mystical experiences in many of the English convents.

The physiological justification for women's inferior status in society hinted at by Baker actually bolstered their credibility as holy persons. Possessing an anatomy and physiology which were at worst a mistake, at best a faulty version (or with regard to the reproductive organs, an inversion) of the male, women's seclusion as wives, mothers and enclosed nuns was justified. Their cold and moist temperament which necessitated menstruation in order to purge the body of evil humours, combined with their child-bearing capacity, served to define their predominantly sedentary domestic life-style.94 The corollary of women's inferior biological make-up was the negative impact it had upon their brains and powers of reason. Moisture was considered to stifle the rational soul and produce retentive memory:

The Female, through the cold and moist of their Sex, cannot be indowed with so profound a judgement: we find indeed that they talke with appearance of knowledge in sleight and easie matters, but seldom reach any farther than to a sleight superficial smattering in any deep science.95

While such an ideology restricted the extent to which women were able to participate in political and intellectual circles, it had more positive implications for their spiritual status. Phyllis Mack has suggested that women's supposed weak intellectual capacity made them more suitable receptors for divine energy. Men who filled their minds with earthly concerns and prided themselves on the strength of their reason were less able to conduct heavenly messages.96 In the realm of religious experience, female passivity was therefore deemed appropriate for accessing the divine. The visionary, mystic or prophet was likened to an empty vessel into which God poured his message. Such women acted as a passive instrument of the divine will.97

The symbolism of the religious person as a vessel or channel for divine communication was concordant with the Christian doctrine that the weak and humble would be exalted over the powerful and proud. The Flemish mystic, Antonia Bourignon, questioned the Lord's proposal to use her as a messenger, citing her gender as a reason why people would not take her seriously. In response, a heavenly voice told her 'I will serve my self of vilest matter to confound the pride of Men. I will give thee all

96 Mack, Visionary Women, p. 33.
97 For an interesting analysis of an alternative image, the visionary as a musical instrument who is played by God, see Ronald E. Surtz, The Guitar of God. Gender, Power, and Authority in the Visionary World of Mother Juana de la Cruz (1481-1534), Philadelphia, 1990, ch. 3.
that thou shalt need; be faithful to me'.98 So physical and mental weakness, combined with lowly status, were prerequisites for mystical experience. This ideology gained more poignancy within the monastic context. The aim of a nun's hard daily regime of 'mortification' was to subject her flesh and will to the extent that, like Cecily Price of Ghent, she hid natural 'qualities and parts of hers with the humble Veil of abjection'.99 Thus the belief in female inferiority, bolstered by the physical and psychological effect of 'mortification', created the climate in which certain nuns had visions.

In reality, mystical union with the divine was difficult to attain. Only a small proportion of nuns ever achieved mystical status. This was because the procedure necessary to engage in mystical activity required enormous effort and concentration on the part of the 'vessel'. In his account of the extraordinary mystical experiences of Lucy Knatchbull of Ghent, Tobie Matthew attributed the abbess's 'Supernatural Favours' to the way in which she made 'a total Sacrifice of herself ... with her affections and appetites, to the greater glory of our Blessed Lord'. By successfully closing her mind and body to worldly distractions, Knatchbull opened her soul to Christ. Thus, he began 'to inhabit that excellent heart of hers after a most celestial way, when he was sure that he should be lodged all alone, which is a thing he so dearly loves'.100

The nuns themselves were well aware of the exertion necessary to secure spiritual union with the Lord. The Benedictine mystic, Gertrude More, argued that abnegation of the will as well as of the world held the key to spiritual communion:

For a soul can never be pure and free to ascend to the praise of God till she be very humble; and the more a soul endeavoureth so to be, the more peace doth she enjoy, and the freer access doth she fond to God, and the less impediments between Him and herself.101

The Benedictine, Bridget Wigmore, who died at Pontoise in 1687, had been esteemed for her great sanctity earned through mystical union. In her spiritual diary Wigmore steeled herself to spurn all disruptive thoughts and activities: 'In the first place now that my mind is a little recollected from the distractions of the world, I must endea[v]our to keepe it soe, by beeing blind deaf and dumb, endeavouing to know nothing but christ crucified'.102 Nuns like More and Wigmore, who managed to subdue their senses and will in order to remove all obstacles from the mystical path, were greatly admired by their religious sisters who knew only too well the difficulties such a road entailed. Obituary

99 Matthew, Life of Lucy Knatchbull, p. 195.
100 Ibid., p. 66. For similar comments, see Edmund Bedingfield, The Life of Margaret Mostyn (Mother Margaret of Jesus), H.J. Coleridge (ed.), new edn., London, 1884, pp. 116-17, 170-73.
102 'Pontoise Registers', p. 279.
notices abound with acknowledgments to those who demonstrated disregard for anything other than matters spiritual. It was said of Frances (Ebba) Browne, who died at Cambrai in 1631 at the age of twenty-two, that she 'lived so wholly abstract of all terrene & human solace & content and so attentive to God in her soule that neither business in health, nor pains in sickness could divert her thoughts & affections from him'. Mary Widdrington, professed among the Augustinians at Bruges in 1687, was 'beloved by all for their great esteem of her sanctity ... When at prayer she seemed perfectly united to God, remaining immovable, and, as it were, absorbed in him. Her thoughts were taken up with God and heavenly things, and had no room for earthly objects'.

Yet, ironically, many women who communed directly with the divine as a consequence of dying to the world found themselves in distracting jobs. The Augustinian prioress, Mary Wright of the Bruges cloister, practised self-abasement to an intense degree. Before her death in 1709, she even burned all records of her intense spiritual relationship with God. Professed in 1657, Wright steadfastly refused to accept any offices because she feared that temporal concerns would endanger her close communion with the divine. When the nuns eventually pressed her into service against her wishes, she soon rose to prominence by being elected prioress. In spite of her fears, Wright's mystical encounters continued to such an extent that she recorded how 'God made known to her the excesses of His Love for her soul in ways known only to Him and her self, enlightening her soul with what her pen could not express'. Similarly, Abbess Anne Neville of the Pontoise Benedictines was deemed to have been divinely inspired during her term in office:

The love of God incessantly inflam'd her hart with zeale & devotion, as appear'd in all her pyous practices, & she had soe familier a conversation and strict union with almighty God, that what she spoke in publicke of edification to her community, she generally drew from the entertainements she had wth him interiourly...

The examples of Mary Wright and Anne Neville demonstrate the inevitable secular consequence of mystical activity. They were only two among many abbesses and prioresses who were graced with reputations for close communion with the Lord. Nuns' choice of an abbess who shunned things of this earth in order to remain closer to the heavenly sphere was based upon two concerns. Firstly, they perceived it was beneficial to be under the leadership of someone who was so clearly in divine favour. Such a superior was an inspiring model for her community to emulate. The Pontoise Benedictines explained their election of the reclusive Elizabeth Dabridgecourt as abbess by declaring that her mystical successes qualified her as 'the Candlestick to Enlighten this

103 'Cambrai Records', p. 74.
104 Durrant, *Flemish Mystics*, p. 312.
105 Ibid., pp. 335-37.
106 'Pontoise Registers', p. 273.
Community'. Secondly, in a more practical sense, such a person would inevitably attract a reputation for sanctity in the world beyond the enclosure and thus generate corresponding temporal benefits for the house.

Occasionally, the mystical experiences of the English nuns were recorded and published. Sir Tobie Matthew, when he prepared his biography of the Benedictine abbess Lucy Knatchbull for publication in 1651, wrote that he would describe the Ghent monastery 'for the edification of the Catholics of our Country'. Thus, although the book was intended as an advertisement for the religious community, Knatchbull was also a model for others to imitate. According to Matthew, Knatchbull's life and spiritual experiences had 'served to animate both her Successors and Subjects since her time to continue in that fair direct way towards Perfection'. In the preface to Elizabeth Shirley's biography of Prioress Margaret Clement of St. Monica's, the nun declared that her former superior's 'holy lyfe and acts' were like 'a firbrand, to inkendell in me the Love of God.' She described Clement as having performed a role as spiritual guide within the cloister, and justified her own audacity in daring to translate the worthy prioress's deeds to paper by saying:

And because the lives of the [blessed] Saints is principally to stire us up to the admiration of their heroicall vertue: Let us make that profitt, that we follow them in spirituall devotions and mortification, but allso in some corporall exercises.

Thus Elizabeth Shirley identified spiritual attributes in Margaret Clement which she believed would inspire and assist later generations to attain closer communion with God.

Other biographies were offered as a blue-print for spiritual success. In his report of Gertrude More's holiness, Augustine Baker presented her life as containing 'things more imitable and more tending to the edification of souls' than some narratives pertaining to other women. He argued that while the majority of visions, trances and apparitions of religious women were fascinating to read, they were impossible for the majority of readers to achieve. According to Baker, More's mysticism was less

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107 Ibid., p. 289.
108 Matthew, Life of Lucy Knatchbull, p. 18.
109 Ibid., p. 22. Thomas Hunter, the biographer of Carmelite mystic Catherine (Mary Xaveria of the Angels) Burton, remarked that 'the singular and visible signs of [God's] protection ... struck all that knew her with an esteem and veneration for her person, so highly favoured by heaven'. Thomas Hunter, An English Carmelite. The Life of Catherine Burton, Mother Xaveria of the Angels, H.J. Coleridge (ed.), London, 1876, p. xviii. Among the numerous devotional ms held in the Boulogne-Pontoise & Dunkirk Benedictine archives (now held at Buckfast Abbey) is a ms copy of Hunter's biography of Catherine Burton which suggests that religious communities circulated edifying material among themselves.
110 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS Q 29, Elizabeth Shirley, 'The Lyfe of Our Moste Reverent Mother, Margrit Clement', 1626, ff. i-ii. On the whole, accounts of exemplary women were written by their confessors & spiritual directors who were often keen to emphasise their own part in the proceedings, despite their avowed intention to set up the nuns as models of piety. Elizabeth Shirley's biography is a rare example of a nun's perspective.
spectacular but more accessible. Hence his account aimed to explain the techniques she employed in order to reach the heights of mystical contemplation. More herself provided evidence of her spiritual success in *Confessiones Amantis; or, The Confessions of a Loving Soul*. Father Francis Gascoigne, who arranged the publication of the book in 1658, said in his dedication to Prioress Bridget More of Paris that he 'would say nothing of the admirable gifts of the authoress', rather he would 'let the book speak them'. These advertisements of mystical nuns' activities suggest that holy women led an ambiguous existence. Dying to the world to attain supernatural communion inevitably opened their lives to public scrutiny. As superiors and exemplars, they became extremely powerful. Certain mystics even attained the intermediary status of saints.

Margaret Clement of St. Monica's was one such woman. Even during her own lifetime, Clement had been esteemed as one particularly in God's favour. When she was a newly professed nun, her Flemish sisters at St. Ursula's ridiculed her, saying 'Sr Margret you seme to be so holy that sh[o]rtly we shall take this pictor to sett one the alter for a Sf for so it semeth you would be acco[un]ted'. Later, the same nuns were so persuaded by her holiness that they elected her prior at the youthful age of thirty. Several nuns attested as to the efficacy of Clement's prayers when they had sought her assistance during times of spiritual anguish. Her fame became so widespread that during the years of her prelature clerics sent her the spiritually destitute in the hope that her prayers and saintly demeanour would assist them. Those whom she helped became devoted to her, declaring that 'next unto god they did ascribe unto her the whole cause of ther salvation'. Clement's powerful role in securing lost souls was widely acknowledged by the clergy. One Jesuit priest later confessed that her intervention had taught him more about dealing with troubled spirits than he had gleaned from many years of theology. The example of women like Margaret Clement indicates how powerful the 'weak vessel' could become. Members of her own cloister, the clergy, and the laity all recognised the strength of her relationship with the divine, and credited her agency in matters spiritual. Clement took on a mediatory role by acting as a conduit of supernatural energy.

112 Francis Gascoigne 'Dedication', in Gertrude More, *Confessiones Amantis*, in Benedict Weld-Blundell (ed.), *The Inner Life and Writings of Dame Gertrude More*, vol. 2, London, 1911, p. iv. Francis Gascoigne, the brother of Catherine and Margaret Gascoigne of Cambrai, was a secular priest & had been prefect & confessor at the English College in Douai.
113 Priory of Our Lady, St. Monica's MS Q 29, f. 21.
114 Ibid., ff. 45-46, 56-57.
115 Ibid., ff. 48-55.
116 Ibid., ff. 52-53.
117 Many other mystics also assumed mediatory roles. Cecily Price of Ghent secured the wavering vocation of a novice by carrying the confused woman's soul (which was incarnated as a dove) to every image of the Virgin Mary in the monastery, where she prayed for the nun's vocation. Matthew, *Life of Lucy Knatchbull*, p. 193.
A reputation for mysticism was therefore one important way by which nuns within the confines of the Counter-Reformation Church could achieve authority. Paradoxically, it was the pursuit of monastic discipline in order to 'die to the world' that enabled them to attain the status of visionary and mediator. The women who followed intensely spiritual courses within the cloister were those most likely to gain widespread recognition as spiritual leaders and figures of temporal power. In this way they became not only models for others to imitate, but spiritual authorities to whom others looked for guidance and direct intervention. However, in spite of their exalted position, these nuns did not claim any agency on their own part. Instead they spoke and wrote of themselves as humble instruments of God.

The innate tension in the mystic's life centred upon striking the right balance between successful application of 'mortification' to achieve direct union with the Lord, and the fame and power emanating from such an achievement. If only the well-mortified soul could interact with the divine, then nuns who were lauded as mystics constantly needed to remind themselves of their human frailty, and they had to intensify the practices necessary to instil its principles in their weak bodies. Thus, 'mortification' became self-perpetuating. This ambivalence might explain why at the very moment when a nun entered a mystical state and was most empowered by the regime of denial she had pursued, she couched her experiences in highly metaphorical language which was replete with images of feminine passivity, humility and emotion.

In nuns' encounters with the divine, the soul was ostensibly female in its reception of the male God. On several occasions Christ pierced the heart of Carmelite prioress, Margaret Mostyn, with darts in a form of spiritual union which hinted at sexual intercourse: 'sometimes she saw streams of glory dart from the Blessed Sacrament into her soul'.118 As women, nuns described their spiritual association using metaphors of secular love. In Confessiones Amantis, Gertrude More characterised her relationship with God in terms of the lover seeking her beloved. Throughout the fifty-three 'confessions', or chapters, which constitute the work, More appealed to the Lord to forgive her shortcomings and teach her to perfect herself so that her soul could enjoy union with him:

Be merciful to my desolate heart, and stir it up to perfect love of Thee, that I may simply seek Thee and sigh after Thee, My beloved . . . Let me long to embrace Thee with the arms of my soul, and think it little to endure any misery in body or soul, so that I may be at last admitted into the bosom of my Love, fairest and choicest of thousands . . . Oh! when shall my soul, having transcended itself and all created things, be firmly united to Thee, the Beloved of my heart?119

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118 Bedingfield, Life of Margaret Mostyn, pp. 120, 124.
Lucy Knatchbull likewise spoke of her association with Christ as a love affair. During her early years at Brussels, at a time when she was experiencing visions and trances, she described herself as 'one deeply stricken in Love'.

This gendered relationship between believer and God was most explicit in the characterisation of the nun as 'bride of Christ'. By perceiving themselves as the spouses of Christ, as opposed to the wives of secular husbands, nuns extended the metaphor into every aspect of their existence, couching their relationship with the Lord in conjugal terms. Gertrude More considered that religious profession qualified the nun to become Christ's lover. In her devotional writings, she spoke of 'hearts capable of Thy [i.e. Christ's] love, and by profession consecrated thereunto'. In a letter to Prioress Margaret Clement of the Augustinian house in Louvain, Father Peter Lupus was even more explicit concerning the relationship between nuns and Christ. Lupus told Clement that Christ would call her at death saying 'come my spouse to thy marriage come to the nuptiall bed [i.e. bed]; that I may kisse thee'. In his endeavour to emphasise the extreme sanctity of Lucy Knatchbull, Tobie Matthew described her divine intercourse as a kind limited to only a few believers. He claimed that it was granted 'to such only, as be admitted to be of his own bed Chamber, as true Spouses are, and ought to be'.

Certain nuns extended the sexual metaphor to encompass a more permanent contract. In one vision, the Carmelite prioress, Catherine Burton, saw herself marrying Christ:

I seemed to be admitted to the spiritual marriage with my heavenly Spouse, which He Himself did declare, when, in His Sacred Humanity, He came to make His abode and habitation with me, as in His own palace, giving me to understand by clear and distinct words, that now these spiritual nuptials were completed He would make me partaker of his heavenly treasures and riches, giving part of them, even now, in my own hands, to dispose of them to my relations and friends.

It is evident from Burton's words that her mystical marriage was to bestow upon her all the rights and privileges which a secular wife gained through her husband's social position. The account makes an explicit analogy between the dignity bestowed upon both the earthly bride of inferior social status and her relatives through her marriage to a secular prince, and the benefits Burton's family and friends were to achieve through the nun's nuptials with Christ. Thus, as women, nuns were able to appropriate metaphors which conformed with their gender to explain their experience of the divine. Furthermore, these images were drawn from the social reality of women's options in early modern society: marriage and the subordinate position of a wife.

120 Matthew Life of Lucy Knatchbull, p. 48.
121 More, Confessiones Amantis, p. 4.
122 Father Lupus's letters were transcribed in St. Monica's MS Q 29, f. 78.
123 Matthew, Life of Lucy Knatchbull, p. 54.
124 Hunter, Life of Catherine Burton, p. 199.
The expression of the English nuns' spirituality conforms in certain ways with that of their medieval predecessors. Caroline Bynum argued that women's spiritual orientation towards the humanity of Christ, which led them to employ images of physicality in their representation of the relationship, was continuous with their own ordinary experience of social inferiority. While for men characterisation of their religious experience often entailed a reversal of both social position and gender (because the divine was accessed through empty vessels and the divine was often male), women operated within the realm of common female experience.125 Certainly, in order to live a life of strict asceticism, the nuns renounced the world, the privileges of their birth into gentry and aristocratic families, the comfort of intimate human contact with parents, husbands and children. However, they spoke of their association with Christ in images commensurate with their female gender; they perceived the divine as father, lover and bridegroom.

Where the early modern English nuns differed from their medieval sisters was in their representations of Christ. For the seventeenth-century nuns he was always a male figure: the infant Jesus in the arms of the Virgin, their bridegroom, the suffering Christ on the cross. While he comforted them and allowed them to witness the signs of his incarnation and Passion, neither Christ nor his father were described as possessing maternal attributes. Jesus was rarely 'mother' in the writings of seventeenth-century English nuns.126 Instead there was a clear emphasis upon the Virgin Mary as maternal comforter. While relationships with Christ and God the Father were constantly depicted by the nuns in terms of interaction between women and their male relatives, the Virgin, and to a certain extent the female saints, fulfilled a distinctly feminine function. In visions Mary was most often seen with her infant son, or, if alone, she would remind the nun concerned of monastic vows and obligations to Christ. Thus, the Virgin Mary became the nun's mother because of the religious woman's status as spouse of Christ.


126 Other than oblique references to the 'mother-god' of medieval literature through the hen imagery (see below), I have found only one image of the 'maternal' Christ in the spiritual material of the English nuns. In one of Lucy Knatchbull's visions, Christ offered her his right foot and told her to suck humility from the wound in it. She wrote, 'Wherefore my Soul instantly, with a kind of greediness, casting her mouth upon it, remained there for some time - how long I know not; perchance for the space of two or three Ave Marias - without any kind of interruption. I know not what to say of these passages, but my soul was made wholly Captive'. While the image does suggest that Christ fed her the virtue of humility, the language in which the vision is described implies a relationship between lovers rather than one between mother and child. Matthew, Life of Lucy Knatchbull, pp. 44-5, 61; 'Ghent Obituary Notices', p. 7. For an analysis of maternal imagery in the writings of medieval mystics, see Caroline Walker Bynum, Jesus as Mother. Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages; Berkeley, 1982; ead, "And Woman His Humanity".
This strictly gendered relationship between mystic and those in heaven was most clearly delineated in the visions of Margaret (Margaret of Jesus) Mostyn, the seventeenth-century Carmelite prioress. Mostyn's devotion to the Virgin began when she was about six years of age. There was a picture of Mary with the infant Jesus in her arms in the house, which the young Margaret spent hours adorning with her bracelets and other ornaments. This image, coupled with saying her beads and other prayers to the mother of God, assured her that she was under the protection of the Virgin. At the age of eleven or twelve she had her first vision of Christ in the eucharist and longed to be able to receive him in the form of the host herself. After she had made her first communion these visions continued. From this early age she desired only to be a nun but initial family opposition to the vocation, and then her own reluctance to enter the religious state, frustrated the plans until she was in her late teens. Significantly, it was the Virgin who assisted her by appearing with St. Teresa to reassure the troubled girl that they would guide and protect her in the cloister. Mostyn believed that Mary and Christ were present at her clothing, and when prior to her profession in 1645 she was having doubts about the monastic life, Christ again appeared to her and assured her that he would not forsake her. Throughout the remainder of her life, Mostyn's visions of the Virgin and Christ continued. Sometimes Mary would hand her the infant Jesus to hold; on other occasions she would be visited by the adult Christ displaying all the marks of his Passion, or as a member of the Trinity.

Margaret Mostyn's interaction with the divine was governed by early modern notions of what constituted appropriate masculine and feminine behaviour. For her the authoritative male figure was God the father. During a vision in which the Trinity entered her heart, she understood that she 'possessed in her soul her Father, Spouse and Comforter'. Christ was alternatively an infant or her spouse in Mostyn's visions. Thus, she either held him in her arms, or she was joined with him in her soul. While the adult Christ appeared to her frequently, she seemed to be more comfortable with his incarnation as an infant. On one occasion when the Virgin called her to see the risen Christ on his heavenly throne, introducing him as Margaret's spouse, the nun drew back. Mary turned to her son and said, 'See she is more afraid of you now than when she enjoys you a Child in my arms'. By the very nature of Christ's incarnation in her visions, it is obvious that the prioress felt most comfortable when she could adopt a maternal position in her interaction with the Lord. While she had several visions in

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128 Ibid., pp. 13-14.
129 Ibid., pp. 18-24.
130 Ibid., pp. 33-7, 40-41.
131 See Ibid., pp. 72, 88-91, 96-101, 104-22, 130-55, 163, 268-90, for accounts of her numerous visions. She was also visited by saints at various stages during her life. See ch. 15.
132 Ibid., p. 89.
133 Ibid.
which Christ entered her heart, suggesting consummation of their relationship as spouse and bridegroom, Mostyn preferred to identify with the role of the Virgin who constantly appeared as a mediator between Mostyn and her son, whether he was child or adult. Mary's role was clearly defined when she declared her position to Margaret: 'those who trust in me, and acknowledge me for their Mother, shall find by experience that I will carry them through this world in my arms'.

As prioress it was Margaret Mostyn's duty to be 'mother' to her nuns. The power of abbesses/prioresses was commonly couched in maternal imagery, so in her relationship with the infant Christ Mostyn was performing a familiar role. Yet, as I have suggested, monastic 'mothers' were authoritarian figures. Thus, in choosing maternal imagery, Mostyn assumed a powerful identity. The prioress often adopted an intermediary role in her visions. For example, she prayed for nuns who were afflicted with devils, and acted as mediator between souls in purgatory and their relatives in the cloister. Mostyn was not alone among the women who became abbesses and prioresses of the seventeenth-century English convents in appropriating maternal imagery which had been applied to the 'mother-God' in medieval spiritual literature. Often superiors were likened to mother hens caring for their chickens, a popular image for Christ who compared himself with the hen who gathers her chicks under her wings for protection in Matthew 23:37. In his analysis of the visions of sixteenth-century Spanish mystic, Mother Juana de la Cruz, Ronald E. Surtz argues that the mother hen image was adopted by the nun in order to identify with the sufferings of Christ. Margaret Mostyn's visions were replete with images which suggest that she performed a protective and redemptive role. Once she had been made subprioress, she had a series of visions of Christ with his cross. These culminated in a trance during which she felt Christ imprint his sufferings upon her heart.

Margaret Mostyn's visions represent the full gamut of women's position in early modern society. She related to the male Trinity as a daughter, spouse and mother, while seeming more comfortable with the Virgin Mary whom she considered her 'Mother and Sister'. However, although she often assumed a passive position in her relationship with the heavenly figures of her visions, she also appropriated a powerful maternal persona in her dealings with the infant Christ. Such postures of authority were commensurate with her experiences as a woman. As nun and prioress, Mostyn was well

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134 Ibid., p. 94.
135 See ch. 3.
140 Ibid., p. 98.
aware of women's potential to rule others, and to make representations on their behalf to patriarchal authorities.

In conclusion, the various forms of spirituality of English nuns in the seventeenth century were shaped by a wealth of external factors which were filtered through personal experiences and understanding. Although cloisters all pursued the common regime of 'mortification', individuals interpreted it and responded to it in vastly different ways. For some women adherence to the 'rule' became the focus of their spiritual lives. Others moulded specific elements of the training process into rituals of personal piety. A few used its procedures as stepping stones to mysticism. What is characteristic of all these differing responses was the tacit understanding on the part of nuns and their communities that spirituality was largely a personal issue. In spite of efforts by the Catholic hierarchy to regulate monastic piety through the propagation of specific cults, particular devotional paths, and the heightened role of the priest as spiritual director, convents and nuns continued to pursue the paths they believed were most efficacious for their salvation. Whether or not they adhered to the common elements of Counter-Reformation piety, the English nuns forged meaningful spiritual relationships through prayer, 'mortification', and the minutiae of daily life. They embodied both contemplative and 'contemplative in action'.
The year 1598 marked the beginning of a remarkable venture to restore Catholic belief and practice in England. Initiated and carried out by English gentlewomen, the female monastic revival reflected Catholic hopes for toleration and possible re-institution of the faith in their homeland. During the ensuing century, the religious women's confidence regarding a return to England waxed and waned, largely in accordance with the political destiny of the Stuarts. Indeed, the convents' fortunes reflected the fate of the royal family because monastic recruitment and income were tied firmly to English events. Certain nuns even participated in political schemes in support of the royal family whom the cloisters' believed would facilitate Catholic emancipation. Ardent royalists during the Civil War and Interregnum, these nuns were committed Jacobites after 1688 when chances of attaining their goal had all but withered. Although most convents survived to return at last to England in the 1790s, the eighteenth century was a period of decline in terms of recruitment and influence for the nuns abroad.

The extent to which the convents' survival rested upon the situation in their homeland reveals the essence of the monastic revival for women. The cloisters were specifically English institutions which seemingly had little to do with their immediate locales, choosing instead to focus principally on the requirements of co-religionists at home. The nuns' persistent disregard for issues on their own side of the Channel is typified by their reluctance to admit foreign women into their novitiates. By and large, the cloisters' insularity can be attributed to their experiences as members of a minority religion in their homeland. John Bossy's discussion of Catholicism as a sect has been rightly criticised for ignoring the 'international' aspects of attempts to support English Catholics, and for dealing solely with the situation of the gentry. Yet the aims of those English women and men who travelled abroad to found and join religious orders can only be described as parochial. Moreover, the convents recruited almost entirely from among the English gentry. So while the nuns embraced the reformed Catholicism encountered on the Continent, and exported it to England in the form of catechised young women and devotional books, they none the less channelled their energy into writing for and teaching the English Catholic gentry; whatever contribution they made to the Catholic Church at large was incidental.

Strict clausura which aimed to isolate contemplative women from the distractions of the world no doubt contributed to the nuns' narrow perspective. However, in spite of formal injunctions regarding the enclosure of female religious, and the advice of clerics like Richard White of St. Monica's who were concerned about laxity in some houses, it
was impossible for monasteries to shut out the world entirely. The English nuns maintained consistent contact with family and friends beyond the convent walls, principally because they were almost entirely dependent upon their kin for economic survival. Recruitment from among the English Catholics provided the cloisters with not only novices, but also their regular source of income in the form of dowries, and thus necessitated regular correspondence. The alms process was another vital component of the monastic economy and, as contemplatives who prayed for others' intentions, the nuns interacted with those lay folk who desired their services. Likewise the other measures implemented by houses to generate income, like teaching young girls and operating guest-houses, also led to secular incursions. The experiences of the English nuns therefore suggests that monastic enclosure was nothing more than an ideal in the seventeenth century. Although the Catholic hierarchy went to extraordinary lengths to eliminate un-enclosed 'active' orders, like Mary Ward's I.B.V.M., contemplative nuns regularly by-passed the restriction of clausura with impunity.

Indeed, secular society intruded into the cloister in more subtle ways. The women entering the novitiate brought with them the cultural values of the English gentry and aristocracy. Religious ideologies were interpreted according to early modern considerations of social status and gender in the convent; therefore monastic government, the household hierarchy, and the conduct of manual labour all reflected worldly models and practices. Many of the ideals were prescribed in statutes and advice books, but evidence that the nuns participated in constructing these secular models can be found in their own writings (especially in obituaries), and in their actions. Religious women related to each other in familial terms, dividing those in the cloister into 'sisters' and 'mothers', and retaining masculine titles for their clerical superiors. Moreover, in the conduct of daily business, nuns ran their cloisters as a gentry household, employing the skills of patronage and hospitality imparted by their mothers and female kin. The nuns' identity as daughters of the English Catholic gentry coloured the culture of the cloister in almost every aspect.

Nevertheless, the nuns were open to new forms of Catholic spirituality, in particular the meditational regime promoted by the Society of Jesus. If they appeared less parochial in their spiritual tastes, then it is most likely because many Counter-Reformation devotions had evolved from late-medieval traditions which had been common in England as well as on the Continent. Although Church authorities attempted to regulate piety, popular observances centred upon the eucharist and the Virgin Mary were retained. The cloisters accepted eucharistic and Marian devotions, and individuals appropriated the elements which best suited their needs. For example, like holy women of the middle ages, the English nuns were attracted to images and venerations commensurate with their gender, showing yet again how those in the cloister could never
escape the vestiges of their former lives in the world. However, where the seventeenth-century nuns differed from their medieval predecessors was in placing different emphases on their relationships with the Virgin and Christ. By conceiving of Mary as mother and protector, and relating to Christ as infant and bridegroom, the nuns reflected their membership of an intensely patriarchal Church and society where gender roles were clearly prescribed.

Yet in many ways the nuns defied early modern gender and social conventions, casting doubt upon the rigidity of the categories 'female' and 'male'. In their spirituality, several cloisters and individual women were drawn towards puissant images of the Virgin as Queen of Heaven and powerful intercessor, suggesting that they were well aware of female potency. Indeed by becoming contemplative religious, all the nuns rejected the common religious, political, social and gender roles expected of them by their compatriots. The very act of leaving England to join a religious institution abroad was politically subversive. Through their prayers for the conversion of England, their schooling of young gentlewomen, the refuges they offered exiled English Catholics and their role in creating and circulating devotional writings, the religious communities actively engaged in the struggle to maintain Catholicism against the wishes of the Protestant government. Even the monastic life itself which enabled a group of women to live together under the rule of an abbess/prioress, semi-independent of immediate male control, was inconceivable for most people in seventeenth-century England. Indeed the Protestant response to the religious women was often ambivalent. On the one hand, propagandists denied the nuns any autonomy, lampooning them as silly women under the thumb of the Jesuits; none the less the government was concerned enough about the convents' activities to seek reports about their progress and affiliations from English agents abroad. Nuns challenged Protestant conceptions of proper womanly behaviour, not merely by rejecting marriage and motherhood, but also by stubbornly adhering to the old faith and actively proselytising from within their enclosures and back in England.

Numerically the nuns never constituted a large portion of the English population, and their geographic isolation across the Channel undoubtedly marginalised them to a degree in their own day; just as it has continued to obfuscate their place in historical accounts of the period. However, this initial exploration of the women's cloisters as active members of the English Catholic community suggests that the convents' absence from studies of religion and society in seventeenth-century England should not continue. Analyses of post-Reformation English Catholicism will benefit greatly from the understanding that nuns continued the proselytising and active promotion of the mission begun by their mothers, grandmothers and other female forebears of the Elizabethan era. Rather than dismiss Bossy's account of strong female leadership during the late sixteenth century, historians must acknowledge that women did assume powerful positions in
recusant households, and that this tradition was translated into monastic houses during the seventeenth century. The missionary priests were not solely responsible for imparting the faith to residual Catholics; the cloisters played a significant part through their educative and spiritual activities.

Moreover, the English religious houses abroad can also shed light upon recent debates about the development of English nationalism. Currently-held historical ideologies and assumptions have equated Protestantism with an emerging national identity in seventeenth-century England. English Protestants might well have defined themselves as English against the 'other' of Catholicism, but the identity of the English Catholic community suggests that Englishness was an exceedingly complex issue. Although the nuns rejected Protestantism and accepted the assistance of Spanish and French Catholics, they nevertheless considered themselves (at least prior to 1688, and even afterwards) as English women. The nuns, and indeed the majority of the English Catholics, who all identified far more with their compatriots than with the universal Catholic Church, point to a more organic notion of 'Englishness' which predated the religious and political upheavals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Finally, the actions and experiences of the women who travelled to the Low Countries and France during the seventeenth century challenge traditional interpretations of the past. The nuns reveal how influential women could be in areas typically viewed as masculine terrain, such as politics and religion. The very fact that the nuns so clearly replicated the ideologies and pursuits of women of their social milieu in England reveals the wealth of new material awaiting the historian of gender in early modern English society. Apart from the untapped source of monastic archives, there is likely to be further material among family papers deposited in national and county record offices and libraries. In 1986, the Rev. B. C. Foley told the Catholic Archives society that the Lancashire Record Office, which has large collections of Catholic family papers, might well prove a mine for those interested in the English nuns. Foley suggested that the religious women's letters to their families are dotted throughout these family muniments. To date they remain an under-used resource. I would suggest that like monastic archives the nuns' correspondence with their families will reveal more of the ways by which women participated in the economic, social and political spheres. The letters of Winefrid Thimbleby and Mary Caryll cited in the thesis certainly support this assertion. Despite the religious women's Catholicism, their vows of religion, and their removal from England, my research suggests that nuns were not radically different from other gentlewomen, both Catholic and Protestant, in England.

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Abbess  Name and title of the female superior of a community of twelve or more nuns belonging to one of the old monastic orders, such as the Benedictines, but also used among Poor Clares, Conceptionists, Bridgettines and Augustinian canonesses.

Abbey  A monastery governed by an abbess.

Affective Piety  The use of the imagination and emotions during meditation to identify with the suffering or joy of the contemplated event. Also known as 'sensible devotion'.

Apostolate  The form of Christian activity, expressed either as a life of contemplation, or one of active engagement in the world by teaching, preaching and administering the sacraments.

Canoness  A nun living under the 'rule' of St. Augustine.

Chambress  Monastic officer in charge of the household goods, such as habits and linen.

Chantress  Nun responsible for the choir. Her duties entailed selecting the correct office for the day, preparing the music and training the nuns' voices.

Chaplain  The priest in charge of the monastery chapel, appointed by the bishop, but often with the concord of the abbess/prioress.

Chapter  A meeting or assembly of nuns for the purpose of discussing convent business, or transgressions against the 'rule'.

Choir Nun  A woman professed under solemn vows whose apostolate was to sing the breviary (or divine office) in the choir.

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Clausura The living space reserved for nuns which they could not leave, nor outsiders enter. The term also applied to the law constraining all nuns to live within this enclosed space.

Clothing The formal ceremony in which a person aspiring to join a religious community received the novice's habit of the order.

Confessor The priest who heard nuns' confessions. He could be the chaplain or spiritual director, but often additional priests were employed too.

Confraternity An association, usually of lay people, having as its object some special religious work, for example, personal sanctification by means of special devotional practices or exercises.

Congregation A group of monasteries following the same 'rule'.

Constitutions The adaptation and interpretation of the order's 'rule' for a specific cloister. Also known as the house's 'statutes'.

Contemplative A nun or monk whose primary role was to worship God, usually through performing the opus dei.

Convent Originally (thirteenth century) a community of brothers, but it later came to designate a community of nuns. The term also refers to the building inhabited by a religious community.

Devotio Moderna A movement of mystical piety which began in the Netherlands in the fourteenth century which stressed affective devotion and the contemplation of the humanity of Christ. In the sixteenth century the piety of the devotio moderna was absorbed by the Jesuits, the Benedictines and the mendicant orders.

Discreets The name for the nuns who formed the advisory and decision-making body to assist the abbess/prioress. They were also called 'council sisters' in certain houses.

Divine Office The official public prayer of the Church which complemented the mass. It was divided into one night hour (matins) and seven day hours (lauds, prime, terce, sext, none, vespers, compline).

Illuminism Groups or sects claiming the possession of an inner light, or direct revelation from God, thus challenging the mediatory offices of the church.
Infirmary  Nun in charge of the infirmary where sick nuns were sent to recuperate.

Jansenism  A heretical movement in the seventeenth-century church which denied the freedom of the will and the possibility of resisting grace.

Lay Sister  A woman taking solemn vows but whose vocation was domestic labour, rather than performance of the divine office. (Also called converse sisters.)

Monastery  Religious houses which were cloistered and subject to full monastic discipline.

Monstrance  The vessel in which the blessed sacrament was exposed during the ceremony of benediction, or carried in procession.

Novice  A member of a religious community who had received the habit, but was free to leave the religious life during the period of probation, which usually lasted twelve months.

Novice Mistress  Nun responsible for teaching the novices the 'rule' and training them for life as professed nuns.

Ordinary  The bishop, or his deputy, who was responsible for governing, adjudication, and the administration of the sacraments within his diocese.

Portress  Monastic officer responsible for regulating contact with the world beyond the enclosure at the grate and doors of the convent.

Postulant  One seeking entry to a religious order by undergoing a period of probation in the cloister (usually three months) before taking the habit.

Prioress  The nun in charge of a priory; or, in the case of an abbey, the abbess's deputy.

Priory  A filiation from an abbey which was under the control of the mother-house. However, the term was also applied to independent religious houses not governed by an abbess.

Procuratrice  Monastic officer in charge of the household finances.
**Profession** The formal taking of religious vows in a ceremony where the novice exchanged her white veil for the black veil of the professed nun. After profession a nun could not leave the religious life.

**Quietism** A seventeenth-century form of illuminism which stressed that passivity rather than exertion led to union with the divine. It therefore contradicted the affective meditation and piety of the Jesuits who used images to inspire contemplative union.

**Recusant** A person who refused to attend the services of the Church of England, but the term was frequently applied to English Catholics in general.

**Regular** Clergy living under a religious rule and their own forms of government, as opposed to the secular clergy who were subject directly to their bishops.

**Rule** A document describing the way of life to be followed by a particular order. It was a set of comprehensive guidelines which included detailed instructions regarding all aspects of the temporal and spiritual aims and practices of the community.

**Sacristine** Nun in charge of the chapel and all its furnishings.

**Sodality** Religious association consisting of lay persons who met for the performance of pious exercises and good works.

**Subprioress** The deputy of the superior in cloisters where a prioress governed the community.

**Visitor** An ecclesiastic designated to 'visit' monasteries to ensure that the nuns or monks were adhering strictly to the 'rule'.

**Vows of Religion** The vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Initially these were simple vows and if violated they did not nullify the action taken. However, after the thirteenth century, they became solemn vows which meant that a professed nun or monk could not possess property, succeed to an inheritance, or marry.

**White Sister** A woman who took solemn vows, but was exempt from certain aspects of the 'rule' because of a physical infirmity.
## APPENDIX 1

### English Contemplative Houses for Women in the Seventeenth Century

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Order</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date Est.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Augustinian:</td>
<td>Louvain</td>
<td>1609</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bruges</td>
<td>1629</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>1634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benedictine:</td>
<td>Brussels</td>
<td>1598</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ghent</td>
<td>1624</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boulogne-Pontoise</td>
<td>1652-1658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dunkirk</td>
<td>1662</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ypres (after 1684 Irish)</td>
<td>1665</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cambrai</td>
<td>1623</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>1650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridgettine:</td>
<td>Syon-Antwerp-</td>
<td>1539 - ? -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Termonde-Syon-</td>
<td>? - 1554-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Termonde-Zierikzee-</td>
<td>1559-1563-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mishagen-Antwerp-</td>
<td>1568-1571-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mechelen-Rouen</td>
<td>1572-1580-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lisbon</td>
<td>1594</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmelite:</td>
<td>Antwerp</td>
<td>1619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lierre</td>
<td>1648</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hoogstraeten</td>
<td>1678</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican:</td>
<td>Vilvorde-Brussels</td>
<td>1661-1669</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franciscan:</td>
<td>St. Omers-Gravelines</td>
<td>1607-1609</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Poor Clare:</td>
<td></td>
<td>1629</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aire</td>
<td>1644</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dunkirk</td>
<td>1652</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. 3rd Order:</td>
<td>Brussels-Nieuport-</td>
<td>1621-1637-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bruges</td>
<td>1662</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sepulchrine:</td>
<td>Liège</td>
<td>1642</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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2. Locations & dates separated by a hyphen represent a move by the house to a new location.
3. Dates in square brackets [ ] signify adoption of new rule.
## I.B.V.M. Houses Established in England & on the Continent in the Seventeenth Century

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Order</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date Est.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I.B.V.M.:</td>
<td>St. Omers</td>
<td>1609</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>London-Yorks.-</td>
<td>1613-[1642]-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paris*5</td>
<td>[1650]</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Liège</td>
<td>1616</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cologne</td>
<td>1620</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trier</td>
<td>1621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rome*</td>
<td>1622 [1633]</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Naples</td>
<td>1623</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perugia</td>
<td>1624</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Munich*</td>
<td>1626 [1633]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vienna}</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Presburg}</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Hammersmith*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dolebank-York*</td>
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<td>Burghausen*</td>
<td>1683</td>
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---


5 # signifies IBVM houses established under reformed Second Institute.
APPENDIX 3

Social Status

i. Social Status of All Nuns in All Cloisters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>57.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>25</td>
<td>4.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2.83</td>
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<td>0.19</td>
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<td>1.89</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.19</td>
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<tr>
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## ii. Social Status of Nuns by Type

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