

PRAYER, PATRONAGE, AND POLITICAL CONSPIRACY: ENGLISH NUNS AND THE RESTORATION*

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ABSTRACT. *Restoration historiography has so far remained silent regarding the alliance between the exiled royalists and the recusant religious houses in the Low Countries. This article examines the assistance provided to the royalist cause by Abbess Mary Knatchbull of the English Benedictine cloister at Ghent. The correspondence of Charles's leading advisers, most notably Sir Edward Hyde, reveals the extent to which the conspirators relied upon the nuns' mail service to communicate with their supporters in England and abroad, and upon the abbess's ability to obtain funds from local financiers. While the nuns were not central players in the conspiracies of the late 1650s, their activities reveal the royalists' dependency upon the networks established by Catholic exiles. The article also explores Mary Knatchbull's motives for devoting so much of her community's temporal and spiritual resources to the royalist cause. The rewards she sought from the king after 1660 suggest that she had a definite religious and political agenda which aimed ultimately at Catholic toleration. Therefore the article raises several important issues about Charles II's and his ministers' links with English Catholics and, in particular, it points to the important role of women in the hitherto masculine territory of royalist conspiracy and politics.*

I

Abbess Anne Neville of the English Benedictine house at Pontoise recorded the exuberant celebrations in the town of Ghent upon the restoration of Charles II, which included a high mass celebrated by the bishop, trumpet fanfares, huge bonfires and roving minstrels. Within the town's English cloister, the nuns sustained their rejoicing well beyond that of the townspeople's single night of revelling. They too lit a bonfire 'where my lady and the Religious sung catches and spent some howrs ther: and 3 days of feasting wth something extraordinary, and y^e whole week recreation'.¹

The Ghent Benedictine nuns had good reason to celebrate the coronation. From July 1656, their abbess, Mary Knatchbull, had been working for the royalist cause; dispatching and receiving the mail of Charles's closest advisers,

* I am grateful to David Lemmings and the assessors for their comments, and Caroline Bowden for directing me to the Clarendon and Carte MSS. I would like to thank in particular the superiors and archivists of the religious communities mentioned in the article for allowing me to cite their manuscripts.

¹ 'Abbess Neville's annals of five communities of English Benedictine nuns in Flanders, 1598–1687', ed. M. J. Rumsey, in *Miscellanea V* (Catholic Record Society, VI, 1909) (hereafter 'Abbess Neville's annals'), p. 39.

I

passing on news of potential supporters and unfolding political events in England, and organizing credit for the penurious prince. The principal collections of royalist papers contain correspondence by and about the Ghent abbess, and reveal that she was known to several of the leading royalist plotters in 1659 and 1660.² Many were directing their mail to Sir Edward Hyde under her cover, and some were in receipt of information about royalist affairs in England and abroad from her. Yet despite copious archival evidence of the Benedictine abbess's royalist activities in the final years of the Interregnum, historians have hitherto paid little attention to her.³

It is not difficult to pinpoint the reason for this oversight. The path to 1660 has always been studied as an exercise in high politics and rebellion, which are traditionally masculine terrains. The various royalist conspiracies and risings were male groupings and actions. Thus the intrusion of women into these affairs was treated either as part of the great royalist mythology – for example, Jane Lane's part in Charles's escape after Worcester – or with dismissive derision – exemplified by criticism of Henrietta Maria's efforts to assist her son in the early 1650s. The manoeuvres of the Protectors, the parliament, and the army were likewise singularly devoid of direct female activity. Women's inability to hold positions of political authority and to bear arms has therefore obliterated their participation in the unfolding events of the late 1650s. This is in spite of overwhelming evidence of their often highly regarded advice and assistance in royalist correspondence. Mary Knatchbull was not alone in attaining the confidence and respect of men like Hyde for her assistance. Elizabeth, Lady Mordaunt oversaw her husband's correspondence with the chancellor, who praised her astute political actions in his *History of the rebellion*, noting her 'very loyal spirit, and notable vivacity of wit and humour'.⁴

In this article I want to explore women's participation in Restoration politics by evaluating the relationship between the Benedictine nuns and Charles II. The Knatchbull correspondence, which identifies the Ghent abbess as an active conspirator, shows that women did engage in political activity at the highest levels. The nuns' control of royalist mail, transmission of news from

² The largest collections are the Clarendon and Carte manuscripts in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

³ There is no mention of her in D. Underdown, *Royalist conspiracy in England, 1649–1660* (New Haven, 1960); or in G. R. Smith, 'Royalist secret agents at Dover during the Commonwealth', *Historical Studies of Australia and New Zealand*, 12 (1967) pp. 477–90. Catholic and family histories are the exception. See B. Whelan, *Historic English convents of to-day: the story of the English cloisters in France and Flanders in penal times* (London, 1936), pp. 46–8, 121; H. Knatchbull-Hugessen, *Kentish family* (London, 1960), pp. 42–53. Caroline Bowden's essay, which locates the abbess's assistance within the unfolding events of the 1650s, appeared after this article was submitted for publication. It offers a detailed description of the abbess's involvement in royalist affairs, but does not explore the motives for her assistance. See Caroline Bowden, 'The abbess and Mrs Brown: Lady Mary Knatchbull and royalist politics in Flanders in the late 1650s', *Recusant History*, 24 (1999), pp. 288–308.

⁴ *The letter-book of John Viscount Mordaunt 1658–1660*, ed. M. Coate (Camden Society, 3rd ser., 69, 1945), pp. x–xix, 100–1, 109, 132, 134, 144; Clarendon, *The history of the rebellion and Civil Wars in England*, ed. W. Dunn Macray (6 vols., Oxford, 1888), vi, pp. 59, 61–3.

England, regular advice to Hyde, and funding of the king's cause equalled, if not surpassed, the contribution of many male supporters. Yet Knatchbull's gender and her religious profession proved enormous obstacles to an acknowledgement of her role, both in her day and in subsequent historical writing. As a woman she could not operate publicly in the political sphere; and as a nun she was physically removed from the centres of royalist action by strict monastic enclosure. Therefore her participation was filtered through the media of her agents and her letters, suggesting that her role was indirect. Recent feminist scholarship has recognized early modern women's exclusion from the formal institutions of power, but shown the enormous influence they wielded as the wives of men in authority and in their own right as servants and friends of royal women.⁵ This research challenges the notion that power is vested only in the dominant ideologies and institutions of a society. It draws upon post-structuralist theories demonstrating the diffuse nature of power, which Michel Foucault argued runs unevenly through the whole of society in the form of an ever-changing grid.⁶ Conceptualizing power in this way suggests that every level of society participates at some stage in its creation and exercise. It also argues that power can be fragmented among many operators whose concerted effort combines to achieve the desired goal. I think this is a useful model for conceptualizing the Ghent nuns' participation in the Restoration.

An analysis of Mary Knatchbull's activities uncovers the complex layers of political activity behind the events of 1658–60. Histories of the Restoration are unanimous in concluding that the king returned to England because of the breakdown of political authority after Cromwell's death, rather than through the efforts of the royalist conspirators. Yet David Underdown pointed out that 'although the conspirators did not make the Restoration ... the very continuity of conspiracy helped to keep loyalty alive, by dramatizing the fact that people existed who were willing to risk their lives and fortunes'.⁷ The comic succession of blundered plots and risings against the Protectorate and Commonwealth highlight the complexity of royalist ambitions. They all agreed that their aim was a return to the monarchy, but were divided as to how they should achieve their goal. Likewise they sought Charles's restoration for a plethora of different reasons: ranging from a genuine commitment to monarchical government; through to a wish for political stability; or personal desires of revenge for their ill treatment by the parliament; and selfish coveting of offices and rewards in the newly restored court. The participation of the Ghent nuns illustrates this diversity of action and motivation particularly well. The religious women were as committed as Hyde and other royalists to the coronation of Charles II, but for vastly different reasons.

⁵ See especially F. Harris, *A passion for government: the life of Sarah, duchess of Marlborough* (Oxford, 1991); S. Mendelson and P. Crawford, *Women in early modern England* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 365–80.

⁶ E. Grosz, 'Contemporary theories of power and subjectivity', in S. Gunew, ed., *Feminist knowledge: critique and construct* (London, 1990), pp. 80–92.

⁷ Underdown, *Royalist conspiracy*, pp. 338–9.

The nuns' complex agenda is expressed in the title of this article. On the eve of the Restoration, Abbess Knatchbull reassured the marquis of Ormonde that 'all these fresh hopes from England sett us a fresh to o[u]r prayers that God would protect and direct his Ma:^{ty} ... in that Glorius worke w^{ch} is reserved for his Ma:^{tyes} good fortune'.⁸ Like the other royalist agitators, the abbess understood that the king's 'good fortune' would filter through to his supporters in the form of financial and other rewards, so the nuns' prayers were a good investment. Yet the correspondence reveals that their divine mediation had a far deeper purpose than simply recouping the expenses of their years of work for the royalist cause. In May 1660 the abbess confided in Ormonde:

I now despaire of o[u]r longe wished for comfort of seeing his Ma:^{ty} heer, and I am affraid you will not tell me tis fitt wee hope for doing it [i.e. entertaining the king] in England though I will not despaire of any Miracle w^{ch} his Ma:^{ty} can attempt to work since God has Putt his power into his Ma:^{tyes} hands to use it att his pleasure.⁹

Her words express the political motives behind the prayers and the patronage. The nuns were working for the toleration of their faith in England. Indeed, Mary Knatchbull hoped to establish her cloister on English soil.

The abbess's influence with the king and his courtiers is only comprehensible in the light of the business she conducted on their behalf. So first I want to outline her position as a conspirator during the Interregnum. Then, in the second part, I will look behind her actions and the words in her letters to her motives. Finally, the conclusion will discuss the broader political significance of her membership of the royalist camp in the 1650s.

II

Mary Knatchbull was the daughter of a Catholic gentry family of Mersham Hatch in Kent which in the course of the seventeenth century sent six of its female relatives to the Ghent Benedictines.¹⁰ The Ghent abbey had been founded in 1624 by nuns from the Brussels Benedictine cloister, the first post-Reformation English nunnery. Mary, professed in 1628, was the niece of Ghent's first abbess, Lucy Knatchbull. She had proven herself a capable administrator under the two preceding superiors, so she was elected abbess in 1650, remaining in office until her death in 1696 at the age of eighty-seven.¹¹

Charles II's links with the Ghent cloister predated her term in office. In March 1650 he had visited her predecessor, Mary Roper, and reportedly requested the nuns' prayers. The annals record that he was so impressed with the abbess and her nuns that he later told the bishop of Ghent that 'if God ever

⁸ Knatchbull to Ormonde, 12 Apr. 1660, Bodleian Library (Bodl.), MS Carte (hereafter Carte) 214, fo. 26.

⁹ Knatchbull to Ormonde, 18 May 1660, Carte 30, fo. 663.

¹⁰ Some of the male members entered the Society of Jesus. For those who joined religious orders and the family generally, see H. Foley, *Records of the English province of the Society of Jesus* (8 vols., London, 1877–83), III, 1878, pp. 393–5n; Knatchbull-Hugessen, *Kentish family*.

¹¹ 'Abbess Neville's annals', p. 35.

restorde him to his kingdome this Comunity shold ever find the effects of his favour'.¹² When Abbess Roper lay dying shortly afterwards, he sent his physician to tend her, promising the man a large reward if she recovered. Unfortunately the abbess expired before the doctor arrived.¹³ It is not clear what contact occurred between the cloister and the royalist exiles while the court was in France and in Cologne, but the Ghent nuns renewed their acquaintance with the king upon his removal to Flanders in 1656.

Ironically, although exiles themselves the nuns were in a strong position to assist the royalist cause. The king had depended upon English Catholic assistance in the past. His celebrated escape after the debacle at Worcester had been engineered in part by a group of Midlands Catholics. David Underdown described English Catholics in the 1650s as 'a cohesive group with the usual recusant tradition of secret activity', and noted that such credentials equipped them to assist the royalist conspirators.¹⁴ The daughters of this resourceful religious minority had adapted the subversive traditions of their families to secure the survival of their convents. Following the foundation of the Brussels Benedictine abbey in 1598, Catholic gentlewomen embraced the monastic life so enthusiastically that by 1700 there were twenty-two contemplative houses in existence. Although located in France and the Low Countries, these religious communities professed almost exclusively English women, often from the leading recusant gentry households, whose dowries and family patronage were central to their economic security. Regular contact with supporters across the Channel was therefore both natural and crucial.

However, the terms of strict monastic enclosure, which was observed in all of the contemplative monasteries, placed physical barriers between the nuns and those with whom they did business. For the straitened English abbesses and prioresses, the quill, ink, and paper became their cloisters' lifeline with the families, patrons, benefactors, and trades people upon whose support and goodwill the nuns depended. Business with kin in England demanded a network of friends and agents who would secure the safe passage of money and letters, in addition to recruiting novices and pupils for the convent schools. Similar networks were nurtured on the continent, and comprised the superiors of other English cloisters, friends among the exiled English clergy and laity, and supportive locals. By the 1650s the Ghent Benedictines had established reliable communication links both locally and in their homeland. These channels were consolidated and extended in the capable hands of Mary Knatchbull, who, through a combination of personal contacts and bribes to minor officials, transported her own mail and that of other exiles and travellers to England. Thus, as she explained to Hyde in 1659, she was well placed to help the king, and would do so at her own expense.¹⁵

¹² Ibid., pp. 31–2; *Annals of the English Benedictines at Ghent, now at St. Mary's Abbey, Oulton in Staffordshire (Ghent annals)* (Oulton, 1894), pp. 24–5. ¹³ 'Abbess Neville's annals', p. 34.

¹⁴ Underdown, *Royalist conspiracy*, p. 77.

¹⁵ Knatchbull to Hyde, 24 June 1659, Bodl., MS Clarendon (hereafter Clarendon) 61, fo. 191.

Given the royalists' limited resources, it was expedient for them to exploit these existing arrangements which were offered so generously by their supporters. Yet Mary Knatchbull was somewhat disingenuous in her assurances to Hyde that she could cover the cost of the royalist mail. The Ghent cloister had been in serious debt since extending the monastery buildings in 1639. The Civil War saw the convent's rents earned from investments in England and Ireland fail, and income from dowries cease because there were so few women entering and taking their final vows.¹⁶ Upon assuming office in 1650, Mary Knatchbull had eighty people to support and debts of over £6,000.¹⁷ She approached this dilemma with a pragmatism and determination which later was to characterize her dealings with the royalists. First she persuaded their greatest creditor, a Dutch merchant, to accept a proportion of each new nun's dowry in lieu of the £200 per annum interest the loan demanded.¹⁸ Then, to reduce the numbers under her own roof, she established a new cloister in Boulogne.¹⁹ Moreover, to ensure a regular income she sanctioned a monastic business venture in which shifts of nuns neglected their spiritual duties to make artificial flowers, which were then sold through local merchants for up to £30 a consignment.²⁰ As a result of these business dealings during the difficult early years of her rule, the abbess cultivated the acquaintance of several merchants in Antwerp, whom she termed shrewdly 'my frindes'.²¹

However, in spite of the monastery's obvious financial woes, it seems that the Ghent nuns' first concrete assistance to the king was pecuniary.²² The royalist camp's poverty during the 1650s was barely alleviated by efforts to collect money from loyal supporters in England, so they were dependent upon pensions and gifts from princes and well-wishers abroad.²³ The Ghent Benedictines joined others in providing financial aid. Yet, unlike the wealthier Bruges Augustinian nuns who cemented their friendship with the king in a donation of 1,000 florins, Mary Knatchbull procured money for Charles on her credit.²⁴ With the permission of her nuns, the abbess arranged loans through her merchant 'frindes' for the royalists, using the convent as security. She did so in the knowledge that her chances of recovering the money were doubtful but, according to the annalist, she placed her trust in God.²⁵ Divine intervention was slow. In 1657 Hyde wrote to Ormonde: 'I am at my witts end,

¹⁶ Stafford, Oulton Abbey Archives (OA), MS G.11, Appeal to the Citizens of Ghent: 'An account of the necessitys of the community'.

¹⁷ Buckfastleigh, Buckfast Abbey Archives (BA), Pontoise MS, Mary Knatchbull, 'An account of the foundation of the convent of Boulogne: first filiation from Ghent' (1653), fo. 2; 'Abbess Neville's annals', pp. 25–37; *Ghent annals*, pp. 162–4.

¹⁸ 'Abbess Neville's annals', p. 37; *Ghent annals*, pp. 164–6.

¹⁹ BA, Pontoise MS, 'Account', fos. 3–69.

²⁰ 'Abbess Neville's annals', p. 25.

²¹ BA, Pontoise MS, 'Account', fo. 12.

²² 'Abbess Neville's annals', p. 38.

²³ R. Hutton, *Charles the second: king of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 74–7, 84–5, 89, 109, 112–13; Underdown, *Royalist conspiracy*, pp. 65–6, 170–1, 299–300.

²⁴ C. S. Durrant, *A link between Flemish mystics and English martyrs* (London, 1925), pp. 262–3; Whelan, *Historic convents*, pp. 87–8.

²⁵ 'Abbess Neville's annals', pp. 36–7.

how to provyde mony to pay the 2500 [guilders] the Kinge had at Dunkirke upon my Lady Abbess's credit, which must be done.²⁶ The situation was little changed in early 1659 when Knatchbull reminded Hyde that he was due to repay a loan to a Brussels merchant, pointedly referring to her convent's poor financial position.²⁷ Needless to say, he defaulted, but she hastily assured him that she would manage, sympathetically noting the increasing reluctance on the continent to provide Charles any credit.²⁸ Yet, despite the royalist leaders' inability to repay the convent, she continued to handle their finances. In November 1659, on the eve of his journey to Madrid, the earl of Bristol advised Hyde that 3,000 florins to clear his expenses would be sent via the abbess.²⁹

The loyalty displayed by Mary Knatchbull in her arrangement of credit for the king, and what it revealed of the wide range of contacts and resources at her disposal, encouraged Hyde to entrust other business to her; in particular, the dispatch and receipt of the exiled royalists' letters to their allies in England and in France. The abbess was corresponding with Hyde within weeks of his relocation from Cologne to Flanders in April 1656.³⁰ The actual date when she began conveying mail is unclear. However, she was certainly relaying packets for Hyde by the end of December 1657.³¹ Despite mention of her in correspondence with Ormonde and the king's secretary, Sir Edward Nicholas, her letters to the former are not extant before December 1659, and her services for the latter were apparently first offered in March 1658.³²

The letters of the abbess and her correspondents reveal the complexity of the Ghent mail service. Correspondence from the royalist exiles was sent to Ghent each week, and the abbess would include it in her convent's mail packet to an agent in England, who would in turn ensure the contents safe passage to their recipients. Likewise her assistants on the other side of the Channel would receive English letters for Charles, Hyde, Ormonde, Nicholas, and others, and direct them to the cloister. In Ghent the abbess sorted the mail and forwarded it, sending a covering note with each dispatch. The correspondents used a variety of aliases and Knatchbull informed them of changes to these, as well as transmitting new ciphers.³³ Sensitive material from royalists under government suspicion was apparently sent in coded letters addressed to the abbess.³⁴ She would open them and forward the documents to their intended recipient, or else she simply conveyed the news they contained in her own covering letter.³⁵ The wide range of contacts the abbess had accumulated in the conduct of her

²⁶ Hyde to Ormonde, 22 Dec. 1657, Clarendon 56, fo. 334.

²⁷ Knatchbull to Hyde, 30 Jan. 1659, Clarendon 59, fo. 442.

²⁸ Knatchbull to Hyde, 12 Feb. 1659, Clarendon 60, fo. 65.

²⁹ [Bristol] to Hyde, 18 Nov. 1659, Clarendon 66, fo. 200.

³⁰ The first letter is Hyde to Knatchbull, 17 July 1656, Clarendon 52, fo. 81.

³¹ Hyde to Ormonde, 27 Dec. 1657, Clarendon 56, fo. 348.

³² Knatchbull to Ormonde, [Dec. 1659], Carte 30, fo. 450; Knatchbull to Nicholas, 7 Mar. 1658, London, PRO, State Papers (SP) 77/32, fo. 41.

³³ Clarendon 57, fo. 21; 59, fo. 110; Carte 213, fo. 518; 214, fo. 26.

³⁴ Clarendon 61, fols. 274–5; Carte 213, fols. 592–3.

³⁵ Clarendon 65, fo. 69; 66, fo. 120.

mail service was most evident when the usual channels for forwarding letters failed, necessitating a complicated re-routing of packets via multiple agents.³⁶

Yet it was unusual for the royalists to suspect that those letters handled by the Ghent nuns had been intercepted by government agents. October 1658 marked the first occasion when Knatchbull warned Hyde that she feared her packet had been opened, and letters containing significant news removed.³⁷ This obstruction in her network continued sporadically into January 1659, and Hyde temporarily arranged an alternative route, while the abbess checked the security of her agents.³⁸ However, the problem was apparently resolved, and interception did not become an issue again until the period following the army's expulsion of the Rump Parliament in October 1659, when one of Knatchbull's London aides suspected that the cloister's mail was under suspicion, prompting the chancellor to find some other conveyance for his next few posts.³⁹ In early November the abbess told Hyde that the English ports were closed to both France and the Low Countries.⁴⁰ A week later the mail was flowing, and she reported receipt of three weeks' letters from England.⁴¹ However, the correspondence over the troubled winter months of 1659–60 was constantly disrupted. Apart from apparent official interception, Lady Mary Moore, one of Knatchbull's principal agents in England and the wife of Sir Henry Moore, the royalist conspirator, was so fearful to continue her clandestine traffic of conspirators' letters that she too obstructed its passage.⁴² By February 1660 Knatchbull had restructured her network to Hyde's satisfaction. However, it seems his correspondents in London were still wary of her means and entrusted their letters to other couriers who were not so reliable, prompting Hyde to ask the faithful royalist agent, William Rumbold, somewhat irritably in March why he still refused to 'send by My Lady Abbess, w^{ch} conveyance now meets with no obstructions'.⁴³

The Ghent cloister was only one of several mail networks used by the royalists.⁴⁴ However, it seemed to be one of the more frequently patronized courier services. Indeed, Hyde evidently deemed it to be one of the more reliable systems. Upon the failure of Rumbold's regular packet in December 1659, the chancellor communicated his fear of its interception to Viscount

³⁶ Clarendon 59, fo. 395; 68, fo. 22.

³⁷ Knatchbull to Hyde, 5 Oct. 1658, Clarendon 59, fo. 28.

³⁸ Hyde to [Slingsby], 12 Jan. 1659, Clarendon 59, fo. 395.

³⁹ Knatchbull to Hyde, 21 Oct. 1659, Clarendon 65, fo. 188.

⁴⁰ Knatchbull to [Hyde], 5 Nov. 1659, Clarendon 66, fo. 37.

⁴¹ Knatchbull to [Hyde], 12 Nov. 1659, Clarendon 66, fo. 120.

⁴² Hyde to [Rumbold], 12 Jan. 1660, Clarendon 68, fo. 88. For miscarriage of mail, see *ibid.*, fos. 9, 133, 135; 67, fos. 83, 99, 154, 215; 63, fo. 318.

⁴³ Hyde to [Rumbold], 26 Mar. 1660, Clarendon 70, fo. 163. For earlier promptings see *ibid.*, fos. 60, 101.

⁴⁴ *Calendar of State Papers Domestic (CSPD), 1660–1661*, p. 12. Petition of Thomas Fry for place of messenger of the council chamber in reward for his conveyance of the packets of Mordaunt and Rumbold. For a discussion of royalist agents and their communication links between England and the exiles, see Smith, 'Secret agents', pp. 477–90.

Mordaunt, saying ‘that packet, which never yet miscarried to my lady abbesse, did not arrive this weeks’.⁴⁵ His confidence in her was often affirmed by his fellow correspondents. In October 1658 Lord Newburgh informed him ‘you took a very sure way to address yours for me to my Lady Abbess for she sent itt immediatly to me’.⁴⁶ Similarly when Ormonde was in London in early 1658, he sent two letters to Hyde, one using Mary Knatchbull’s cover and the other via an alternative channel. Only one reached Hyde, and Ormonde deduced that it was the former, again verifying the security of the abbess’s mail.⁴⁷

Knatchbull apparently entrusted her mail to the official postal service, but used a combination of allies and bribes to secure her packets from official attention.⁴⁸ Given the high incidence of interception in the years when Thurloe was in charge of the Protectorate’s espionage activities, her success is remarkable. From 1655 he was in complete control of the post office and oversaw a thriving business of opening and copying the letters of known and suspected conspirators. In 1657 Alan Brodrick, who supplied Hyde with intelligence about the Protectorate’s naval and military capacity, estimated that three in every four letters sent by regular post were lost.⁴⁹ Thurloe’s spies must have been aware that the Ghent cloister harboured a staunchly royalist abbess, who was in regular contact with Charles Stuart and his ministers.⁵⁰ Certainly Samuel Morland, one of Thurloe’s principal aides at the post office, was aware of her service when he became a double agent in 1659, because he sent news to Hyde under her cover in November.⁵¹ Yet Knatchbull claimed that she could identify the signs of tampering, and Thurloe’s assistants were not particularly skilled at opening and resealing documents.⁵² Given the network of agents the abbess employed, it is probable that some were more invisible to government probing than others. The correspondence rarely reveals the identity of her English representatives, but they most likely comprised the cloister’s business associates, who were well versed in the transmission of sensitive information. On at least one occasion, a wary agent burned her packet of letters, for fear it might fall into the wrong hands.⁵³ Knatchbull used both women and men as couriers in England, and women seemed less likely to

⁴⁵ *Letter-book of Viscount Mordaunt*, ed. Coate, p. 139.

⁴⁶ [Lord Newburgh] to Hyde, 20 Oct. 1658, Clarendon 59, fo. 104.

⁴⁷ Ormonde to Hyde, 17 Feb. 1658, Clarendon 57, fo. 76; 1 Mar. 1658, *ibid.*, fo. 136; 15 Mar. 1658, *ibid.*, fo. 199.

⁴⁸ Knatchbull to Hyde, 24 June 1659, Clarendon 61, fo. 191.

⁴⁹ Underdown, *Royalist conspiracy*, p. 191.

⁵⁰ But there are no obvious references to her in Thurloe’s papers: Bodl., MS Rawlinson A. 62–7; *A collection of the state papers of John Thurloe esq., secretary first to the Council of State, and afterwards to the two Protectors, Oliver and Richard Cromwell*, ed. T. Birch (7 vols., London, 1742), v–vii. However, the state papers for 1659–60 do suggest rare interception, see Knatchbull-Hugessen, *Kentish family*, p. 44.

⁵¹ [Morland] to [Hyde], 25 Nov. 1659, Clarendon 67, fos. 37–9.

⁵² C. H. Firth, ‘Thurloe and the Post Office’, *English Historical Review*, 13 (1898), pp. 530–1; Underdown, *Royalist conspiracy*, pp. 61–2; A. Marshall, *Intelligence and espionage in the reign of Charles II* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 85.

⁵³ Knatchbull to Nicholas, 23 June 1658, British Library (BL), MS Egerton 2536, fo. 243.

attract suspicion. Moreover, Knatchbull controlled such a vast quantity of mail that it was no doubt impossible for the spies at the post office to intercept it all.⁵⁴ Whatever the success rate of her postal service and the reasons for its security, Hyde was growing increasingly dependent upon it in 1659 and 1660.

The eighteen months leading to the Restoration also marked the chancellor's growing confidence in the abbess's reporting and evaluation of news from England. Through her web of contacts, she received regular bulletins about the political situation in London and the counties, as well as copies of some royalist and parliamentary pamphlets, which she duly forwarded to Hyde.⁵⁵ In 1658 praise of her intelligences had evidently reached Sir Edward Nicholas, but she modestly denied that she was privy to exclusive information:

My intelligence I assure you Sr is very inconsiderable. The world knows I am a hartly lover of his Ma:^{tyes} interests and upon that account frinds are so charitable some times as tell me good nuse wⁿ any is stirring, w^{ch} I shall be very ready to impart to you wⁿ I have any worth writing. Att the present I heare not any thinge more then the prints from England delivers.⁵⁶

However, by June 1659, she was receiving bulletins from such diverse contacts that her letters increasingly offered her own summary and evaluation of the political situation in England and abroad.⁵⁷ Following the crushing of Sir George Booth's rising in August, she told Hyde that despite her abhorrence of a foreign invasion, Booth's defeat made the assistance of a foreign army imperative in any attempt by Charles to land in England.⁵⁸ She also advised Hyde about the character and utility of their mutual correspondents.⁵⁹ While the chancellor might not always have agreed with her views, he and his correspondents accepted that her information was reliable, passing it on to one another in their letters.

The good relationship Mary Knatchbull had fostered with the exiled royalists is perhaps best reflected in the local news and gossip she imparted to Hyde and her other correspondents. Their common goal of Charles's restoration, coupled with shared hopes and fears for the safety of mutual friends and acquaintances, bound them in an association best described as 'political kinship'. The Ghent cloister formed a vital link in this royalist 'family' by keeping track of its members in England and abroad, and informing leaders, agents, and their kin of one another's whereabouts.⁶⁰ Knatchbull strengthened the sense of kinship by venturing news of the 'monastic family', which encompassed both her own cloister and the broader congregation of English

⁵⁴ Some scholars have cast doubt upon Thurloe's brilliant and all-encompassing control of intelligence, see Smith, 'Secret agents', p. 490; Marshall, *Intelligence and espionage*, pp. 23–4.

⁵⁵ Knatchbull to [Hyde], 16 Sept. 1659, Clarendon 64, fos. 183–4; 15 Nov. 1659, 66, fo. 167.

⁵⁶ Knatchbull to Nicholas, 7 Mar. 1658, PRO, SP 77/32, fo. 41.

⁵⁷ For examples, see Clarendon 62, fo. 176; 64, fos. 105, 183–4; 66, fo. 120; 67, fos. 83, 215. She also passed on news to Ormonde, see Carte 30, fo. 543.

⁵⁸ Knatchbull to Hyde, 8 Sept. 1659, Clarendon 64, fo. 105.

⁵⁹ Knatchbull to Hyde, 17 Oct. 1658, Clarendon 59, fo. 87; 22 July 1659, Clarendon 62, fo. 73.

⁶⁰ For examples, see Clarendon 59, fo. 87; 61, fos. 191–2; 62, fo. 73; 64, fo. 105; Carte 30, fo. 541.

and foreign houses on the continent. In a 1659 letter to Hyde she confirmed that one of her nuns, the highly revered Magdalen Digby, had just died and, as a consequence, she was 'in no very good hummer to write'.⁶¹ In a 1660 missive to Ormonde, the abbess urged him to persuade Abbot Walter Montagu to visit Ghent, so that she could thank him for his charity to her daughter-house at Pontoise, and beg him to offer more aid to the struggling nuns.⁶² The conversion to Catholicism of Princess Louise of Bohemia, Charles's cousin, and her subsequent profession as a nun, forged an even closer bond between the monastic and royalist families. Mary Knatchbull was evidently known to the princess. In January 1658 the earl of Bristol forwarded a letter from Louise to Charles, asking him to relate the contents to the abbess because Louise planned to visit Ghent.⁶³ The following year, Knatchbull gave Secretary Nicholas an account of the princess's clothing ceremony, which she had learned from the abbess of the Pontoise Benedictines.⁶⁴ In addition, visits to the cloister by Charles, his ministers, and other members of the royal family further bolstered the Ghent nuns' sense of royalist identity and kinship.⁶⁵

The correspondence shows therefore that whatever their differences in the area of spiritual allegiance, the royalists and Knatchbull upheld and promoted a common political agenda during the 1650s. Their desire to witness a restoration of the Stuart monarchy in the person of Charles II cemented an amicable alliance. However, the Restoration saw the relationship between the Ghent nuns and Charles and his ministers change markedly, even in the weeks between Monck's declaration for the king and the royal party's return to England. The abbess's influential position within the royalist camp, which had existed purely by virtue of her capacity to assist them, was lost; and she was forced into the role of a humble supplicant, demoted in the royal favour because of her Catholicism and her religious profession. Yet Mary Knatchbull's patronage of the royalists in their time of need had generated such bonds of obligation and friendship that it was difficult for the king and his ministers to ignore completely her pleas for recompense. In her letters and travels of 1660 and 1661, the Ghent abbess unveiled the ambitious agenda which had motivated her steadfast adherence to the king's cause to the point of almost bankrupting her cloister. She did not seek mere financial compensation for her conspiratorial labours. In fact, during the 1650s she had been working for the restoration of the king, and with him, the toleration of Catholicism.

⁶¹ Knatchbull to Hyde, 8 Sept. 1659, Clarendon 64, fo. 105.

⁶² Knatchbull to Ormonde, 3 Mar. 1660, Carte 30, fo. 541. The Ghent filiation to Boulogne (mentioned above) had moved to Pontoise in 1658, and by 1660 was in major financial difficulties after borrowing money to extend the monastery buildings. Montagu, former almoner to Henrietta Maria and commendatory abbot of St Martin, near Pontoise, became one of the cloister's principal benefactors. See 'Abbess Neville's annals', pp. 48–52, 64–5.

⁶³ Bristol to the king, 29 Jan. 1658, Clarendon 57, fo. 59; Princess Louise to the king, 20 Jan. 1658, *ibid.*, fos. 61–2; [Bristol] to Hyde, 13 Feb. 1658, *ibid.*, fo. 86.

⁶⁴ Knatchbull to Nicholas, 2 Apr. 1659, BL, MS Egerton 2536, fo. 337.

⁶⁵ 'Abbess Neville's annals', pp. 36, 39; [Bristol] to Hyde, 13 Feb. 1658, Clarendon 57, fo. 86.

III

Writing of Mary Knatchbull's support for the exiled prince at a time when Ghent could least afford it, Anne Neville of the Pontoise Benedictines claimed that the abbess's generosity was unconditional.⁶⁶ Yet given Charles's earlier assurances of favour should his endeavours to return to England succeed, and Knatchbull's subsequent requests for help after the Restoration, her motives were not entirely altruistic. I now want to unravel the various reasons for Mary Knatchbull's assistance. Her motivation was complex and it operated at several levels. First, it was to advance her cloister's prospects. In return for the aid, the abbess expected to reap the fruits of royal patronage once the king's fortunes were reversed. Moreover, she understood that royalist connections would raise the profile of her own religious house and thereby attract novices and pupils from the recusant gentry who had supported Charles I during the Civil War. Second, she also cultivated her royalist connections to benefit her personal patronage network, and to enhance her own position within it. Third and finally, she was intent upon founding a new monastery, and it is this seemingly modest aim which best illuminates her overtly political ambitions.

Although exultant at the news of Charles's long-awaited restoration for which so many prayers, letters, and loans had been expended, Abbess Knatchbull was obviously fearful that once safely back in England, the king and his ministers might forget her nuns' efforts on their behalf. Her letters to Hyde and Ormonde in April and May 1660 are tinged with these concerns, reiterating the nuns' loyalty and their hopes of continued correspondence with their friends at the court.⁶⁷ In her final letter to Hyde, she begged him to keep the needs of her community in mind, writing 'You know w^t it is to want a broad and therefore though we may not come home to you, [you] will by yo^r goodness and piety continue some meanes by w^{ch} wth more ease wee may abroad continue our prayers for you.'⁶⁸ Her trepidation was not ungrounded. The avalanche of petitions descending upon the courtiers, added to the pressures of establishing the Restoration government, distracted the ministers from fulfilling their obligations to the nuns. By September, the abbess was writing to Ormonde requesting 'a generous care and kindness towards easing the burthen of our over opprest condission'.⁶⁹ Such reminders continued into the next year. Congratulating Ormonde on his promotion to a dukedom, Knatchbull pointedly mentioned the nuns' continuing 'Tedeums and prayers for his Ma:^{ty}s increasing fellisity'.⁷⁰

The abbess's concern about the possible short-term memory of the royalists once they had returned to the king's dominions must also have motivated her

⁶⁶ 'Abbess Neville's annals', p. 36.

⁶⁷ Knatchbull to Hyde, 26 Apr. 1660, Clarendon 71, fo. 268; 4 May 1660, Clarendon 72, fo. 15. Knatchbull to Ormonde, 12 May 1660, Carte 214, fo. 171; 18 May 1660, Carte 30, fo. 663.

⁶⁸ Knatchbull to [Hyde], 25 May 1660, Clarendon 72, fo. 394.

⁶⁹ Knatchbull to Ormonde, 9 Sept. 1660, Carte 31, fo. 28.

⁷⁰ Knatchbull to Ormonde, 29 Apr. 1661, *ibid.*, fo. 157.

plaintive requests for a final visit from Charles. In letters to Ormonde in May 1660 she expressed a desire for the king to visit Ghent before he set out for England.⁷¹ She lobbied Hyde for the same purpose.⁷² Her requests in these instances were somewhat more restrained than earlier ones. In December 1659, the nuns had been bitterly disappointed when, upon his return from Spain, Charles had failed to visit them en route to Brussels. In a letter to Ormonde which professed the community's loyalty to the king, and the nuns' desire to serve him in whatever way possible, she begged the marquis to grant their wish for a visit, pleading 'For God's sake my Lord procure wee may see his Ma:^{ty} before he leaves these parts.'⁷³ Charles was not deaf to Abbess Knatchbull's pleas for attention. He reportedly visited Ghent 'to take leave of my lady Knatchbull'. Then, on the eve of his departure for England, he wrote thanking her for the nuns' support in his time of need; and, with a gift of 500 gold pistols, promised that 'yu shale find y^e hereafter I will do all I can, to make y^r condition more easy'.⁷⁴

As this letter implied, Charles II respected Mary Knatchbull, and appreciated her efforts on his behalf. Whatever his shortcomings after 1660, he had done his utmost to oblige her requests in previous years. He had visited Ghent on many occasions during his exile in Flanders, apparently even lodging at the convent on occasions.⁷⁵ According to the Benedictine annals, during such sojourns he discussed his political business with the abbess, and sought the nuns' prayers.⁷⁶ Such evidence of royal favour was coveted by the English cloisters which depended upon good connections for recruitment of novices and pupils. Annalists carefully recorded the occasion, relating its nature, those attending the royal visitor, and any favourable comments, promises, or gifts bestowed upon the house. Given their fairly regular periods of exile during the course of the century, the Stuarts enjoyed the hospitality of several monastic houses.⁷⁷ They also acted as patrons, providing financial assistance and interceding on the nuns' behalf in disputes with local clerical and lay bureaucracies.⁷⁸ So Mary Knatchbull's impatient requests on behalf of her

⁷¹ Knatchbull to Ormonde, 12 May 1660, Carte 214, fo. 171; 18 May 1660, Carte 30, fo. 663.

⁷² Knatchbull to Hyde, 26 Apr. 1660, Clarendon 71, fo. 268.

⁷³ Knatchbull to Ormonde, [Dec. 1659], Carte 30, fo. 450.

⁷⁴ 'Abbess Neville's annals', p. 39.

⁷⁵ In 1698 the earl of Ailesbury visited the Ghent cloister and stayed in the room supposedly used by Charles in 1658 and 1659. See *Memoirs of Thomas, Earl of Ailesbury* (2 vols., Westminster, 1890), II, pp. 464–5.

⁷⁶ 'Abbess Neville's annals', pp. 31–2, 36; OA, MS G.39, *The English Monastery at Ghent*, fo. 2.

⁷⁷ 'Abbess Neville's annals', pp. 17–18; Durrant, *Flemish mystics*, pp. 316–17; A. F. Allison, 'The English Augustinian convent of Our Lady of Syon at Paris: its foundation and struggle for survival during the first eighty years, 1634–1713', *Recusant History*, 21 (1993), p. 484; *Ghent annals*, pp. 24–5.

⁷⁸ Abbess Mary Percy to Gerbier, 29 May 1637, PRO, SP 77/27, fo. 195; Abbess Mary Caryll of Dunkirk Benedictines to John Caryll at St Germain, [c. 1695], BL MS Add. 28,226, Caryll letters, fo. 113; *Ghent annals*, p. 44; Whelan, *Historic convents*, pp. 59–60, 62–3, 67–9. I discuss this

nuns for Charles to visit the Ghent community were predicated upon more than a simple desire to entertain the king. On the eve of the Restoration, when it was hoped that the monastic communities would once again be able to attract English postulants, it was prudent to advertise the cloister's royal favour.

However, during the 1650s, the king's sponsorship of the Benedictine abbess extended beyond visiting her community. Writing to the earl of Bristol in 1656, Hyde noted that 'the Lady Abbess at Gante is a subject of [such] eminent affection, that he [i.e. Charles] is willing to gratify her in any thing that is in his owne power'.⁷⁹ In this instance, she had applied for the preferment of a friend at the Spanish Court. Later suits were also successful. In January 1660 Hyde reported that Charles had approached the Spanish recommending the appointment of the nuns' confessor to a canonry at Ghent.⁸⁰ There was even talk of Mary Knatchbull having secured the rights to St James's Park in the event of a restoration.⁸¹ Therefore, apart from the tangible benefits for her own monastery's welfare, access to the king provided the abbess with an opportunity to wield considerable personal power, through her potential to advance the interests of her family and friends.

The royalists' letters demonstrate quite clearly that by 1660 Knatchbull was at the centre of an expanding patronage network. Recent scholarship has shown that women frequently inhabited, sometimes even controlled, the spaces within which the commerce of early modern patronage occurred, giving them access to significant political influence.⁸² The abbess of Ghent exemplified the power women could exercise in this way. As superior of a religious community, Mary Knatchbull had nurtured potential patrons and accumulated a plethora of clients. Many of the former were in a position to assist the royalists in the 1650s, while some of the latter had been dislocated from their fortunes and homeland by their espousal of the cavaliers' cause during the Civil War. Those in need recruited the assistance of their well-connected kinswoman at Ghent.

During the 1650s Knatchbull used her relationship with the royalist leaders to secure positions for her clients. A number of her relations were employed in the king's business upon her advice. In September 1659, she sought a place for her cousin Francis Roper, whom she recommended to Hyde as 'no unusefull creature' for the royalist service.⁸³ In her letter of the following week, she thanked him for his 'kind favour and frindship' to her cousin.⁸⁴ Such a prompt

further in my forthcoming book, *Gender and Politics in Seventeenth-Century English Convents* (Macmillan).

⁷⁹ Hyde to Bristol, 18 Oct. 1656, Clarendon 52, fo. 341.

⁸⁰ Hyde to Bennet, 24 Jan. 1660, Clarendon 68, fo. 155. For the continuation of their correspondence about this preferment, see Clarendon 70, fo. 70; 71, fo. 119.

⁸¹ [Peter Talbot to Sir Robert Talbot], 21 July 1659, Clarendon 62, fo. 52; Knatchbull-Hugessen, *Kentish family*, pp. 45–6.

⁸² See n. 5.

⁸³ Knatchbull to Hyde, 17 Sept. 1659, Clarendon 64, fo. 197.

⁸⁴ Knatchbull to Hyde, 23 Sept. 1659, Clarendon 64, fo. 258.

response on Hyde's part suggests the power of Knatchbull's suit. As I have already suggested, by this time the abbess was becoming an increasingly important aide in the royalist camp. However, it is also possible that the chancellor's inability to repay the loans he had obtained on her credit that year made him more willing to accede to her appeals for patronage to compensate for the financial debt. By April 1660 her cousin's position seemed secure, prompting her to thank Hyde for his patronage which had 'putt me att the end of my care for him'.⁸⁵ However, she did not only lobby the chancellor. Between January and March 1660 she approached Ormonde on the behalf of another cousin, Plunkett, whose good fortune apparently continued after the Restoration.⁸⁶

It was not only her own kin who sought Knatchbull's influence. In 1656 she was an advocate for the duke of Buckingham in his quest to return to the royal favour.⁸⁷ September 1658 saw her intercede on behalf of Colonel Richard Butler, Ormonde's brother, whose large debts she had taken on her credit in the hope that his brother would relieve them.⁸⁸ The abbess acquired such a formidable reputation as a successful patron that other royalists approached her when their own applications to the king's ministers had failed. In early 1660, the countess of Bristol learned of her husband's whereabouts and his status in the royal favour by using Knatchbull as an intermediary between herself and Ormonde.⁸⁹ On the eve of the Restoration, those employed in the Ghent postal network directed their petitions for preferment through the abbess. For example, Lady Mary Moore, the wife of royalist conspirator Sir Henry Moore, had been one of the agents in London. Lady Moore's handling of the mail had been somewhat unreliable at times, and as a result she had incurred Hyde's displeasure.⁹⁰ In recognition of Knatchbull's influence with him, she wrote, 'Madame I doe not know well how to begg; yett I must be an humble petitioner to my Lord Chanselor but by yr La:^{ty} means and favour else should I not have confidence to aske or hopes to obtaine my request.'⁹¹ Lady Moore was not the only supplicant. In her letter to Hyde recommending that suit, Knatchbull also sought assistance for four orphaned girls whose inheritance was being detained by their uncle.⁹²

Petitioners recognized the influential position the abbess had obtained as a result of her own patronage of the exiled and impecunious royalists. Mary Knatchbull likewise understood that the newly restored monarch was indebted

⁸⁵ Knatchbull to Hyde, 26 Apr. 1660, Clarendon 71, fo. 268. In May 1660 she thanked Hyde for his preferment of her cousins, Francis and William Roper, as well as Colonel Charles Finch; see Clarendon 72, fo. 391.

⁸⁶ Carte 213, fo. 500; 30, fos. 541, 543; 31, fo. 157.

⁸⁷ Hyde to Knatchbull, 17 July 1656, Clarendon 52, fo. 81; Peter Talbot to the king, 19 July 1656, *ibid.*, fo. 88.

⁸⁸ Knatchbull to Hyde, Sept. 1658, Clarendon 58, fo. 228.

⁸⁹ For letters between Knatchbull, Ormonde, the countess and Hyde (Jan. to May), see Carte 213, fos. 492, 494, 518, 614; 30, fos. 543, 663; 214, fos. 23, 26, 171; Clarendon 72, fo. 15.

⁹⁰ Knatchbull to Hyde, 22 July 1659, Clarendon 62, fo. 73; Hyde to [Rumbold], 12 Jan. 1660, Clarendon 68, fo. 88.

⁹¹ Moore to Knatchbull, 21 May 1660, Clarendon 72, fo. 365.

⁹² Knatchbull to [Hyde], 25 May 1660, *ibid.*, fos. 392–3.

by her assistance. Hence, from the moment the Restoration seemed secure, she began lobbying his ministers about her chosen reward, the foundation of another Ghent daughter-house. The nuns may have entertained some hopes of their community's return to England in the event of Charles's restoration, but they were realistic about the chances of such a windfall. On 18 May when Knatchbull begrudgingly admitted to Ormonde that they doubted they would see the king before his return to England, she added 'and I am affraid you will not tell me tis fitt wee hope for doing it in England'.⁹³ Instead the pragmatic Benedictine nun had formulated an alternative bounty. In April 1660 she asked Ormonde for advice concerning this project, reminding him that on a previous occasion 'you did but beare the consults of yo^r Abbess and her counsell about the nue Monastery w^{ch} in good time his Ma:^{ty} is to allow her'.⁹⁴ As this reminder and her subsequent letters suggest, Mary Knatchbull had high ambitions. She had requested the foundation of a new monastery which had the financial support and recognition of the king. In other words, she wanted to call it a 'royal foundation'.

We only have the abbess's word that Charles had indeed consented to the proposal. Her letters and the lengthy account of the new foundation by the Benedictine annalist, Anne Neville, report it.⁹⁵ It is difficult to imagine how a Protestant monarch might have provided letters patent for a Catholic convent, even in the euphoria of the Restoration. The improbability of such an enterprise most likely explains why the king was slow to grant the Ghent nuns their desired cloister. However, Abbess Knatchbull would not permit him to forget her project, nor the debt Ghent had incurred for his cause. As early as September 1660 she had sent a messenger to Ormonde, who presumably pressed her case. In May 1661, her cousin Patrick Bryant went to the Court to secure 'that work of charity his Sacred Ma:^{ty} hath designed to doe our Community'.⁹⁶ Bryant's mission was unsuccessful, so the abbess took matters into her own capable hands. In October she, two of her nuns, and the convent's confessor travelled to England to press their suit directly. The annalist recorded that 'she found a most kynd reception from his majesty with all favour possible'.⁹⁷ He agreed to her request, assigning £3,000, of which she received £1,000 immediately, thanks to Hyde's intervention.

The abbess wasted no time, establishing the new cloister in Dunkirk in August 1662. But from the outset her plans were beset with difficulties, caused principally by the king. In June Knatchbull had written to Hyde (by then Clarendon) in desperation, begging for the remaining £2,000 of the king's promised grant.⁹⁸ In September, Charles stunned the nuns by denying he had

⁹³ Knatchbull to Ormonde, 18 May 1660, Carte 30, fo. 663.

⁹⁴ Knatchbull to Ormonde, 12 Apr. 1660, Carte 214, fo. 26.

⁹⁵ Ibid.; 'Abbess Neville's annals', pp. 39–42.

⁹⁶ Knatchbull to Ormonde, 20 May 1661, Carte 31, fo. 191.

⁹⁷ 'Abbess Neville's annals', pp. 39–40.

⁹⁸ Knatchbull to [Clarendon], 30 June 1662, Clarendon 77, fo. 27.

approved the foundation. Writing to the governor of Dunkirk, Secretary Nicholas declared that the king had never given his consent because 'it would be very mischievous to have an English Convent there where the Papists could preach in English'.⁹⁹ It is possible that news had reached London of the governor's generous assistance to the newly arrived nuns, who had reciprocated by endeavouring to convert as many of their countrymen as possible.¹⁰⁰ Such reports might well have sparked Charles's obstruction of the Dunkirk foundation, but the more likely explanation lies in the improbability that he could ever publicly support a Catholic convent. Still reeling from this setback, the nuns were even more devastated by the sale of Dunkirk to Louis XIV in October.¹⁰¹ Moreover, they still awaited the promised £2,000. In June 1663, Mary Knatchbull sent Mary Caryll, who was the prioress of Dunkirk, and Anne Neville to London to secure the money, and later joined them herself. Eventually the king admitted such a sum was impossible and offered an annual pension of £500. By this stage Mary Knatchbull was well aware of Charles's capacity for empty promises, so she stationed two nuns, Anne Neville and Paula Knatchbull, in London to ensure the regular payment of the pension. This time the nuns were more successful. Through her connections, the abbess had gained the co-operation of Sir Charles Berkeley, one of the king's closest friends, who had succeeded Sir Henry Bennet as keeper of the privy purse.¹⁰² In December 1663, the abbess was effusive in her gratitude, writing 'our totall relyance for a subsistence, is on your Generous care in procuring the due payment of the 500 ll a yeare our cheefe frind and yors was pleased to assigne us'.¹⁰³ According to Anne Neville, Berkeley faithfully paid the pension in half-yearly instalments until his untimely death in 1665. She and Paula Knatchbull remained in London until 1667, when it became evident that their money from the privy purse was no longer forthcoming.¹⁰⁴

Mary Knatchbull's chosen reward for her years of royalist assistance is significant. From his initial dealings with the Ghent cloister, Charles's praise for the nuns had led them to hope that he would act kindly towards English Catholics, perhaps even to the extent that he would permit their cloister to return to English soil. On the eve of the Restoration, the abbess certainly entertained the possibility that her God, who had restored the king, might well inspire him to assist her co-religionists.¹⁰⁵ It is within this context that the establishment of the Dunkirk cloister must be located. Dunkirk was an English

⁹⁹ *CSPD*, 1661–1662, pp. 488, 499.

¹⁰⁰ 'Abbess Neville's annals', pp. 40–1; *A history of the Benedictine nuns of Dunkirk, now at St. Scholastica's Abbey, Teignmouth* (London, 1958), pp. 7–11.

¹⁰¹ *Nuns of Dunkirk*, p. 10. However, the French king immediately raised the cloister's status to that of a royal abbey; see 'Abbess Neville's annals', p. 41.

¹⁰² See Cyril Hughes Hartman, *The king's friend: a life of Charles Berkeley, Viscount Fitzhardinge earl of Falmouth (1630–1665)* (London, 1951), pp. 5, 68–72, 104–6.

¹⁰³ Knatchbull to Berkeley, 14 Dec. 1663, Centre for Kentish Studies, MS U269 C324 (Bundle 58) Sackville MSS, Berkeley Correspondence. ¹⁰⁴ 'Abbess Neville's annals', pp. 40–2.

¹⁰⁵ Knatchbull to Ormonde, 18 May 1660, Carte 30, fo. 663.

territory, so the foundation of a religious house there was a politically charged act on Knatchbull's part. She had been offered a house and charitable assistance in the town of St Omer by the abbot of St Bertin's, and there was no such security for the nuns in Dunkirk.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, the abbess ignored other more serious obstacles to her plan. There was already an English convent in the town belonging to the Poor Clares. Charles had apparently agreed to the new Benedictine cloister on the understanding that the Poor Clares planned to relocate to Ghent (thus retaining the status quo of a single English convent in Dunkirk). At the last moment, the Franciscans decided against the move, calling the Benedictine venture into doubt. Mary Knatchbull refused to be thwarted and went ahead with the new foundation anyway, claiming she had the king's verbal permission.¹⁰⁷ This was later to prove her undoing when Charles denied his support for the cloister, because she lacked the letters patent which would have identified her cloister as a royal foundation. The determination of the abbess to proceed with the cloister strongly implies that she saw it as the preface to the return of monasticism to England's shores, where it would be tolerated, along with Catholicism generally.

This was the understanding of the Dunkirk nuns in later years, who went so far as to imply that the abbess had entertained hopes for the actual reconversion of her homeland. The foundation of a monastery in Dunkirk was, in the words of the cloister's partisan historian, 'owing in great measure to the earnest desire that our holy Order might once again settle in England, and the hope that the return of our country to the ancient faith was not far off'.¹⁰⁸ For that purpose, several devotions in the new house were directed towards the conversion of England, including the designation of two nuns to communicate and offer dedicated weekly prayers for it.¹⁰⁹ Thus, the nuns' faith in the inevitability of Catholicism's ultimate triumph over Protestantism often clouded their perception of the political reality of such an unlikely outcome. Yet, in spite of the setback presented by the sale of Dunkirk to the French, Mary Knatchbull might well have claimed success for this broader venture. While Charles II did not act upon any inclination he might have had towards Catholicism until his deathbed, the conversion of the duke of York was heralded with great joy in the religious communities. When Bishop Burnet attributed James's adoption of the Roman faith to 'the nun's advice in a monastery in Flanders', he might well have meant the abbess of Ghent.¹¹⁰ Whatever role she played in the conversion of James II, she had certainly befriended the monarch and his second wife, Mary of Modena. In 1686 James thanked her for the Ghent nuns' support and prayers, and assured her that he intended 'to have your cloyster, our Darling monastery, the first in my kingdom. Then you shall find I will not only make

¹⁰⁶ *Ghent annals*, p. 39; *Nuns of Dunkirk*, p. 6.

¹⁰⁷ 'Abbess Neville's annals', p. 40.

¹⁰⁸ *Nuns of Dunkirk*, p. 11.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Burnet, *History of his own times*, ed. Thomas Stackhouse (London, 1906), pp. 25–6. There was a tradition in the Ghent cloister that James had converted there. The annals note the unfortunate loss of documents relating to it, see *Ghent annals*, p. v.

good my brother's promises, but add new favours.¹¹¹ (In the end it was one of the Ghent daughter-houses, Ipres, which was first invited to his realm.) Knatchbull's nuns continued their spiritual patronage of the Stuarts under James II. In 1687 the abbess wrote to Mary of Modena offering the Ghent cloister's new year's gift of 'two thousand communions, Masses, paires of Beads and acts of penance' for the monarchs' intentions, for which she received a gracious reply.¹¹² In June 1688 she wrote in an exultant tone congratulating the queen on the birth of a prince of Wales.¹¹³ But, later that year, all her hopes for Catholic concessions were dashed by William and Mary. In the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution she and her Ghent nuns were ardent Jacobites, continuing their prayers and temporal support for the exiled Stuarts.

Mary Knatchbull therefore saw herself as an advocate for English Catholics within the patronage network she had formed. Ultimately her success during Charles II's reign was limited to her sphere of family and friends, and her religious community. The conversion and accession of his brother seemed to answer the nuns' years of prayer, but the abbess lived long enough to witness the Glorious Revolution, and with it the end of all serious prospects for Catholic toleration. Yet in spite of the failure of her political aims, Knatchbull remained a powerful figure within the English Catholic community by virtue of her association with the monarch. During the 1660s through to the 1680s, her cloisters flourished, attracting many new postulants. She even founded another new community at Ipres in 1665. I now want to turn to the conclusions that we can draw from the relationship the Ghent cloister fostered with the Stuarts.

IV

The association of the Ghent Benedictine nuns and the monarchy reveals the extent to which women could exercise considerable influence in early modern society through their patronage networks. Motivated by her desire to further the Catholic cause in England, Mary Knatchbull assisted Charles in time of exile. Once he had regained his crown, she hoped to use her credit with him to secure the return of monasticism to England. Patronage was central to this relationship. Although, like many of her contemporaries in the world, Knatchbull used her influence to advance the interests of her own religious and secular families, she was also able to participate personally in the politics of the 1650s, and after 1660 could press her religious agenda. Without doubt Abbess Knatchbull understood the diffuse nature of seventeenth-century power, and she spent her lifetime trying to turn it towards her cloisters' and her co-religionists' advantage. Ultimately she was unable to achieve the enormous

¹¹¹ James II to Knatchbull, 20 Jan. 1686, printed in *Dodd's church history of England*, ed. M. A. Tierney (1839–43; repr. 5 vols., London, 1971), iv, pp. 105–6n.

¹¹² Knatchbull to Mary of Modena, 1 Jan. 1687, BL, Add. 28,225, letters of royal and other persons to Mary, queen of James II, 1685–8, fo. 126; Historical Manuscripts Commission (HMC), Stuart MSS at Windsor Castle, 1579–1716: 1902 Series 56, part 1, p. 24.

¹¹³ Knatchbull to Mary of Modena, 24 June 1688, BL, Add. 28,225, fo. 293.

gains for English Catholics that I have argued motivated her royalist assistance, and which inspired her to continue to lobby the king and his ministers in the face of endless setbacks. Yet the petitions and letters from her scattered throughout the state papers are a testament to her indefatigable zeal for both the good of her nuns and her broader political schemes.¹¹⁴ To her dying day she never ceased acquiring and nurturing contacts at the royal court and beyond in an effort to achieve her goals.

The conspiratorial work of Abbess Mary Knatchbull also says a great deal about Charles II and his ministers. The royalist correspondence makes it clear that Charles respected the abbess and was extremely grateful for her labours on his behalf. He repaid her directly during the 1650s by approaching the Spanish and other leaders on behalf of her clients, suggesting that his favour to her was simply the fruit of obligation. But the promises he apparently made concerning her proposed new religious cloister present a more complex picture. After 1660, Charles II's sympathy for loyal English Catholics was obvious in his early efforts to ease measures against them and to amend the oath of allegiance.¹¹⁵ However, he was sensitive to anti-Catholic sentiment and pragmatically accepted popular and parliamentary calls to curtail papists' liberty whenever the need arose.¹¹⁶ Moreover, he was vulnerable to criticism regarding his own religious orientation. There were rumours that he had attended mass while abroad, and his seeming taste for things Catholic led critical commentators, like Gilbert Burnet, to assume that he had secretly converted in France.¹¹⁷ Whatever Charles's private inclinations, and in spite of his flirtation with conversion during the period of the French alliance in 1669–70, he accepted that the English king had to conform to the Church of England. It was only upon his deathbed that he apparently made his preference for Catholicism explicit by accepting the ministrations of Father John Huddleston. Despite this conversion, as Hutton has noted, Charles's true religious leanings remain ambiguous.¹¹⁸ However, given the king's chameleon-like attitude to religious toleration, which saw him support or stifle it according to political exigency, it is not improbable that he would have embraced Catholicism in 'a last-minute act of insurance'.¹¹⁹ Within this context, it is possible to suggest that Charles's patronage of the Ghent abbess derived from more than merely a sense of duty to repay her assistance. However fragile were his own inclinations towards Rome, the support of a cloister which continued its prayers for his temporal success and eternal salvation represented security for the future of both his throne and his soul.

¹¹⁴ *CSPD, 1673–1675*, pp. 368–9; HMC, Stuart MSS, p. 90; OA, MS G.16, photostats of letters from Abbess Mary Knatchbull to the duke of Ormonde, 2 July 1666, 23 Feb. 1686.

¹¹⁵ J. Miller, *Papery and politics in England, 1660–1688* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 92–3, 97–8.

¹¹⁶ J. Miller, *Charles II* (London, 1991), pp. 63–4.

¹¹⁷ Burnet, *History*, p. 25.

¹¹⁸ For a convincing discussion on the significance of Charles's deathbed conversion, which refutes the traditional view that he had always been inclined towards Catholicism, see Ronald Hutton, 'The religion of Charles II', in R. Malcolm Smuts, ed., *The Stuart court and Europe: essays in politics and political culture* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 228–46.

¹¹⁹ Miller, *Charles II*, p. 382.

Clarendon presents another interesting conundrum. The surviving royalist letters establish him as the most regular correspondent of the Ghent abbess in the 1650s and, as I have argued, the chancellor seemed to rely more and more on her intelligences and postal network in 1659 and 1660. The letters also imply that he had enjoyed the nuns' hospitality on occasions. Yet Sir Edward Hyde's friendship with a recusant nun is at odds with his reputation as a staunch Anglican. While his anti-Catholic reputation might be exaggerated, he did none the less maintain certain uncompromising religious views, and was clearly not so willing to tolerate Catholic liberty as the king.¹²⁰ But on occasions the chancellor did endeavour to protect recusants from further legislation. In 1663, he argued against more anti-Catholic laws, stressing Charles's obligations to Catholics, especially the Benedictines, incurred during his exile.¹²¹ Indeed Clarendon reiterated his respect for the Benedictine order in a treatise against the superstitious excesses of Catholicism, noting its loyalty and assistance in the 1650s.¹²² And whatever his subsequent shortcomings, he did secure the immediate payment of part of the king's promised £3,000 in 1661. Yet, ultimately, I do not think we can read too much into his patronage of Mary Knatchbull during the 1650s and at the outset of Charles II's reign. He obviously was not motivated by any attraction to Catholicism. Rather he was honourably fulfilling his obligation to the nuns who had assisted him in the king's cause.

Finally, I want to return to Mary Knatchbull's absence in the historiography. Ironically her exclusion can be attributed to the two qualities which both recommended her to the royalists, and ensured her success as a conspirator: her gender and her Catholicism. As Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford have noted, it was the negative opinion regarding women's intellectual capacity and their reputation as gossips that 'made them so useful to men as emissaries, mediators, and spies'.¹²³ The security of the abbess's packets was due in part to a supposition that women's letters were not likely to contain anything of political importance. It also reflected Knatchbull's experience as a Catholic abbess, whose cloister depended upon regular and safe communication with England. Just as Charles would not have escaped Worcester without secretive Catholic networks, the royalists abroad benefited from years of exiled recusant subterfuge. However, the support of Catholics was a double-edged sword. Whatever differences had to be overcome among the various Protestant factions in 1660, they were more or less united against the perceived threat of popery. So despite the royalist ministers' willingness to court Catholic powers when alternatives were lacking, in March 1660 they accepted with alacrity Monck's advice to leave Spanish soil. As Ronald Hutton has noted, 'the most ironic feature of the new situation was that the King's

¹²⁰ Ibid., pp. 80–1.

¹²¹ Miller, *Popery*, pp. 101–2.

¹²² [Clarendon], *Animadversions upon a book, intituled, fanaticism fanatically imputed to the Catholick Church, by Dr. Stillingfleet, and the imputation refuted and retorted by S.C.* (London, 1674 edn), pp. 43–4.

¹²³ Mendelson and Crawford, *Women*, p. 413.

traditional adherents now threatened to become his greatest liability'.¹²⁴ This was especially pertinent to the recusant cavaliers. No matter how loyal English Catholics like Knatchbull might declare and prove themselves to the crown, in the political climate of the 1660s they were dubious allies.

The royalists' need to distance themselves from anything that might impugn the king's English Protestant credentials explains in part Knatchbull's difficulty in obtaining her reward. The other obstacles hindering the abbess were her gender and her religious profession. In the contemporary imagination, the nun was a figure of fun – the archetypal foolish woman. Anti-Catholic literature and the observations of travellers often depicted the nuns as 'silly seduced women'.¹²⁵ Aside from the age-old caricature of the 'unchaste virgin', the English nuns were portrayed as pawns of England's arch-enemies, the Jesuits, and their convents perceived as wealthy because the nuns' large dowries 'suck a great deal of money out of England'.¹²⁶ Given such attitudes towards women's religious houses, it was obviously prudent to downplay the financial and practical assistance of Ghent. The suspicion regarding the king's religious orientation was sufficiently problematic without the ignominy of the nuns' conspiratorial aid. So the role of Mary Knatchbull during the 1650s was not acknowledged publicly after the Restoration. While Clarendon wrote fondly of his association with Benedictine monks in exile, he made no mention of the Ghent nuns. Indeed his references to nuns reiterate the common perception that they were weak in judgement and easily led into superstition.¹²⁷

Those imperatives which made the nuns invisible in the 1660s have preserved their historical anonymity. Restoration historiography has remained strongly Protestant in tone, and silent about gender. As the Ghent nuns' participation in royalist affairs from 1656 onwards demonstrates, both Catholics and women were involved. Yet the Protestant nationalist flavour of late seventeenth-century studies, which juxtaposes the flawed but politically shrewd Charles II against the bigoted and foolish James, has obfuscated Catholic influences on the former. Likewise, despite recent interest in Charles's mistresses, the full place of women in Restoration court politics is still to be examined.¹²⁸ Mary Knatchbull as a Catholic nun could never be credited with a principal role in political affairs after 1660. However, her continued efforts to secure patrons, which included several visits to London, ensured she maintained a profile among Charles's courtiers. There is evidence to suggest that she and her nuns

¹²⁴ Hutton, *Charles*, p. 130.

¹²⁵ [Thomas Robinson], *The anatomy of the English nunnery at Lisbon in Portugall* (London, 1622), p. 14; C. D. van Strien, 'Recusant houses in the southern Netherlands as seen by British tourists, c. 1650–1720', *Recusant History*, 20 (1991), p. 504.

¹²⁶ J. Gee, *New shreds of the old snare* (London, 1624), pp. 42, 113–17.

¹²⁷ [Clarendon], *Animadversions*, pp. 43–4, 66, 231–2.

¹²⁸ An excellent preliminary investigation is that of Sonya M. Wynne, 'The mistresses of Charles II and Restoration court politics, 1660–1685' (Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge, 1997). See also Nancy Klein Maguire, 'The duchess of Portsmouth: English royal consort and French politician, 1670–85', in Smuts, ed., *Stuart court and Europe*, pp. 247–73.

achieved sufficient physical presence at the court to excite the concern of both the king and queen.¹²⁹ Through her networks, lobbying, and visits, however irritating they might have proved to Charles, she retained the capacity to influence those in positions of authority. Knatchbull's participation in the events of the 1650s therefore has implications beyond her financial and practical assistance. It demands a far broader definition of the political than the traditional historiography has rendered. By recognizing the significance of gender and Catholicism we obtain a far more complex view of the 1660s. The prayer, patronage, and political conspiracy of the Ghent Benedictine nuns had a more profound impact upon the Stuart monarchy than the nuns, the king, and historians cared to acknowledge.

¹²⁹ *Dominicana* (Catholic Record Society, xxv, 1925), pp. 48–9.