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Reading, Work, and Catholic Women's Biographies

Although Catholic women in post-Reformation England do not seem to have produced a body of autobiographical writings comparable to that of their Protestant counterparts, they did figure significantly as the subjects, consumers, and much more rarely the authors of a large body of biographical writing. These texts have attracted surprisingly little critical attention, in part because the access they offer to women's voices, experiences, or self-representations is so obviously mediated. Furthermore, these long, detailed narratives, by turns weird and dull, can stymie readers. While most of these texts were not printed until much later, some were printed in the seventeenth century and some circulated in manuscript. Neither these lives nor these women seem homogeneous: some of the protagonists were stalwarts in the old religion, most converts; some were widows, some nuns, some mothers. Their lives are filled with remarkable incidents. Yet the narratives share striking similarities of emphasis, suggesting that certain conventions for the Catholic woman's life had evolved by the seventeenth century.

These Catholic biographies form a post-Reformation subgenre. To understand these texts only by reference to their pre-Reformation pre-cursors—saints' lives—is to perpetuate the assumption that Catholicism was always rooted in the past, looking backward. These biographies were written mostly in the seventeenth century, tailored to the particular conditions of English Catholics after the Reformation (and for the most part after the Gunpowder Plot), and dedicated to English readers and patrons, often women. To the extent that writers drew on saints' lives, they turned to saints who posed the most useful models for post-Reformation English women, and texts available in English in new translations and versions. Writers and translators undertook their projects fully aware of the entrenched assumptions, the legal prohibitions, and the numerous texts against which they had to work.

But Catholic biographical writing can shed new light on the one text of this group that has gained considerable critical attention, *The Lady Falkland, Her Life*, a biography of Elizabeth Cary by one of her daughters, a Benedictine nun.¹ Considering the *Life* as a participant in a subgenre of Catholic biography reveals the tension between the conventions and precedents available to Cary's biographer on the one hand and her intractable subject on the other. Like similar biographies, the *Life* verges on hagiography, but is particularly unsuccessful at transforming its subject into a saint. While criticism continues to dwell on Cary as eccentric and exceptional, she has much in common with other female subjects of Catholic biography and hagiography, as can be seen by attending to the kinds of texts that Cary and her daughter might well have read, and the parameters they set for writing an eminent Catholic woman's life. These texts figure reading and housework as the chief means by which Catholic women define and sustain their confessional identities in the hostile environment of post-Reformation England.

II

CATHOLIC WOMEN'S READING

After the Reformation, what did English women who considered themselves "Catholic"—lay or nuns, at home or in convents abroad—read? Many anti-Catholic polemicists in post-Reformation England would view it as something of a miracle if such women could read at all, an astonishing triumph over the double bind of being both Catholic and women. But it is getting harder and harder to assume that Catholicism, women, and illiteracy inevitably went together. Before the Reformation, stained glass windows and manuscript illuminations frequently depicted women, from the Virgin Mary in Annunciation scenes, to saints, to lay

1. There is some dispute as to which of Cary's four daughters wrote the biography. See Donald Foster, "Resurrecting the Author: Elizabeth Tanfield Cary," in *Privileging Gender in Early Modern England*, ed. Jean Brink (Kirksville, Mo., 1993); Barry Weller and Margaret W. Ferguson, "Introduction," in their edition of *The Tragedy of Mariam, the Fair Queen of Jewry with The Lady Falkland Her Life* (Berkeley, 1994), pp. 1–2, 52–53n3; and Elizabeth Cary, *Lady Falkland, Life and Letters*, ed. Heather Wolfe (Cambridge and Tempe, 2001), pp. 59–64, 87, 97. I will hereafter refer to this text as *The Lady Falkland Her Life*; I quote from the Weller and Ferguson edition as the most accessible, but have checked all passages against the Wolfe edition.

women, holding or reading books.² After the Reformation, women, if anything, may have lost some access to literacy and learning. Convent schools had offered educational opportunities to girls; religious institutions had also commissioned, transmitted, and preserved women's texts. Convents continued to fulfill these functions after the Reformation, but were forced to do so on the Continent, where their services and resources were available to a much smaller, and more privileged, group.

Eve Sanders emphasizes the parallels between women's real loss of opportunities and authority and their loss of symbolic preeminence. Since images of the Virgin Mary and her mother, Anne, honored their roles as readers and teachers, the destruction or erasure of these images worked to sever women's association with teaching and learning.³ Yet, despite their loss of opportunities and iconographic models, Catholic women continued to engage actively in literate culture as readers, teachers, and writers. Women also played important roles as the harborers of secret presses, as translators and scribes, and as disseminators, conservators, importers or smugglers, sellers, and consumers of Catholic texts.⁴ Catholic women, then, participated in the robust Catholic culture of print for which Alexandra Walsham, for instance, argues.⁵ For such women, reading was not about withdrawal into the self but about connection to other readers and writers.

In post-Reformation England, Catholics were sufficiently associated with the book to have the traffic in those books monitored and fined.

2. Karen A. Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca, 1997), ch. 4; *Women and the Book: Assessing the Visual Evidence*, ed. Jane H. M. Taylor and Lesley Smith (Toronto, 1997). Richard Kieckhefer argues that reading figured more significantly in the medieval lives of women saints than in those of men saints. See "Holiness and the Culture of Devotion: Remarks on Some Late Medieval Male Saints," in *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Tímea Snell (Ithaca, 1991).

3. Eve Rachele Sanders, *Gender and Literacy on Stage in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, Eng., 1998), pp. 1–22. Marina Warner also grants significance to St. Anne as a model of valued female storytelling and teaching in *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (New York, 1994), esp. ch. 6. On women's loss of symbolic prominence after the Reformation in England, see also Huston Diehl, *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage: Protestantism and Popular Theater in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, 1997).

4. On women's contributions to the dissemination of Catholic texts, see: Nancy Pollard Brown, "Paperchase: The Dissemination of Catholic Texts in Elizabethan England," in *English Manuscript Studies, 1100–1700*, I, ed. Peter Beal and Jeremy Griffiths (Oxford, 1989), pp. 120–43; and Leona Rostenberg, *The Minority Press & the English Crown: A Study in Repression, 1558–1625* (Nieuwkoop, 1971), pp. 86, 104–05, 129, 204.

5. Alexandra Walsham, "'Domme Preachers'? Post-Reformation English Catholicism and the Culture of Print," *Past & Present* 168 (August 2000), 72–123.

According to Alison Shell, for instance, “England wished in general to extirpate Catholic books. Importation of them from English and foreign continental presses was forbidden; illicit Catholic presses and caches of books were searched for and destroyed by government pursuivants; bonfires of them and of other popish artifacts were a common cautionary demonstration; Catholic texts were expurgated where they impugned Protestantism; the legislation regulating the book trade had profound implications for the distribution of Catholic texts.”⁶ Despite such constraints, books printed abroad made their way into England sporting false imprints and disclaiming their English origins. Some recusant wives’ presumed ignorance may even have protected their books. In his compilation of and commentary on penal laws, William Cawley discusses the awkward situation of searching for prohibited Catholic books in a house in which the wife is a recusant but the husband is not. Under a Jacobean statute, he advises, it was not intended that justices of the peace “should seize, burn or deface any Books of the Husbands though Popish, unless such whereby the Wife might be aided or confirmed in her Superstition: so that in this Case Books, written in a Language or Stile unintelligible to the Wife, are not within the meaning of this Act, nor ought by colour thereof to be taken from the Husband, who is no Popish Recusant.”⁷ In such a case, the husband’s conformity might protect even otherwise prohibited books when they could be assumed to belong to him and to be “unintelligible” to his wife. Yet the assumption that certain books would be “unintelligible” to women—because of their content or perhaps because they were in Latin—was not a safe one to make.

Given the small numbers of priests in England and limited access to the sacraments, women may well have relied more heavily on books for spiritual instruction and direction.⁸ Reading was often a crucial step in conversions to Catholicism. In the manuscript account of her conversion

6. On the attempts to control the trade in English books, see Alison Shell, “Anti-Catholic Prejudice in the Seventeenth-Century Book-Trade,” in *Censorship and the Control of Print in England and France, 1600–1910*, ed. Robin Myers and Michael Harris (Winchester, Hampshire, 1992), pp. 33–57, esp. p. 35. Shell offers a useful introduction to Catholic imaginative literature, and to the prevalence of anti-Catholic imagery in canonical literature, in *Catholicism, Controversy, and the English Literary Imagination, 1558–1660* (Cambridge, Eng., 1999).

7. William Cawley, *The Laws . . . Concerning Jesuites, Seminary Priests, Recusants* (1680), sigs. 2H2v–2H3, discussing 3 [& 4] Jac. 1, cap. 5, sect. 23.

8. Cecile M. Jagodzinski, *Privacy and Print: Reading and Writing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Charlottesville, Va., 1999); Walsham, “‘Domme Preachers’.”

that Catherine Holland wrote under her confessor's order, dated 1664, she explains that as she worked her way toward Catholicism "my Knowledge of the Catholick Religion did increase by means of Catholick Books, which I grew so fond of, as I gave a gold Ring for one." Through reading she discovers that before Henry VIII broke with Rome "all England was Catholick" and "no Protestants were heard of."⁹ Elizabeth Shirley would "secretly steal Catholic books of her companions, and read them by herself."¹⁰ These purloined books ultimately led to her conversion and her decision to enter a convent. Elizabeth Cary, too, read her way toward Catholicism.

Many kinds of Catholic books were available in English; women might have read any of them. The *Life* of Elizabeth Cary claims that she read Calvin's *Institutes*, Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Luther, Jewel, and Church Fathers; she translated the *Reply* of Cardinal du Peron. After Margaret Clitherow learned to read in prison, she "most delighted to read the New Testament of Rheims Translation, Kempis of the *Following of Christ*, Perin's *Exercise*, and such like spiritual books." She also learned "our Lady's Matins in Latin." Dorothy Lawson's confessor explains that she prepared herself for communion by reading "a chapter of the golden treatise, intitl'd the *Imitation of Christ*."¹¹ Cary, Clitherow, and Lawson did not restrict themselves to what might be called "women's books," and their biographers praise them for their serious engagement with religious treatises.¹²

9. Catherine Holland (1637–1720), "How I Came to Change My Religion," presented in C. S. Durant, *A Link Between Flemish Mystics and English Martyrs* (London, 1925), pp. 278, 286, 295. [Edward Scarisbrick's] *The Life of the Lady Warner of Parham in Suffolk* (1691) presents Holland as a model, "who by her own Reading, and her Mothers Pious example, who was a Catholic . . . was so mov'd, to embrace the Catholic Religion, and a Religious State" (sigs. E2v-E3). *The Lives of Philip Howard and Anne Dacre, His Wife*, ed. Duke of Norfolk (London, 1857), mentions that in 1582 to 1583 Anne decided to become a Catholic after reading a Catholic book (p. 182). (I am grateful to Colleen Seguin for this reference.) On the role of reading in conversion narratives, Puritan and Catholic, see Jacqueline Pearson, "Women Reading, Reading Women," in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1500–1700*, ed. Helen Wilcox (Cambridge, Eng., 1996), p. 95.

10. *The Chronicle of the English Augustinian Canonesses Regular of the Lateran at St. Monica's in Louvain 1548 to 1625*, ed. Dom Adam Hamilton (Edinburgh, 1904), p. 104.

11. *The Lady Falkland, Her Life*, pp. 268–69; *Mr. John Mush's Life of Margaret Clitherow*, in *The Troubles of Our Catholic Forefathers Related by Themselves*, ed. John Morris (London, 1877), III, 393–94; William Palmes, *The Life of Mrs. Dorothy Lawson [1580–1632] of St. Antony's, near Newcastle-on-Tyne* (London, 1855), p. 37.

12. Erica Longfellow, in a work-in-progress, "How can we know what early modern women read?," challenges both the idea that women read "books for women" exclusively and that books supposedly "for women," such as conduct books, were read exclusively by them.

Yet there were Catholic books specifically addressed to women and/or about women's lives. Marian devotion had particular attractions for seventeenth-century women; as part of this devotion many women may have read psalters, accounts of Mary's miracles, and lively and passionate defenses of Marian devotion.¹³ Because of the controversy surrounding the extra-scriptural details of Mary's life, and perhaps the inimitable nature of her life, surprisingly few biographies of the Virgin were published. However, numerous biographical narratives expressly for and about women appeared in this period. Many of these books were accounts of saints, usually translated into English, often by the confessors to houses of English nuns. Biographies of recently deceased English women such as Lady Magdalen Viscountess Montague, Mrs. Dorothy Lawson, Lady Trevor Warner, Catharine Burton, and Dame Lucy Knatchbull were also often written by priests who had served as "ghostly fathers" or confessors to these women, either in convents or in the women's households, often when the priests were hidden there. They are thus the fruit of the intimate, daily interactions of priests and women in English households and in convents abroad. Although these relationships were often maligned or dismissed, we would not have such remarkably detailed and sympathetic accounts of these women's lives without them. The mediation of these biographies, then, corresponds to that built into Catholic worship, with priests intervening between these women and readers as they did between them and God. Since most of these biographies seem to have been written some years after the women's deaths, and cannot be precisely dated, they provide an interesting perspective on periodization since they are a step removed from the years they describe, and suggest continuities across the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth.

13. On devotion to Mary, see Dolan, *Whores of Babylon: Catholicism, Gender, and Seventeenth-Century Print Culture* (Ithaca, 1999), ch. 3. Some lives of the virgin were published in English in the seventeenth century. John Taylor dedicates *The Life and Death of the Most Blessed Among Women, the Virgin Mary Mother of our Lord Jesus* (1620, 2nd ed. 1622) to Mary, Countess of Buckingham, and claims to have translated a prose life he found in Amsterdam into verse, including only "the best authorities of Scriptures, and Fathers which I best credited." John Falconer dedicates *The Mirrour of Created Perfection. Or The Life of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary Mother of God* (St. Omer, 1632) to Agnes Rosendale, an English Carmelite at Antwerp, who escaped from "domesticall and unjust Captivity" to steal away to a convent; William Fleetwood's *An Account of the Life and Death of the Blessed Virgin, According to Romish Writers* (1687) is actually an attack on Marian devotion and its lack of scriptural foundation.

While these books were invariably accounts of those who were dead,¹⁴ they emphasize not the women's exemplary deaths, but rather how they lived and managed to survive. These textual lives appeal to an audience whose chief challenge was to persist in and propagate the faith. Many of these texts emphasize the martyrdoms of daily life. Sister Dorothy Barefoot "was subject to many and great Infirmities of Body, with Aridities, Desolations, Temptations, and Difficulties of Mind, so that really, upon the whole matter, her very life was a kind of Martyrdom to her." In her final illness she is confined to her bed "like a living Martyr" until God finally releases her.¹⁵ Lady Trevor Warner suffers "a kind of Martyrdom" because of internal conflict and "agitations of Mind." She contrives, through self-mortification, to "keep her self constantly upon the rack" and to be "in effect a real Martyr every hour." Her biographer describes her profession as a nun as "the hardest of Martyrdoms; by taking upon her so long and terrifying a one, as was that dying Life, or living Death, she had so joyfully embrac'd for the love of God."¹⁶ In these stories the protagonists' martyrdoms go on and on.

Biographies of Catholic women present them not as enduring rather than acting, but as enduring in order to act. In evading criminal prosecution and surviving the frequent illnesses that seem to characterize their experience, these women were able to prepare for an earthly future—building a convent and raising the funds needed to support it, running a household and harboring priests there. Sir Tobie Matthew claims that Lucy Knatchbull's achievement in founding an order was "not like playing upon a Lute, or singing, or talking, or the like, whereof remains no sensible effect or mark, when the thing is past, but rather like Writing, or Printing, or Building, the sensible effect and fruit whereof remains afterward."¹⁷

14. In *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New York, W. W. Norton, 1990), J. Paul Hunter has argued of biography in the early modern period, that "the person whose life was published was nearly always someone already dead" (p. 314). In a text praising a Protestant woman John Bryan explains that "it is safer, and lesse subject to exception and danger, to praise the dead, and more profitable for two reasons, (*Ambrose* gives them) because then (saith he) flattery will not move the praiser, nor vaine-glory tempt the *praised*. Therefore *Ecclesiasticus* adviseth us to judge none blessed before their death" (Bryan, *The Vertuous Daughter. A Sermon Preached . . . at the Funerall of the most Vertuous . . . Ciceley Puckerling* [1636], sig. B1v).

15. Sir Tobie Matthew, *The Life of Lady Lucy Knatchbull*, (c. 1642–51) ed. Dom David Knowles (London, 1931), pp. 190–91. In the brief biographies Matthew offers of those who survive Abbess Knatchbull, the nuns' constant ill health is striking. The *Life* seems to have been "written in part I, before 1642 and finally prepared for publication in 1651" (p. xxiv).

16. Scarisbrick, *Life of the Lady Trevor Warner*, sigs. E8v, S2v, S5v, M1.

17. Matthew, *Life of Lady Lucy Knatchbull*, pp. 207–08.

Knatchbull eschews the fleeting accomplishments of ladies for more lasting achievements. Matthew does not mention the most obvious way in which men and women leave lasting fruit: having children. Dorothy Lawson combines writing and building when she marks her devotion onto the new house she builds, displaying Jesus' name in huge letters facing the water and dedicating each room to a different saint.¹⁸ This emphasis on creating material and lasting memorials to one's faith and one's life—a religious house, a safe house, a book—makes it particularly poignant that these women's achievements have become so invisible.

While there were, of course, Catholic martyrs and martyrologies, women did not figure significantly in them. Since Catholic martyrologies, like legal prosecutions, focused on priests, they tended to exclude women; according to Geoffrey Nuttall's statistics, of 314 Catholic martyrs between 1535 and 1680, only four appear to have been women, three executed under Elizabeth in connection with hiding or helping priests.¹⁹ Although Catholic writers busily worked to resist John Foxe's appropriation of the genre of martyrology, and recast as martyrs those executed by the state as traitors, martyrology had limited use in the Catholic missionary project. Certainly, as Protestant polemicists feared,

18. Palmes, *The Life of Mrs. Dorothy Lawson*, p. 30.

19. Geoffrey F. Nuttall, "The English Martyrs, 1535–1680: A Statistical Review," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 22:3 (July 1971), 191–97, esp. p. 194. On Catholic martyrologies see: Elizabeth Hanson, "Torture and Truth in Renaissance England," *Representations* (1991), 53–84; Arthur F. Marotti, "Manuscript Transmission and the Catholic Martyrdom Account in Early Modern England," in *Print, Manuscript, and Performance: The Changing Relations of the Media in Early Modern England*, ed. Arthur F. Marotti and Michael D. Bristol (Columbus, Ohio., 2000), pp. 172–99; A. G. Petti, "Richard Verstegan and Catholic Martyrologies of the Later Elizabethan Period," *Recusant History* 5:1 (1959), 64–90. On women martyrs see also Patricia Crawford, *Women and Religion in England, 1500–1720* (London and New York, 1993), pp. 62–68; Patrick McGrath and Joy Rowe, "The Elizabethan Priests: Their Harbourners and Helpers," *Recusant History* 19:3 (1989), 209–33; Marie B. Rowlands, "Recusant Women, 1560–1640," in *Women in English Society, 1500–1800*, ed. Mary Prior (London, 1985), pp. 149–80, esp. pp. 158–59; and Helen White, *Tudor Books of Saints and Martyrs* (Madison, 1963), pp. 238–39. For a subtle analysis of the motivations of priest hunters, see Michael Questier, "Practical Antipapistry during the Reign of Elizabeth I," *Journal of British Studies* 36:4 (1997), 371–96.

Fr. John Mush's *Life of Margaret Clitherow*, who was pressed to death in York in 1586 because she refused to plead to the charge of harboring priests, survives in multiple manuscript versions, and an abbreviated printed version, *An Abstract of the Life and Martirdome of Mistres M. Clitheroe* (1619), but was not published in full until the nineteenth century. On Margaret Clitherow, see Arthur F. Marotti, "Alienating Catholics in Early Modern England: Recusant Women, Jesuits and Ideological Fantasies," in *Catholicism and Anti-Catholicism in Early Modern English Texts*, ed. Marotti (Houndmills, Basingstoke, 1999), pp. 1–34; and Megan Matchinske, *Writing, Gender, and State in Early Modern England: Identity Formation and the Female Subject* (Cambridge, Eng., 1998), ch. 2.

martyrs could mobilize sympathies and win converts to Catholicism. Yet as the controversy surrounding equivocation suggests, Catholics were striving to spare lives, to strategize their way out of martyrdom in order to preserve the numbers of priests and increase the numbers of Catholics.²⁰ In contrast to Foxe's suppression of women's roles as "sustainers" of the Marian martyrs, many accounts of priests' struggles, such as Fr. John Gerard's *Autobiography*, dwell on the help provided by women at great risk to themselves. Thomas Freeman claims that even for Foxe, who could depict an Anne Askew engaging in theological debate, it was more challenging to present the role of women who did not die for their faith.²¹ Catholics faced particular pressure to rise to this challenge since women were so crucial to the propagation of the faith in England, but so statistically insignificant among those who died for it. In Catholic martyrologies after the Reformation, then, torture and execution became the special province not of the virgin martyr but of the priest. Women emerged as protagonists in a rather different story. As Mary Beth Rose argues of Elizabeth I's transformation of the meaning of courage in her speeches: "dying is easy; living is hard. . . . Survival, not death, constitutes the meaningful self-sacrifice."²² Paradoxically, the women excluded from the Elizabethan program of priest-hunting, and those who wished to praise them, similarly faced the challenge of investing heroism in living rather than dying. Refused the privilege of execution, these women and their biographers had to find new plots and new positions of moral prestige. They did so partly through saints' lives, which offered more various models than is sometimes assumed, and circulated widely in both manuscript and print.

For post-Reformation Catholics, the saint's life became a feminized genre. According to J. A. Rhodes, in the late sixteenth and early

20. Marotti, "Manuscript Transmission," pp. 191–92, and "Southwell's Remains: Catholicism and Anti-Catholicism in Early Modern England," in *Texts and Cultural Change in Early Modern England*, ed. Cedric C. Brown and Arthur F. Marotti (Houndmills, Basingstoke, 1997), pp. 37–65. On manuscript circulation, see also Brown, "Paper Chase." Peter Lake and Michael Questier claim that only a few male martyrs' lives and deaths achieved "the relatively rare apotheosis of print" ("Agency, Appropriation and Rhetoric Under the Gallows: Puritans, Romanists and the State in Early Modern England," *Past and Present* 153 [(1996)], 83–84).

21. John Gerard, *The Autobiography of a Hunted Priest*, tr. Philip Caraman (Chicago, 1988); Thomas Freeman, "'The Good Ministrye of Godlye and Vertuose Women': The Elizabethan Martyrologists and the Female Supporters of the Marian Martyrs," *Journal of British Studies* 39 (2000), 8–33.

22. Mary Beth Rose, *Gender and the Transformations of Heroism in Early Modern English Literature* (Chicago, 2001), pp. 39–40. I have found Rose's formulations of the relationship between gender and heroism invaluable.

seventeenth centuries “nearly half the printed lives were about women saints and the majority of dedications were addressed to women.”²³ Some women wrote saints’ lives; for instance, Elizabeth Cary’s biographer claims that she wrote lives of St. Agnes the Martyr and St. Elizabeth of Portugal, both now lost. Catherine Holland translated saints’ lives from French and Dutch into English for the benefit of her community.²⁴ Most saints’ stories were English translations of much earlier texts; most were printed outside of England and probably found readers on the Continent. Furthermore, they may well have been read by both women and men. But they often appeal directly to English women; furthermore, the lives chosen for the fullest treatment in English are often tailored to the special circumstances of Catholic women in post-Reformation England. The processes of canonization could be fiercely partisan and nationalist,²⁵ and there was a market for stories of English saints and martyrs, and of exemplary English men and women. But saints’ lives, often depicting the remote past in foreign countries, required readers to identify with an embattled Catholicism rather than with a nascent Englishness.

In a particularly popular collection of saints’ lives, Alfonso Villegas’ *Lives of Saints*, which offers brief accounts of many saints and went through many editions, the majority of female saints are nobly born, beautiful virgins who can withstand extraordinary suffering until God finally blesses them with martyrdom.²⁶ By contrast, books offering lengthy

23. J. T. Rhodes, “English Books of Martyrs and Saints of the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries,” *Recurrent History* 22:1 (1994), 18. According to Rhodes, in Catholic saints’ lives, “martyrs, missionaries and religious founders were presented as mainly male; cloistered mystics, tertiaries and pious laypeople were usually female” (p. 19).

24. C. S. Durant, *A Link Between Flemish Mystics and English Martyrs*, p. 306.

25. Peter Burke, “How To Be a Counter-Reformation Saint,” in *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, Eng., 1987), ch. 5.

26. Alfonso Villegas, *The Lives of Saints*, tr. William Kinsman, (1621), pp. *2v, *3. According to Leona Rostenberg, “The Jesuit, William Kinsman, who had been detained and interrogated as the agent for Viscount Montague, had translated with his brother Edward *The lives of saints* by Alfonso de Villegas. Auroi had issued the first English edition at Douai in 1610. The work was revised and published in 1621 by Heigham, who announced the ‘second edition . . . more correct, and more exact then the former’” (Rostenberg, *The Minority Press & the English Crown*, p. 126). Heigham published about 66 devotional books.

On the changing fortunes of cults devoted to two virgin saints in post-Reformation England, see Carole Levin, “St. Frideswide and St. Uncumber: Changing Images of Female Saints in Renaissance England,” in *Women, Writing, and the Reproduction of Culture in Tudor and Stuart Britain*, ed. Mary E. Burke, et al. (Syracuse, New York, 2000), pp. 223–37. On “the generic virgin martyr,” see Karen A. Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca, 1997), pp. 5–10. Eamon Duffy also addresses the dynamic appeal of saints’ lives, in *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400–c. 1580* (New Haven, 1992), ch. 5.

accounts of a single saint's life tend to focus on less spectacular lives and deaths, offering models that were more applicable to most English female readers. In these books strikingly consistent conventions obscure distinctions between past and present, Hungary or Sienna and Yorkshire, a princess and a gentlewoman. Readers are connected to the protagonists of these works not only by a shared Catholicism but by an assumption that women's experiences are similar.

Thus in seventeenth-century England two trends conspire to exclude Catholic women from the most prestigious and familiar positions of representation: the association of martyrdom with virgins, and the recent tendency of the Elizabethan and Jacobean state to single out Catholic men, particularly priests, for execution. The surviving Catholic woman falls in between the two, and her double exclusion becomes an opportunity to invent a different story, a new ground of value. Her biographer, often a priest who is himself a survivor, must find a way of valuing not only the martyrdoms of daily life but the episodic structure of a quiet life, dogged rather than dramatic.

III

HOLY HOUSEWORK, OR LOVING YOUR ABJECTION²⁷

In many of the longest lives of women saints, the struggle takes place not in the interrogation room or at the pyre, but in the household. The domestic focus of many of these accounts results partly from the authors' and translators' desire to subordinate the miraculous. Repeatedly, authors or translators of saints' lives assert that they have included only those miracles that can be fully documented. Biographers pledge that they do not claim for themselves the power to canonize.²⁸ While the focus on the quotidian avoids one kind of controversy, it opens up another: the turn to faith is often shown as a turn away from the family, and a source of conflict with one's intimates. For some saints, conflict arises over whether to marry Jesus or some merely human suitor. However, a

27. "The chief point of . . . humility consists not only in willingly admitting our abject state but in loving it and delighting in it" (Francois de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life* (1609) tr. John K. Ryan [New York, 1972], p. 139).

28. Many of the later lives begin with the author's pledge that, in compliance with a decree from Pope Urban VIII in 1625, he is disclaiming any authority to elevate his subject to sainthood. On Catholic unease about saints' lives after the Reformation, see Evelyn Birge Vitz, "From the Oral to the Written in Medieval and Renaissance Saints' Lives," in *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Snell (Ithaca, 1991), pp. 97-114.

surprising number of these saints do marry and then struggle to balance the demands of their devotional lives against the demands of running households, to vow only “such obedience” to a confessor “as might stand with her Mariage estate.”²⁹ This is the pattern for St. Elizabeth of Hungary, for example, whose life received at least two treatments in the 1630s, a boom time for texts about the Virgin Mary and female saints, probably because this was the decade in which Henrietta Maria presided over what Sophie Tomlinson has called “a cult of woman, or focus on the feminine in Caroline culture.”³⁰ In one life of St. Elizabeth she sneaks out of her husband’s bed and rejoices “to winne so much tyme unknown to her Spouse, to attend more freely to the traffique of her soule.” She prefers to sleep on the ground outside, free from the temptation of comfort or “the approach of her husband,” despite the fact that he warmly supports her desire to steal time for prayer. He is amused when the servant who is charged with awakening Elizabeth by pulling her toe pulls his instead; he gives Elizabeth a signal to warn her when a dish at the table falls outside her dietary restrictions; he advises her to be less severe in her self-castigation, but does so more to satisfy his own conscience than in the belief that she will obey. Still, this text presents Elizabeth as profoundly ambivalent about her married state: “She would often complayne, shee was unworthy to dedicate her virginity when tyme was, to her heavenly Spouse; and yet loved her Lord no whit the lesse; from whom she would willingly never be absent . . . For shee well understood his company debarred nor hindered her at all from her exercize of watching and Prayer.” Her “Spouse” is Jesus, while her “Lord” is her husband. According to this text, “There never was a creature caryed her self more even betweene her heavenly and earthly Spouse then *Elizabeth* did, shee rendred so her debts, as shee defrauded neither, & therefore was blessed from heaven, with three children.”³¹

Although not a saint, Dorothy Lawson resolves the conflict between heavenly and earthly spouses by being two places at once. In the account of her life, her husband approves this magical feat: “delighting much to see her take care of her domestick affairs, as she could doe it extremely

29. H. A., *The History of S. Elizabeth, Daughter of the King of Hungary* (St. Omer, 1633), sig. C8v.

30. Sophie Tomlinson, “She that plays the King: Henrietta Maria and the Threat of the Actress in Caroline Culture,” *The Politics of Tragicomedy: Shakespeare and After*, ed. Gordon McMullan and Jonathan Hope (London and New York, 1992), pp. 189–207, esp. p. 190. See also Erica Veevers, *Images of Love and Religion: Queen Henrietta Maria and Court Entertainments* (Cambridge, Eng., 1989).

31. H. A., *The History of S. Elizabeth, Daughter of the King of Hungary*, sigs. C3v, C5–C5v, D6v.

well, he beheld her one day amongst the servants in the kitchen, as he pass'd by, and going directly to his chamber, which was accessible but by one pair of stairs, he found her there upon her knees, with much astonishment, as after that he profess'd, he never thought time lost in housekeeping which she spent in prayer."³² Even this English gentlewoman is presented as requiring miraculous powers to meet the demands of housekeeping and devotion.

Another way to balance one's duties is to approach household chores and caregiving as both discipline and devotion. This is especially useful for women who live in secular households, either as daughters or as wives. St. Catharine's parents "put away" the kitchenmaid and make Catharine do "all the workes of drudgerie about the howse." Later, by preference, she continues to do "all the vilest & fowlest services in the howse, as to swepe the howse, to scowre vessels, to wash dishes, and to doe other more base and lothsome services then these, such as doe properly apperteine to abjecte servantes and drudges." St. Maude, though a queen (and wife to Henry I), embraces, washes, and cares for lepers.³³

Housework-as-discipline also applies to conventual life. As Isobel Grundy points out, "housekeeping details crop up in most accounts of convent life by women."³⁴ Although St. Clare was an Abbess, ruling over a religious community, she disdained authority, making herself more contemptible than her religious "both in habit and base service." She even serves her religious as a servant at table, and washes their feet, explicitly following Mary Magdalene's and Jesus' example. "She performed to the sicke all kind of services, were they never so loathsome, as to make cleane any thing that was defiled or foule, shunning with so worthy a spirit al pleasant, and delightfull actions, never abhorring, or desdayning the most offensive smells."³⁵ Dame Margaret Knatchbull "never showed any inclination at all to undertake any other Office than the most humble and low in all the House, and went indeed about as if she had thought herself no more than a very mere worm of the earth,

32. Palmes, *The Life of Mrs. Dorothy Lawson*, p. 62.

33. Raymond of Capua, *The Life of the Blessed Virgin, Sainct Catharine of Sienna*, tr. John Fen, the confessor to the English nuns at St. Monica's Convent in Louvain, from an Italian translation of the Latin Original (Douai, 1609), sigs. C7v, H7v; John Wilson, *The English Martyrologe* (St. Omer, 1608), sig. O5.

34. Isobel Grundy, "Women's History? Writings by English Nuns," in *Women, Writing, History, 1640-1740*, ed. Grundy and Susan Wiseman (Athens, Ga., 1992), p. 132.

35. *The Life of the Glorious Virgin S. Clare*, tr. I. W. (n.p., 1622), sigs. C4v-C5. For Magdalene as model, see [I.C.], *Saint Marie Magdalens Conversion* (n.p., 1603).

notwithstanding that it was easily perceived how capable she was to discharge the highest employments.”³⁶ Lady Trevor Warner “forgot her Quality, submitting her self to the lowest Employments; taking more delight to be an abject in the House of God, than others can do in all sorts of Worldly Honors and Satisfactions,” and doing these “Humblest Offices . . . as if she had all her Life time been brought up in them.” Warner and her husband both decide to convert to Catholicism and enter monastic life, despite the fact that they have two small daughters. After she joins the English Poor Clares at Gravelines, Warner continues to demand that she be employed “as the last in the House.” She begs to be allowed to work as a scullion in the kitchen rather than take care of her own daughters, who have come to live at the convent, but her Abbess refuses, insisting that she accept the mortification and distraction of childcare.³⁷ Although Margaret Mostyn (Mother Margaret of Jesus) “was very handy in all sorts of work, and particularly what regarded her needle, she never failed in any the least necessity to employ herself in the meanest offices, such as sweeping, washing dishes, helping the vestieres to fold linen, or darn their old things, in which she took particular satisfaction.”³⁸ Catharine Burton, who writes her own account of her life, embraces menial work even before she joins a convent: “Before this year I should have been glad to play the mistress; but now I employed myself in the meanest offices of the house, studying how to humble and mortify myself”; once a nun she seeks out “mean employ, telling our Lord I was content to be His scullion,” that is, if she cannot play Mary’s part, which she prefers. The Lord promotes her, telling her, “Since you were content the last time to be My scullion, I will now take you into My chamber of presence to converse with you,” at which point she goes into a rapture.³⁹

Such housewifely mortifications are equally conventional in the lives of lay women, suggesting the impact of these stories in granting prestige to caretaking and housework. As a young woman sent for her education to the Countess of Bedford, Lady Magdalen, Viscountess Montague,

36. Matthew, *Life of Lady Lucy Knatchbull*, p. 180.

37. Scarisbrick, *The Life of the Lady Trevor Warner*, sigs. A3v, E6, E6v, G3, K4v.

38. Rev. Edmund Bedingfield, *The Life of Margaret Mostyn (Mother Margaret of Jesus), Religious of the Reformed Order of our Blessed Lady of Mount Carmel (1625–1679)* (London, 1878), p. 185.

39. Catharine Burton, *An English Carmelite: The Life of Catharine Burton, Mother Mary Xaveria of the Angels, of the English Teresian Convent at Antwerp. Collected from Her Own Writings*, ed. Thomas Hunter, S. J. (London, 1883), pp. 32, 142, 142–43. Burton was born in 1668 and died in 1714. While her autobiographical text was not published until long after her death, some of her sisters in the convent at Antwerp seem to have been aware of it.

attended the Countess, even acting as her chambermaid, “being ready every hour of the night, whensoever the Countess called (which by reason of her old age and infirmities she often did), to rise out of her bed and diligently to attend her. Yea, the right noble virgin being delicately educated did not disdain, of her own accord and unknown to the Countess, to perform that base kind of service which curious [fastidious] ears refuse to hear related.”⁴⁰ Margaret Clitherow “would not disdain, as many do, more outwardly nice than inwardly virtuous, or think much to make the fire, to sweep the house, to wash the dishes, and more gross matters also, choosing rather to do them herself, and to set her maids about sweeter business.” Both these passages praise women for not disdaining chores that they might legitimately view as beneath them. Clitherow encouraged servants and children to do such tasks only in order that they, too, might learn humility. She often said: “God forbid that I should will any to do that in my house which I would not willingly do myself first.”⁴¹

The ability and willingness to undertake any job in the house is the mark of a good mistress; conduct books routinely advise that a mistress can only oversee work she knows how to do properly herself. Protestant women, too, might therefore approach housework as a test of their mettle as mistresses and as a form of devotion.⁴² However, the emphasis on Catholic women’s willingness to undertake disgusting work reflects the particular burden placed on Catholic women in post-Reformation England, many of whom ran households or convents, ministered to prisoners and the sick, harbored priests and limited their reliance on any but the most trusted servants. Stories stressed that the women were spiritually humbled rather than socially demoted by this work. Lay women, like the nuns Claire Walker has studied, could close the “Mary/Martha” dichotomy by viewing “manual labor as a form of prayer.”⁴³ Abbesses

40. *An Elizabethan Recusant House, comprising The Life of the Lady Magdalen Viscountess Montague (1538–1608)*, ed. A. C. Southern (London, 1954), p. 11. Richard Smith’s *The Life of Lady Madgalen Viscountess Montague*, tr. Cuthbert Fursdon, was first published in 1627. Wolfe claims that the Cary daughters would have known this text (pp. 62n.131, 73).

41. *Mr. John Mush’s Life of Margaret Clitherow*, p. 375.

42. See Michelle Dowd, *Working Fictions: Narratives, Women, and Labor in Early Modern England* (Columbia University diss., 2003), ch. 4.

43. Claire Walker, “Combining Martha and Mary: Gender and Work in 17th-century English Cloisters,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 30/2 (1999), 417. Walker argues that “Within the monastic context, manual labor was imbued with a distinctive spiritual significance which aimed to lift toil beyond mere financial necessity, and into the realm of religious devotion” (p. 399). Still, “social status was a significant factor in monastic work” (p. 414)—that is, lay sisters were taken in to do housework.

and ladies made it a form of dazzling condescension as well. Thus these texts value the most menial kinds of labor and reveal how privileged all of these protagonists are; their willingness to do these tasks would not be admirable if they were not assumed to have a choice.

If these stories respond to the particularities of Catholic women's circumstances, they also share an intense corporeality that corresponds to the "real presence" of the body in Catholicism. These texts dwell on the details of bodily failure, the assault of the diseased on the caretaker's senses, in a way that is not typical of Protestant women's biographies and autobiographies.⁴⁴ Here the body is vividly, grossly present. To "care and diligence" the praise of these women usually adds an emphasis on their eagerness for self-abasement, detailed evocations of just how repulsive some jobs can be, and near-glee at the possibilities for self-mortification through disease and caregiving. Anne Dacres was willing to dress the wounds of even the most "poor and despicable" "with her own hands"; "there was no exercise so humble to which she would refuse to put her hand."⁴⁵ Dorothy Lawson cared for her husband's brother when he "contracted a disease so contagious and noisome, that neither friend nor stranger would entertain him" and "did all about himself, his diet, and chamber, without troubling any servant, commending the success of this difficult enterprise to the assistance of St. Francis Xavier, and Ste. Catharine of Sienna, by whose examples shee was moved to undertake it."⁴⁶ Catharine Burton graduates from her work as a scullion to sucking the corruption from a sore, in imitation of her beloved St. Xavier.⁴⁷ Whereas virgin martyrs suffer terrible tortures, these women endure nursing as their own gendered, bodily experience of spiritual struggle. In either case, the body is both denied and everywhere described; it is the ground of whatever virtue can be achieved by mastering it.

Texts about Catholic women's lives suggest that both imprisonment and bereavement could be opportunities to concentrate on one's devotions. In prison Margaret Clitherow had "good time and opportunity to attend only to serve God, and the gathering of spiritual riches."⁴⁸

44. See Rose on the absence of the body from privileged women's autobiographies, and how Alice Thornton functions as an exception (*Gender and the Transformations of Heroism*, pp. 70–77).

45. *The Lives of Philip Howard, Earl of Arundel, and of Anne Dacres, His Wife*, p. 284.

46. Palmes, *Life of Mrs. Dorothy Lawson*, p. 27. Lawson also cared for plague victims.

47. Burton, *An English Carmelite*, p. 140.

48. *Mr. John Mush's Life of Margaret Clitherow*, p. 390.

Dorothy Lawson is able to consult a priest more freely, “her husband going more frequently than at first to London about law business.”⁴⁹ When Elizabeth of Hungary’s husband was away, “shee seemed to be rather a claustrial Widow, or recluse Anchorite, shut up in walls, then a Lady of the court, or especially the Princess thereof.” Elizabeth immediately reverted to wifely devotion when her husband returned. But his death “brought that life to her, which she desired, and that she might wholly and entirely vowe her selfe to it, she disarrayed her selfe from all pleasures of the world.” Another version of Elizabeth of Hungary’s life claims that she performed her devotion and obedience to her husband “more readily, punctually, and absolutely” *after* his death.⁵⁰ Similarly, when Lady Magdalen, Viscountess Montague, loses her beloved husband, the narrative presents this as a stroke of luck: “For whereas formerly obliged to wedlock she was constrained to think, as the Apostle saith, how also to please her husband, now, that band being dissolved and having gotten a more settled freedom of exercising her virtue, she applied herself more attentively to the service of God.”⁵¹

For all of the value placed on women’s devotions, their service was so valuable to the mission in England that even the respite for contemplation afforded by bereavement might have to be brief. Two priests invoke Martha’s example to convince grieving widows that, rather than retreat into contemplation, they should devote their lives to helping the mission. In his *Autobiography*, Fr. John Gerard describes a widow so depressed that she has barely left her room for a year. He guides her toward deciding to remain a widow (as second best to virginity), then convinces her to embrace a future that is very much in his own interests: “She would practise poverty, in the sense that she would put all she possessed or came to possess at the service of God and His servants; and she herself would be a kind of handmaid to them to wait on their wants. Lastly and before all else, she would be obedient. She would carry out what she was told to do as perfectly as if she had made a vow—in fact, she complained that our priests were forbidden to receive such vows. Briefly, she decided, and I could see she was resolved, to fulfil as nearly as she could the role of Martha, and of other holy women who followed Christ and ministered

49. Palmes, *Life of Mrs. Dorothy Lawson*, p. 20.

50. Peter Mathieu, *The Historie of S. Elizabeth Daughter of the King of Hungarie*, tr. Sir T. H. (Brussels, 1633), sigs. D2v, E7v, C9.

51. *An Elizabethan Recusant House, comprising The Life of the Lady Magdalen Viscountess Montague (1538–1608)*, p. 23.

to Him and His Apostles. She was ready to set up house wherever and in whatever way I judged best for our needs.”⁵² Similarly, after her husband’s death Mrs. Dorothy Lawson “had an earnest desire to be like a solitary turtle,” but her confessor, and other priests who had attended her but were in jail, confer and “after due consultation with God, and dispute among ourselves, ballancing in one scale her years, and want of health, in the other the great good which would be neglected, if shee solely attended to her own soul, resolv’d in our Lord to be more advantageous for his glory, and her crown to persever as she had begun, not only in the study of her own perfection, but allso in the pursuance and acquisition of others.” She immediately agrees: “since shee was not worthy to enjoy the sweetness of Mary’s part, shee would strive better than heretofore to make it acceptable to his divine will, by the conjunction of Martha.”⁵³ In both examples the woman’s confessor persuades her to forego contemplation and continue to serve her confessor and other priests, undertaking domestic tasks that age and status would normally spare her, and committing the capital offense of harboring priests. Service becomes a form of heroism.

If the problem with domestic work is that it is “never done” and must therefore be reiterated on a daily basis, then these texts suggest that this ritualistic repetition grants work its significance as a form of self-mortification and even martyrdom, as a devotional practice, and as a way of shaping a life. Through domestic work, these protagonists intervene effectively in the world: they cure the sick, win converts, protect priests, sustain life. Their biographies also employ detailed descriptions of work to connect women to other women and to a feminized tradition of cleaning and nursing. While each biographer praises the remarkable virtue of his subject, he also presents her virtue in conventional terms that link her to traditions and communities rather than individualizing her. The conventions that shape these texts forge connections between lives in the remote past and in recent memory, in foreign lands and in one’s own neighborhood or family, between saints and housewives, convents and households, nuns and lay women.

52. John Gerard, *The Autobiography of a Hunted Priest*, tr. Philip Caraman (Chicago, 1988), pp. 199–200; see also p. 195. Of a Catholic woman with a Protestant husband he writes that “as far as she could do so with such a husband, she gave herself up to my direction” (p. 227).

53. Palmes, *The Life of Mrs. Dorothy Lawson*, p. 36.

IV

THE LADY FALKLAND, HER LIFE

Elizabeth Cary's biographer was one of her daughters. Many nuns wrote biographies in this period, although usually in the abbreviated form of obituaries of their sisters, intended for manuscript circulation and archival preservation within the convent. As a nun's contribution to the body of Catholic biographical writing, *The Lady Falkland, Her Life* is distinguished from most other biographies by its author's gender and familial relation to her subject, and from convent obituaries by its length. This text was written some time after Cary's death in 1639, probably in 1645, and was not published until the nineteenth century. Whichever daughter wrote Cary's *Life*, she seems to have been well-versed in other lives of exemplary Catholics, as Heather Wolfe's recent edition demonstrates.⁵⁴ In the context of the conventions I have been sketching here, the episodes celebrated as quirky and therefore true appear the most familiar. Certain of Cary's struggles are unique, but her biographer grants them meaning within a set of constraints and emphases that shape most *Lives* of Catholic women.

Like other biographical subjects in the genre, Elizabeth Cary "was very careful and diligent in the disposition of the affairs of her house of all sorts; and she herself would work hard, together with her women and her maids, curious pieces of work, teaching them and directing all herself."⁵⁵ Cary extends this to nursing. When her estranged husband's injured leg turns gangrenous after a riding accident, she watches over him day and night (p. 219). To concentrate on her devotions, Cary also welcomes escape from household demands, even when grief provides the occasion. Perhaps this is why Cary, like Lady Trevor Warner,

54. Weller and Ferguson suggest that the *Life* was written between 1643 and 1650, when Lucy Cary died (pp. 1, 47–48); Wolfe argues that it was written between February and August, 1645 (p. 89). The manuscript of the *Life* was preserved in the Cambrai convent where several of her daughters lived. At the convent's dissolution at the time of the French revolution, it was moved to the Archives Départementales du Nord in Lille, France, where it remains. Wolfe demonstrates the biographers' familiarity with and indebtedness to Catholic "life writing" (pp. 45–54, 64–85).

55. *Life*, p. 191. Grundy sees a connection between "sanctity and humdrum domesticity" in Cary's *Life* and finds this not surprising given the popularity of "the model of saintly Catholic motherhood" in the years of persecution (Grundy, "Women's History," p. 133). However, in the biographies domesticity entails more than mothering and did not always correspond with maternity; furthermore, domesticity in these texts is as often carnivalesque and chaotic as it is "humdrum."

expresses little grief for those she loses (pp. 202, 221, 270). Like other subjects of biography, Cary also experiences mundane martyrdoms (in her case poverty more than illness), must cope with others' uncharitable views of her piety, and finds that her conversion creates conflict with her family.

While most biographies of converts present the conversion early in the narrative and then move to the committed Catholic life, *The Lady Falkland, Her Life* describes a protracted, secretive conversion rather than an early, life-altering one. The conversion of Cary's children is the most suspenseful conflict in the narrative. An adult child's perspective may shape this emphasis, seeing her own conversion as the most important accomplishment of her mother's life. But other *Lives* similarly record the many conversions Catholic women facilitate, depicting them as reproducing not only bodily but spiritual life. While most criticism has focused on Cary's conflict with her husband, especially given its connections to *The Tragedie of Mariam*, her most intense conflict in the *Life* is with the villainous Mr. Chillingworth over the conversions of her children.⁵⁶ As the story unfolds, Cary undermines as much as she facilitates these conversions, although they will ultimately be presented as her accomplishment.

Two features of the portrait of Elizabeth Cary have particularly interested critics: her devotion to reading and her neglect of her appearance. Both traits appear in the opening pages of the biography, as if they are Cary's central characteristics. She taught herself many languages (then forgot most of them), and went into debt to the servants to procure

56. *Life*, pp. 232–63. On the relationship between Cary's life and *The Tragedie of Mariam*, see Elaine V. Beilin, *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers of the English Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ, 1987), ch. 6, esp. p. 158; Dymphna Callaghan, "Re-Reading Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedie of Mariam, Faire Queene of Jewry*" in *Women, "Race," & Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London and New York, 1994), pp. 163–77; Margaret W. Ferguson, "Running On with Almost Public Voice: The Case of 'E. C.,'" in *Tradition and the Talents of Women*, ed. Florence Howe (Urbana and Chicago, 1991), pp. 37–67; Sandra K. Fischer, "Elizabeth Cary and Tyranny, Domestic and Religious," in *Silent But for the Word: Tudor Women as Patrons, Translators, and Writers of Religious Works*, ed. Margaret P. Hannay (Kent, Oh., 1985), pp. 225–37; Jonathan Goldberg, *Desiring Women Writing: English Renaissance Examples* (Stanford, 1997), pp. 164–90; Tina Krontiris, *Oppositional Voices: Women as Writers and Translators of Literature in the English Renaissance* (London, 1992), ch. 3; Barbara K. Lewalski, *Writing Women in Jacobean England* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), ch. 7; Marta Straznicky, "'Profane Stoical Paradoxes': *The Tragedie of Mariam* and Sidnean Closet Drama," *English Literary Renaissance* 24.1 (1994): 104–34; and Stephanie Wright, "The Canonization of Elizabeth Cary," in *Voicing Women: Gender and Sexuality in Early Modern Writing*, ed. Kate Chedgzooy, Melanie Hansen, and Suzanne Trill (Pittsburgh, 1997), p. 58.

candles after her mother forbade her to read at night. When her mother-in-law seized her books and confined her to her chamber, she switched from reading to writing. Cary had little regard for “her own fineness”; “dressing was all her life a torture to her . . . she was not able to attend to it at all, nor ever was her mind the least engaged in it, but her women were fain to walk round the room after her (which was her custom) while she was seriously thinking on some other business, and pin on her things and braid her hair; and while she writ or read, curl her hair and dress her head.”⁵⁷ What little effort she made was to please her husband. Once they were estranged, she stopped even that. Most biographical essays and headnotes on Cary have dwelt on these details. They create an appealing portrait of the woman writer who values books, reading, and writing above more traditionally feminine pursuits such as time-wasting beauty treatments. Yet these details also ally Cary not just with a tradition of women writers, but also with the tradition of saintly or holy Catholic women. The characterization of Cary may have as much to do with what her daughters read as with Cary’s actual life. Her attributes remain charming, but their charm ceases to reside in their uniqueness. In valuing Cary’s studiousness and squalor, we not only value her defiance of a particular standard of femininity but also ourselves participate in a long-standing feminist, and more surprisingly perhaps, Catholic, tradition of valuing women for just these rebellions.

The neglect of appearance is typical of saints, who always look into their hearts rather than their mirrors. As depicted in a seventeenth-century English translation of her *Life*, St. Catharine of Sienna’s mother “was earnest with her, that she should bestowe more tyme and diligence, in washing and scouring her skynne, in kembing and couloring her haire, in plucking up such haire as grewe in her face or necke disorderedly, and in other the like vaine and superfluous attendances, about the trymming and decking of her bodie, to please the eyes of men.” Resisting these demands, Catharine closely crops her hair, to vex her mother and thwart her wedding plans. Her mother then enlists Catharine’s older

57. *Life*, pp. 193–194. Yet “she that never (not in her youth) could take care or delight in her own fineness, could apply herself to have too much care and take pleasure in [her children’s]”; she was “excessive in all that concerned [her children’s] clothes or recreation” (p. 193). As a child, Margaret Mostyn virtuously displaced her own vanity onto a statue rather than a child: “She had scarce arrived unto full six years, when she began to be greatly delighted in adorning, with her bracelets, chains, and other curiosities, a picture of our Blessed Lady with the Infant Jesus in her arms, in which she often spent much time, and was once so seriously occupied in the innocent devotions that she forgot her dinner” (*The Life of Margaret Mostyn [Mother Margaret of Jesus]*, p. 12).

sister Bonaventura to help pressure Catharine to comply. Since this distracts Catharine from her devotions, and prepares her for a marriage she does not want, God intervenes. “[T]hat there might be nothing to hinder her fervour and devotion” God “laid his hand soone after upon *Bonaventura* her sister, by whose meanes she was induced to that inconvenience, and tooke her out of this life, with great anguish and travaile in child-bearing: not withstanding that she was otherwise a lustie yong woman, and like to beare manie children.” Bonaventura must die “because she had attempted to drawe her sister from the service of God . . . and to allure her to the van[it]ies of the worlde.”⁵⁸

Lay women also neglect their appearance. Lady Magdalen, Viscountess Montague, for instance, “never in her life dressed her head or adorned herself by a glass, which in a woman, especially a noble and a courtier, may be esteemed as a miracle, sith women otherwise devout have been subject to this defect.” She was also free of the imperfection of “painting her face with cheek varnish, ceruse, or other like colourings.”⁵⁹ This disdain for appearance is so much the mark of virtue that Catherine Holland diverts suspicion from her preparations for escaping overseas to join a convent by being “more vain . . . in Words, and Apparel; in so much as some Times I was chid for patching my Face and going so gay.”⁶⁰ Catharine Burton turns dressing into an occasion for self-mortification: “I would lace myself so strait that my stays were more painful to me than any chain I have worn since I came to religion” (pp. 32, 33).

According to their biographers, most virtuous women remain radiantly lovely despite their transcendence of vanity and even their self-mortification. Cary’s biographer does not go this last hagiographical step. She describes her mother’s neglect of appearance but also points out that she is short, fat, poorly dressed, and unkempt. She positions her subject

58. *Life of the Blessed Virgin, Saint Catharine of Siena*, sigs. C2, C4v–C5. In one account of her life, Elizabeth of Hungary threatens that if her father persists in urging her to remarry after she is widowed, “she would slitt her nose, thrust out her eyes, so disfigure her selfe, that not any should desire her. From that tyme forward, she became the fable, and floute of the world, the scorne of great ones, the shame and rebuke of her nearest Allyes” (sig. F4v). In another version of Elizabeth’s life, she not only disdains finery, but convinces court ladies to do so as well. When she must appear sumptuously dressed, she wears “very sharp and cruel cilices” (hair shirts) under her silks (*The History of S. Elizabeth*, sig. D2).

59. *An Elizabethan Recusant House, comprising The Life of the Lady Magdalen Viscountess Montague (1538–1608)*, p. 26.

60. C. S. Durant, *A Link Between Flemish Mystics and English Martyrs*, p. 303.

through the conventions of saints' lives and eminent women's biographies, but she also suggests how her mother—with her big appetite, creaky knees, bad memory, and foolish generosity—fails to conform to those ideals or exceeds the bounds of the roles provided. This tension between subject and ideal erupts in the constant qualifications in the text and the margins. For instance, the biographer announces that Cary “always much esteemed and loved order (when she remembered there was such a thing).”⁶¹ Ambivalence and sly criticism distinguish *The Lady Falkland, Her Life* from other Catholic biographies. Cary's faults bring her to life for the secular reader, even as they trouble the process of assimilating her to the model of the virtuous Catholic lady, if not saint. Despite her biographer's claim that “her heart was very open, and she easily known,” however, the seldom-named Cary remains elusive (p. 270).

Perhaps because Cary's contradictions emerge in her interactions with others, including her biographer, the portrait of Cary as a solitary reader conforms more closely to the available models. The *Life* presents Elizabeth as being born through or in conjunction with reading: “She was christened Elizabeth. She learnt to read very soon and loved it much.” Throughout the *Life* the biographer comments on the importance of reading. In her concluding assessment of her mother, the biographer addresses the extent of her reading first so that Cary's life seems to begin and end with reading (pp. 186, 248, 264, 268–69).

The opposition of Cary's mother and mother-in-law to her reading casts it as transgressive. Sometimes it is, as when it empowers Cary to stand up to authorities. This links Cary to holy women such as St. Katherine of Alexandria, the patron saint of students, who earns her martyrdom by debating and defeating scores of wisemen that the Emperor Maxentius brings to confront her. Katherine easily defeats the philosophers, pointing out at various moments that they would fare better “if [they] had read the famous poets” and that their ignorance of Jesus “sheweth plainlie [their] small reading.”⁶² They are consequently converted, then burned on the pyre. Cary's erudite self-assertion also

61. *Life*, p. 216. The passage enclosed in parentheses was crossed out in the manuscript, but it is not clear whether the author or another reader, perhaps a sister or brother, chose to delete it (see Weller and Ferguson pp. 48, 50–51; Wolfe pp. 88–89, 144).

62. Villegas, *The Lives of Saints*, pp. 924–25. In *Virgin Martyrs*, ch. 4, Winstead examines how two different fifteenth-century English versions of Katherine of Alexandria's life suggest changing attitudes toward her reading and erudition.

links her to her contemporaries. Just as Cary stands up to her parents, her husband, the King, and the Privy Council, other women wittily defend their own consciences. Catherine Holland, for instance, cannot suppress her delight in disputing with a bishop her father enlists to dissuade her from converting to Catholicism.⁶³

Cary's reading is also a compensation for the plays, dinner conversation, and good food she also enjoys, but is often denied (pp. 216, 224, 225, 269–70). Reading consoles her, leads her toward conversion, and then becomes central to her devotions. Biographies and saints' lives consistently stress the significance of reading to spiritual practice; some go so far as to confer divine approval on women's reading. In *The Life of the Blessed Virgin, Sainct Catharine of Sienna*, for instance, Jesus often visited Catharine, sometimes bringing along his mother or other saints, but most often by himself. When he came alone, he "conferred with her, even as one familiar is wont to doe with an other"; "manie tymes they walked up and downe in her chamber together, and said the psalmes, or divine service together, as though they had ben two clerkes, or religious persones." Like many other mystics, Catharine understands herself as Jesus' spouse, and even wears a ring he has given her. Her experience of their union not only as a marriage, but as the collegiality of "two clerks" strikes me as more interesting. The narrator remarks upon this relationship as particularly surprising given that "she never learned to read, by the teaching of anie man or woman." Catharine wants to learn how to read in order to learn her matins, and asks one of her sisters "to get her an A.B.C. and to teach her the letters." But her progress is slow and distracts her from her devotions, so she puts aside her studying and prays that if Jesus wants her to sing the divine service he will grant her the ability to read. "It was a wonderful thing to report, that she had no sooner ended her praier, but that she was foorthwith able to read as readily, as one that had been trained long tyme in the studie of learnyng. Whereat her ghostlie Father, was mervlously astoined [sic]: forsomuch as it was well knowen to all, that conversed with her, that before that tyme, she could not only not read, or spell, but also verie hardly knowe one letter from an other. After this tyme she gate her bookes of Church service, and began to saie her Mattins, and other Canonical howers."⁶⁴

63. Durant, *A Link Between Flemish Mystics and English Martyrs*, pp. 293–97. See also Lady Trevor Warner's learnedness (*The Life of the Lady Warner*, sigs. A4, B6v, Gv).

64. *Life of the Blessed Virgin, Sainct Catharine*, sigs. G6–G7.

Catharine both confirms the assumption that it is a miracle when Catholic women can read, and undercuts the notion that devotion and reading are disjoined for Catholics. To read Catharine's story is to reproduce her miracle, and to participate in reading as a divinely sanctioned and enabled practice. Whatever parents or husbands might think, Jesus likes his female supplicants to read.

Catharine's story is exceptional and seems very different from Elizabeth Cary's laborious efforts to bribe servants for candles, her slow conversion, and her many languages rapidly learned and gradually forgotten. Yet the story offers a miracle women might find attractive, since it acknowledges the obstacles to learning and literacy. Catharine Burton, who claims to have read a life of St. Catharine of Sienna in her youth, describes an intervention by St. Xavier in her struggles to learn Latin that closely parallels Jesus' tutoring of St. Catharine. As she tries to learn her Breviary, Burton is constantly chided by her mistress for being slow. "Being more than ordinarily concerned to think my noviceship was almost done, and that I was still so backward in reading my Breviary, I complained to the Saint sweetly, as if I took it unkind that he had not been so good as his word in helping me." He appears to her and replies: "'Child, you shall have your Latin as perfect as any of them,' meaning, as I understood, my fellow novices. The Saint having comforted and encouraged me, soon departed. In less than two years I was chosen Sub-Prioress, whose office it is to take care of the choir and correct those who read in it." St. Xavier also helps Catharine with her writing. First he directs her to write an autobiography, promising to help her "having no talent in writing, nor time for it" by virtually dictating it. When she tells her confessor about this idea "he answered if the Saint helped me as he had promised, all would go well, otherwise, knowing what a writer I was, he thought it could never be done." But it does get done, with the saint as editor and supporter.⁶⁵

Women like Cary who valued reading but also experienced it as a challenge would be most likely to marvel at the miracles of these two Catharines, one a saint, the other an English nun. Miracles resolve the problems of daily life: they eliminate obstacles, cure illnesses, and alleviate pain. The two Catharines' miraculous rescue by tutorial proves the rule by the exception: how hard it was to attain books, especially devotional ones; how hard it is to learn to read Latin. Smaller, more domestic

65. Burton, *An English Carmelite*, pp. 31, 142, 16–17; see also 134, 178, 200.

miracles flesh this out further. In a freshly made bed, one woman “found a book lying under the bolster.” “She then looked into the book, and found that it was a Catholic one, whereof she was very glad, for she had a long time desired to know something of that religion, hearing so much talk of papists and recusants, and longed to understand the manner of their observances, but could never have her desire satisfied herein until now that Almighty God provided her of means, for in this book, which it seems was of controversy, she found all heretical objections so clearly confuted, and Catholic religion so manifestly proved in all points, that she fully resolved to become a Catholic, seeing it was the true faith, and no other means to be saved but by it.”⁶⁶ When books were prohibited, schools shuttered, and instruction hard to gain, miracles that provide books and the skills one needs to read them seem useful indeed. Just as reading in these stories binds the miraculous readers to their divine teachers, the stories themselves forge a connection between the protagonists and readers.⁶⁷

Biographies of lay women similarly depict reading as relational rather than solitary. In his biography of Dorothy Lawson, William Palmes attributes to her a gendered reading practice closely allied to the domestic service associated, and in competition, with women’s devotion: “being asked why she read [the *Imitation of Christ*] so leasurly, shee gave a solid reason by a couple of familiar examples: the one of a hen who breaks with her bill the meat for her chickens, but eates none herself; the other of a nurse who converts the meat into her own substance to breed milk, and feed her little one; so said shee, in reading a treatise of such con-cearnment, we must imitate a wise nurse, not the simplicity of a foolish hen.” This gendered model of reading invests value in laborious self-nurture, not because it promotes self-development or fervent spiritual experience but because it will enable one to give or to serve more. In Palmes’s account of her life, Lawson often engages in such a maternal reading practice: she reads the rules of the sodality of the immaculate conception to her children; “Shee gave her servants more than was due in temporalls as a bountifull mistress, and all aide and satisfaction as their companion and equall in spiritualls, often relating Saints lives to her maids, and reading pious books in their company.”⁶⁸

66. *The Chronicle of the English Augustinian Canonesses Regular . . . at St. Monica’s in Louvain 1548 to 1625*, p. 191. This describes the experience of Sr. Susan Brooke’s mother.

67. As Karen Winstead asks of earlier Continental depictions of reading saints, “what better way to associate saints with readers than to portray saints as readers?” (Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs*, p. 150).

68. Palmes, *The Life of Mrs. Dorothy Lawson*, pp. 38, 48; see also 43, 49–50.

According to her biographer, Lady Trevor Warner combined Elizabeth Cary's reading-while-dressing with Dorothy Lawson's reading-as-nurturing. "Ladies ordinarily challenge the time of Dressing and Adorning themselves, as properly their own; and endeavor to make it the whole Employment of their Servants. But on the contrary, She to redeem that, which others do not account lost; was accustom'd to Read constantly some Devout Book to them; not only when they were busy in this Employment, but in the Afternoon also; causing such, whose Circumstances would permit them, to Work in her presence; that she might Read to them whilst they were there: And took care not only to give them all, a constant Employment; but also, that whilst their Hands were at Work, their Minds might be Piously taken up, with Attention to what they Heard."⁶⁹ The similarity between this vignette and the famous description of Cary at her toilette is striking. So is the difference. Trevor Warner redeems the daily ritual of "Dressing and Adorning" herself by turning it into an opportunity for edifying others. In contrast, Elizabeth Cary turns inward, "seriously thinking on some other business," complicating her servants' task without improving them in the process. Although Cary often instructs her children and her servants, helping to contribute to their conversion, when the biography discusses her reading, it is not as a form of service but as a means of self-definition and a form of private devotion. Reading in the *Life* is a solitary, consoling and wholly absorbing occupation.

Even the telling differences between Cary and other Catholic gentlewomen, such as Lady Trevor Warner and Dorothy Lawson, come into focus only when these biographies are considered together. Genre conventions and confessional priorities are as important in the *Life* as the actual woman and what her daughter really felt about her. Cary's biographer never mastered her own ambivalence or the complexity of Cary's life; both exert considerable pressure on the genre of the virtuous Catholic woman's life story. While the discontinuities between subject and form

69. Scarisbrick, *The Life of the Lady Warner*, sig. B5v. Margaret Mostyn also "employed much time in reading the saints' lives and other spiritual books, which she sometimes red to the servants" (p. 15); "Even when her occupations allowed her the least spare time, she had always some pious book or other at hand to spend it in, restoring her decayed forces by that heavenly food, as she called it. And she has often been heard to say there was nothing she took more delight in than reading, and that, according to inclination, she could leave meat and sleep or any pastime soever, for the pleasure she took in this exercise. On Sundays or other festive days, she would find out a pious historical book, and read it to the religious in time of recreation, and which was the most agreeable entertainment she could give them" (*Life of Margaret Mostyn*, p. 189).

are fascinating, it was probably the fit between the two—that is, the ways in which Cary's life could be seen and presented through the lens of the Catholic biography—that enabled her biographer to undertake the project of writing her mother's life.

V

CONCLUSION

Hagiographers or biographers of Catholic women understand these remarkable lives by comparing them to and modeling them on one another. Richard Smith's *The Life of Lady Madgalen Viscountess Montague* constantly draws parallels between this aristocratic widow and mother of eight and various female saints, repeating formulas such as "as St. Jerome writeth of St. Paula."⁷⁰ In *A Relation of the holy and happy Life and Death of the Lady Lucy Knatchbull, Abbess*, Sir Tobie Matthew constantly points out how she modelled herself on St. Teresa; having already published a translation of Teresa's autobiography, he identifies Teresa's life as the model for his depiction of Knatchbull.⁷¹

Women themselves seem to have self-consciously emulated saints' lives. For instance, upon her first "clothing," Lady Trevor Warner takes "the Name of Sister Teresa Clare; she having had, even whilst a Protestant, a very particular esteem of St. Teresa, upon the Reading her Life, which accidentally fell into her hands."⁷² Cary, too, seemed to shape herself in relation to lives of female saints. The virtue of these women becomes recognizable to themselves and to others as conformity to a standard produced and disseminated through books. As Alison Shell argues, Catholics' "consistency in behaving like the saints they venerated, at

70. *An Elizabethan Recusant House, comprising The Life of the Lady Magdalen Viscountess Montague (1538–1608)*, p. 31.

71. Sir Tobie Matthew, *The Life of Lady Lucy Knatchbull*, pp. 77, 123–24; see also pp. 46, 51, 77–80. In Matthew's translation of Teresa's *Life* she claims that she herself did not find consolation in reading saints' lives because they were so much more virtuous than she and when once called to God never backslid (*The Flaming Hart or the Life of the Glorious S. Teresa*, tr. T. Matthew [Antwerp, 1642], sig. *****3v). However, Burke argues that some later saints "consciously modelled" themselves on earlier prototypes ("How to be a Counter-Reformation Saint," p. 57). Margaret Mostyn's "spiritual reding, of which she was always a lover, rendered her familiar with the lives and maxims of the saints, where amongst other things she learned that the way to perfection is mortification" (*The Life of Margaret Mostyn (Mother Margaret of Jesus)*, p. 34).

72. Scarisbrick, *The Life of the Lady Warner*, sig. E5. Scarisbrick reports that a Fr. Hall says of Lady Trevor Warner (aka Sister Clare) that "Whatever I observ'd in any Saints Life, that was great, and good; I think truly I saw it Coppy'd out exactly in Sister Clare" (sig. Gv).

trial, in prison and on the scaffold, was perhaps the supreme achievement of the controversial imagination, turning worldly defeat into spiritual success,"⁷³ so that inspiring models were more useful than documents describing what particular women really did. Indeed, the ideal and the document are not separable; Catholic women's lives and words were only recognized as worthy of record to the extent that they conformed to or could be brought to conform to the conventions of the developing subgenre of eminent women's biography.

Employing the categories of religious/ethnic identity, gender, and literary convention can help to shift the focus from individuals to communities and call into question the source and meaning of agency. Much research on women writers continues to be organized around exceptional individuals; much work on women readers, too, is tied to the evidence left by a few articulate, record-keeping individuals. As critics such as Margaret Ferguson link women's writing to their reading, they are discovering other principles of organization, such as locating women writers and their works in relation to genres, coterie, and generational cohorts.⁷⁴ Such approaches see Cary's decision to write a closet drama or Mary Sidney's to translate one as contingent on their membership in a particular coterie;⁷⁵ they see Margaret Cavendish not as an isolated eccentric but as an informed participant in controversies surrounding inquiry, knowledge, science, perception, and reading.⁷⁶ Thus women

73. Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy, and the English Literary Imagination*, p. 227.

74. For influential arguments about the relationship between women's reading and their writing, see the pioneering work of Margaret W. Ferguson, "A Room Not Their Own: Renaissance Women as Readers and Writers," *The Comparative Perspective on Literature: Approaches to Theory and Practice*, ed. Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes (Ithaca, 1988), pp. 93–116, and *Dido's Daughters: Literacy, Gender, and Empire in Early Modern France and England* (Chicago, 2003). See also Margaret J. M. Ezell, *Writing Women's Literary History* (Baltimore, 1993); Mary Ellen Lamb, *Gender and Authorship in the Sidney Circle* (Madison, Wis., 1990); and Wendy Wall, *The Imprint of Gender: Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca, 1993), ch. 5. For the idea of a "generational cohort," see Maureen Quilligan, "Completing the Conversation" in *Shakespeare Studies* 25 (1997), 42–49. See also Paula McDowell's ground-breaking study of *Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics, and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace, 1678–1730* (Oxford, 1998).

75. Marta Straznicky, "'Profane Stoical Paradoxes,'" p. 109; see also Sanders, *Gender and Literacy*, chs. 3 and 5; and Nancy A. Gutierrez, "Valuing *Mariam*: Genre Study and Feminist Analysis," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 10 (1991), 233–51.

76. Elizabeth A. Spiller argues that Margaret Cavendish should be considered "a reader who became an author," in "Reading through Galileo's Telescope: Margaret Cavendish and the Experience of Reading," *Renaissance Quarterly* 53 (2000): 192–221, esp. 197n10. Marina Leslie, *Renaissance Utopias and the Problem of History* (Ithaca, 1998), also argues for Cavendish's "profound engagement with, and revision of, her intellectual and cultural milieu" (p. 124); see also Anna Battigelli, *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind* (Lexington, 1998).

writers and readers might best be understood as members of textual and social networks.

Biographies of Catholic women, and the saints' lives on which they drew, shaped and documented the terms in which the Catholic clergy could value women's contribution to the mission and achievement of virtue. These texts create rather than record struggle, suffering, and survival as the conditions under which women's stories might be found meaningful. Questions about literary form—why would one tell this woman's life story like this? and how do those formal choices link this story to other stories?—may prove more useful than questions about what such texts can teach us about Catholic women's lived experience.⁷⁷

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77. On experience, see Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington, 1984), ch. 6; Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), chs. 1 and 2; and Joan W. Scott, "Experience," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan Scott (New York, 1992), pp. 22–40.

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