

# Why Are Nuns Funny?

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IN ENGLAND A GENERATION OR TWO after the Reformation, the nun was a stock figure in a surprisingly wide range of representations. She appears in mischievous ballads; in comedies (where, from the poisoned nuns in *The Jew of Malta* to the wise abbess in *The Comedy of Errors*, the nun is either silly or benign rather than a female version of the misguided friars and villainous cardinals of tragedy); in earnest exposés of Catholic corruption; in erotic elaborations of what might happen inside the cloister and inside the confessional; in the occasional biography of a nun by her confessor or abbess; in theological treatises and guides addressed to her; and in the letters and other writings nuns themselves composed. Except for texts produced by and for Catholics, most of these texts provoke laughter at the nun's failed attempts at chastity, her misguided obedience, her superstition, and her presumption to authority.<sup>1</sup> Since nuns were as various as anyone else, and representations of them spanned centuries, appearing in a range of genres and addressed to a great variety of readers, the polemical project of ridiculing the nun needs to be scrutinized rather than taken as given. The laughable nun is exposed to hostile view from the outside. Her exposure is designed in part to secure the alienated position from which one observes and ridicules her. From this viewpoint, she figures that part of Catholicism that is to be dismissed rather than feared: the absurdity of female authority and separatism; the inevitable eruption of repression into license; the mindless submission to corrupt leaders.

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1. This was, of course, a two-sided conversation. For a vivid example of a Catholic perspective on the convent, see Lawrence Anderton's *The English Nunne. Being a Treatise, wherein (by way of Dialogue) the Author Endeavoureth to Draw Yong & Unmarried Catholike Gentlewomen to Imbrace a Votary, and Religious Life* (St. Omer, France, 1642). Scholars such as Peter Lake, Michael Questier, and Alexandra Walsham encourage us to see the important role popular print played in fueling religious controversy, forging oppositional religious communities, and shaping confessional identities. See Peter Lake and Michael Questier, *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat: Protestants, Papists, and Players in Post-Reformation England* (New Haven, Conn., and London, 2002); and Alexandra Walsham, "Domme Preachers'? Post-Reformation English Catholicism and the Culture of Print," *Past and Present*, no. 168 (August 2000): 72–123.

Jokes about clerical hypocrisy were standard in popular culture long before the Reformation. But when the Reformation changed nuns' circumstances, it changed the jokes about them, too. Beginning with the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539, some dispossessed nuns joined convents abroad or banded together to attempt to continue a contemplative life; some daughters of English exiles entered local cloisters. Then, in the late sixteenth century, women began to found expatriate English cloisters. There were three by 1610; foundations peaked in the 1620s; ultimately, twenty-two contemplative houses were founded in France, the southern Netherlands, and Portugal between 1591 and 1710.<sup>2</sup> Thus, while there were English nuns after the Reformation, they did not live in England and they were not especially visible from there. Their family members might correspond with them; travelers sometimes visited them. Indeed, visits to women's religious houses in the Southern Netherlands became a standard feature on tourists' itineraries by the late seventeenth century. On these visits, Protestant tourists who had "little occasion to mix with Catholics at home" were entertained by nuns through the titillating mediation of the convent grate.<sup>3</sup> Abroad, nuns could feature as an "attraction" as they never would at home since they had ceased to be participants in daily life in England.

The strange status of nuns as exiles—displaced from England but enshrined in fantasies—was particular to England after the Reformation and before Catholic emancipation. If anything, the nun became a more prominent figure in popular culture by the seventeenth century. As Kate Chedgzoy has argued, "even as the Reformation in England exacerbated [nuns'] actual marginality, it simultaneously increased the usefulness of the convent as a fictive space in which women's ambiguous relation to the central institutions of early modern society could be reimaged"; the Reformation actually made it easier to use the convent "as a space of and for fantasy."<sup>4</sup>

It might seem as if we have two parallel lines of development here, one in which English women who wish to become nuns are exiled to the Continent, thus isolated, marginalized, and invisible; and another in which the figure of the nun, divorced from any grounding in experience with real nuns, looms ever larger as fiction and fantasy.

2. Claire Walker, "Combining Martha and Mary: Gender and Work in Seventeenth-Century English Cloisters," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 30.2 (1999): 397–418; Claire Walker, *Gender and Politics in Early Modern Europe: English Convents in France and the Low Countries* (Basingstoke, U.K., and New York, 2005), 13, 15, 17. See also J. C. H. Aveling, *The Handle and the Ax: The Catholic Recusants in England from Reformation to Emancipation* (London, 1976), 87–103; Peter Guilday, *The English Catholic Refugees on the Continent, 1558–1795*, vol. 1: *English Colleges and Convents in the Catholic Low Countries, 1558–1795* (London, 1914)—apparently, no volume 2 of this work was ever published; and Anne Laurence, *Women in England, 1500–1760: A Social History* (London, 1994), 181–90. Various historians come up with different tallies of English Catholic houses on the Continent. Aveling claims that by the 1660s there were almost one hundred (p. 87); Laurence claims that "during the seventeenth century, twenty-one new foundations for English women were established on the continent and English nuns outnumbered English monks" (p. 188).

3. C. D. Van Strien, "Recusant Houses in the Southern Netherlands as Seen by British Tourists, c. 1650–1720," *Recusant History* 20 (1991): 495–511, esp. 495.

4. Kate Chedgzoy, "For *Virgin Buildings* Oft Brought Forth': Fantasies of Convent Sexuality," in Rebecca D'Monté and Nicole Pohl, eds., *Female Communities, 1600–1800: Literary Visions and Cultural Realities* (Houndmills, U.K., 2000), 53–75, esp. 56 and 62.

But these trajectories intertwine.<sup>5</sup> Women who chose to become nuns, often against family opposition, had to counter the fully developed, widely disseminated idea of what it meant to be a nun. Derisive, eroticized depictions of nuns probably contributed to the many obstacles that limited access to this option because they intensified parental resistance.<sup>6</sup>

Just as ridicule might have limited an already restricted option, it might also have shaped the process of recording and remembering the early modern past. The story of how English women founded and sustained convents and recruited new members, and of their active role in the long fight to restore Charles II and later to achieve toleration, is just now being written. One of the most important historians responsible for that revision, Claire Walker, suggests that we have had a hard time seeing the important political contributions of someone like Mary Knatchbull, abbess of the English Benedictine convent at Ghent for forty-six years (1650–96), because her contemporaries were embarrassed to admit their reliance on and esteem for her. The fact that no one took such women seriously may have actually helped them with such political involvement as they did undertake. The nuns were able to run correspondence networks because the Protectorate's intelligence services did not "consider a nun's mail packets politically significant"—or, for that matter, any woman's: Charles and his closest allies adopted female pseudonyms rather than ciphers in the correspondence engineering the Restoration on the assumption that women's letters would not be closely scrutinized (an assumption that proved correct). But after the Restoration, Walker argues, royalists tried to distance themselves from the nuns who had sheltered them, given them money, and facilitated their correspondence and intelligence networks because "in the contemporary imagination, the nun was a figure of fun—the archetypal foolish woman." As a consequence, "the imperatives which made the nuns invisible in the 1660s have preserved their historical anonymity."<sup>7</sup>

I find both Chedgzoy's and Walker's formulations enormously persuasive and useful. I share their interest in how reduced exposure to real nuns facilitated fantasies

5. I do not want to replicate Bridget Hill's dismissive gesture: "Of course many Catholic parents who regretted the absence of nunneries surreptitiously began to send their daughters to nunneries abroad. But I am not concerned with them here" (p. 109). Hill scrupulously defends Mary Astell from the charge of Catholic sympathies—"she was very far from wanting a return of Catholicism or Catholic nunneries" (p. 109)—and her own project from a sympathy for Catholicism she depicts as merely nostalgic. See "A Refuge from Men: The Idea of a Protestant Nunnery," *Past and Present*, no. 117 (November 1987): 107–30.

6. At the very moment when Protestant women such as Mary Astell or the Farrar family at Little Gidding tried to appropriate and reinvent the convent as a model of female association, popular culture worked industriously to discredit convents.

7. Claire Walker, "Prayer, Patronage, and Political Conspiracy: English Nuns and the Restoration," *Historical Journal* 43 (2000): 1–23, esp. 22; Claire Walker, "Loyal and Dutiful Subjects: English Nuns and Stuart Politics," James Daybell, ed., *Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450–1700*, (Hampshire, U.K., 2004), 228–42, esp. 238. On the use of female pseudonyms, see C. M. K. Bowden, "The Abbess and Mrs. Brown: Lady Mary Knatchbull and Royalist Politics in Flanders in the Late 1650s," *Recusant History* 24 (1999): 288–308. Of Knatchbull's case, Walker writes: "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"; "Prayer, Patronage, and Political Conspiracy," 22.

about nuns, and in how those fantasies about nuns fed back into the perceptions of real nuns. But I want to think about the causes and consequences of how nuns are represented not just for nuns, or even for Catholics. To do so I will try to trouble the dichotomy Chedgzoy proposes between the “actual” and the “fictive,” or fantasy; and that between political action and the contemporary imagination Walker assumes. I will argue that the nun serves as a limit case for constructions of femininity, so that laughter at her functions as much to reaffirm assumptions and manage anxiety about the familiar as to express derision of the other. As a consequence, depictions of her are embedded in and have consequences for attitudes toward all women. Rather than focus on what fantasies were attached to nuns despite their “actual marginality” or have obscured our understanding of their actual contributions, I will consider what certainties and anxieties were worked out through laughter at nuns; I consider those certainties and anxieties to be, in themselves, “actual.”<sup>8</sup> Even if the nun of the popular imagination can tell us very little about nuns in English houses on the Continent after the Reformation, she is still an important figure because of what she can tell us about attitudes toward women’s sexuality, agency, and authority, about attitudes toward Catholic capacities for loyalty and critical judgment, and about the tangled worlds of sexual, political, and theological fantasy.

Representations of nuns always cut two ways—they are always about Catholics *and* about women. What is the interplay between the nun’s Catholicism and her femininity and how does she function sometimes as a limit case for women, sometimes as a limit case for Catholics, and sometimes as both? To think about nuns as figures for (all) women and (all) Catholics requires a two-layered consideration of history. The depictions of nuns’ failings as distinctively feminine dwells on and perpetuates long-standing assumptions about women and emphasizes continuity across time. Yet this gender construction, which splatters all women even as it focuses on a very particular subset of Catholic ones, is also put to use to discredit Catholics in historically and politically specific ways, as we will see. Before I turn to the historically specific depictions of nuns in the late seventeenth century, I will examine some fairly consistent features of caricatures of nuns.



In popular culture, nuns just want to have fun. Thomas Robinson’s purported exposé of the Bridgettines in Lisbon in 1622 claims that “well doe they [nuns] manifest the abundance of idleness that is in them, when at sundry times playing upon their instruments for their fathers [confessor’s] recreation, they sing him ribaldrous Songs and jigs, as that of Bonny Nell, and such other obscene and scurrilous Ballads, as would make a chaste eare to glow at the hearing of them, and which I would scarce have be-

8. I emphasize certainties as well as anxieties because I do not assume that laughter expresses only anxiety, fear, or aggression. Alan Bray suggests, for instance, that jokes about the male body in letters exchanged among men in the early modern period might not have expressed anxiety about masculinity and male sexuality, as has often been assumed: “something can be the source of humor precisely because it is secure”; *The Friend* (Chicago, 2003), 164–72, esp. 169.

lieved would have proceeded out of their mouthes, had I not heard them with my owne eares.”<sup>9</sup> (Note the distinction here between a chaste ear and Robinson’s own.) *The Friers Chronicle* of 1623 claims that “a Gentle-woman taken in Adulterie, and so divorced, desired for her penance to be detrued into a Monasterie, alledging this reason to her inward friends, that in stead of punishment, shee should bee sure to have there the greater pleasure.”<sup>10</sup> In her prose fiction, Aphra Behn gives us nuns who chat amiably with relatives for hours through the grate, sing, dance, play instruments, and make “little plays” to “divert themselves.”<sup>11</sup> Public relations and financial need compelled nuns to entertain their English visitors with snacks, conversation, and a range of affordable souvenirs.<sup>12</sup> While depictions of them as giving and taking pleasure have a kernel of truth, then, such representations also suggest that nuns are not to be taken seriously.

Emphasizing nuns’ pastimes participates in the broader critique of the Catholic clergy’s sloth and self-indulgence. As Thomas Becon writes of priests in 1637, “they of the labour of other mens hands, and the sweate of other mens browes may live an idle & voluptuous life, as Epicures and belly beasts, borne onely to consume the good fruits of the earth.”<sup>13</sup> Just as penal laws forced priests into hiding, so the Reformation interrupted a process that unfolded elsewhere in Europe by which nuns developed active agendas of nursing and teaching.<sup>14</sup> Mary Ward attempted to open up such possibilities for English women but her success was contested and contained. Thus the Reformation forced women into enclosure and priests into secret residence in homes and then censured them for the contemplative lives (read, idleness) imposed on them. Everything we know about English convents on the Continent suggests that nuns worried about money, struggled with language problems, fought about doctrine, and did hard or at least tedious physical work on an exhausting schedule. They weren’t isolated from political turmoil but rather subjected to it. Derisive accounts erase this subsistence struggle, robbing nuns of industry and purpose. At least the insistence on nuns as women of pleasure concedes that whatever is happening inside convents is of interest to the nuns; nuns want to be there.

9. Thomas Robinson, *The Anatomy of the English Nunnery at Lisbon in Portugall* (London, 1622), sig. C3.

10. *The Friers Chronicle: or, the True Legend of Priests and Monkes Lives* (London, 1623), sig. C3.

11. Aphra Behn, “The History of the Nun,” in *The Works of Aphra Behn* (1915), ed. Montague Summers, vol. 5 (New York, 1967), 276. The heroine of Behn’s “History of the Nun” is so beloved in the convent to which her father consigns her (and where her aunt is abbess) that “at the Age of eight or nine Years, she was thought fit to receive and entertain all the great Men and Ladies, and the Strangers of any Nation, at the Grate” (p. 267). The nuns love little Isabella so that “whatever Excellency any one abounded in, she was sure to communicate it to the young Isabella, if one could Dance, another Sing, another play on this Instrument, and another on that” (p. 266).

12. Van Strien documents numerous travelers’ accounts of their entertainment at convents’ grates; “Recusant Houses in the Southern Netherlands,” 499–500, 502–3, 505.

13. Thomas Becon, *The Displaying of the Popish Masse* (London, 1637), 272.

14. Mary Laven, *Virgins of Venice: Broken Vows and Cloistered Lives in the Renaissance Convent* (New York, 2002); Elizabeth A. Leffeldt, *Religious Women in Golden Age Spain: The Permeable Cloister* (Aldershot, U.K., 2005); Elizabeth Rapley, *A Social History of the Cloister: Daily Life in the Teaching Monasteries of the Old Regime* (Montreal and Kingston, Ontario, 2001); and Ulrike Strasser, *State of Virginity: Gender, Religion, and Politics in an Early Modern Catholic State* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2004).

Nuns' pleasure-seeking links them both to other clergy members in the particular circumstances of post-Reformation England and to venerable constructions of femininity. While the nun is a recognizable "type," her appeal has in part to do with the fact that she doesn't seem all that different from other women. Three of the tensions central to depictions of nuns also structure most discussions of female virtue and conduct: the double message regarding sexual circulation—one must not withhold one's self from the market but must not trade freely; the double message regarding female enclosure—one must police one's movements and conduct but not to the extent of being cloistered; and the double message about obligation—one must be able to make and keep a vow, but only the marriage vow. Standing as the limit case for women's chastity, confinement, and obligation, the nun always goes too far by attempting the most extreme compliance with familiar prohibitions. In her excess, the nun makes it possible to explore not only reservations about the extreme constraints and impossible expectations placed on most if not all women, but also the apprehension that some women might seek out or require even more extreme forms of constraint. Ridicule then helps to distance the nun from other women and to manage the disturbing possibility that the normative expectations for women institutionalized through marriage and the family are just as excessive and doomed as those institutionalized through the cloister.

As a woman who withholds herself from sexual circulation, the nun reinforces the imperative that women surrender to their own exchange. This logic survives in the lamentation that an attractive nun or priest is a "waste." In the early modern period, we see this logic at work in the first scene of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, in which Valentine describes Olivia's grief-stricken vow not to show her face to the sun for seven years as turning her into a kind of temporary nun:

But like a cloistress she will veiled walk  
 And water once a day her chamber round  
 With eye-offending brine—all this to season  
 A brother's dead love, which she would keep fresh  
 And lasting in her sad remembrance.

(1.1.27–31)

Viola as Cesario most sternly and directly scolds Olivia for withholding herself from sexual circulation: "what is yours to bestow is not yours to reserve" (1.5.167–68). After seeing Olivia's face she says, "Lady, you are the cruell'st she alive / If you will lead these graces to the grave / And leave the world no copy" (1.5.211–13). Similarly, in plays in which the heroines temporarily enter convents they are promptly hauled out as too beautiful for such an option. In Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (ca. 1589), when Margaret enters a convent after she has been spurned, her father urges her to "bury not such beauty in a cell," and her suitor insists "'Twere injury to me / To smother up such beauty in a cell." In John Fletcher's play *Monsieur Thomas* (1639),

Thomas (disguised as a nun) demands his beloved from the convent to which she's fled, insisting, "Out with this Nun, she is too handsome for ye."<sup>15</sup>

Valerie Traub pinpoints the explicitly economic valence of this emphasis on celibacy as a waste. As she argues with specific reference to female homoeroticism, what is at issue "is less eroticism or even gender per se than the upholding of marital alliance, with social and biological reproduction at its core." Chedgzoy applies this insight to the figure of the nun, who is critiqued for keeping her vow of chastity as much as for breaking it.<sup>16</sup> The nun who succumbs to her libido, with other nuns or priests, is laughably but reassuringly human. As Sister Angelica says to Sister Agnes in *Venus in the Cloister*, "the truth is, that it is very sweet and delightful to suffer owns [*sic*] self to be led and conducted by that pure and innocent Nature, in only following the inclinations it gives us." In contrast, the nun who does not so succumb is niggardly and unnatural, "a Renegade to Nature, and to Love."<sup>17</sup> As we will see, in the fervently erotic fantasies of the cloister, the nuns therein are invariably led by nature. This suggests that the sexual choice that is the hardest to imagine—in part, of course, because it is the least titillating for the reader—is the choice to withhold or refrain, the choice that nuns understood themselves to be making.

Although recent scholarly attention to post-Reformation English nuns has tended to focus on Mary Ward's Institute, the nun of the cultural imaginary is an enclosed nun; indeed, the majority of English women who became nuns entered contemplative orders. Tridentine reforms that attempted to preserve such orders from reproach reinforced the barriers that defined them.<sup>18</sup> The walls locked out predatory

15. Robert Greene, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, in David Bevington et al., eds., *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology* (New York, 2002), scene 14, lines 2, 57–58; John Fletcher, *Monsieur Thomas. A Comedy* (London, 1639), 5.9 (sig. Mv).

16. Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2002), 181; Chedgzoy, "Fantasies of Convent Sexuality," 58. Focusing on the middle ages, Karma Lochrie argues that nuns provoke anxiety "precisely because women do not seem to be governed by any natural inclination to chastity or marriage, that, in fact, they 'naturally' tend to perverse sexual acts"; *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't* (Minneapolis, 2005), xxv, also 47–70.

17. *Venus in the Cloister* (London, 1683), sigs. A5–A5v; "A Letter to a Virtuous Lady, to Disswade Her from Her Resolution of Being a Nun" (London, 1686). Similarly, in Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Democritus Junior laments "how odious and abominable are those superstitious and rash vows of popish monasteries, so as to bind and enforce men and women to vow virginity, to lead a single life, against the laws of nature, opposite to religion, policy, and humanity, so to starve, to offer violence, to suppress the vigour of youth!" He assumes that nature so thwarted erupts in "fearful maladies, feral diseases, gross inconveniences" and that, as a consequence, the history of clerical celibacy is manifestly the history of "notorious fornications"; *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Holbrook Jackson (New York, 2001), pt. 1, sec. 3, member 2 (p. 418). But an alternative perspective was available. Defenders of the convent in Anderton's *English Nunne* refute the assertion that sexual activity and reproduction are "natural." Confessarius, for instance, points out that "who observeth not, that in all kind of fruits and hearbs, commeth a great quantity of seed, which is never sowne . . . yet we cannot accuse Nature, as if she had made it in wayne, or erred therein" (sig. B8).

18. See, for instance, the emphasis on grates, curtains, bolts, and keys in *The Manner of Visiting the Monasteries of Discalced Nuns* (n.p., 1669), sig. A3v, and the defense of enclosure in Anderton's *English Nunne*, sigs. C2v, D8, G3v. On the complex meanings of the convent wall for early modern religious, see the essays in Craig A. Monson, ed., *The Crannied Wall: Women, Religion, and the Arts in Early Modern Europe* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1992), especially Elissa B. Weaver, "The Convent Wall in Tuscan

men and locked in women presumed to be too weak and fickle to police themselves.<sup>19</sup> Walker describes the house of Benedictines in Ghent as typical in “requiring high walls around the nuns’ buildings and gardens, with only one door to the outside world for authorized movements of people and a ‘turn’ (revolving cupboard) for the exchange of sanctioned goods. Legitimate face-to-face meetings occurred at a grate (occasionally curtained to preclude visual contact) in the parlour, while a covered grille separated penitents from their confessors.” Thus the walls were always permeable, through the turn, grate, and grille.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Walker and Heather Wolfe have shown that nuns communicated across the convent wall through correspondence by which they spread and learned news, proselytized, and recruited; through writing, translating, and transcribing works for circulation not only within but also outside of their cloisters; through fundraising; and through political engagements in the interest of the long-term cause of Catholic toleration and their own return to England.<sup>21</sup>

Some nuns may also have used walls to their own advantage—to escape worldly distractions and demands, to harbor fugitives, to resist male authority, or to instantiate their integrity as a kind of second skin or fortified hymen.<sup>22</sup> The cloister made literal an architectural symbolism for describing the female body and the technologies necessary to protect its vulnerable apertures. According to Laura Gowing, “the imagery of gates and hatches was pervasive in descriptions of vaginas and hymens”; these gates and hatches were needed to keep men out and to keep women’s fluids in. Garthine

Convent Drama,” 73–86. According to Weaver, “pastoral visitors sent to the convents to inspect and to enforce the reforms insist in their reports on imposing enclosure with masonry: they order new walls, higher walls, stronger walls, double-doors locked from within and without with different keys, and the closing off of windows that gave onto city streets. They meant to keep the nuns in and the secular world out, to protect the nuns, to be sure, but also to shield them from contact with what they were being asked, often forced, to give up” (p. 74). Weaver describes Italian convents but her point applies to all of them: The Council of Trent (meeting in the 1560s) required the reinforcement of *clausura*. Comedy insisted that this was always and inevitably a doomed enterprise, especially since it was undermined from within.

19. On the broad appeal of enclosure, see Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist* (Chicago, 1986), 131; Nicole Pohl, “‘In this Sacred Space’: The Secular Convent in Late Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Expository Literature,” in Pohl and D’Monté, eds., *Female Communities, 1600–1800*, 149–65.

20. As Leffeldt argues of nuns in Spain: “cloister walls were decidedly permeable and permitted the tangible passage and presence of individuals, and convents were constantly enmeshed in temporal preoccupations like lawsuits and the management of property”; *Religious Women in Golden Age Spain*, 2. The wheels or turntables were installed so that goods could come in and out with minimal human contact across the boundary. Laven includes a sixteenth-century plan of a convent church in Venice showing a *roda* or wheel; *Virgins of Venice*, 13.

21. Walker, *Gender and Politics*, 50; Claire Walker, “‘Doe not suppose me a well mortified Nun dead to the world’: Letter-Writing in Early Modern English Convents,” in James Daybell, ed., *Early Modern Women’s Letter Writing, 1450–1700* (Houndmills, U.K., 2001), 159–76; Heather Wolfe, “Dame Barbara Constable: Catholic Antiquarian, Advisor, and Closet Missionary,” in Ronald Corthell, Frances E. Dolan, Christopher Highley, and Arthur Marotti, eds., *Catholic Culture in Early Modern England* (Notre Dame, In., 2007), 158–88; and Wolfe, “Radical Bells and Loose Papers: Reading and Writing Practices of the English Benedictine Nuns of Cambrai and Paris,” in Victoria E. Burke and Jonathan Gibson, eds., *Early Modern Women’s Manuscript Writing: Selected Papers from the Trinity/Trent Colloquium* (Aldershot, U.K., 2004), 135–53. See also Marie-Louise Coolahan, “Identity Politics and Nuns’ Writing,” *Women’s Writing* 14.2 (2007): 306–20.

22. Walker, *Gender and Politics*, 49, 50.

Walker argues that “locks and keys constituted common metaphors for sex in various kinds of early modern narratives.” As a consequence, women faced with the challenge of describing sexual assaults without attributing either knowledge or agency to themselves turned to “metaphors of open, closed, and locked doors and chambers.”<sup>23</sup> For nuns, the external carapace of the convent walls might have served as an extreme reification of a symbolism many women used to describe and defend their chastity.

Yet, as scholars such as Gowing and Walker emphasize, the project of closing and locking the female body was always construed as hopeless. As “A Letter to a Virtuous Lady, to Disswade Her from Her Resolution of Being a Nun” wonders, “can Virgins find no trick / For Chastity, but to be Buried Quick? / And yet when all this straight preventions wrought, / Not all your Walls, nor Bars, can keep out Thought.”<sup>24</sup> According to Gowing, “the project of enclosing and controlling the female body . . . dwells insistently on the natural grotesqueness of the female body and its resistance to control.”<sup>25</sup> Hostile accounts of nuns suggest that it is impossible to enclose the irrepressible openness of the female body. These texts insist that nuns are funny because women are when they are cast, as so often, in the role of the grotesque body ridiculously exposed. As Margaret Miles writes in *Carnal Knowing*, “because of women’s affiliation with the quintessentially grotesque events of birth, sexual intercourse, and death, from the collective male perspective of the public sphere, the most concentrated sense of the grotesque comes, not from exotic but distant monsters, but from the figure ‘woman.’” Nuns’ unsuccessful attempt to break their association with birth and sex makes them all the more grotesque, enabling them to fulfill “one of the most important functions of the grotesque, that of converting the terrible into the comic.”<sup>26</sup> Thus nuns are also just that little bit funnier because they are women who propose to discipline the body—to clothe it, to restrain it sexually, to starve its appetites so as to give freer rein to the spirit. These depictions of nuns insist that all attempts at bodily control will inevitably fail; women presuming to overcome or at least control their bodies and failing to do so are predictably and thus reassuringly ludicrous. Of course, women—and nuns—*did not* always fail. The texts I’m looking at here insist that they will and do, using ridicule to ward off the unsettling possibility of their success.

When the containment of the female body is presumed to be impossible, then the walls of the convent become not reinforcements of chastity but barriers to surveillance. Gowing’s claims about women’s secrets have special pertinence for nuns. According to Gowing, “keeping women’s bodies secret caused as many problems as it solved . . . When illicit sex was in question, secrecy was a crime; closed doors, locks and keys were highly suspect.” If “the walls of the household were as much a threat to order

23. Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch, and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven, Conn., 2003), 24; Garthine Walker, “Rereading Rape and Sexual Violence in Early Modern England,” *Gender and History* 10.1 (April, 1998): 1–25, esp. 14.

24. “A Letter to a Virtuous Lady, to Disswade Her from Her Resolution of Being a Nun” (London, 1686). On scandalous eruptions of clerical sexuality, see Laven, *Virgins of Venice*, 167–202. The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Venetian scandals Laven describes sound strangely like those described in later texts such as *Venus in the Cloister*.

25. Gowing, *Common Bodies*, 7.

26. Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston, 1989), 147, 168.

as a safeguard of it,” then this was doubly so of the walls of the convent.<sup>27</sup> The convent added the deep distrust of Catholic privacy to the suspicion of women’s secrets. In popular inquiries into convents’ supposed secrets, the private is always the prurient private, imagined only so as to be breached and exposed. Catholic privacy is usually imagined as nested—that is, as an enclosed, even hidden space within another walled space: the priest hole or the secret chapel or the confessional.<sup>28</sup> What is fantasized as taking place there is clandestine congress rather than solitary contemplation. *The Adamite, or the Loves of Father Rock and His Intrigues with the Nuns* (1683) confides that “the Confessionaries which are in most Convents are little secret Chambers divided into two, and parted by a Grate, the Confessionaries called vulgarly the Tribunal of Penance. These places I say where they ought to recover a perfect Innocence, are often in the Cloisters of Women Places of Scandal, and Cabinets of Wickedness.”<sup>29</sup> Thomas Robinson’s *Anatomy of the English Nunnery* similarly describes one father Foster’s “private house” for hearing confessions, in which there is a grate facing the nuns’ side: “and this grate (howsoever it seeme substantiall and firme) may be, and is with a sleight easily taken out, whereby the sisters have free egress and regress into his chamber when they list, and hee to them.” The grate, then, is less a barrier than an opportunity.<sup>30</sup> In *Venus in the Cloister* (1683) nuns look through keyholes and chinks they’ve made especially for the purpose. In this text, the confessor explains to Sister Agnes that in the confessional there are “two Boards, that were to be lifted up, the one on his side and the other on mine, and which gave sufficient passage for a Person.”<sup>31</sup> In each of these three texts, then, the confessional is imagined as an enclosure within an

27. Gowing, *Common Bodies*, 30, 33. Discussing a sex scandal in a Venetian convent, Laven argues that “the convent walls, supposedly shielding the nuns from corruption, also shielded them and their seducer from exposure”; *Virgins of Venice*, 169.

28. Frances E. Dolan, “Gender and the ‘Lost’ Spaces of Catholicism,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 32.4 (Spring, 2002): 641–65; Lisa McClain, “Without Church, Cathedral, or Shrine: The Search for Religious Space among Catholics in England, 1559–1625,” *Sixteenth-Century Journal* 33.2 (2002): 381–99; Julian Yates, *Error, Misuse, Failure: Object Lessons from the English Renaissance* (Minneapolis, 2003), 143–207.

29. *The Adamite, or the Loves of Father Rock and His Intrigues with the Nuns* (London, 1683), (sigs. Dv–D2); Robinson, *Anatomy*, sig. C4v. Lewis Owen’s *The Unmasking of All Popish Monks, Friars, and Jesuits* (London, 1628) insists that “there is nothing that openeth a wider gap, or way unto sinne, than *Auricular Confession*” (sig. S4).

30. Robinson, *Anatomy*, sig. C4v. Alison Shell reads the title page of this text, on which “the author is shown in the act of drawing a curtain to disclose the lewd embrace between monk and nun,” as representative of the emphasis on disclosure in anti-Catholic representations. The corruption exposed is often associated with the feminine; *Catholicism, Controversy, and the English Literary Imagination, 1558–1660* (Cambridge, 1999), 30.

31. *Venus in the Cloister*, sigs. C5, D4v. The title page of *Venus in the Cloister* claims that it is by the Abbot Du Prat and translated out of French; it is addressed to “the Lady Abbess of Loves Paradiice” (Madam D. L. R.). Thompson identifies the author as Jean Barrin, a French cleric, who first published it in French in 1683—the same year as the first English edition—with a Cologne imprint. Henry Rhodes published the first edition; Edmund Curll was tried (and convicted) for publishing “lewd and infamous books,” including the second, much expanded edition, which may have been translated by Robert Samber (in 1725). Curll justified himself in *The Humble Representation of Edmund Curll, Bookseller and Citizen of London, Concerning Five Books, Complained of to the Secretary of State* (London, ca. 1725), claiming that it is not “the subject Matter, but the Inclination of the Reader, that makes these

enclosure that enables priest and nun to join together protected from view, rather than preserving a barrier between them. Pornographic exposés of what goes on behind the veil or inside the confessional suggest that walls should be torn down rather than reinforced, so as to put an end to the intrigues they obscure and enable.<sup>32</sup> Such texts also refuse to imagine convents as communities, instead enshrining a clandestine cross-sex couple at their center.<sup>33</sup>



The cloister that enclosed and defined the nun stood as the limit case for the restrictions placed on all women's range of movement. In Edmund Tilney's *The Flower of*

Pieces offensive" (sig. A2) and that *Venus in the Cloister* "is written in Imitation of the Style and Manner made use of by Erasmus in his Colloquia, and with the same Design, to lay open the Abuses and Corruptions of the Church of Rome . . . The Moral of it is inimitably instructive, and if the Author has taken some Liberties of Expression, it was no more than what the Subject necessarily required for its Illustration" (sig. A4v). For Curll's trial, see Roger Thompson, *Unfit for Modest Ears: A Study of Pornographic, Obscene, and Bawdy Works Written or Published in England in the Second Half of the Seventeenth Century* (Totowa, N.J., 1979), 151–55; Alexander Pettit, "Rex v. Curll: Pornography and Punishment in Court and on the Page," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 34 (2001): 63–78; and Paul Baines and Pat Rogers, *Edmund Curll, Bookseller* (Oxford, 2007), 156–59, 166–69. Mudge offers an edition of the 1725 expanded version of the text in *When Flesh Becomes Word: An Anthology of Early Eighteenth-Century Libertine Literature* (Oxford, 2004). Mudge and James Grantham Turner, *Schooling Sex: Libertine Literature and Erotic Education in Italy, France, and England, 1534–1685* (Oxford, 2003), both emphasize that *Venus in the Cloister* borrows heavily from earlier erotic texts (pp. 343–53). Like Turner, Mita Choudhury emphasizes the text's eroticized depiction of education; see *Convents and Nuns in Eighteenth-Century French Politics and Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2004), 129–54.

32. In nineteenth-century America, where there were some convents as well as numerous lurid depictions of what might happen inside them, popular representations depicted convents as gothic lairs, in which women were held against their will and brutalized. This fear of convents as dangerous places led to attacks on them, with the ostensible purpose of liberating the inmates. In this rather different cultural moment, nuns provoked sympathy or suspicion rather than ridicule. See Mary Ewens, *The Role of the Nun in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1978); Tracy Fessenden, "The Convent, the Brothel, and the Protestant Woman's Sphere," *Signs* 25.2 (Winter 2000): 451–78; Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley, Calif., 1994); Susan M. Griffin, "Awful Disclosures: Women's Evidence in the Escaped Nun's Tale," *PMLA* 111.1 (1996): 93–107; and Nancy Lusignan Schultz, *Fire and Roses: The Burning of the Charlestown Convent, 1834* (New York, 2000).

33. On the coupling of priests with women in anti-Catholic polemic, see Frances E. Dolan, *Whores of Babylon: Catholicism, Gender, and Seventeenth-Century Print Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1999; South Bend, Ind., 2005), 85–94. Laven points out that, in Venice, "despite the regulations that insisted on the separation of female nuns and male clergy, priests and friars had a knack of finding their way into the convents," often to get practical help as much as sexual contact; *Virgins of Venice*, 184. "In a number of trial records, nuns are reported cooking, washing and mending for priests and friars. Even reports of illicit sexual liaisons between religious men and women are almost always accompanied by evidence of nuns providing these practical, domestic and traditionally female services to their lovers" (p. 176). According to Laven, "these exchanges give weight to the view that celibates of both sexes were keen to create situations in which they could mimic heterosexual and heterosocial relationships" (p. 179). Melissa Mowry argues that political pornography worked to sexualize and denigrate collective action; *The Bawdy Politic in Stuart England, 1660–1714: Political Pornography and Prostitution* (Aldershot, U.K., 2004). We can see a very particular twist on this in depictions of the nun-priest dyad in the confessional.

*Friendship* (1568), Lady Julia describes the duty of the married woman and pauses after listing examples of women who never or rarely left their houses to say: "My meaning is not in reciting these examples, to have the married wife continually lokt up, as a cloystr'd Nonne, or Ancres, but to consider hereby, what respect she must have in going abroade, and what a vertue it is to kepe well hir house."<sup>34</sup> In his *Bethel: or, a Forme for Families* (1634), Matthew Griffith imagines his particularly resistant female readers objecting to his quite standard injunction that the housewife not "gad abroad" in these terms: "But (say some *Planet striken* women, and so subject to wander) Must my house be my *prison*? Must I be *Cloistered* like a *Nun*? Is there no liberty, &c."<sup>35</sup> The answer is invariably "no." The self-policing restraint of the housewife is supposed to be somehow distinctly different from the imprisonment of the nun. But exactly how is unclear. While it was an insult to be a "gadder," and Mary Ward's "jesuitresses" were denounced as "galloping girls," it was also a problem when Henrietta Maria spent the Holy Week of 1626 living with her ladies, like "cloistered nuns," in her residence at Somerset House.<sup>36</sup>

Women writers emphasize that since the cloister's demands are no more onerous than the demands of marriage can often be, the cloister beckons as an alternative. In Aphra Behn's *The Rover* (1677), Helena vividly describes the repulsions of an older husband; she also insists to her brother, Pedro, "I had rather be a nun, than be obliged to marry as you would have me, if I were designed for it."<sup>37</sup> In her *Sociable Letters* (1664), Margaret Cavendish writes that "Marriage is a very Unhappy Life when Sympathy Joyns not the Married Couple, for otherwise it were better to be Barr'd up within the Gates of a Monastery, than to be Bound in the Bonds of Matrimony."<sup>38</sup> Both texts evoke the concrete restrictions of the convent in order to emphasize the constraints imposed by "unsympathetic" marriages.

Like the contempt for the nun's celibacy and enclosure, the anxiety about the nun's vow raises the question of just how different it is from a married woman's vow. When Mary Astell proposes her resolutely Protestant academy for ladies, she emphasizes that the inhabitants should not be expected to take permanent vows.

Since Inclination can't be forc'd, and nothing makes people more uneasy  
than the fettering themselves with unnecessary Bonds, there shall be no

34. Edmund Tilney, *The Flower of Friendship* (London, 1568), ed. Valerie Wayne (Ithaca, N.Y., 1992), 136–37.

35. Matthew Griffith, *Bethel: or, A Forme for Families* (London, 1634), sig. Dd8.

36. Lowell Gallagher, "Mary Ward's 'Jesuitresses' and the Construction of a Typological Community," in Susan Frye and Karen Robertson, eds., *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens: Women's Alliances in Early Modern England* (New York, 1999), 199–217, esp. 203; Thomas Birch, ed., *The Court and Times of Charles the First*, 2 vols. (London, 1848), 1:50.

37. Aphra Behn, *The Rover*, in *Oroonoko, The Rover, and Other Works*, ed. Janet Todd (Penguin, 1992), 1.1.162, 163.

38. Margaret Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, ed. James Fitzmaurice (Peterborough, Ontario, 2004), letter 60, p. 113. Julie Crawford excavates the material foundations of Cavendish's interest in convents: the house in which she grew up and that in which she lived with her husband were both former convents; in her exile during the war and Interregnum she probably visited convents, too; see "Convents and Pleasures: Margaret Cavendish and the Drama of Property," *Renaissance Drama*, n.s. 32 (2003): 177–223. See also Erin Lang Bonin, "Margaret Cavendish's Dramatic Utopias and the Politics of Gender," *SEL* 40.2 (Spring 2000): 339–54.

Vows or irrevocable Obligations, not so much as the fear of Reproach to keep our Ladies here any longer than they desire. No: Ev'ry act of our *Religious* Votary shall be voluntary and free, and no other ty e but the Pleasure, the Glory and Advantage of this blessed retirement to confine her to it.<sup>39</sup>

Astell's convent is thus a contractual relation from which one can withdraw at will. Astell relies on this provision as the principal means of distinguishing her academy from convents. But Astell's insistence on voluntary association also distinguishes her academy from marriage, which Astell herself does not imagine as a revocable contract. The more that writers such as Astell emphasize the problems with irrevocable obligations, binding ties, and involuntary commitments, the more they open up the question of why these are any more acceptable in marriage than they are in the convent.

In Aphra Behn's story, "The History of the Nun, or the Fair Vow Breaker," the heroine, Isabella, takes a religious vow when she is too young and inexperienced to understand what she is renouncing, later breaking it so as to marry. Ultimately, she inadvertently commits bigamy and, upon learning that her first husband is alive, kills both husbands in one night, smothering one and then sewing the collar of the second to the body bag so that when he throws the body off a bridge he is dragged down with it. Even the narrator remarks that the second murder "has, in my Opinion, far less Excuse, than the first." In this remarkable history, it's hard to accept the lesson pointed, "never to break a Vow; for that was first the Ruine of her, and she never since prosper'd, do whatever other good Deeds she could." What seems the more striking lesson is that marriage and the convent are similar confinements. Isabella, when married to Villenoy, "liv'd more like a Nun still, than a Lady of the World."<sup>40</sup> According to Jacqueline Pearson, Behn does not exoticize the nun, as some of her contemporaries do, but rather domesticates her: "In Behn's fiction the nun . . . becomes a metaphor for the female condition. Nuns and wives are openly identified as parallel instances of society's limitation of women's lives . . . the 'inclos'd Life' . . . of the nun figures the domestic life of all women."<sup>41</sup> Yet, while Behn depicts the convent and the conjugal household as parallel confinements, she presents the convent as, if anything, preferable.

39. Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of Their True and Greatest Interest*, pts. 1 and 2 (New York, 1970), 25. As Astell insists at the "Conclusion" to pt. 2 (1697): "They must either be very Ignorant or very Malicious who pretend that we wou'd imitate Foreign Monasteries, or object against us the Inconveniencies that they are subject to; a little attention to what they read might have convinc'd them that our Institution is rather *Academical* than *Monastic*" (p. 157). See also Hill, "Idea of a Protestant Nunnery." Astell's insistence on the difference between her academy and a convent did not prevent her scheme from being satirized based on the similarity. *The Tatler* describes the visit of a Rake and his friends to the "Protestant nunnery." Of the various interlocutors "there was hardly one of them but was a mother or father that day twelve-month" (*The Tatler* No. 32, 23 June 1709). See also John Stockden, *The Seven Women Confessors or a Discovery of the Seven White Divels Which Lived at Queen Street in Coven-Garden* (London, 1641).

40. Behn, "The History of the Nun," 318, 323, 309.

41. Jacqueline Pearson, "The History of *The History of the Nun*," in Heidi Hutner, ed., *Rereading Aphra Behn: History, Theory, and Criticism* (Charlottesville, Va., and London, 1993), 234–52, esp. 246. Strasser argues that Tridentine reforms actually made the convent more like marriage; "Mandating

Behn also emphasizes women's stunted moral capacities. The story suggests that women are strangers to their own desire and never fully understand their own motives, needs, or longings because their enclosure and their vows suppress rather than develop self-awareness. The narrator of "The History of the Nun" confides that she herself "once was design'd an humble Votary in the House of Devotion" but decided she did not have sufficient "obstinacy of Mind" to make and keep that vow. She also confesses that she has sometimes regretted her choice: "Nevertheless, I could wish, for the prevention of abundance of Mischiefs and Miseries, that Nunneries and Marriages were not to be enter'd into, 'till the Maid, so destin'd, were of a mature Age to make her own Choice," but "since I cannot alter Custom, nor shall ever be allow'd to make new Laws, or rectify the old ones, I must leave the Young Nuns inclos'd to their best Endeavours, of making a Virtue of Necessity; and the young Wives, to make the best of a bad Market" (p. 265). Behn thus uses a heroine who is both a vow-breaking nun and a bigamist to highlight the restricted field of women's choice and, as a consequence, women's undeveloped abilities to make choices or keep vows.

Behn's "The History of the Nun" was printed in 1688; Astell's *A Serious Proposal* in 1700. The two texts thus bracket a decade that was consumed with questions of vow making and oath swearing because of debate about what constitutes loyalty and how it can be secured following the "Glorious" Revolution.<sup>42</sup> Taking the debates of the 1690s into account, we can read both Astell's reassurance that her seminary will not fetter its pupils with "unnecessary Bonds, . . . Vows or irrevocable Obligations" and Behn's tentative wish that young, inexperienced people not be expected to keep vows they are not "mature" enough to make as speaking to the urgently topical question of obligation and allegiance, as well as to the long-standing, intransigent "Custom" of restricting women's options and sapping their capacity for choice.

Both Astell and Behn dedicated works to a notorious "fair vow breaker," Hortense Mancini, the Duchess of Mazarin. Mancini, niece to Cardinal Mazarin and one of Charles II's mistresses, separated from her spendthrift, controlling husband. While her case was pending, she was sent to a convent over which her husband's aunt presided as abbess (as is true of the heroine in "The History of the Nun"). The court finally ordered her to return to her husband, at which point she escaped to London, where she lived on

strict cloister and male control, the Council of Trent laid the doctrinal groundwork for re-creating nunneries in the image of male-headed households with the added component of confinement"; Strasser, *State of Virginitiy*, 74.

42. I am grateful to Rachel Weil for this suggestion. See her *Political Passions: Gender, the Family, and Political Argument in England, 1680–1714* (Manchester, 1999). Each printing of *The Book of Oaths, and the Severall Forms Thereof, both Antient and Modern*, that of 1649 and that of 1689, includes a version of a nun's vow (sig. N8v in the 1649 edition and sig. M2v in 1689). I would like to thank Jessica Staheli for this reference. Caroline Bowden offers an introduction to and facsimile and transcription of the oath of obedience of Sister Joan Seller, an English lay sister at the Benedictine convent in Cambrai in 1631, in Helen Ostovich and Elizabeth Sauer, eds., *Reading Early Modern Women: An Anthology of Texts in Manuscript and Print, 1550–1700* (New York and London, 2003), 145–47. Choudhury argues that the forced vocation, and the despotic abuse of power within convents, become popular and highly politicized topics in eighteenth-century France; *Convents and Nuns in 18th-Century French Politics and Culture*, 70–128.

a pension from Charles—just down the street from Astell in Chelsea. Astell claimed that she wrote *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700) after reading the published account of the trial in which Mancini's husband attempted to have her extradited back to France, *The Arguments of Monsieur Herard, for Monsieur the Duke of Mazarin, against Madam the Dutchess of Mazarin, His Spouse* (London, 1699), published in the year of Mancini's death.<sup>43</sup> Behn dedicated "The History of the Nun" (published posthumously in 1688) to Mancini as well. According to Pearson, "Behn's dedication to Mancini must therefore be seen as ironic, as clumsily inappropriate, or else as helping to provide a frame that subverts the simple moral tale that the novella appears to offer."<sup>44</sup> I think that the dedication undercuts the already unstable moral in order to reinforce the link between the two forms of vow breaking: divorce and leaving the convent. The dedication also activates the political valences of breaking vows and foreswearing oaths. In the upheavals of the late seventeenth century, a subject requires some strategic slipperiness just to survive. Behn's admiration for Mancini hints that vow breaking might be admirable when vows thwart rather than secure desire. Behn explains that she was "impatient for an Opportunity, to tell Your Grace, how infinitely one of Your own Sex ador'd You, and that, among all the numerous Conquest, Your Grace has made over the Hearts of Men, Your Grace had not subdu'd a more entire Slave."<sup>45</sup> How has Mancini stirred Behn's adoration and subdued her to slavery if not by audaciously breaking her vows?

Attending to the moment in which Behn and Astell wrote and their common dedicatee reveals that the derisive caricature of the nun does change over time and is put to different uses at different times. Mancini's story links *Some Reflections upon Marriage* to "The History of the Nun" as much as the dedications to her do. Since she spent the transitional period between her husband's house and Charles II's court in a convent, her exploits there figure importantly in her own memoir and in the extradition proceedings. In the convent, she and another visitor joined "in playing some Tricks to the Nuns."

The King has been told a hundred ridiculous Stories about it: That we used to put Ink into the Holy-Water-Pot to smut the good old Nunns: That we used to run through their Dormitory; at the time of their first Sleep, with a great many little Doggs, yelping and yellowing, and twenty other such Fooleries, either altogether invented or much exaggerated. As for example, having desired them to let us have some water to wash our Feet, The Nuns concerted amongst themselves to refuse us what was necessary, and to find fault, as if we had been put in there to observe their Rule. It is true that we filled two great Chests that where [*sic*] over the Dormitory, with Water, and not taking notice, that the floor was ill

43. On Astell's knowledge of and interest in Mancini, see Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell*, 151–56.

44. Pearson, "The History of *The History of the Nun*," 244.

45. Behn, "History of the Nun," 262.

jointed, the water run through, and wet all the poor Nunns beds. If you were at that time at Court, you will easily remember that this accident was represented there as a meer Horse-boyes pranke. It is also true, that under Colour of keeping us Company, they would never suffer us to go out of their Sights. The eldest amongst the Religious women were chosen for this purpose, as being the hardest to be suborned; but we having nothing else to do but to run about, we soon tyred them out one after another, and one or two of them sprained their Leggs, striving to run after us.<sup>46</sup>

Mancini's jokes begin in exasperation. She flees to the convent as an alternative to her husband's repressive household and finds there instead an even larger staff of her husband's agents, who attempt to restrict her movements and restrain her exuberance. She outruns her aged guardians and cooks up pranks to discomfit her hosts, making it clear that she and her entourage are not there to "observe their Rule" but rather to impose their own misrule. In the account of the legal proceedings in which her husband attempted to secure her return, his advocate concludes bitterly, "The Abbies of Lys Chelles, and of the Nuns of St. Mary, and some others, will never forget the honour of those Frolicks Madam Mazarin has had there; the Memory of which will be kept up by Tradition in those Houses for many Ages. The Question then is, Whether Madam Mazarin shall go into a Convent, which She will undoubtedly spoil; or return to Monsieur Mazarin, who will endeavour, if possible, to mend her."<sup>47</sup> Mancini's pranks and frolics stand as evidence that she is irreverent and intractable, capable of spoiling nuns but not of being mended by them. The circulation of the charges against her forces her into her own spin control: "I should not tell you these little odd Follies, if Monsieur Mazarins partisans had not published them before; and since they represented them as so many Crimes, I am glad you know all the enormities of them." By recounting these "ridiculous stories" in print in 1676, Mancini reveals that they are politically useful as well as titillating, incriminating, or frolicsome. Her stories include some substantive critique of the nuns. Not only don't they wash their guests' feet, as Christ did for his disciples, but they do not even allow them to wash their own feet.

Mancini's merry sojourn amidst the nuns, on her way to installation with the merry monarch, reinforces the familiar link between nun and courtesan, nun and wife,

46. *The Memoires of the Dutchess of Mazarine* (London, 1676), sigs. C8v, D–Dv. This is a translation of the French text, which appeared in the same year.

47. *The Arguments of Monsieur Herard, for Monsieur the Duke of Mazarin, against Madam the Dutchess of Mazarin, His Spouse* (London, 1699), sig. E8. The duke's advocate reports that she "retired to the Nunnery of St. Mary, but the Religious being soon weary of her Conduct, in a few Months she took a progress thro' three Convents more" (sig. B7). On distinguished visitors to convents, see Walker, "Combining Martha and Mary," esp. 410–11. Such visitors included Henrietta Maria; the Duchess of Buckingham (who lived in the Benedictine house in Ghent from December 1642 to April 1650); and Barbara Villiers, Duchess of Cleveland and mistress to Charles II. See *Records of the English Province of the Society of Jesus*, vol. 4, ed. Henry Foley (London, 1878), 684–85. Walker points out that gentlemen borders offered convents income and patronage; convents offered women retreat from the dangers of being Catholic in England, especially at times of heated controversy and threat, such as the Interregnum and the years of the Popish Plot; *Gender and Politics*, 94–96, 109–10.

as kept women. It works to enhance her exoticism and fascination by placing her as an insider, albeit temporarily, in the scene of curiosity and fantasy. But that scene is revealed to be populated by stern if ineffectual old nuns with sprained legs and wet beds. They are hardly the sexpots of fantasy. Through these stories, Mancini positions herself as a critic of Catholics and as the prankster—rather than the target of anti-Catholic, misogynist humor. Although she was one of the king's Catholic mistresses, as opposed to the "Protestant whore" Nell Gwynn asserted herself to be, she here distances herself from the troublesome Catholic piety of Charles's wife, Catherine of Braganza, or James II's new wife, Mary of Modena. Confessing to playing pranks on nuns might be a kind of boast at this moment, a shrugging admission that she is an irreverent Catholic, the only kind of Catholic one might want anywhere near the monarch. In this context, to be a bad Catholic is the only way to be a good, or at least tolerable, one.



In the last few decades of the seventeenth century, it becomes evident that the nun is not just a limit case for constructions of women but also for constructions of Catholics. Through the nun, one might explore a fascination with as well as a distrust of Catholics' consciences. The prurient fascination with what goes on inside cloisters is also a prurient fascination with what goes on inside Catholics' hearts and minds. Like nuns, all Catholics are feared to be unable to think for themselves, witlessly obedient to those who do not deserve their subservience.

We thus see the figure of the nun operating in two ways in the course of the seventeenth century. Banished from English soil and confined to Continental convents, she comes unmoored from any attempt to describe her circumstances or experience accurately. Thus unmoored, she operates as a stock figure in a cultural repertoire that says relatively consistent things about women and about Catholics but puts those stereotypes to very particular uses at certain moments. In the course of the seventeenth century, depictions of nuns become freighted with increasing political significance.

The prurient interest in nuns' sexuality is not separate from the process of exploiting them as representative Catholics. It is, rather, central to that process, because erotic accounts of nuns tend to depict them as obedient rather than libidinous. While popular accounts of nuns consistently sexualize them, they also tend to occlude their desire. What do nuns want? Most texts have no idea. They come closest to exploring this question when they suggest that nuns desire one another. Two of the best known references to this are Marvell's "Upon Appleton House" (ca. 1650–52), in which a nun promises a potential convert that she could "each night [from] among us to your side / Appoint a fresh and virgin bride"; and Aphra Behn's *The Rover* (1677), in which Helena remarks that "I should have stayed in the nunnery still, if I had liked my Lady Abbess as well as she liked me."<sup>48</sup> The most fully developed early modern exploration is *Venus in the Cloister*. Valerie Traub and others have examined such representations of convent homoeroticism, where the usual reluctance to depict female same-sex

48. Andrew Marvell, "Upon Appleton House," in *The Complete Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Story Donno (New York, 1972), lines. 185–86; Behn, *The Rover*, 3.1.189.

eroticism seems to break down. In pornographic attacks on convents and nuns, Traub argues, “same-sex transgressions are fostered by the innate hypocrisy of Catholics and the deprivations of sex-segregation: celibate, and therefore burning in lust, the wily nun is imagined to satisfy her lust either with other hypocrites like herself or, particularly egregious, with unsuspecting novitiates.”<sup>49</sup> The most familiar dynamic of conventual same-sex desire is, in fact, the older nun who recruits the younger one. The unsuspecting novice is usually depicted as more pliant than libidinous.

Most depictions of nuns’ sexual transgression focus on their relationship to priests. Here, the hierarchy and the abuse of authority we glimpse in the scenario of the older nun preying on the novices become more explicit. In most texts, nuns are foolish dupes who sin through excessive obedience rather than excessive desire. Ballads about bawdy priests show them reassuring the nuns they confess that sex is not much of a sin, and besides they can always forgive it afterward, so why worry? As the priest in one ballad advises a nun, “you in duty are bound, my commands to obey.”<sup>50</sup> In the world of these satires, priests also advise nuns that it is perfectly acceptable or at least forgivable to eliminate the consequences and proof of sexual transgression through abortion or infanticide.<sup>51</sup>

This emphasis on nuns’ passivity is most fully developed in Thomas Robinson’s *The Anatomy of the English Nunnery at Lisbon in Portugall. Dissected and Laid Open by One that Was Sometime a Yonger Brother of the Convent* (1622). Robinson’s text was probably the best known and most widely distributed text I discuss here; it went through five printings between 1622 and 1662, and its most salacious anecdotes were repackaged in 1684 as part of *Rome’s Rarities: or the Pope’s Cabinet Unlock’d and Exposed to View*.<sup>52</sup> It is a satire of the Bridgettine House from Syon abbey, which was unique among English convents in that it housed the only English order with a continuous history. After the Reformation, these Bridgettine sisters moved to Flanders, where they were the only English house in the 1590s and where they were somewhat

49. Traub, *Renaissance of Lesbianism*, 63. See also Ros Ballaster, “The Vices of Old Rome Revived: Representations of Female Same-Sex Desire in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century England,” in Suzanne Raitt, ed., *Volcanoes and Pearl Divers: Essays in Lesbian Sexuality* (London, 1995), 13–36; Judith C. Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (Oxford, 1986); Chedgzoy, “Fantasies of Convent Sexuality”; Theodora Jankowski, *Pure Resistance: Queer Virginity in Early Modern English Drama* (Philadelphia, 2000), 175–76; and Sarah Toulalan, “Extraordinary Satisfactions: Lesbian Visibility in Seventeenth-Century Pornography in England,” *Gender and History* 15.1 (2003): 50–68.

50. “Good Sport for Protestants; / in a Most Pleasant Dialogue / between an Old Bawdy Priest, and a Wanton Young Nun” [n.d.]. See also “THE / Lusty Fryer of Flanders; / How in a Nunnery at the City of Gaunt this Fryer Got Thirty Nuns with Child in Three Weeks / Time, and Afterwards Made His Escape” (1688); and Thomas Herbert, *Newes Newly Discovered. In a Pleasant Dialogue betwixt Papa the False Pope, and Benedict an Honest Fryer* (London, 1641).

51. Robinson claims that when repairing a wall he found countless bones of dead children interred there; *Anatomy*, E2v. *The Friars Chronicle* asserts, “Priests perswaded silly women, that abortion was no sinne. I will also adde, that in the gardens of Nunneries, was always a tree or two of Savine, which they say the Nunnes used to drinke steeped in Wine: now the property of Savine is to destroy any thing condensed in the wombe, and so you may judge the cause” (sig. Ev).

52. The ESTC records additional printings in 1623, 1630, 1637, and 1662. See also *Rome’s Rarities; or the Pope’s Cabinet Unlock’d and Exposed to View* (1684), sigs. N3v–N8.

nomadic; they were invited back to England by Mary I, then forced to resume their travels in the Netherlands by Elizabeth I's accession; finally, they went to Portugal, where they established themselves in Lisbon, until they returned to England in 1861.<sup>53</sup> Many accounts of convents make little effort to locate them in time and space; *Venus in the Cloister*, for instance, is a translation of a French text and owes more to a tradition of erotic writing than it does to any knowledge of nuns or convents. In contrast, Robinson claims this convent as English, locates it very precisely, tells us when he visited it, and appeals to English readers to save their daughters and sisters. Other English writers present his text as a reliable source. In 1628, Lewis Owen claims that nuns are sexually subordinated to the friars, "which I have read in that little Pamphlet, which is intituled, *The Anatomy of the English Nuns of Lisbon*."<sup>54</sup> Acknowledging the influence of Robinson's pamphlet, the Bridgettines at Lisbon appear to have written a response in which they explain that while they cannot reach Protestant readers who "lyke of and laugh at" Robinson's book "as they do at" the nuns, they hope to reassure their own "parents and frindes . . . or catholikes," and they proceed to do so by employing withering sarcasm to deflate Robinson's claims to credibility.<sup>55</sup>

Robinson depicts these nuns as foolish and passive in part because of their social class: "Neither are the people of it for birth and parentage equall to their predecessors, who were wont to bee of good discent: whereas now (save only a few) they are Recusants daughters of the meaner sort, and silly tender-hearted chambermaids." As chambermaids, he claims, many of these women ministered to seminary priests and Jesuits "in all things" when they were hiding in their masters' houses in England, "and by such meanes having gotten a clap, divers of them become Nunnes." Accustomed to serving, they continue to do so. Similarly, James Wadsworth laments in 1630 that while most of the occupants of English convents are "Damsels which are most of them Gentlemens daughters of very great fashion in *England*," the rest are "Chambermaids which having beene by the Jesuites well rigd of their maidenhead, and something old, are sent over to these or such like places to do penance for their sins in a Nunnery, where it is much doubted that they continue neverthesse in their old courses, & intice likewise the young Dames to the same."<sup>56</sup> While the lament that nuns just aren't as refined as they used to be cuts against the claim that the priests who try to recruit women are after their dowries as much as their bodies (not unlike predatory

53. See Laurence, *Women in England, 1500–1760*, 187–88; Guilday, *English Catholic Refugees on the Continent*, 56–61; Walker, *Gender and Power*, 13.

54. Lewis Owen, *The Unmasking of All Popish Monks, Friars, and Jesuits*, sig. Ev.

55. Jenna Lay is working on a manuscript response to Robinson, apparently by one or more members of the Bridgettine order in Lisbon; see Lay's dissertation, "They Will Not Be Penned Up in Any Cloister": Catholic Englishwomen and Early Modern Book Culture" (Stanford University, forthcoming). I would like to thank her for generously giving me a copy of this manuscript response (British Library, MS. Add. 21, 203).

56. Robinson, *Anatomy*, sig. B4; James Wadsworth, in *The English Spanish Pilgrime. or, a New Discoverie of Spanish Popery, and Jesuiticall Stratagems* (London, 1630), sig. L. Since convents depended on dowries, Anderton addresses this prejudice that the convent is suitable "only to the meaner condition and sort of Men or Women" (sig. E5v), presenting arguments that wealthy families should commit their heirs and estates to religious houses and subsidize the vocations of poorer children as well.

husbands), this contempt for nuns as former chambermaids underpins the emphasis on them as submissive to a fault. Robinson's disparaging discussion of the Bridgettines' class reminds us that nuns never actually stood for all women. After the Reformation, English nuns came from a largely privileged subset of an already specific group—those Catholics willing to make a public declaration of their faith.<sup>57</sup> Even among the nuns in a single convent there would have been differences marked by their family's stature, the size of the dowry they brought with them, and their position within the convent itself. It is not really possible to understand nuns without reference to class; Robinson's contemptuous dismissal of them as chambermaids simply makes that fact visible. At the same time that Robinson's class slur reminds us of the social distinctions among nuns, even if they weren't exactly the ones he describes, the suggestion that they are tractable subordinates plays into his critique of all Catholics as chambermaids.

Throughout his text, Robinson emphasizes the nuns' victimization: "it is pittifull and miserable to behold the condition of these silly seduced women: for they neither dare nor can complaine to any body, being seldome permitted to speake even to them that are of the house as well as themselves"; "these silly women thus muzzled in blindnesse, doe live in very servile obedience unto their Superiours; and, in such sort, that without standing to discusse or examine the thing that is commanded them whether it be lawfull or no, they will readily performe it."<sup>58</sup> Their uncritical submission leads to sexual slavery: "not one amongst them will (for feare of being disobedient) refuse to come to his bed whensoever he commands them."<sup>59</sup> What one finds in Robinson's *Anatomy*, then, is a salacious discussion of nuns' sexuality that erases their agency and desire. These nuns routinely have sex but not because they want to; they do it because they have been told to and they are incapable of distinguishing right from wrong, or desire from duty, for themselves. What's funny about Robinson's nuns is that they choose celibacy only to be sexually exploited more vigorously in the convent than they would be in marriage; that they bear and kill infants; that they aren't smart enough to resist lascivious priests. While cloister porn sometimes depends on the joke that desire will out, the joke is more often this crueler one: that nuns might presume to make a defiant choice to enact their own desire, but that desire doesn't really exist. In his popu-

57. Many studies of early modern convents emphasize that the women who joined them tended to be wealthy, well-connected elites. See, for instance, Lehfeltdt, *Religious Women*, on Spanish nuns' litigation regarding their property or dowries (pp. 81–104); and Strasser, *State of Virginity*, on how, at least in Munich, the Council of Trent's reforms, pushing women into contemplative, cloistered lives, intensified convents' dependence on dowries (pp. 70–77).

58. Robinson, *Anatomy*, sigs. C3v, Dv. The text details how Foster manipulates the nuns' reading matter so as to encourage them to obey him in everything. Foster produces special conduct manuals for his charges. On certain pages, he includes "false doctrine and unallowable perswasions to draw them to obedience in unlawful things," but he does not put these pages in until the books have been certified as having "nothing in them repugnant to the Catholique faith" (sig. Dv). The nuns "take the approbation at the end of the booke for a sufficient warrantie of all the doctrine therein contained" (sig. D2). While Robinson's charges against Foster are probably invented or at least exaggerated, priests did write instructive works especially for the nuns they confessed. See Walker on Richard White (*Gender and Politics*, 58) and Wolfe on Augustine Baker ("Dame Barbara Constable" and "Radical Bells").

59. Robinson, *Anatomy*, sig. D2. Walker, too, emphasizes that Robinson assigns the nuns "no agency whatsoever"; *Gender and Politics*, 116.

lar exposés of Catholic deceptions, John Gee condenses this portrayal of the nun's agency into the verb forms he coins. For Gee, becoming a nun is something that is done to women, not something they choose freely: they are "nunnified" or "nunnized" through the self-serving machinations of Jesuits.<sup>60</sup> In texts such as *The Anatomy of the English Nunnery* and *Venus in the Cloister*, nuns stand in for all Catholics, who are laughably stupid, superstitious, and easily led.

The refusal to imagine the nun's desire, even in pornographic texts, reaches its peak—or nadir—in a comic depiction of the rape of nuns in a convent in Spain. *Letters from the Living to the Living* (London, 1703) begins with a jocular letter from a soldier to his friend in which he claims that no nun "complained of her usage" during the assault on the convent. In the following verse account, "On the Taking of St. Maries: A Poem," we learn of the soldiers that "Cocking of their little Guns, / They made a sally on the Nuns." The soldiers assume nuns are not all that innocent. "Woman for th' use of Man was made, / The Innocence you plead's a Jest, / You would not talk so to a Priest." Another letter about this incident, "A Gentleman in London's Answer to his Friend at St. Marie's," claims that English ladies are so taken with reports of the "manly Exploits with the Spanish Ladies" that they "cannot forbear asking every Man of Intelligence, when the Nun firkers come home, as if they were afraid, the dextrous department of the devout Hipocrites (who practise Fornication in Cloisters, and have the Advantage of being well instructed by their Lascivious Priests) should so far excel the Correspondent Activity of our English Ladies, that they should quite alienate your affections from your own Country Women."<sup>61</sup> Like the "nun firkers," the "English Ladies" who admire them and compete for their attentions assume that nuns are sexually "well instructed" and "practiced." Thus raping them is no crime and might even be addictively pleasurable. This "comic" text so erases the nun's capacity for agency or consent, let alone innocence, that it is impossible to imagine her rape by soldiers as anything other than a joke. The distance between virgin and whore is assumed to be a short one. As Robinson remarks in a withering marginal note to his text, "it is no great miracle for a whore to become a Nunne, nor for a Nunne to become a whore."<sup>62</sup>

While the contempt for nuns in texts such as Robinson's *Anatomy* and *Letters from the Living to the Living* relies on and perpetuates misogyny, it also participates in a broader critique of Catholics. Nuns prove to be especially useful figures for the most

60. John Gee, *New Shreds of the Old Snare* (London, 1624), sigs. C, G2v. In contrast, when one is "jesuited" it usually means that one has fallen under the influence of Jesuits, rather than turned into one.

61. *Letters from the Living to the Living* (London, 1703), 168, 171, 177, 183–84.

62. Robinson, *Anatomy*, sig. B4. Pearson claims that Restoration fiction generally assumed this slippage ("The History of *The History of the Nun*"). Fessenden argues that depictions of nuns and prostitutes as interchangeable figures in nineteenth-century America work to "biologize woman's sphere and so render all women, whatever their claims to social privilege, sexual agency, or spiritual autonomy, captives of their female embodiment"; "The Convent, the Brothel, and the Protestant Woman's Sphere," 457. Strasser points to institutional parallels between the convent and the brothel in Munich: "Nuns and prostitutes wore special clothes, eschewed matrimony, and inhabited separate institutional spaces. The two groups of unmarried women enjoyed a certain amount of power and independence, yet they were simultaneously deemed servants of the common good and the larger community on behalf of which they carried out their respective tasks"; *State of Virginity*, 70.

obsessively imagined and vividly reviled aspects of Catholic religious practice and belief. For example, the simultaneous sexualization and ridicule of nuns draws on distrust of the ways in which Catholics supposedly overvalue objects. Texts like *Venus in the Cloister* exploit and ridicule the fervent eroticism of Catholic spiritual practice and the potentially erotic investment in the objects that form part of it—objects that were, after all, prohibited in England. Traub identifies a “materialization of female desire in the form of prosthetic objects” in early modern pornography.<sup>63</sup> Given the assumption that Catholicism is a grossly physical religion, the fictions set in convents place special emphasis on the erotic appropriation of liturgical objects and the central role of *things* in erotic practices. *Venus in the Cloister* describes the use of glass dildos, a priest who wears a reliquary next to his heart filled with locks of his conquests’ pubic hair (“relics of the holy beard”), and industrious flagellation of self and others.<sup>64</sup> The sexuality it depicts is one in which objects figure importantly, not unlike the spirituality outsiders assign to Catholics. To dwell on the materiality of nuns’ sexuality is simultaneously to objectify women and their desires and to denounce Catholic hypocrisy, superstition, and sensuality. It’s not just that Catholics cannot escape the bodies that level the distinctions among confessional groups and make nonsense of chastity vows. The very nature of their spiritual practices grounds them in the material and provides the paraphernalia—such as whips—for sexual excess. Nuns, in particular, are imagined as repudiating sex by committing themselves to a religion whose rituals, accoutrements, and habits become erotic in themselves.

Since nuns are not just women but vow-making and -breaking Catholics, they serve as useful focal points for aspersions on Catholics as subjects (in the various meanings of that word). This is especially true in the 1680s and 1690s. The nun provided an entry point for a far-reaching interrogation of the political consequences of uncritical submission and of dividing one’s allegiance between pope (or priest) and sovereign. If, as Steven Shapin puts it, Catholics were assumed to be unreliable or untruthful because “they were said to be at the bidding of others, not free to do as they pleased,” then the nun was the perfect embodiment of the biddable Catholic.<sup>65</sup> The authoritarian priest, blithely ordering his daughters to sin and promising to forgive them, mobilizes the same associations among Catholicism, absolutist tyranny, and sexual excess Rachel Weil identifies in satires on Charles II; the priest thus stands as a figure for what is wrong with the combination of authority, Catholicism, and libido.<sup>66</sup> Interestingly, these associations persist even during the reign of the uxorious and pious James II, suggesting that the issue is the feared misuse of inflated authority more than a known history of promiscuity. Roger Thompson proposes that Henry Rhodes, the

63. Traub, *Renaissance of Lesbianism*, 103.

64. *Venus in the Cloister*, sig. D9v and passim.

65. Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago, 1994), 96.

66. Rachel Weil, “Sometimes a Scepter Is Only a Scepter: Pornography and Politics in Restoration England,” in Lynn Hunt, ed., *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity* (New York, 1993), 125–53. See also James Grantham Turner, “Pepys and the Private Parts of Monarchy,” in Gerald MacLean, ed., *Culture and Society in the Stuart Restoration: Literature, Drama, History* (Cambridge, 1995), 95–110.

young bookseller who published the first English translation of *Venus in the Cloister* in 1683, “did far more damage to the cause of James II than all the frenzied efforts of Whig publishers.”<sup>67</sup> If so, then Rhodes stirred up contempt for and suspicion of Catholics in ways that had powerful political effects. To the same end, Robinson’s revelation of priests’ abuse of authority and nuns’ gullibility was repackaged and printed in 1684.<sup>68</sup> As numerous scholars have shown, both gender inversion or disorder and anti-Catholicism were renewable resources for discrediting one’s opposition and mobilizing sentiment. When the goal is whipping up fear and loathing, overt topicality is not necessary—and may not be as effective as displacement. A whipping girl for both women and Catholics, the nun offered both titillation and a safer target than the Stuart monarchs.



Yet we can catch rare glimpses of nuns as the laughers rather than the objects of scorn—and thus as capable of viewing their leaders critically. This is even possible in anti-Catholic texts. In *Venus in the Cloister*, Sister Agnes receives her confessor in a room in which the grate between nun and priest has *not* been specially rigged (as was usually the case, supposedly). As a result, she reports, the priest “prepared me sufficient matter to laugh at, in that having by his efforts loosened one of the Bars of the Iron in the Grate, and thinking he had made a passage sufficiently large, to pass through it, he ventured, notwithstanding my dissuasions: But through he could not get, for as much as having passed his head, and one of his shoulders with a great deal of difficulty, his Cowle got hold of one of the spikes without, so notwithstanding all his struggling he could not get rid of that snare. I could not contemplate him in that posture, without bursting out laughing” (sigs. D6v–D7). In this text, the nuns also laugh at the “pleasant adventure” of their abbess finding a lobster in her chamberpot. The lobster “had never met with so delicate and so relishing a bit” and so would not let go (sigs. F4v–F7). In both instances, authority figures’ physical exposure and discomfiture provoke the nuns’ laughter. For the reader, the next layer of the joke is that nuns would find naughty bits funny. While nuns are often depicted as dupes who are not smart enough to question commands they receive or to consult their own consciences, here they are depicted as capable of enjoying their leaders’ unease; the object of ridicule is their unworthy and undignified leaders rather than their own obedience.

A biography of an English nun offers a different, far more complicated, view of the interplay of authority and jest in a convent. Edward Scarisbricke’s *The Life of the Lady Warner* justifies Lady Trevor Warner’s decision to become a Poor Clare despite the fact that she was already married and the mother of two daughters. Her husband, John, became a Jesuit and the confessor to James II. Certainly some of her contemporaries might have viewed Lady Warner as a kind of vow breaker. Scarisbricke emphasizes that she secures her husband’s consent and that she is destined to be a nun.

67. Thompson, *Unfit for Modest Ears*, 154.

68. On the particular market for “secret histories” of rulers in the 1680s, see John Watkins, *Representing Elizabeth in Stuart England: Literature, History, Sovereignty* (Cambridge, 2002), 150–87.

Scarisbricke generally depicts Lady Warner, who takes the name of Sister Clare, as a humorless figure, especially formidable in her dealings with her two small daughters. But on one occasion her abbess attempts to tease Sister Clare. The incident occurs on the day of a “cloathing,” the crucial ceremony through which nuns “take the veil.” Nuns sought to strip themselves of the accoutrements of a worldly life so as to reclothe themselves in the humble habits of their orders. For them, nakedness and abasement had spiritual meanings. Many obituaries and biographies mention the women’s former delight in fashionable clothing and how they forsake it. This emphasis on un-clothing and re-clothing becomes the excuse for titillation in many convent stripteases. In *The Adamite, or the Loves of Father Rock*, for instance, Father Rock convinces impressionable nuns that they can regain Paradise by stripping down to Edenic nudity;<sup>69</sup> *Eve Revived, or the Fair One Stark Naked* depicts a Jesuit who gets revenge on the nun who has left him for someone else by stealing all of her clothes while she’s swimming; the subtitle of *Venus in the Cloister* is *The Nun in Her Smock*.

Scarisbricke assumes that his readers will understand the significance of “a cloathing.” He describes how Sister Clare and the other members of her convent hear a sermon at a “Cloathing” preached

upon this Text; *Nigra sum sed formosa; I am black but comely*; from which the Preacher took occasion to exhort the Spouse, that was to take the Habit, to Humility; expressing how they were to make themselves black to the Eyes of the World, to become more fair in the sight of God: The Religious sometime after speaking of this passage, Mother Abbess jestingly said to Sister Clare, *You also Sister Clare must black yourself*; she presently after, took occasion to go out into the Kitching, where she black’d her Face and Hands all over, with the Soot of the Chimney, and return’d again to the place of Recreation, with that Modesty and chearful Gravity, as if nothing had happen’d. This sight, instead of exciting Laugh-ter in those that were present, mov’d them to Tears, to see what an humble Sacrifice, she had made of her self to blind Obedience.<sup>70</sup>

The biblical passage, the abbess’s jest, Sister Clare’s self-sooting, and her community’s tears all stem from the assumption that blackness is the opposite of comeliness, that it is a flagrant self-abasement to blacken one’s white skin. The abbess speaks “jestingly” to Sister Clare, who then takes this literally in a way that turns the abbess’s jest into tears

69. Printed in 1683, *The Adamite, or the Loves of Father Rock and His Intrigues with the Nuns*, refers back to the supposed sect of “revolutionary naked fundamentalists” in the 1640s, called the Adamites. David Cressy explains that we “know of them as a textual phenomenon rather than a social movement” because the only references to them are from hostile outsiders; Mary Fissell refers to the Adamites as a “wholly imaginary” sect. See David Cressy, *Agnes Bowker’s Cat: Travesties and Transgressions in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 2000), 251–80, esp. 251; and Mary E. Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies: The Politics of Reproduction in Early Modern England* (Oxford), 158.

70. Edward Scarisbricke, *The Life of the Lady Warner in Which the Motives of Her Embracing the Roman Catholick Faith Quitting Her Husband and Children to Become a Poor Clare at Graveling, Her Rigorous Life and Happy Death Are Declared* (London, 1691, 1692, and 1696), sigs. G6v–G7; quotation from the 1696 edition. The title signals the text’s apologetic project.

for “those that were present.” One can imagine an abbess more annoyed than moved by Sister Clare. One can also confer complex motives on Sister Clare, blackening her face and hands, then acting “as if nothing had happen’d,” so as to turn a jest at her expense into a tearful acknowledgment of her virtue. Scarisbricke, however, spins this episode of martyrly minstrelsy in order to showcase Sister Clare’s “blind Obedience,” the very quality that is ridiculed in erotic accounts of nuns who are not smart enough to critique the orders they are given.

A narrative by another priest assigns a would-be nun a comic heroine’s inventiveness and determination. (Here again we can see that clothing and un-clothing were resonant tropes within Catholic discourses that could then be exploited in erotic fictions.) In a dedication to Agnes Rosedale, an English Carmelite at Antwerp, John Falconer describes how she “dexterously freed” herself from the “domesticall, and unjust Captivity” in which her family was keeping her to prevent her from becoming a nun.

Getting alone to the Monastery, and well assured, that the doore thereof would not, but with some better allowance of your powerfull friends, be opened to receive you (as the Reverend Mother & Religious of themselves exceedingly desired) with an heroicall resolution, scarcely to be exemplified, you pulled of your secular rich clothes, put your selfe in to a small Wheele, serving (as the manner is) to take in and out things needfull for the inclosed, left at that tyme by a rare chance unlocked, and so turned your self into the place you desired, by such a strange meanes, as it no lesse amazed the Reverend Mother, and Sisters to see a person of your knowne quality, kneeling almost naked before them, with flowing teares begging their holy habit, then it joyed your selfe to have gotten in so among them.<sup>71</sup>

The “wheel” Rosedale employs is the “turnstile or similar contrivance at the entrance of a convent,” purposefully designed to accommodate objects but not persons.<sup>72</sup> Through this “strange means,” Rosedale delivers herself—almost naked, weeping, but triumphant—in the midst of her new community. Falconer depicts her achievement as a kind of miracle: “this entry of yours seemed almost miraculous, the straytnes of the Wheele, divided into foure parts, and your tall stature considered; the devise at least, & your manner of executing it, was (I doubt not) divinely suggested and not without a mystery performed.” His emphasis on the miraculous also draws out the comical nature of the episode, encouraging his readers to imagine Rosedale, by the time of his writing an eminent abbess, tall yet mysteriously crammed into a compartment designed to accommodate groceries. However miraculous he finds her story, he does

71. John Falconer, *The Mirrour of Created Perfection. or the Life of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God* (St. Omer, France, 1632), 3–5.

72. See the *OED* for this definition. In *The Jew of Malta*, Barabas orders his servant to use such a device to send poisoned rice pudding into the convent: “There’s a dark entry where they take it in, / Where they must neither see the messenger, / Nor make inquiry who hath sent it them”; *Jew of Malta* 3.4.80–82, *Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Plays*, ed. J. B. Steane (Penguin, 1969). By this means he kills all of the nuns, including his own daughter.

not find her an exception. He mentions “many other eminent Gentle-women of our nation, who have trampled secular Braveryes, neglected Worldly contentments and preferments, left their Country, and forsaken the delicacies of their Parents houses, to enter into severall monasteries.”<sup>73</sup> Rosedale wasn’t trying to be funny, exactly, but her exploits have a comic inventiveness and urgency in that, like other “eminent gentle-women,” she’ll “trample,” “neglect,” and “forsake” in order to “turn her self into the place she desires.”<sup>74</sup> While many popular accounts of nuns ridicule them as ciphers—trying unsuccessfully to resist natural impulses, subjected to false doctrines and foolish leaders (especially priests)—the attempts of these two Jesuit priests to write nuns’ stories emphasize their buoyant assertion of their own desire.

These two stories suggest that, from within the Catholic clergy, it was possible to imagine nuns’ stories as divine comedies: the renunciation of worldly attachments and material pleasures, the dissolution of the bounded, possessive individual in the community’s embrace, the pursuit of salvation. Scarisbricke and Falconer are able to imagine that what nuns want is to be nuns: poor, celibate, devoted to contemplation, living in community with other women but in isolation from their families and, often, from the surrounding communities. From this perspective, it is the insistence on embodiment that is the pathetic failure—not the repudiation or restriction of the body. Some nuns might have aspired to be funny in their willingness to set dignity aside, to admit their own limitations, to prefer their chosen communities to families or marriages, to be “black” or “naked.” The comedy here resides in all of the ways in which nuns resist the temptations of the flesh and refuse to be like other women or like other Catholics. It thus suggests that there might be other ways of being women or being Catholic than those so relentlessly parodied, and secured through that parody. In the comic possibility of Agnes Rosedale emerging “almost naked” in the midst of her new community we can see from inside the cloister what popular culture worked busily to occlude: that nuns have their own desires and their own assessments of what’s funny.

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73. Falconer, *Mirroure of Created Perfection*, 4, 5.

74. The word “turn” was widely used in the period to describe conversion, often with negative connotations. See, for instance, Daniel Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570–1630* (New York, 2002). Catholics themselves used the word positively to describe the turning toward faith that often also entailed a turning away from other attachments. In Abbess Eugenia Poulton’s obituary of Sister Alexia Grey, for example, she describes how God “out of his infinite mercy whilst she was actually dancing, even in one of the turns of the same dance turn’d her hart wholly towards him”; *Obituary Notices of the Nuns of the English Benedictine Abbey of Ghent in Flanders 1627–1811*, contributed by the Lady Abbess and Community, *Catholic Record Society* 19 (1917): 26.

**ABSTRACT**

The dissolution of English convents (at least on English soil) and the disappearance of nuns as familiar inhabitants of local communities did not signal the nun's disappearance from post-Reformation popular culture. Throughout the seventeenth century, the nun commanded center stage in ballads, plays, prose fiction, and scurrilous pamphlets. In this essay, Frances E. Dolan looks at pornographic depictions that render the whole idea of celibacy ludicrous; a range of other denunciations of nuns as women who are not to be taken seriously; and representations of nuns actually trying to be funny. Even if the nun of the popular imagination can tell us very little about nuns in English houses on the Continent after the Reformation, she can tell us much about attitudes toward women's sexuality, agency, and authority, about attitudes toward Catholic capacities for loyalty and critical judgment, and about the tangled worlds of sexual, political, and theological fantasy. *Keywords:* dissolution of English convents; Reformation popular culture; pornographic depictions of nuns; nuns and women's sexuality; nuns and political attitudes toward Catholics