Sanctified Subversives

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Nuns in Early Modern English and Spanish Literature

By

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CHAPTER ONE

EARLY MODERN NUNS IN CONTEXT

Why are nuns so fascinating? We take a second look when we see them on the streets. We are in awe of them as much as we are mystified by their lifestyle. Their habits, vows, and convents have intrigued us for millennia. Despite their long-standing presence in society, nuns still manage to grab our attention. What draws our interest has been a staple of nunhood since its inception: their perennial status as the other within. Nuns are a paradox in a patriarchal world; they are at once the quintessential embodiment of femininity and incongruous to its very definition. As chaste women devoted to God they are viewed as the purest of the pure. Yet, as females who reject courtship, sex, marriage, child bearing, and materialism, they are anathema to how society has proscribed roles for women: sex object, wife, mother, and capitalist consumer.

People notice when nuns speak up, become political activists, or articulate feminist convictions because the popular expectation is that nuns are meek, mild-mannered, and subservient. As this book fleshes out, nuns have been rebelling for centuries, veering from the normative paths constructed for women thanks to a feminist loophole within the Catholic Church's patriarchal hierarchy: conventual life as a nun. Western ideologies about womanhood and gendered power structures in early modern society can be illuminated by an examination of nuns and how their alternative lifestyles, as described in popular literature of the time, helped reflect and define what it meant to be a woman during the Renaissance.

Given the growing divide between Catholicism and Protestantism during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, examinations of the early modern era's literature benefit from an analysis of how authors articulated sentiments about these Christian denominations and their relationship with women. In this book, I pay particular attention to how authors perceive convents and the profession of nuns as either expanding and/or hindering the opportunities of early modern women within English and Spanish cultures.

On one hand, nuns and convents in the works of English authors such as William Shakespeare and Margaret Cavendish express English sympathy and nostalgia for Catholicism, the philanthropic endeavors of the clergy, and the opportunities the Catholic Church afforded women who wanted to circumvent the sexual economy that rendered them chattel. On the other hand, the Spanish Empire's familiarity with Catholic clergy and institutions influenced its authors to offer more complex depictions of conventual life. For example, Catalina de Erauso, better known as the Lieutenant Nun in her self-titled memoir/exploration narrative, runs away from a Basque convent and experiences life as a male soldier in the New World while battling would-be wives, antagonistic indigenous populations, and incredulous church officials. Meanwhile, her contemporary María de Zayas idealizes life in the convent with her collection of astoundingly riveting stories, *Desengaños amorosos* (*The Disenchantments of Love*). Zayas does as much by recognizing, as many female writers of the *querelle des femmes* did, that women could prevail in a female intellectual circle with the help of the Catholic Church and its distinct spatial home for women religious. Catalina, however, much like many other nuns, knew that the more independent-minded women chafed under the strictures of a conventual life whose structure and livelihood was still under the male purview.

If Shakespeare posits *Measure for Measure*'s Isabella as a noble heroine and Zayas envisions the convent as the ultimate escape for women avoiding violent marriage, then what does an actual nun do and write about? For this reason I ask us to cross the Atlantic Ocean to analyze the writing of a real-life nun – Mexico's Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. A close reading of her poems, prose, and drama demonstrates how the feminist hopes expressed in Shakespeare's and Zayas's works are fulfilled in Sor Juana's engagement with the *querelle des femmes* thanks to the independence she enjoyed within her convent and from the liberties she was granted by the viceregal court of New Spain.

In this book, I employ fictional representations of nuns as a framework through which to interrogate depictions of gender, sexuality, and power structures in early modern English and Spanish societies. I do so by drawing on the scholarly tools of New Historicism, Feminism, and Queer Theory to establish a transnational, transatlantic, and inclusive framework. I utilize this collection of texts to study how popular authors exploited the role of the nun in fiction to challenge notions about gender in Christian nation-states beginning to see the earliest buds of feminist polemical

writing. From commercial playwrights such as Shakespeare to feminist[1] authors such as Zayas highly attuned to how the continent-wide *querelle des femmes* was determining women's role in society, English- and Spanish-language writers of the early modern period were aware of the significance of nuns as mirrors, conduits, and trial balloons for their views and theories of gender dynamics, the double standard, and heterosexism.

Nuns have long possessed an exceptional status in Western Civilization in their role as women set apart from the lay female population. Their special standing as women venerated for their ability to renounce worldliness and embrace the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience renders them relatively anomalous in a patriarchal world that subsumes women into a heteronormative sexual economy that belittles their worth. Nuns are simultaneously the antithesis and epitome of femininity. From a superficial perspective, we can begin this discussion by acknowledging popular conceptions about the choices nuns make when they live a religious life. On the one hand, because nuns are expected by the lay population to be silent, meek, humble, and caring, they fulfill expectations of the nurturing, maternal woman. On the other hand, their vow to renounce marriage, heterosexual intercourse, childbearing, and childrearing establishes them as non-conformists who challenge heteronormativity and reproductive futurity. Nonetheless, this peaceful coexistence of expectations demonstrates how living as nuns allowed many women during the early modern period to lead lives that afforded them a safe environment in which to pray, meditate, learn, and educate others with the blessing of religious and secular male leaders. Similar to the way in which I highlight the paradox inherent in a nun's public persona, Elizabeth Kuhns makes a similar observation about the dichotomous symbolism of nuns' clothing: "the habit serves to shroud the body and to mask the individual, it also dramatically announces its wearer to the world. The habit has the glamour of fashion while being antifashion;

[1] I liberally use terms such as "feminist," "queer," "capitalist," and "Marxist" throughout this book so that contemporary readers can efficiently understand the epistemological identities I am examining. I reject the need to always use the prefix "proto-." Historians and literary scholars know that these words were not coined until centuries after the Renaissance, but it does not mean that these ideologies or identities were nonexistent. We have created these words to explain and reify abstract concepts. Thus, I use them to provide a sociohistorically-minded literary analysis of such concepts when they appear in the works under consideration.

it is the antithesis of extravagance and sexual allure, yet it impresses and arouses" (7).

This book illustrates how both English and Spanish authors of the early modern period latched onto the figure of the nun as a way to evaluate feminine identities. As seemingly paradoxical representations of what womanhood could entail, nuns presented writers with the richest of subjectivities to scrutinize. If nuns cannot exist without the states of being they renounce – material richness, sexual coupling, and obedience to secular males – then their expected embodiment of the more virtuous side of femininity's binary allows them to be the perfect conduit through which authors can query and challenge society's assessment of womanhood. A discrete analysis of a nun's moral structure underscores the potential she possesses to subvert and exploit the gendered expectations placed on her when she wishes to transcend them. By eschewing bawdy, lewd, and propagandistic literature about lusty nuns that serve as whores to priests who act as pimps, this book employs mature works to tease out how canonical writers employed the role of the nun to showcase the powerful potential these women possessed in acting as sanctified subversives.

To initiate such a study, this introductory chapter briefly discusses the significance of Catholicism in late Medieval and early modern England. Doing so illustrates how integral nuns were to the everyday politics and culture of these nation-states as they expanded into global empires. Given that the Catholic Church began to lose its grip on wide swaths of Europe during the Renaissance, it is literature from the early modern period that merits a close examination of the fictional interpretations of the archetypal nun.

In an ambivalently Protestant England that saw a half-dozen shifts in political, religious, and cultural direction between the 1530s and the 1660s, authors and other intellectuals were accustomed to contemplating how the textual, political, religious, and sociological commentaries published in their name would play out on the larger cultural landscape. Because Catholicism remained an integral part of England's hallowed history, depictions of a "Romish" past could not escape feelings of nostalgia and/or wishful-thinking for those steeped in the traditions of the Catholic Church and/or aware of how it afforded women opportunities they were denied in Protestant nations. Even without considering scholarly work that posits Shakespeare as a crypto-Catholic, one sees that Shakespeare's personal religious persuasion does not distract from the fact that his England was awash in Catholic residue – architecturally, liturgically, textually, and psychologically. From rood loft edicts attempting to physically cleanse England of its Catholic past to Queen

Elizabeth's support of the "Common Prayer" book, Protestant England's ties to the Catholic Church – through both its contemporary threat and historic importance – are indelible parts even of the secular literature produced in such a religiously-centered era.[2] In fact, the Abbey of the Order of Saint Clare, a convent of the Poor Clares, the community that Isabella in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* wishes to join, had been located in Aldgate, the easternmost part of London since it was founded in 1293 by Blanche, Queen of Navarre, wife of Edmund Plantagenet, until its closure during the Reformation. No doubt Londoners seeing this play would have remembered the convent when they first saw Isabella speak with Francisca as she enquires about becoming a Poor Clare nun.

In the case of Golden Age Spain and its global empire, long deemed the official defender and representative of the Catholic faith by popes in awe of the nation's imperialist success and valiant military force, the nation's authors were familiar with living under the splendor and yoke of the Catholic Church. Intellectuals, particularly female authors, decided to challenge the status quo from within the system. Zayas and Sor Juana employed the convent and the figure of the nun to distance themselves from a world ruled by men for men. By subverting stereotypes about nuns as subservient to patristic leaders, these two authors engendered hope among their readers that all-female religious communities could provide a quasi-utopian alternative to a hostile world that usually rendered them inferior objects subject to male control.

Independent Women: Constructions and Identities of Early Modern Nuns as Anomalous Women

Early Christians who sought a respite from the frenzy and vagaries of the world escaped cities for spaces such as the desert, remote caves, or isolated monasteries. These locations offered the requisite tranquility needed for religious devotion and contemplation. Understandably, women

[2] The following monographs are essential reads on English Catholic recusancy during the early modern period: Ronald Corthell's, ed., *Catholic Culture in Early Modern England*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. Frances E. Dolan's *Whores of Babylon: Catholicism, Gender, & Seventeenth-Century Print Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999. Jane Degenhardt & Elizabeth Williamson's *Religion and Drama in Early Modern England: The Performance of Religion on the Renaissance Stage*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2011. Alison Shell's *Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination, 1558-1660*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

and men who flocked to Christianity in its infancy sought clandestine places of worship since their lives depended on it. As Christianity gained political currency and its followers were able to practice the religion more freely, there was still an attraction to transcending worldliness by removing oneself from society. Escaping the bustle of urban life stemmed from a "biblical tradition" wherein a freeing space "meant . . . wild places without limit or definition, which represented withdrawal from worldly engagement, purification, and contact with the divine" (McNamara 61). However, the gradual institutionalization of the Church introduced sexist, hierarchical elements into the philosophies grounding permanent religious communities.

As isolated areas gave way to the construction of formal religious houses, the desire to separate monasteries by sex developed. A woman's vow of chastity was one of the main reasons behind this segregation. A woman's virginity contained a mixed blessing for women who sought to attain spiritual transcendence in a religious world governed by men. Virgins were celebrated for their purity and ability to renounce sexuality in pursuit of living a rigorously ascetic life. Nuns' perceived purity made them integral to Catholic life as lay people paid them reverence and requested that they made intercessory prayers on their behalf. At the same time, the alleged innate weakness of the female sex created an expectation of transgression: "As the descendants of Eve—forever linked to images of carnality and bodily sin—women would always, it would seem, fall short of the mark. Thus, women required rigid safeguards and protection" (Lehfeldt 3). Despite the problematic double bind of freedom and surveillance that these religious houses bestowed on nuns, women who sought to avoid either marriage and/or losing their virginity frequently flocked to convents in search of sanctuary. Both popular legends and historical anecdotes during the Middle Ages tell tales of heroines "fighting to retain their virginity at all costs" and entering "a walled enclosure that would guard them from the lusts of men and the ambitions of their families" (McNamara 99). The four protagonists that flee their family home for a convent in Zayas's *Desengaños amorosos* demonstrate how powerful a pull conventual life held for women in a society that offered them little recourse to abstain from sexual relations with men if they wanted to enjoy the essentials of civilized life.

Despite how attractive the convent seemed to some women, the empowerment accorded to nuns within the convent should not be overstated. As Sor Juana's life story makes clear, nuns took a vow of obedience that rendered them subservient to male superiors and Catholic Church hierarchy. Various applications of canon law required male

supervision of convents. Bishops often butted heads with competent and intelligent abbesses who had to justify their actions to the patriarchy. Regular visitations by superiors removed any hope of a life unencumbered by male intrusion. On a more philosophical plane, the women's chasteness inspired outsiders to be continually protective, suspicious, and controlling of nuns' sexuality. As Elizabeth Lehfeldt argues in her study of women religious in early modern Spain, "nuns who accepted the enclosure of the convent had to accept at a certain level an ideology that devalued their worth as women and was suspicious of their ability to protect their own chastity" (13).

Because nuns were most recognized for what made them anomalous – their refusal to engage in sex and procreate – their vow of chastity was always more closely scrutinized, surveilled, and slandered than that of clergymen. Historically, many women who have resisted heterosexual intercourse have been physically abused and raped as punishment for their attempt to defy the sexual status quo. Despite a millennia of Catholics venerating the Blessed Virgin Mary and celebrating the virginal status of nuns and other women religious who chose to take a vow of chastity, by the Middle Ages it was commonplace for "dirty jokes and pornographic fantasies detailing the fictional longings of unwilling nuns" to give "license to the sexual ambitions of young men seeking wives or just a brief diversion by breaking into convents" (McNamara 4).

In fact, some Protestants considered it their duty to target nuns and free them from their enclosure and celibacy. One subgenre within popular anti-Catholic discourse included texts written to advise Protestants how to dissuade friends and family members from being Catholic or taking on a Catholic profession. The French-English Anglican clergyman Peter du Moulin included an example of such a text by adding a "Circulatory Letter to the Fathers of those Virgins that Desert their Families to Turn Nuns" as an epilogue to his 1678 book *The Ruine of Papacy: Or, A Clear Display of the Simony of the Romish Clergy*. The letter begins by saying it is written for the "consolation and attonment" of fathers and to "instruct the Daughter, and to give her such reasons as might be capable to perswade her to leave the Nunnery with as little noise and danger as she enter'd in." (85) The letter launches characteristically Protestant attacks on issues such as Transubstantiation, which the author says would create a paradox wherein if "all the Hosts were the body of Christ, at the same time Christ would be above in one place, and below in another. One body would be large, another small; one would be hot, another cold; one weighty, another light, one would rest in the Church, another be carry'd through the Streets" (92) and contends that "To understand Transubstantiation, there is a

necessity of understanding Chimeras, accidents without substances, substances without accidents, Conversions without Communication, and Bodies without quantity" (93). Despite the profound theological subject matters addressed in the letter that belittle the cognitive reasoning abilities of nuns, the author concludes humanely by advising parents that nuns must leave the convent only by their own "free will" (95) rather than by force.

Likewise, Martin Luther wrote a letter to three nuns in the summer of 1524 that enjoined them to leave the convent and quit their profession because chastity was unnatural. Luther argued that "both Scripture and experience teach that among many thousands there is not one to whom God gives the grace to maintain pure chastity. A woman does not have the power [to do this] herself. God created her body to be with a man, bear children and raise them, as Scripture makes clear in Genesis 1" (141). Luther's call for women to quit the early modern equivalent of a work place and return to the kitchen has had far-reaching consequences well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In contrast to Luther, by rejecting this notion of rescuing women, the ostensibly Protestant authors Shakespeare and Cavendish sought to redress the grievances of English women religious who were forced to relinquish their conventual life during King Henry VIII's Reformation. The tension created by wars between Protestants and Catholics during the early modern period lends support to this study's examination of how authors of fictional narratives employed the figure of the nun and the space of the convent as literary devices to enable discussions about the value of virginity. After all, following Luther's 1517 posting of his Ninety-five Theses on the Wittenberg Cathedral, the voices of those "long silenced by monastic rhetoric rose to condemn celibacy as an occasion of sin and virginity itself as a crime against nature. Protestantism attacked the spirituality most associated with women, denying the redemptive value of prayer and sacrifice" (McNamara 419).

For example, in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* the idea of a woman refusing to engage in sexual intercourse and bear children inspires Angelo to homophonically pun on Isabella's choice of vocation and to question her identity when she rejects his obstreperous wooing, "Be that you are, / That is, a woman; if you be more, you're none" (2.4.135-36). Opposing such narrow-mindedness, some early modern Catholic theologians had already developed progressive epistemologies about gender and sex inspired by the Biblical verse that in Christ "There is neither Jew nor Greek: there is neither bond nor free: there is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). In fact,

"monastic theorists tended to conceptualize a third gender, apart from the two sexually active genders, harking back to the old view that, without active sexual and reproductive activity, gender did not exist" (McNamara 144). When Protestants critiqued the alleged unnaturalness of women who chose not to marry or engage in sexual intercourse, they discounted both the agency and genuine religious beliefs articulated in such a decision[3].

Whereas St. Jerome's notably misogynistic discussion of virgins and women presented virginity as a physiological state, St. Augustine recognized it along moral and spiritual principles that valued the quality of the woman's spirit over any physical actions that might have caused her to lose her virginity against her will. In oral storytelling and manuscript culture, tales of valiant women who resisted male encroachment on their spiritual being gained popularity throughout the Middle Ages as these legendary virgins were celebrated for their devotion to God. The most notable feature about the narratives that surround these women – such as St. Cecilia, Margaret of Antioch, and Catherine of Alexandria – is that while "the heroines are credited with 'meekness' . . . what is truly striking is their extraordinary boldness and defiance of all forms of authority" (Atkinson 136). Thus, it should come as no surprise that Zayas's celebration of the convent as a sanctuary for women who rebel against violent machismo and Shakespeare's laudation of Isabella demonstrates these authors' championing of the most unconventional of literary underdogs in a misogynistic era: the asexual woman.

Periculoso, The Council of Trent, and the Dissolution of Nuns' Agency

Canon law that called for the strict enclosure of nuns reached its apex with *Periculoso*, title sixteen in the third book of *Liber Sextus*, a collection of papal legislation published under Pope Boniface VIII in 1298. Although the sixteenth-century Council of Trent added stiffer penalties to violations of *Periculoso*, the centuries that preceded the council witnessed nuns, clergymen, and canon jurists wrestling with both the ideas and practical

[3] Clarissa Atkinson's study on the ideology of virginity in the late Middle Ages and its influence on the early modern period provides various attestations of women's clear understanding of how the maintenance of their virginity afforded them holy significance. Atkinson, Clarissa W. "'Precious Balsam in a Fragile Glass": The Ideology of Virginity in the Late Middle Ages." Journal of Family History 8:2 (Summer 1983) 131-43.

enforcement of strict claustration for nuns.[4] Pope Boniface VIII's edict justified the fears of so many nuns and abbesses about the amount of power that male religious could have over their lives when he legislated that clergymen had to strictly enforce the claustration of nuns within their jurisdiction or face "divini iudicii et interminatione maledictionis aeternae" ["divine judgment and the threat of eternal damnation"][5].

Claustration of nuns has been a part of monastic practice since at least the 300s according to references made in the letters of St. Jerome and in legal texts discussing the earliest communities of women religious in Rome (Makowski 9). During the early Middle Ages the philosophy behind encloistering religious professionals was applied to both men and women. Although not regularly followed by monks or nuns, the encloistering of members was thought of by many orders as engendering a more ideal situation for allowing them to follow their vows and the rules of their order without unnecessary interruptions from the outside world. With the exception of mendicant orders that relied on the charity of others for their sustenance, most religious houses understood that realities – financial and sometimes familial – necessitated some flexibility when it came to enclosure. Thus, when Pope Boniface VIII's legislation was imposed, many abbesses protested that the act would hinder their ability to solicit funds from the outside and to admit laywomen who wanted to retire in the convent (especially those with substantial funds).

Historians of the Catholic Church cannot clearly ascertain why the pope enacted *Periculoso*, especially since it appeared neither in any papal registers before its publication nor in any response to a decretal letter (a papal reply to a specific question of argument by others). A 1605 edition of a standard gloss to *Liber Sextus* by Joannes Andreae reports the alleged reason for *Periculoso*'s origin as shockingly simple: "A certain person in the presence of Boniface VIII asked the pope to tell him how nuns ought to live; *Periculoso* was the pope's extemporaneous reply" (Makowski 21). We should not dismiss the possible validity of such a marginal reason for enacting new canon law. However, there were some sociohistorical undercurrents that might have informed the pope's desire to more closely monitor the activities of nuns.

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[4] Elizabeth Makowski's *Canon Law and Cloistered Women: Periculoso and Its Commentators, 1298-1545*, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1997, is essential reading for this topic.

[5] Bracketed translations throughout the book are mine.

Because the early Middle Ages saw formal religious roles for women in the Catholic Church open to an exclusive well-to-do group of women, many pious women sought more diverse relationships with their faith. The elitism of some religious communities resulted in a disproportionately high number of women (compared to men) that were attracted to heretical movements of the thirteenth century, especially those that promised leadership roles for women. For example, the Guglielimites, which developed after the death of their namesake Guglielma of Bohemia, based its structure on the leadership of women. Consequently, as Elizabeth Makowski asserts, "the variety of religious roles for women in the late thirteenth century" seems to have inspired *Periculoso* as a way to "cordon off women . . . from that growing welter of groups, sects, and individuals" (14).

The practical needs of cloistered life also troubled patristic administrative leaders, since necessity rendered women quasi-autonomous in what occurred within the confines of their convent[6]. Bishops and abbots attempted to ameliorate problematic situations with regular ecclesiastical visits, yet the continual outflow of official literature about the expected comportment and home environment of nuns implies that nuns were not always abiding by the rules handed down by the hierarchy. As early as the twelfth century, Peter of Abelard was advising monasteries to follow the Rule of St. Benedict by ensuring that a religious house contain "within its walls the necessities of everyday life, such as a garden, water, a mill and bakehouse, and places where the sisters could perform their daily tasks, so that no occasion be furnished for straying outside" and so that they may "preserve their bodies from carnal contagion" (qtd. in Makowski 31). The number of utilitarian items and maintenance services required for a self-contained community underscores the realistic need for contact with the extraconventual world.

Despite strident exhortations against the potential for nuns in convents to be tempted and tainted by the worldliness of the outside world, there

[6] An area of study that deserves more research for individual and comparative analysis is the role of ribat communities specifically designated for women in Islamic cultures. These ribats functioned as shelters for women, particularly abandonded, divorced, or widowed women, and offered religious guidance, educational services, and personal counseling. Two good sources that discuss ribats include Zainab Alwani's "Muslim Women's Contribution in Building Society" and Adam Sabra's *Poverty and Charity in Medieval Islam: Mamluk Egype, 1250-1517*.

continued to be stern calls for careful surveillance of women religious who seemed to circumvent patristic control and find pleasure in worldly goods. In the mid-1580s, Johannes Franciscus de Pavinis, auditor to Pope Paul II, published his treatise *De visitatione episcoporum*, which encouraged church leaders to exhort nuns in being more diligent in their rejection of materialism. He wanted to ensure that nuns neither "violate dress regulations by wearing silk, various furs, or sandals; that they not wear their hair long in a horn-shaped style nor put on striped and multicolored caps" nor "attend dances, take part in secular banquets, and go walking through the streets and towns by day or night" (Makowski 96). Although this prohibition against luxuries was concomitant with traditional ascetic practices following Jesus Christ's anti-materialist tenet, leaders of the Roman Catholic Church in the palatial Vatican did not think it necessary for themselves to have to follow such spartan guidelines. Cavendish mocks such a repudiation of material luxuriousness in *The Convent of Pleasure* when she has Lady Happy, the closet drama's would-be abbess, describe her convent as one where she and her followers will wear the "softest Silk, / And Linnen fine as white as milk / . . . / Thus will in Pleasure's Convent I / Live with delight, and with it die" (221). By bestowing her female enclave with the richest of trappings, Cavendish rejects the papal auditor's double standard[7].

Johannes's warning surely relies on knowledge of nuns partaking in such activities as Cavendish satirizes, but annual visits to convents rarely uncovered flagrant or frequent examples of nuns eschewing expected behavior. In fact, some orders of nuns relished the ability to encloister themselves. For example, the order of the St. Clare Franciscans made the act of living a cloistered life as important as their other vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity: "vivendo in obedientia, sine proprio, et in castitate, sub clausura." Despite the order's strict membership guidelines and their nearly unflagging attention to St. Clare's deathbed rule of absolute poverty for individual members as well as the entire order, the Poor Clares experienced overwhelming popularity across Europe. Convents were established throughout Italy, France, Spain, Belgium, Bohemia, and Spanish America (Poor, par. 5). The fact that the order reached its peak in 1630 with more than nine hundred religious houses and 34,000 members

[7] Lino d'Assumpção's *Frades e Freiras: Chroniquetas Monasticas*'s study of the Clarist nuns in Beja, Portugal, provides a glimpse into the sometimes sumptuous religious and secular festivities and entertainments in which these convents engaged to celebrate holidays.

demonstrates the credibility of Isabella's earnest insistence to enjoy fewer privileges and become a Poor Clare in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*: "Yes, truly. I speak not as desiring more, / But rather wishing a more strict restraint / Upon the sisterhood, the votarists of Saint Clare" (1.4.3-5).

Another detrimental effect of the Council of Trent's reapplication of *Periculoso* was that it silenced those who challenged the reification of ideas about the fragile nature of nuns' purity and virtue. The council's effect on the cultural radar was to simultaneously banish nuns from appearing in the daily lives of many and augment the public's fascination with the lives of these women who existed inside of and yet apart from society like some *other within*. Manuela Mourao's discussion of literary representations of nuns after the early modern period confirms that the Council of Trent's strict adherence to *Periculoso* engendered an "aura of mystery" around nuns that in effect created the "opportunity for stereotypes to develop. It certainly opened the way for the fictional representation to become the main vehicle for our experience of nuns" (xx).

This House Is Not a Home: The Dissolution of Monasteries in England

To establish the foundation for English representations of Catholicism, convents, and nuns, this section examines how early modern England responded to its political affiliation with Protestantism. Because the history of convents and monasteries in Spain is part and parcel of the larger history of such institutions in Catholic polities, I will focus only on the watershed dissolution of these houses in the British Isles. For more information on Spanish convents and monasteries, see the monographs noted below.[8]

In descending order of importance, the dissolution of religious houses in England during the 1530s was due to politics, economics, the value of lands, the behavior of same-sex religious communities, and religious belief. With 9,300 male and female religious living in England and Wales in 1530, there was about one person religious for every 375 citizens

[8] Concha Torres Sanchez's *La clausura femenina del siglo XVII: Dominicas y Carmelitas Descalzas*. Salamanca: Universidad de Salamanca, 1991 and Angela Muñoz Fernández's *Acciones e intenciones de mujeres: vida religiosa de las madrileñas (ss. XV-XVI)*. Madrid: Horas y Horas: Comunidad de Madrid, Direccíon General de la Mujer, 1995.

(Woodward 2). To argue that English citizens thought of clergymen and women religious solely as burdens, nuisances, or Romish intruders would be to discount their importance in the daily lives of English men and women.

The primary purpose for the existence of convents revolved around prayer, praise, and offering Masses for the deceased. Secondary purposes for these eleemosynary convents included education, housing travelers, and healing the sick. Although there is not much evidence to suggest that English religious houses educated children — with the exception of novices and those who meant to become men and women religious as adults — surveys of the religious homes show that they were efficient in offering hospitality to travelers and giving alms to the poor (Woodward 21).

Despite whatever charitable causes the residents of these homes supported, for centuries there existed an anti-clerical tradition that questioned the amount of property owned by the Catholic Church. Simon Fish asserted in his 1529 tract to King Henry VIII, *A Supplication for the Beggars*, that the clergy "haue gotten ynto theyre hondes more then the therd part of all youre Realme" (1). This claim was often repeated by other anti-clerical writers throughout the time period. Thus, the combination of the crown's financial troubles in the 1530s and the rising anti-Catholic sentiment of certain members of the court created a situation that made the religious homes of the Catholic clergy a prime target for financial appropriation. The crown even began to view monastic lands as foreign enclaves on English soil because the "monies paid to their mother houses often looked like subsidies to England's enemies" (McNamara 423).

Usurping the lands of the religious was not a new idea. During King Henry V's war with France, certain homes were dissolved because of their connections with French peers. Even in Spain during the late 1400s, male church leaders dissolved convents if they deemed their size too small. However, since King Henry VIII's version of Protestantism was not as theologically grounded as that of advisers such as Thomas Cromwell, ardent anti-Catholic forces needed to establish good reasons for the dissolution of the monasteries. Following in the footsteps of Catholic Church officials' periodical ecclesiastic visits to each monastery and convent, the crown conducted its own survey of more than one hundred religious homes between 1535 and 1536. The top-down hierarchy and tightly controlled bureaucracy of the project has led historians to assert that the outcome was determined before the survey was conducted: "Their principal task was to gather material for a campaign designed to bring

celibacy and relics into disrepute, and the religious orders with them" (Woodward 33).

The closure of the monasteries began by focusing on those houses whose annual income was less than £200. The crown was able to avoid direct confrontation with the more politically powerful large houses by focusing on small abbeys. Publicizing the crown's financial motivations was not the most prudent way of accomplishing the goal of securing more funds. Consequently, charges against the immorality of those who lived in the religious houses needed to be established. Cromwell employed his own men rather than the local gentry to conduct the visitations of the religious homes. Thomas Legh and Richard Layton were two of the men chosen for this endeavor, and the best known authors of the study's final report, *Compendium Compertorum*. Layton betrayed his unwavering loyalty and lack of neutrality in the matter when he wrote to Cromwell asking to be a member of the expedition attesting that no other applicant would be "so trusty, true and faithful . . . doing all things diligently for your purpose" (qtd. in Woodward 60). Coupling the numerous vague, unsealed entries in the report with the fact that Legh and Layton's travels should have resulted in an impossible visit to two religious houses a day, despite the wide and perilous travel required between such visits, casts doubt on the authenticity of all of their entries. The document reported only four cases of serious crimes and sexual irregularities out of 120 visits – comparable to results by periodical ecclesiastic visits – but still called for the dissolution of all monasteries inhabited by monks and nuns. In a telling example of the crown's predetermined conclusion about the survey, the *Compendium Compertorum* had not even been completed when the bill calling for the dissolution of the monasteries was introduced to the "Reformation Parliament" that met between February 4 and April 14, 1536[9].

The report found the larger abbeys to be more often guilty of immorality, a fact that was carefully excised from public readings of the report since the crown wanted to avoid direct confrontation with the prominent political clout of these houses. The preamble to the Suppression Act of 1536 argued for the transfer of sinful male and female religious to larger houses wherein they could be more easily controlled:

> Forasmuch as manifest sin, vicious, carnal and abominable living is daily used and committed amongst the little and small abbeys, priories, and

[9]Anthony N. Shaw's 2003 doctoral thesis "The *Compendium Compertorum* and the making of the Suppression Act of 1536" from the University of Warwick offers a stunningly detailed study of this issue.

> other religious houses of monks, canons, and nuns . . . so that without such small houses be utterly suppressed, and the religious persons therein committed to great and honourable monasteries of religion in this realm, where they may be compelled to live religiously for reformation of their lives . . . (qtd. in Gee and Hardy 257-58)

Historians have interpreted the relatively quick closure of dozens of monasteries as a sign of the providential nature of the English Reformation's success. Such historians characterize the time period in a manner that argues for a "decay of Catholicism (which must have decayed, because it lost)" and a "growth of popular Protestantism (which must have been popular, because it won)" (Haigh 15). Facts, however, demonstrate that the dissolution was more haphazard and faced more resistance than popularly remembered. Some organized resistance manifested itself in the northern parishes of Yorkshire and Cheshire, although it is still arguable whether priests and monks coerced the lay people into supporting their cause or whether the local parishioners were genuinely inspired to resist the crown's usurpation of the Catholic Church's property. The seizure of so much church property helped fuel the people-powered Pilgrimage of Grace in the fall of 1536. In the short term, the pilgrimage caused the crown to reestablish religious houses and respect for the pope's supremacy.

Francis Aidan Hibbert is one of many recent scholars who have begun to study the dissolution of the monasteries through the lens of regional case studies. Hibbert examines the County of Staffordshire and offers a localized view of the dissolution's effects on one area and comes to the conclusion that "the suppression by Henry VIII and Cromwell was prompted far less by anti-papal necessities than by sheer cupidity, and not at all for moral reasons" (vi). Hibbert's research shows that far from having the wealthiest monasteries in England, Staffordshire had a monastic wealth of some £1,600 in annual net income with respect to property, real estate, and agricultural lands. His case study can be seen as an illustrative example of the suppression of "ordinary religious houses" (8). Staffordshire included a variety of religious orders such as Benedictines, Austins, Cluniacs, Dominicans, Franciscans, and Cistercians. His study is filled with an appendix listing the items appropriated by the crown from the monasteries and convents. Hibbert wisely argues that it "is the exceptional which attracts attention, but it is the ordinary which better represents the truth" (18). Hence, as one reads through the list as it ranges from "one table of alabaster" and "particions of carvyd woode" in the inventory of sales at the Brewood Nunnery (225) to "all the tyle, shingle, tymber, stone, glasse and iron, one marble grave

stone, the pavementes of the church, quyer, and chapelles, with rode lofte, the pyctures of Cryst, Mary and John, beyng in the church and chauncell" of the Austin Friars in Stafford (250) we see how rapaciously the crown and its aristocratic supporters appropriated the holdings of the Catholic Church and the places of worship that so many enjoyed for centuries.

In line with Hibbert's work, Nicholas Dogget analyzes the dissolution's effects on the County of Hertfordshire. His case study focuses on monastic lands, particularly buildings, and discusses the reasons listed by the crown for their dissolution. Dogget then details an inventory of monastic property, catalogs their residents, and describes how the lands were appropriated, capitalized, utilized, and oftentimes destroyed by later owners. His study ranges from "the minor adaptation of existing buildings as sites like St Margaret's, Nettleden, and King's Langley to the transformation of monastic buildings into major country houses as at Ashridge and Sopwell" (15). Buildings were converted by Protestants as well as recusant/closeted Catholics. Dogget hypothesizes that Catholics saw "in the re-use of the buildings themselves some continuity with its monastic past" while Protestants regarded the "secularization of the buildings as the triumph of reason and reform over the perceived ignorance superstition of medieval religion" (69).

It was the crown's assault on the cultural accoutrements of the Catholic Church that most angered laymen: "there were attacks on saints' days and pilgrimages . . . and there were royal officers throwing monks and nuns from their houses, paying off their servants, pulling lead from their roofs, and packing up cartloads of valuables for transport to London" (Haigh 143). The crown's hostile actions against the parishioners' familiar clergymen and the royal officers' obvious concern for appropriating valuable items from the churches offended the people who had been raised Catholic and knew not where this Reformation would go, much less what its religious tenets were, since the king himself had yet to articulate them thoroughly. Recent research into Catholic recusants during the English Reformation even singles out entire geographic areas for their adherence to the Old Faith, such as Lancashire, which is noted as an "intensely recusant county" brimming with Catholic architectural heritage and residue to this day (Davidson 35). Mary Erler's case studies of the writings of male and female religious during the dissolution found varying responses to the Reformation. Several former friars, monks, and nuns retired to life with their families and indicated an openness to Reformation theology. Intriguingly enough, Morpheta Kingsmill, Abbess of Wherwell, Hampshire, left bequests in her will to seven of her nuns, which suggest "the existence of a post-dissolution female living community" (Erler 8).

Some nuns seemed to have left willingly, especially when they had a support system in the secular world.

Overall, however, the situation for nuns being evicted was direr than that of monks. Given the dearth of professional and financial opportunities for women, most nuns clamored to join the larger abbeys, which soon became so overcrowded that the smaller houses had to be exempted from being dissolved in order to accommodate the women. As Parliament acted to include more religious houses under its jurisdiction, rumors spread about how to deal with the crown. It soon became clear that surrendering without a fight would make the terms more favorable for the male and female religious involved in negotiations, since the amount of pensions was at the discretion of the crown. The financial aspect of a quick surrender endowed the crown with a "helpful hold over the monks and nuns who did not take long to learn that a ready compliance with the wishes of the crown would be rewarded more generously than stubborn resistance to all persuasions" (Woodward 108). Male and female religious' new-found awareness about the financial interest at stake coincided with the news that they would no longer have the option of continuing their traditional lifestyle, as even the largest of homes were now being appropriated.

It is difficult to ascertain if the clergy's knowledge caused the crown to change their reasoning regarding the continuing dissolution of religious houses. Whereas the original, official agenda of the crown aimed to eradicate the immorality rampant in such houses, by 1538 and 1540 the preambles of numerous deeds of surrender "spoke of the earnest desire of the religious to be released from a life of idleness and superstition" – a clear attack on the founding philosophy of monastic life (Woodward 108). Historians have also noted that the Reformation Acts of the 1530s served as the impetus for many English intellectuals and religious to flee for the Low Countries. Erler argues that it was the writings of exiles during the ascension of Queen Elizabeth that "made the exchange [of controversial writings] between England and the continent somewhat more visible" (107). Again and again we see evidence that English Catholics did not simply reform overnight or even over the course of decades.

By March 1540 the religious orders were virtually extinct in England and Wales. Thousands of monks lived off comfortable pensions as they became secular clergy, worked within the newly founded Anglican Church, or entered other fields. Nuns did not fare as well since their pensions were usually paltry compared to that given to men, and they could not enjoy an equal level of involvement within the Anglican Church. Some were forced to return to their families, while others married so as to

remain financially secure. Nonetheless, a small group of male and female religious, noted for their exceptionality more than for their representativeness, determined to live the common life with each other, such as the monks of Bretton, near Barnsley, and the nuns from Kirklees, a nunnery in the Calder valley (Woodward 153-54). These discrete groups combined their small assets and libraries to continue a religious and contemplative life. Unable to attract new postulants, these communities soon disintegrated with the death of their members.[10]

This gradual, piecemeal dissolution of the English and Welsh monasteries during the 1530s demonstrates that the transition to Protestantism was not as fluid as academic surveys of the period claim. Although many male and female religious slid into their new lives without much protest, the scarcity of written records from the time period raises questions about the number of clergy that genuinely wanted to leave the religious environment they now shamefully confessed to consisting of "dumb ceremonies, wearing of a grey coat, disguising ourself after strange fashions, and other like papistical ceremonies" (Woodward 119).

Haigh asserts that "those who lived in Tudor England experienced Reformation as obedience rather than conversion; they obeyed a monarch's new laws rather than swallowed a preacher's new message" (21). This claim is supported by events such as the Pilgrimage of Grace and the acknowledgment that monks and nuns did not freely abandon their profession because of differences with the Catholic Church. Rather, most English citizens went along with the reformations of the time period as a pragmatic matter. In fact, King Henry VIII's own resistance to some of Cromwell's more radical ideas reflects the English people's comfort with Catholicism even when they did not agree with all of its tenets and its political involvement with the English nation-state. After all, King Henry VIII wrote "Affirmation of the Seven Sacraments" in 1521 to rebut Luther's doctrines, which led to Pope Leo X conferring the king with the title "Defender of the Faith."

From a Catholic perspective, England's loss was the Continent's gain. In the 1560s Spain's King Phillip II created and supported a Catholic

[10] See Amy M. Froide's "The Religious Lives of Singlewomen in the Anglo-Atlantic World: Quaker Missionaries, Protestant Nuns, and Covert Catholics" in *Women, Religion, and the Atlantic World (1600–1800)*, edited by Daniella Kostroun and Lisa Vollendorf, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009: 60–78, for more information of covert Catholic nunneries and the attempts of Protestant women to establish a religious community for retired single women.

seminary in Douay, which was then part of the Spanish Empire's dominion in the Netherlands, that attracted many English Catholics. The English College at Douay led to the publication of the influential Douay-Rhemis Bible, an English translation of the Latin Vulgate. The success of this institution inspired the creation of similar ones in Rome, Valladolid, Sevilla, and Lisboa that attracted Catholic dissidents from England and other principilaties that had become overwhelmingly Protestant and hostile to Catholics. Father William Newman wrote to Spain's King Phillip IV in 1621 and cited Douay as a model for the English seminary in Lisboa, the intention of which was to "formar sacerdotes que possam pregar a santa fé católica aos heres ingleses" ["form priests that can preach the holy Catholic faith to the English heretics"] (Homem 30)[11].

Accordingly, Robert Persons, a British priest at the English College in Valladolid, Spain, described in a 1592 letter to a fellow countryman that the students at his college would dedicate a portion of each afternoon in the church praying for England's need: "Luego despues desto vienen todos à la yglesia, donde se dizen unas letanias de nustra Señora por las necessidades de Inglaterra" ["After this they all go to church, where they say some litanies to our Mother for England's needs"] (24). Likewise, once a week they "hallan todos por dos horas a unas disputas, o conclusiones de controversias contra los hereges, principlamente contra los q aora ay en Inglaterra" ["gather together for two hours for debates, or conclusions about controversies against the heretics, principally against those that are now in England"] (26). Upon completion of their studies, the majority of students returned to England to minister to Catholic recusants and attempt to bring others into the Catholic fold: "se partan a Inglaterra a ayudar à la conversion de aquellas almas, hasta dar la vida en la demanda" ["they depart for England to help in the conversion of those souls, even to give their life if so demanded"] (78).

[11] The college received funds from the Portuguese crown under King John IV at the same time that his daughter, Catarina de Bragança, was wedded to England's King Charles II. What was affectionately called the Convento Dos Inglesinhos by Lisboans trained priests until 1973, well after Catholicism was once again freely practiced in England.

The Council of Trent

Facing powerful charges of corruption, ineptitude, and a failure to live up to its core religious beliefs, the Roman Catholic Church responded to the exponential growth of the Protestant Reformation by designing an organized Counter-Reformation with the Council of Trent. The importance of this nineteenth ecumenical council can be gleaned from the fact that it met for eighteen years, from 1545 to 1563, more than a decade longer than any other council. Pope Paul III oversaw the first phase of the Council of Trent and established its goals as defining Catholic doctrine, correcting the morality of the clergy and laity, restoring ecumenical peace within Christianity, and fighting infidels. By the time the council was adjourned in 1563, it had been overseen by five different popes and had issued dozens of decrees throughout its twenty-five sessions.

Jo Ann Kay McNamara, a historian of Catholic nuns, argues that the council "hastily" issued its decree regarding nuns and enclosure during its final meeting on December 3, 1563 (461). Compared to lengthier chapters dedicated to clarifying church doctrine on the veneration of relics and saints and the use of sacred books, the fifth chapter of the twenty-fifth session's published decrees tersely renews the rules of *Periculoso* without discussing the necessity for the strict enclosure of nuns. The language strongly rebukes critics of the enclosure of nuns and even calls for secular interference to ensure that the rule is carried out:

> The holy Synod . . . enjoins on all bishops . . . that the enclosure of nuns be carefully restored, wheresoever it has been violated, and that it be preserved, wheresoever it has not been violated; repressing, by ecclesiastical censures and other penalties, without regarding any appeal whatsoever, the disobedient and gainsayers, and calling in for this end, if need be, the aid of the Secular arm. (Waterworth 240)

Although the enforcement of the Council of Trent's decrees on the local level usually took a few generations to take full effect by way of papal nuncios forwarding the new rules, by 1566 Pope Pius V, who never oversaw the council during its different phases, "ruled that the law applied to all professed nuns . . . those who had not taken solemn vows were instructed to do so or have their communities closed" (McNamara 461).

The renewed call for the physical closure of communities of women religious continued the atmosphere of seclusion and isolation that permeated the ideology of conventual life. The Council of Trent simply rehashed *Periculoso*'s argument about the need to protect weak nuns by calling for the forced displacement of nuns in rural areas where they "are

exposed, often without any protection, to the robberies and other crimes of wicked men" to safer, more urban areas (Waterworth 240). As such, the Catholic Church patriarchy reinforced the idea that whereas chastity and seclusion were beneficial for clergymen, they were indispensable to the spiritual progress of nuns' lives.

Building a Mystery: The Symbolic Significance of Nuns

Despite whatever original enjoyment women may have felt about their ability to lead more spiritually and intellectually fruitful lives inside a monastery, the increasingly negligible amount of power they possessed within the Catholic Church rendered them passive and subject to the seemingly infallible rules enacted by patristic decrees. As the symbolic importance of the virginal female body that acquired ascetically-derived spiritual significance became gradually transformed into a more rigid interpretation of female subjectivity, nuns were pressured to renounce and repress awareness of their corporal agency. This construction engendered an "inherently misogynist ideal that intended to essentialize the female body and cast it as the locus of society's redemption from sin" (Kirk 4).

This rejection of the female body's agency reached an apex in a guidebook written for nuns in New Spain by the Jesuit priest Antonio Núñez de Miranda in the mid-seventeenth century. The book extends conventional arguments about nuns giving their bodies to God, exaggerating the Baroque fascination with the figurative construction of nuns' bodies as dead, to render them as the "ultimate docile bodies—dead bodies—unable to contaminate and infect" the bodies of other nuns "with their propensity to sin" (Kirk 44).

As can be garnered from the sometimes violent ideologies that patristic writers employed to describe nuns, progressive scholars should not rejoice in the opportunities afforded to nuns in their enclosed, single-sex communities without considering the pressures and restrictions church leaders placed on female convents during the early modern period. Nonetheless, we must acknowledge that the potential for nearly unfettered feminine power in the convent was a tantalizing and promising prospect for thousands of women who sought to circumvent the patriarchy at any costs – even if it meant near continual regulation from male church figures. These women were willing to accept the sometimes spartan aesthetics and dogmatic asceticism that a nun's life required. Theodora Jankowski argues that a nun was able to usurp the power and identity of a man by taking masculine privilege into her own hands and "embracing power and life choices that were traditionally restricted to men" thanks to