

English Convents in Exile, 1600–1800 (Review)

ALICIA KERFOOT

SUNY Brockport

English Convents in Exile, 1600–1800: Communities, Culture and Identity, edited by Caroline Bowden and James E. Kelly. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013. Pp. 282. \$115.47. ISBN: 9781409450733.

“Who were the nuns?” asks an Arts & Humanities Research Council-funded database of the same name, put in place to identify those who entered English convents abroad after the Reformation (<http://wwtn.history.qmul.ac.uk>). The contributing authors of *English Convents in Exile, 1600–1800*, who often cite the database, ask this same question with an interdisciplinary lens in place. In his essay in the collection, Geoffrey Scott gives an example of an 1807 account in which “two seventeenth-century canonesses were reputed to have descended from their portraits as ghosts” (208), while Nicky Hallett observes that the nun Mary Xaveria “represents herself almost as a ghost-writer of her own life-story” (145); both observations speak to a complicated absence-in-presence question that the collection as a whole negotiates. Questions of visibility and invisibility, authority, and narrative construction of identity, permeate all of the essays. For many English nuns in exile, more absorption in the community meant less visibility (as Marie-Louise Coolahan notes in her chapter on Irish nuns in English convents), but practices of communal authorship and cross-border politics discussed in several of the essays make clear the delicate web of influence and interconnection that was part of convent life in exile and which often reveals a complexity of identity rather than obscuring it.

In their introduction to the fourteen essays, Caroline Bowden, James E. Kelly, and Michael C. Questier note that the English convents in exile have not been well-represented in histories of the post-Reformation English Church because historians make “the assumption that if there was . . . any kind of coherent Catholic residual presence within it [the English Church], then it was by and large a hidden one” (1). Bowden and Kelly’s collection does much to correct this oversight, as it offers valuable insights into the history of English convents in exile and the ways that nuns defined themselves both in relation to their English identities and those of the countries in which they settled (9). The book is divided into four parts: “Part I: Communities”; “Part II: Culture: Authorship and Authority”; “Part III: Culture: Patronage and Visual Culture”; and “Part IV: Identity.” Part II is the most cohesive of these, while Part IV seems the most disconnected (with two essays on national identity and one on emotional identity), but this is perhaps because the question of identity is, in fact, central to the entire collection.

In Part I, James E. Kelly discusses how powerful Catholic families in Essex controlled convent recruitment and had a political impact on spiritual disputes in convents abroad (51), while Caroline Bowden looks at those who left convent communities and concludes that “the existence of candidates who failed to take solemn vows, or who left after profession” indicates that convents were managing their own membership (68). Of particular note is Elizabeth Patton’s chapter on Dorothy Arundell, which traces her “transition from an actively apostolic Catholic community . . . operating [in] . . . secrecy in Post-Reformation England—to a cloistered convent in the heart of Catholic Brussels” (20); Patton does this by reading Arundell’s *Life of Cornelius*

in order to understand how she brought her English experience abroad. This way of reading individual and communal written works continues in Part II, which offers several excellent readings of the relationship between individual and group authorship, as well of the responses that nuns had to representations of their communities in other early modern publications. Jenna D. Lay's analysis of Thomas Robinson's *The Anatomy of the English Nunnery at Lisbon* (1622) alongside Syon Abbey's manuscript response to his pamphlet, offers an especially convincing argument about the way that the nuns were "participants in" and "shapers of" early modern book culture rather than victims of it (73). Lay argues that if we recognize the literary techniques the nuns used to assert their agency, then "we can begin to acknowledge the myriad strategies that early modern nuns used to intervene in contemporary religious politics and thereby prevent the erasure of female intellectual engagement from the historical record" (86). This is an important argument for a collection that is attentive to the ways in which nuns' identities have been obscured in the historical record.

In her chapter titled "Naming Names," Victoria Van Hying identifies the first chronicler of St Monica's Convent, Louvain, and considers the relationship between her and "several scribes, editors and authors who perpetuated her narrative" (87). She concludes "that the nuns were primarily responsible for the authorial and editorial construction of this work" even though they worked with confessors to produce it (108). In a chapter on Mary Percy, Jaime Goodrich similarly notes that "many of the texts produced in convents were cooperative ventures" (109), and a "recognition of multiple agents allows for a fuller understanding of [Percy's] self-presentation" (122), while Genelle Gertz considers how Barbara Constable writes her own commentary on confession in order to assert "the abbess' authority to provide spiritual advice" yet "hides this proposal deep within the text" (124). This hidden narrative that comes to light with close reading is again addressed in Nicky Hallett's essay on anonymous authorship, in which she uncovers how editorial practices obscured the identities of women authors: "often these women only emerge as authors at their deaths, in retrospective testimony. And it is only then we see how much they shaped the preceding narrative and the historiography surrounding it" (141).

The communal and political motivations for different forms of authorship and editorial practice are themes that continue in the essays that analyze visual culture. Elizabeth Perry's essay offers a contextual analysis of Syon Abbey's collaborative creation of an illuminated book charting their exile, meant for presentation to the Infanta María Anna. The illustrated pages are reproduced in color in the collection, and Perry offers analysis of the ways in which these illuminations symbolically and politically narrate the history of the convent. The essays in Part III on book-making, music and portraiture demonstrate connections across borders and time periods that remind the reader of the themes addressed in Part I of the collection, and of how convents did not exist outside of English identity in the period, but rather responded to political and spiritual needs across borders. For example, Geoffrey Scott gives an extensive survey of how portraits of English nuns were influenced by, and in turn influenced, other kinds of visual culture; this includes wax nun dolls, which he notes were "designed either as aids to prayer or as mementoes of exiled daughters" (197). These portraits are reproduced in color in the collection, and give the reader a sense of the many forms that representations of nuns took in the period under study.

In Part IV, Carmen M. Mangion picks up the thread of multifaceted identity when she discusses English convents during the French Revolution, noting that "they relied on their English identities as well as their status as French subjects to meet their objectives; they did not

seem to feel a tension between [them]” (263). Mangion also observes that the “experiences of the last of the nuns in exile” need to be explored further, and calls for “the remainder of this story” to be told (263). This call, which the entire collection seems to be both repeating and responding to, is an important one for all of the nuns whose voices and ways of constructing self and community are charted so carefully by the contributors. Who were the nuns, then? This collection offers many answers to that question and does much to undermine the idea that they were anonymous ghosts in the early modern English context.