

Afterword: English, Women, Writing, Catholicism

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When the call for papers for this issue went out, it was first imagined as a collection about eighteenth-century English Catholic women writers. The focus shifted to “Eighteenth-Century Women and English Catholicism” in response to the excellent submissions, which reveal a great deal about our current understanding of the amorphous nature of what Catholicism meant in the long eighteenth century (and in the early modern period more broadly). The idea of a Catholic woman suggests more certainty than these essays reveal. What would it mean to be a Catholic woman writer when confessional identity was so often in flux in the period? Instead, these essays suggest that many women writers wrote in some vexed, hard-to-pin-down relationship to Catholicism, whatever their professed confessional identity. These essays even suggest that it was almost impossible not to engage Catholicism in one way or another. In her detailed study of Mary Blount, Duchess of Norfolk, Clare Haynes even makes us attend to the word “English” in the issue title.¹ What is particularly English about the Duchess of Norfolk’s Catholicism?

I

As with all identity categories, the fundamental question is who is included as Catholic and on what grounds. Who decides who counts as a Catholic? When Diane Long Hoeveler discusses whether or not Regina Maria Roche was “in fact a Roman Catholic,” she assigns a stability and certainty to that identification that many of the other essays here cast into doubt.² Because anti-Catholic prejudice was widespread, as all of these essays agree, and because there were penalties for going on the record as a recusant, people with Catholic sympathies or affiliations had good reason to conceal them. Furthermore, the boundaries between confessional categories were not as distinct as “was she/wasn’t she” might suggest. It was possible to have Catholic sympathies even if one did not engage in the practices that put one on the record as a recusant—and compromised inheritance, for instance. Indeed, we have abundant evidence that some people outwardly conformed to the Church of England but engaged in private devotions or held heterodox beliefs; that married couples divided the labor of recusancy with men conforming and their wives recusant

themselves because penalties for their recusancy were lesser; and that many people's spirituality was eclectic, combining supposedly disparate beliefs and practices. According to Joanne E. Myers, for example, Catholic casuistry remained part of Catherine Trotter's "imaginary" even after she converted back from Catholicism to the Church of England.³ Choosing to shift her confessional allegiance did not lead Trotter to empty her conceptual resources and start over. Rather, she kept what she found useful or compelling, resulting in a kind of composite confessional identity. The cases of Trotter and Jane Barker both remind us of the frequency of conversions to and from Catholicism.⁴ For those who converted to Catholicism, it was not old but new, perhaps even fashionable, especially in the courts of Charles II's and James II's Catholic wives. In one of Barker's poems, a Friend accuses Fidelia of such an *au courant* conversion: "You chang'd your faith, to be in the court mode, / For fashion sake you change and eat your God."⁵ Conversions remind us that an "old" faith could accrue new meanings and attractions in changing circumstances.

Just as what it meant to be a Catholic varied across time and from person to person, so a given individual's confessional allegiance was subject to change—and to misinterpretation. When Michael Tomko points to Catholics' awareness of a division between who they were and how they were perceived, he identifies a double consciousness that arguably is central to what it meant to be Catholic in post-Reformation England.⁶ While maintaining a "double character" might be typical of persecuted minorities, it had special meaning for Catholics because of the persistent association with practices of secrecy that was imposed upon them and then held against them: building hiding places into their homes for hunted priests, making chapels invisible from the outside, speaking only part of a truth and withholding the incriminating remainder (or equivocation), outwardly conforming but inwardly keeping the faith (p. 131). Perhaps the legacy of architectural and linguistic secrets is one link between Catholicism and the gothic (which Hoeveler discusses).

II

What do we want from women writers? Clearly, we have not always asked the question that lies at the heart of this volume: what was English women's relation to Catholicism during the long eighteenth century? Upon asking it, a range of fascinating answers emerges, and these essays do not exhaust the possibilities. In order to ask this question, however, we have needed to be open to the discovery that women are sometimes driven to write by the defense of privilege and entitlement and by political engagements rather than gender identifications.⁷ Bridget Keegan and Libby Hallgren Hoxmeier's introduction to their edition of Barker's poems points

out that many of Barker's most religious poems have not been anthologized because they do not conform to our expectations for women writers. If we are looking for a gendered subject, it can be off-putting to find the speaker of one of Barker's poems renouncing the self: "I'll for ever my whole self renounce."⁸ Yet consider John Donne's famous assertion of spiritual abjection: "That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend / Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new."⁹ In order to think seriously about religion we have to be open to the ways in which it sought to starve and subordinate the parts of the self we are sometimes seeking. While I agree with Lisa McClain that it is important to ask what Catholicism meant to the women who professed it rather than letting their critics define it, it is also important to acknowledge that it can be hard to achieve access to that meaning.¹⁰ The meanings of Catholicism might have clashed and shifted from moment to moment for a given person, who might not always have been fully aware of them.

In her essay on using digital resources, Victoria Van Hyning laments the absence of "confession searching," that is, targeted searches that would enable us to identify Catholic women writers.¹¹ While this would obviously be extraordinarily useful and illuminating, I think that the way in which it would align the scholar with the pursuivant—the government agent paid by the head to hunt down those who broke penal laws—should give us pause. What are the ethical and practical challenges of searching for information people had reason to hide? What does it mean to demand of the objects of our research something they might have chosen to conceal? There are questions to be asked about "outing" figures from the past even as there are urgent reasons to undertake that project so as to resist the ways in which Catholic visibility has been compromised. Whether it is desirable or not, "confession searching" suggests a stability of confessional identity that the writers discussed in this issue belie.

What is more, Catholicism was not just a spirituality but an inevitably political position. Barker's poetry, like John Dryden's, can seem inaccessible—desperately in need of an editor's glossing—because of its topicality as much as its spirituality. Catholics throughout the early modern period grappled with the challenge of defining a politically loyal but also oppositional identity.¹² The problem of staking out a tenable religious and political position as a Catholic was compounded by not being different enough. Barker's poems offer compelling articulations of this dilemma. *Fidelia* says of the Church of England that "the more like us, the more I her detest."¹³ In "*Fidelia weeping for the King's departure at the Revolution*," *Fidelia* expands upon this from the opposite perspective:

Their Church so neerly is to ours aly'd,
By the first sacrament so closly tyd,
They can't mock us, but must themselves deride.

Just so the shrew, mistakes in the disgrace,
In calling cuckold to her husband's face.¹⁴

Positioning Catholicism as the cuckolded husband and the Church of England as a shrew, Barker domesticates this religious conflict, thereby making it seem intractable as well as familiar. Perhaps because the differences were so small, a huge apparatus of distinction arose, focusing on oaths designed to separate the loyal from the disloyal. If the word "religion" derives from binding or tying, these essays remind us that it is also always about dividing.

III

Did Catholicism mean isolation or connection? The answer seems to be both. Catholicism separated its professors from some people and connected them to others. When Elizabeth Cellier was in the pillory and the crowd threw rocks at her, she probably did feel "Singl[e] and Alone" (McClain, p. 33). However, she was also so well connected that she could write to King Charles II to complain about this treatment and thereby win special permission to deflect the missiles hurled at her during her next stint at the pillory.¹⁵ Catholicism created networks that until recently have remained largely invisible to us—networks through which a woman like Cellier moved freely in part because she was a midwife; in which prisons were key sites for Catholic worship, networking, and labor (see McClain); in which convents were not just a memory but a reality for women willing to leave England to enter holy orders and for the many tourists who wanted to visit convents while on tour; and in which great houses like that of the Duke and Duchess of Norfolk offered centers of community (see Haynes).

Catholicism also created models for female community for those who did not identify themselves as Catholics. Mary Astell is probably the best-known example with her ill-fated scheme for a Protestant "nunnery." However, these essays suggest that the convent inspired other women's imaginations as well. McClain argues that Cellier's proposed college of midwives was modeled on the convent and was part of a "Catholic effort to form new institutions inspired by traditional Catholic models" (p. 47). In one of Barker's poems, *Fidelia* idealizes the convent at St. James's, describing it as "a terrestrial Paradise" in which one might be "Secluded from this world's impertinence" and "Where no disorders ever intervene."¹⁶ Even for women who did not identify as Catholic, the convent figured importantly, as Hoeveler argues regarding Roche (pp. 150-51). However, as Beth Kowaleski Wallace points out, if we find everywhere "the specter of the nun," the crucial question is "*which nun?*"¹⁷ Do we mean the stock figure of the nun who is a dupe, a victim, and a buffoon, or the nun who lives in community with other women outside of marriage? Does the nun stand

for the fate from which women in the marriage plot are saved, or does she represent a desirable alternative?

In her essay, Hoeveler raises a challenging question: “why, when we know that there was a vogue for anti-Catholic sentiment throughout this period, when we know that Protestant female novelists were complicit in articulating anti-Catholicism, is there currently an attempt to elide the historical facts staring us in the face”? (p. 151). Some of the other essays in this collection begin to suggest an answer: allegiances and the facts of the matter were very complicated. Many women writers did not fall neatly into the categories of Protestant or Catholic—and they were as likely to long for the alternative female community of the convent as to demonize it. In addition to the writers discussed in these pages, we can see the complex attitudes of supposedly Protestant female writers in Margaret Cavendish’s description of herself as an anchorite and her invention of a convent of pleasure, as well as in the frequent appearances of nuns and convents in Aphra Behn’s works.

IV

The issue of whether convents represent the superseded and maligned past or an alternative future takes us to the most controversial issue in this volume, at least for me: the ways in which Catholicism troubles standard periodizations. It does so because the turning points and watersheds of Catholic history are sometimes different than those in grand narratives. The Gordon Riots loom larger in this collection, for example, than they would in a volume on another aspect of the eighteenth century. Even more important, however, Catholicism troubles periodizations because of continuities that survive supposed paradigm-shifts. For example, Caroline Bowden’s essay demonstrates that saints’ and martyrs’ lives were not simply pre-Reformation or medieval genres since people continued to read and write in these genres well into the eighteenth century.¹⁸

It is easy to consider Catholics as the losers of history, the opponents to the march of progress. Hoeveler, for instance, aligns Catholicism with “the archaic and superstitious beliefs of the past,” the feudal, the pre-modern, “this earlier system of belief,” and the “dead” (pp. 146, 152, 150) as opposed to the dynamic, modern, secular, “nationalistic, bourgeois, individualistic, personal, and conjugal,” which she identifies with progress (p. 146). Many of the other essays in this volume challenge the assumptions at work here, suggesting that Catholicism remained a vital part of the “cultural imaginary” even for those who never had or no longer viewed themselves as affiliated with it. Myers’s discussion of Trotter, for instance, challenges the idea that she progressed from “older, hierarchical institutions” to “a modernizing individualism,” suggesting instead that Trotter aspires toward

“an alternatively modern individual, one whose liberty is more readily recognizable when understood as the product of a specifically religious experience” (p. 71). Wallace argues powerfully that Catholicism was not consigned to the past because “a self-conscious English Catholic community was in continuous formation all through the eighteenth century” (p. 161).¹⁹ Far from being readily identifiable and contained, Catholicism was, instead, “ambient,” the ubiquitous “not-said” of eighteenth-century English culture (p. 160). Wallace tackles the question of whether Catholicism can or would want to be modern head-on through her reading of *Emma*:

Austen affords her heroine a progressive, “modern” future, one remarkable for the way in which it updates monastic tradition by carrying forward the best virtues of a community-centered tradition into a modern, secular landscape. While this argument is undoubtedly appealing, my objective here is to query whether modernity *had to* unfold as the novel insists that it had to, and to ask whether there might not have been other futures for Emma and the women like her. What else follows from a reader’s willingness to accept Knightley’s Donwell Abbey as the place that Protestant England *had to become*? What other possibilities will never be imagined or envisioned? (p. 175)

Asking such a question, and thereby challenging the view that Catholicism equals the pre-modern and that it must be superseded for the modern to emerge, is an important step toward imagining those alternatives. Resisting the alignment of the modern with the individualistic and conjugal, some readers identify a productive association between Catholicism and the queer.

V

There is at least one more cherished assumption about English Catholicism that these essays undo. Far from being associated with acts and objects rather than the Word, Catholicism generated texts. The title page of John Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments* (1563) contrasted a group of Protestants contemplating books with a group of Catholics holding rosaries (see the 1610 edition, for example). After the Reformation, however, Protestants continued to rely upon images and objects, like this very woodcut, while Catholics relied upon books to maintain their faith, sustain their connections with other Catholics, and learn about issues of importance to them within and outside of England. These essays demonstrate the particular inaccuracy of the assumption that Catholics were not bookish by the long eighteenth century. In particular, Bowden shows us how convent life and devotional practices demanded texts and how nuns rose to the challenge of providing them. In a parallel line of argument, McClain contends that the vexed political status of Catholics prompted them to petition the government (as it did Quakers and other dissenting Protestants, whose petitions

have been more discussed). It also impelled them to use the printing press both to define and address a Catholic counterpublic, on the one hand, and to demand social justice and advocate for social change to a broader audience, on the other. In short, these essays demonstrate that Catholicism was a spur to women's writing—although it operated in wonderfully various ways for different writers—rather than an obstacle to it.

NOTES

Unless otherwise noted, all article citations and Jane Barker's poems are from *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 31 (2012), and after the first reference, will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹ Clare Haynes, "Of Her Making: The Cultural Practice of Mary, 9th Duchess of Norfolk," 77-98.

² Diane Long Hoeveler, "Regina Maria Roche's *The Children of the Abbey*: Contesting the Catholic Presence in Female Gothic Fiction," 137.

³ Joanne E. Myers, "Catharine Trotter and the Claims of Conscience," 55.

⁴ For a discussion of Jane Barker's conversion to Catholicism, see Bridget Keegan with Libby Hallgren Hoxmeier, introduction to "Jane Barker's Catholic Poems: An Edition of 'Poems Referring to the times' from the Magdalen Manuscript, Part One," 181-86.

⁵ Barker, "Second Dialogue," ed. Keegan and Hoxmeier, 202, lines 7-8.

⁶ Michael Tomko, "'All the World have heard of the Devil and the Pope': Elizabeth Inchbald's *The Mogul Tale* and English Catholic Satire," 117-36.

⁷ For early and influential formulations on the complex intersections between gender, politics, and religion for eighteenth-century women writers, see Catherine Gallagher, "Embracing the Absolute: The Politics of the Female Subject in Seventeenth-Century England," *Genders*, 1 (1988), 24-39; and Paula McDowell, *Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics, and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace, 1678-1730* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

⁸ Barker, "Fidelia arguing with her self on the difficulty of finding the true Religion," 195, line 70. On the challenges posed by the intersection of modern scholarly sensibilities with early modern religious writings, see Patricia Crawford, *Women and Religion in England, 1500-1720* (London: Routledge, 1993); and Margaret J. M. Ezell, *Writing Women's Literary History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

⁹ John Donne, "Holy Sonnet 14," in *The Complete English Poems*, ed. A. J. Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1971), 314, lines 3-4.

¹⁰ Lisa McClain, "Neither Single nor Alone: Elizabeth Cellier, Catholic Community, and Transformations of Catholic Women's Piety," 33-52. On taking women's experience of their spirituality more seriously, see Laurence Lux-Sterrett and Carmen M. Mangion, eds., *Gender, Catholicism and Spirituality: Women and the Roman Catholic Church in Britain and Europe, 1200-1900* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

¹¹ Victoria Van Hying, "Using Digital Resources for the Study of English Catholic Women Writers," 231.

¹² For example, see Haynes, "Of Her Making."

¹³ Barker, "Fidelina and her friend the third dialogue," 204, line 34.

¹⁴ Barker, "Fidelina weeping for the Kings departure at the Revolution," 206, lines 27-31

¹⁵ For a discussion of Cellier on the pillory, including two woodcuts, see Frances E. Dolan, *Whores of Babylon: Catholicism, Gender, and Seventeenth-Century Print Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 173-83.

¹⁶ Barker, "Fidelina having seen the Convent at St James's," 195-96, lines 1, 19, 27.

¹⁷ Beth Kowaleski Wallace, "'Penance and mortification for ever': Jane Austen and the Ambient Noise of Catholicism," 159, 169.

¹⁸ Caroline Bowden, "'A distribution of tyme': Reading and Writing Practices in the English Convents in Exile," 99-116.

¹⁹ For her portrayal of Catholic persistence in the long eighteenth century, Wallace depends on Gabriel Glickman's *The English Catholic Community, 1688-1745: Politics, Culture, and Ideology* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009), a book that will be of interest to many readers of this issue.