Br. Cathol. Hist. (2019), *vol.* 34(4), *pp.* 599–618
doi:10.1017/bch.2019.27

'Low & plain stile': poetry and piety in English Benedictine convents, 1600–1800

Jaime Goodrich*

English Department, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI 48202, USA.
Email: goodrija@wayne.edu

This article examines the functional nature of English Benedictine poetry in order to understand the bespoke literary systems that flourished within convent settings. Even as form has emerged as a primary concern within scholarship on early modern women writers, so too are literary critics starting to show interest in the early modern convent as a site of literary production. Uniting these two scholarly strands, this article explores the formal implications of texts written by and for the six English Benedictine convents founded on the Continent during the early modern period. This analysis of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Benedictine poetics reveals that English cloisters on the Continent actively cultivated alternative approaches to textual production, developing monastic modes at odds with the secular literary system of the time. Poetry provides an ideal case study for this discussion of convent style due to its relatively high status among literary forms. By considering Benedictine theories of speech as well as the formal qualities of the verse that nuns read and wrote, this essay will outline how the English Benedictine convents on the Continent developed a distinctive literary system that rejected secular modes in favour of a poetics aligned with monastic humility.

Keywords: Benedictine, convent, form, Ignatian, poetry

According to a death bill circulated among English Benedictine convents on the Continent, Clare Vaughan (professed 1657, d. 1687) of the Pontoise Benedictines was 'powrefull in words, and in works instructing, and reduceing into the boosome of our holy mother the Roman Catholicke church, many heriticques English souldiers which were quarter'd in the town'.[1] Vaughan's powers of persuasion must have been considerable indeed if she convinced Protestant soldiers to convert to Catholicism, yet she left no written trace of this spoken eloquence. As a more expansive obituary composed specifically for the Pontoise convent notes, Vaughan self-consciously employed a plain style when writing up the insights she gained through the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises: 'she composde them

* I would like to acknowledge the support of a US-UK Fulbright Scholar Award in funding the research for this article.
[1] 'Registers of the English Benedictine Nuns of Pontoise', in *Miscellanea X*, Catholic Record Society 17 (London: 1915), 282.

in soe playn and breefe a manner, as taking care not to give them any other flourish or advantage, than what proceeded from holy simplicity and sincerity of hart'.[2] Vaughan's scrupulous avoidance of 'any … flourish or advantage' neatly illustrates how monastic writing challenges our most basic assumption about literary achievement: that literature should be aesthetically pleasing or rhetorically sophisticated.

Building on two recent critical developments that have begun to reshape our understanding of early modern women's writings, this essay examines the functional nature of English Benedictine poetry in order to understand the bespoke literary systems that flourished within convent settings. On the one hand, form has emerged as a primary concern within scholarship on early modern women writers thanks to the pioneering work of Danielle Clarke, Marie-Louise Coolahan, Sasha Roberts, and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann.[3] On the other hand, literary critics are exhibiting a growing interest in the early modern convent as a site of literary production, as demonstrated by the recent publication of ground-breaking monographs by Jenna Lay and Victoria Van Hyning.[4] Uniting these two scholarly strands, I explore the formal implications of texts written by and for the six English Benedictine convents founded on the Continent during the early modern period: Brussels (1598), Cambrai (1623), Ghent (1624), Paris (1651), Pontoise (1652), and Dunkirk (1662). This analysis of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Benedictine poetics (or theories of writing) in turn reveals that English cloisters on the Continent actively cultivated alternative approaches to textual production, developing monastic modes at odds with the secular literary system of the time.

Poetry provides an ideal case study for this analysis of convent style due to its relatively high status among literary forms. To date, the sparse scholarship on poets from the early modern English Benedictine convents on the Continent has attempted to define the aesthetic qualities of nuns' verse in relation to traditional literary paradigms, both high and low. In 1989, Dorothy Latz claimed that

[2] *Ibid.*, 279.

[3] Sasha Roberts, 'Women's Literary Capital in Early Modern England: Formal Composition and Rhetorical Display in Manuscript and Print', *Women's Writing* 14.2 (2007): 246–69; Elizabeth Scott-Baumann, *Forms of Engagement: Women, Poetry, and Culture 1640–1680* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Danielle Clarke and Marie-Louise Coolahan, 'Gender, Reception, and Form: Early Modern Women and the Making of Verse', in Ben Burton and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann eds., *The Work of Form: Poetics and Materiality in Early Modern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 144–61.

[4] Jenna Lay, *Beyond the Cloister: Catholic Englishwomen and Early Modern Literary Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Victoria Van Hyning, *Convent Autobiography: Early Modern English Nuns in Exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

https://doi.org/10.1017/bch.2019.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

poets at Cambrai were influenced by the metaphysical turn that dominated the lyric in seventeenth-century England.[5] More recently, Arthur F. Marotti has defended the poetic minimalism of Gertrude More (professed at Cambrai in 1625, d. 1633) by drawing a firm line between her verse and the genre of doggerel: 'Though this writing might seem to be devotional doggerel, its deliberate artlessness and avoidance of imagery, of ingenious language, and of literary complexity are part of a strategy of self-effacing religious plain-speaking consistent with [Augustine] Baker's and More's ideals of contemplative prayer, which included an avoidance of distracting sensuous particularity'.[6] As this essay will show, most of the poetry circulating in the English Benedictine convents during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was in fact 'devotional doggerel', or verse characterized by rough or monotonous meter, unsophisticated language, and obvious rhymes. Well-suited for a monastic environment that prioritized utility over aesthetics, doggerel was employed within English Benedictine cloisters for its pious effects. By considering Benedictine theories of speech as well as the formal qualities of the verse that nuns read and wrote, this essay will outline how the English Benedictine convents on the Continent developed a distinctive literary system that rejected secular modes in favour of a poetics aligned with monastic humility.

English Benedictine Theories of Language

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, English Benedictine convents fostered distinctive attitudes toward speech and writing that reflected their order's traditional emphasis on humbleness. In fact, moderation of language was a fundamental part of daily life for English Benedictine nuns as each house observed designated hours for silence and speech. While silence has long been essential to monastic tradition, the Rule of St Benedict identifies this practice as part of the key Benedictine virtue of humility.[7] Benedict describes twelve degrees of humility, two of which involve verbal restraint. In the ninth degree, 'the Religious refraine[s] her toung from speaking'.[8]

[5] Dorothy L. Latz, '*Glow-Worm Light': Writings of 17th Century English Recusant Women from Original Manuscripts* (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1989), 8–9, 26, 36.

[6] Arthur F. Marotti, 'Introductory Note', in *Gertrude More*, ed. Arthur F. Marotti, Early Modern Englishwoman: A Facsimile Library of Essential Works, Series II, Printed Writings, 1641–1700: Part 4, Vol. 3 (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), xvi. For an edition and discussion of More's poetry, see Latz, *'Glow-Worm Light'*, 23–57.

[7] On silence in monastic contexts, see Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 53–102 and Nicky Hallett, *The Senses in Religious Communities, 1600–1800: Early Modern 'Convents of Pleasure'* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013), 140–59.

[8] *The Rule of the Most Blissed Father Saint Benedict* (Ghent, 1632), 38; 'linguam ad loquendum prohibeat monachus': *S. Benedicti Regula*, 7.56, http://www.intratext.com/IXT/LAT0011/_P8.HTM, Accessed 1 July 2019.

https://doi.org/10.1017/bch.2019.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Meanwhile, the eleventh degree encourages 'the Religious [to] use few words in her speach and, those very reasonable, sweete without laughter humble with gravitie, lett her not bee clamourous in her voyce, as it is written, the wiseman telleth his mynde in few words'.[9] The early modern reception of these exhortations to silence can be reconstructed from contemporary commentaries by English Benedictine monks that circulated at Cambrai and Dunkirk. In a manuscript book of retreats once owned by the Dunkirk Benedictines, Anselm Mannock OSB (professed in 1700, d. 1764) devotes a day's meditation to the ninth through twelfth degrees of humility. Explaining Benedict's motivation for recommending verbal circumspection, Mannock observes that an unmoderated tongue was a source of potential evil: 'Our H[oly] Father recommends much Silence & little talk because much evil Comes from the tongue, & endangers Greater Evil'.[10] Later in the same retreat, Mannock goes so far as to define religious life as one of silence: 'The life of a monk is a life of Silence, more than talk'.[11] In a treatise entitled *The Spirit of St Benedicts Rule … on 12 Degrees of Humility* that circulated at both Cambrai and Dunkirk, Leander á Sancto Martino OSB (professed in 1600, d. 1635; *alias* John Jones) focuses less on silence and more on verbal circumspection.[12] Mary Bede Culcheth (professed in 1696, d. 1748) of Dunkirk copied excerpts from this work into her spiritual miscellany, including his comments on fulfilling the twelfth degree by avoiding unnecessary speech: 'use, & love silence; & few words in your talke; never speakeing out of time till you bee asked, or necessity requier … in your talke; especially with seculers, avoid all manner of familiaritie'.[13] As the Rule and these early modern commentaries suggest, moderation of speech provided an important means of practicing Benedictine humility.

Other spiritual treatises that circulated within the Benedictine convents reveal how the Rule's tenets informed monastic ideas about proper speech. In order to facilitate the recollection necessary for prayer, English Benedictine nuns strove to avoid speaking as much as possible, including with outsiders. 'A Meditation for the Feast of our Holy Father St Benedict' in a retreat book from Ghent devotes one day to the topic of 'Sacrific[ing] the desire of conversing with worldly men, and being known by them'. After noting that Benedict himself lived in a cave for three years because he was 'desireous to

[9] *Rule*, 38–39; 'cum loquitur monachus, leniter et sine risu, humiliter cum gravitate vel pauca verba et rationabilia loquatur, et non sit clamosus in voce, sicut scriptum est: Sapiens verbis innotescit paucis': *Regula*, 7.60.
[10] Anselm Mannock, A Spiritual Retreat for One Day in Every Month (1752), 354–355, Box T V 5, Douai Abbey, Berkshire.
[11] Mannock, Spiritual Retreat, 355, his emphasis, Box T V 5, Douai Abbey, Berkshire.
[12] For copies of this treatise, see MS 20 H 42, Archives Départementales du Nord, Lille and Box T V 5, Douai Abbey, Berkshire.
[13] Mary Bede Culcheth, Miscellany, n.p., Box T V 6, Douai Abbey, Berkshire.

fly all conversation, with worldly men, and live unknown to all', the author exhorts his readers to follow Benedict's example: 'it behoves those that profess a Cloisterall retirement, to be often in their Cells, praying and Conversing with God alone, flying all conversations as much as possible, only those that may direct us in our Religious life'.[14] Such privileging of silence over speech was in line with other convent treatises on the subject. 'A Consideration of Silence' from a Dunkirk miscellany, for example, identifies silence as a means of enhancing the soul's ability to communicate with God: 'silence concurrs to Recollection & this with a perfecter union with god[;] its edifying and religious[,] a great help to prayer & an excellent disposition to receive holy inspirations of god to whom at such times we may often elevate our minds by pious aspirations'.[15] Abbess Anne Neville of Pontoise (professed at Ghent in 1634, d. 1689) even argues that unmoderated speech posed a significant threat to the monastic virtue of chastity, warning against 'long & free conversation at grates' and the use of 'indearing words, actions and exprissions'.[16] As these examples suggest, Benedictine nuns were exhorted to cherish silence as a means toward attaining the ideals of cloistered piety.

Since convent life allowed for speech during recreation and chapter meetings, spiritual treatises also encouraged English Benedictine nuns to adopt a mode of verbal expression that was purely functional. An eighteenth-century retreat book from Ghent contains a daylong meditation entitled 'On recollection & Silence', which defines silence as 'a prudent government of our tongue. Such a moderation & Circumspection in our words, as not to Speak, but in due time & place, upon proper Subjects, & with Convenient regard to persons & other Circumstances'.[17] In addition to adapting one's language to 'time & place' and choosing 'proper Subjects', cloistered speech required a particular style. Augustine Baker OSB (professed in 1605, d. 1641) wrote several treatises for the Cambrai convent that recommend simple language unmarked by any aesthetic ornamentation: 'Let your talke & conversation be vulgar & plaine, without affectation of holines, elegance of words or ostentation of witt'.[18] Baker likewise counselled the Cambrai nuns to employ a plain style when speaking in chapter meetings: 'if you do have some matter that necessarely must be handled or spoken, do it breefly & in plaine & [h]omely words (as beseemeth a religious spirit), & without all manner of affectation, ostentation, or desire to shew your witte, eloquence or knowledge.

[14] Prayers and Meditations, 119, MS G 63, Oulton Abbey, Staffordshire.
[15] Mary Gertrude Darrell, Miscellany, n.p., Box T V 6, Douai Abbey, Berkshire.
[16] Anne Neville, Guidance for Superiors, 33, Box T IV 1, Douai Abbey, Berkshire.
[17] Retreats, n.p., MS G 73, Oulton Abbey, Staffordshire.
[18] Augustine Baker, *Directions for Contemplation: Book D*, ed. John Clark (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1999), 17.

https://doi.org/10.1017/bch.2019.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

If you have nothinge to say, say nothinge; & if there by somewhat that you must say, say it breefly & plainly'.[19] In seeking to adjust their language to the 'religious spirit' associated with their vocation, English Benedictine nuns would ideally develop a plain and concise style of speech that was rooted in the values of their order.

The nuns' own guidelines on the proper style for letters reveal how such theories of speech could in turn apply to the activity of writing. The statutes composed by the Brussels Benedictines carefully detail both the content and style expected of letters sent to outsiders: 'lett them study to write those things which bee seeme their state and profession, and lett them doe it discreetly and prudently, that their frends may receave Edification, and spirituall profitt from them'.[20] This 'discreet' and 'prudent' style matches the functional nature of the letters, which are meant to instruct the readers rather than to display the nun's rhetorical abilities. Much as convent treatises discouraged conversation with outsiders, so too the Brussels statutes warned against frequent correspondence with family and friends: 'a Religious person ought to bee very sparing in that kinde, as benig [sic] one dead to the world, and that desyreth onely to live to Christ alone'.[21] The Cambrai constitutions likewise comment on the style expected of monastic letters: 'when anie one hath leave to write, lett her do it in al as few words as may be, and those discreet, without ostentation of learning, devotion, eloquence, spirituallitie etc'.[22] Since this ban on 'ostentation of learning' echoes Baker's own views on the topic of conventual language, it is possible that he was responsible for writing this passage.[23] Finally, the Paris constitutions contain a very similar mandate, with the additional caveat that letters must be written 'seldome; & that upon just occasion'.[24] While these regulations

[19] Augustine Baker, *Directions for Contemplation: Book F*, ed. John Clark (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1999), 61. For his views on silence, see Augustine Baker, *Directions for Contemplation: Book H*, ed. John Clark (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 2000), 30–31.

[20] *Statutes Compyled for the Better Observation of the Holy Rule of … S. Benedict* (Ghent, 1632), §1.9.3.

[21] *Statutes*, §1.9.4.

[22] Constitutions Compiled for the Better Observation of the Holie Rule of … S. Bennet, 30–31, MS 20 H 1, Archives Départementales du Nord, Lille.

[23] Margaret Truran notes several passages throughout the Constitutions that similarly parallel Baker's other writings, arguing that he had a hand in the composition of the Cambrai constitutions: 'Did Father Baker Compile the First Constitutions of the English Benedictine Nuns at Cambrai?', in Geoffrey Scott ed., *Dom Augustine Baker 1575–1641* (Leominster, UK: Gracewing, 2012), 31–42. Baker similarly warned the Cambrai nuns about the dangers of letterwriting: 'The soul is to give over all vain correspondence with the world by letters or conversation. Let her not write letters without meer necessity, or as discretion shall force her unto it': Augustine Baker, *A Spirituall Alphabet for the Use of Beginners* in *Alphabet and Order*, ed. John Clark (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 2001), 36.

[24] Constitutions for the Better Observation of the Holy Rule of … St Bennet, §5.6, MS P2, Colwich Abbey, Staffordshire.

https://doi.org/10.1017/bch.2019.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

only concern themselves with letters, they nevertheless demonstrate that Benedictine views on speech could be extended to writing.

Some texts composed by English Benedictine nuns explicitly comment on the author's attempts to cultivate a functional style in line with monastic humility. The compilers of the Paris obituaries strove for a pragmatic register in order to edify readers: 'we have held a Low & plain stile that the Truth & sencerity may more cleerly apeare which was that we cheifely regarded'.[25] Ironically, this sentence's sole literary flourish—the doublets 'Low & plain' and 'Truth & sencerity'—reinforces the idea that an unadorned style was necessary for factual accuracy. According to her obituary, Teresa Gardiner (professed in 1642, d. 1650) of Ghent took these ideas of verbal modesty to an extreme by refusing even the appearance of authorship:

> though she was as excellent at her pen as any of her Sex both for writing and inditing, yet would she constantly Decline those Correspondences; unless pressing business inforced her, and then She would only write after an others dictate, nor that neither, but when it was requisit that her own hand must be produc'd. Once indeed she writt to a Catholick niece of hers in this Country about a spirituall Concern of her own inditing; otherewise she would Civilly excuse herself, saying she had now Left the world wholly, and did not desire to intangel with it again.[26]

Gardiner demonstrates a praiseworthy self-abnegation by refusing to compose or even copy letters, despite her skill in both 'writing and inditing', or penmanship and composition. Gardiner's refusal to send letters also demonstrates her complete abandonment of the world, with the notable exception of the 'Catholick niece' who receives advice on 'a spirituall Concern'. This verbal modesty fulfilled the pious aim of conforming to the Rule's emphasis on humility even as it gave rise to a literary style with Benedictine roots.

It is important to note at this point that each house's textual production was also shaped by its members' adherence to particular meditative practices. All of these institutions descended in some way from the first convent established on the Continent for Englishwomen: the Brussels Benedictines. In addition to having an ordinary confessor who was assigned to the house by its superior, the Brussels Benedictines also relied heavily on the assistance of extraordinary confessors, largely Jesuits who offered the Spiritual Exercises and heard confessions on a semiregular basis. Although this division of labor created a clash in spiritual authority that led to serious difficulties at Brussels, the community successfully exported its model of Ignatian spirituality to a filiation at Ghent,

[25] 'The English Benedictines of the Convent of Our Blessed Lady of Good Hope in Paris', in *Miscellanea VII*, Catholic Record Society 9 (London: 1911), 334.
[26] 'Obituary Notices of the Nuns of the English Benedictine Abbey of Ghent in Flanders, 1627–1811', in *Miscellanea XI*, Catholic Record Society 19 (London: 1917), 49.

https://doi.org/10.1017/bch.2019.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

which in turn set up daughterhouses along similar lines at Dunkirk and Pontoise.[27] The nuns at these convents used the Spiritual Exercises to pursue union with God by activating their wills through prescribed forms of meditation that involved the senses. A separate tradition of English Benedictine spirituality emerged at the houses founded in Cambrai and Paris. Three Brussels nuns helped found the Cambrai convent in 1623, but the monastery gained a reputation for following the contemplative teachings of Augustine Baker. Believing that Ignatian prayer was not suitable for a monastic environment precisely because it stimulated the will, Baker instead recommended that nuns employ personalized forms of prayer such as spontaneous affective aspirations (or short ejaculatory prayers) in order to reach a state of passive contemplation of God.[28] In 1651, Cambrai founded an offshoot at Paris, which also practiced Baker's 'way of love'. As the remainder of this article will show, these distinctive spiritualities exerted their own influence on the poetry read and written by English Benedictine nuns between 1600 and 1800.

Devotional Doggerel: Poetry from Cambrai, Dunkirk, and Paris

Seeking a stylistic register that was compatible with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Benedictine theories of language, cloistered poets adopted a plainspoken aesthetic that reflected a shared commitment to verbal humility. As a result, the circulation of poetry within English Benedictine convents did not depend on an appreciation for inventive or clever use of formal elements such as meter and rhyme. In fact, a clear disinterest in form can be observed in extant poems, such as this eight-line verse transcribed by a Dunkirk or Pontoise nun on the rear flyleaf of a manuscript:

> What Stait more happie
> and of greater pleasur—
> then to find god and convars
> with him at Laseur—
> whear hart and soul Reposes
> swetly in him—
> and all distracting frenships
> are dispised for him—
> what shal we say is thear—

[27] On the Brussels clashes, see Jaime Goodrich, 'Authority, Gender, and Monastic Piety: Controversies at the English Benedictine Convent in Brussels, 1620–1623', *British Catholic History* 33.1 (2016): 91–114.

[28] For useful overviews of Baker's spirituality, see Liam Peter Temple, *Mysticism in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2019) and Claire Walker, *Gender and Politics in Early Modern Europe: English Convents in France and the Low Countries* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 143–47.

none happey then but those that
Liveth in god and he in them—
none for sartan for this all
those will say—
who with mary hath larned
the way to pray.[29]

In formal terms, this poem is extremely simple, employing a prosaic rhyme scheme (e.g., 'him', 'him') and veering roughly from iambic pentameter to iambic hexameter in the first and second lines alone. The copyist herself disrupts the poem's lineation by using dashes to signal line breaks, and she loses track of the rhyme scheme halfway through by overlooking the rhyming pair 'then' and 'them'. An even more extreme example of this tendency to disregard form occurs in *Gemitus peccatorum* by Barbara Constable (professed at Cambrai in 1640, d. 1684), which presents a brief verse passage in prose format: 'O thou my lord, my god, & all, to thee for ever will I cry & call, its thee alone my hart doth thus desire, its thee alone hath sette my hart on fire'.[30] Benedict Rayment, an eighteenth-century priest who later owned this manuscript, recognized the poetic nature of this passage and reconstituted it as verse within the margin, 'correcting' Constable's version by imposing the format he associated with poetry. As these examples suggest, Benedictine nuns were often less interested in the formal elements typical of lyric verse than in its pious content.

Evidence from the Cambrai convent's library suggests that the convent purposefully chose to reject the aesthetics of contemporary verse in favour of this humbler poetic style. A catalogue of the house's books compiled around 1793 demonstrates that the Cambrai nuns had access to some of the most important English poetry written between 1600 and 1800. In its earliest years, the convent received or collected Catholic verse that could presumably be used as a basis for meditation: Richard Verstegan, *Odes in Imitation of the Seaven Penitential Psalmes* (1601); Robert Southwell SJ, *St Peters Complaint* (1620); John Abbot, *Jesus Praefigured* (1623); Ludovicus à Nazareth OFM (Robert Howard), *A Sacred Poem Describing … the Glorious Convert St Marie of Egypt* (1640); Richard Crashaw, *Steps to the Temple* (1648) and *Carmen Deo Nostro* (1652); and John Austin, *Devotions in the Ancient Way of Offices* (1668).[31] Yet toward the end of the seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth century, the Cambrai convent began to acquire both Protestant and secular poetry, albeit often with a royalist leaning: John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1678, 1741, 1746); Elizabeth Singer Rowe, *Divine Hymns and Poems on Several*

[29] Hayle Jesus Miscellany, n.p., Box T V 5, Douai Abbey, Berkshire.
[30] Barbara Constable, Gemitus peccatorum, 258, Stanbrook Abbey, North Yorkshire.
[31] J. T. Rhodes, *Catalogue des livres provenant des religieuses anglaises de Cambray* (Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 2013), 49, 122, 138, 140, 162, 214.

https://doi.org/10.1017/bch.2019.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Occasions (1704); Samuel Butler, *Hudibras* (1744); John Dryden, *Miscellaneous Works* (1764); Oliver Goldsmith, *The Traveller* (1770) and *The Deserted Village* (1775); Alexander Pope, *The Iliad* (1771); William Shakespeare, *The Plays of William Shakspeare* (1778); and John Gay, *Poems on Several Occasions* (1778).[32] The convent's library also included commentaries on poetry, including *Vida's Art of Poetry* (1725) and Joseph Warton's *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (1782).[33] As a result, the Cambrai nuns had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with contemporary poetic theories and trends, both secular and devotional.

Manuscripts from Cambrai reveal that members of this convent approached such literary works from a functional perspective. As I have shown elsewhere, Mary Cary (professed in 1640, d. 1693) was the copyist of a partial transcription of Samuel Woodford's *Paraphrase upon the Psalms of David* (1667).[34] In rewriting this Protestant Psalter for a cloistered audience, Cary often replaces Woodford's lines with less polished versions of her own. Woodford's rendering of Psalm 131:1 presents David as an open book read by God: 'Alike before Thee open ly / My Innocent heart, and humble eye, / Which have no pride, but from the malice of my Foe'.[35] Cary offers several alternate versions of the third line: 'Which humbled are & far cast downe below', 'Thou knowst I seek But thee; & unto thee to go' and 'I now seek only thee; unto thee to go'.[36] While repetitive in their language, the latter two phrasings piously refocus the line on the speaker's relationship with God ('thee'). Cary seems to have been intent on transforming Woodford's text into something that was more suitable for meditation on the soul's desire for union with God, and her rewriting of the text is thus more concerned with function than sophistication.

Many of the literary volumes in Cambrai's library may have been intended for use in its school for Catholic girls. One manuscript appears to be an instructor's manual used in the classroom. Written in a practiced hand with passages later highlighted or crossed out in red pencil, this manuscript contains miscellaneous material: three poetic selections; historical and topographical information on Cambrai, Jerusalem, and Turkey; and histories of the Catholic Church, Islam, and England, including excerpts from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*

[32] *Ibid.*, 39, 55, 68, 71, 77, 97, 105.
[33] *Ibid.*, 132, 135.
[34] Jaime Goodrich, 'Monastic Authorship, Protestant Poetry, and the Psalms Attributed to Dame Clementia Cary', in Michael Denbo ed., *New Ways of Looking at Old Texts V: Papers of the Renaissance English Society*, (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2014), 193–207.
[35] Samuel Woodford, *A Paraphrase upon the Psalms of David* (London, 1667), Psalm 131, 1.3–5.
[36] MS 20 H 39, n.p., Archives Départementales du Nord, Lille.

https://doi.org/10.1017/bch.2019.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the English People.[37] Red pencil has struck through two poetic fragments: first, an excerpt from the 'General Prologue' to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and second, Erminia's encounter with the old shepherd and his sons in Book Seven of *Jerusalem Delivered* by Torquato Tasso (1544–1595).[38] The manuscript concludes with substantial excerpts from Josuah Sylvester's 1605 translation of didactic quatrains by Guy Du Faur, Seigneur de Pibrac (1529–1584), a well-known Catholic legal expert.[39] If this manuscript was compiled as a teaching aid, it reveals that the nuns saw verse as a practical means of forming their pupils' moral character while also introducing them to key Catholic literature from both medieval England and the Continent.

Despite the house's easy access to contemporary religious and secular literature, the Cambrai nuns favoured simplistic poetry that bears little similarity to the works of Chaucer or Tasso. The popularity of Augustine Baker's short 'mystic verses' exemplifies the relationship between doggerel and devotion at Cambrai and Paris. Baker exploited the stylistic infelicities of doggerel by emphasizing rhyme over meter and rhetorical devices, as in a lengthy poem with lines 'that end in ay'.[40] Baker explains that his intent is to encourage the nuns to 'often think of aie [forever]', and the result is a repetitive poem that certainly accomplishes this purpose. Most of Baker's poems were similarly meant to instruct the convent rather than to serve as vehicles for prayer because he viewed rote prayer as a hindrance to contemplation. Such didacticism transformed one of Baker's verses into a communal motto representing the spiritual modes used at Cambrai and Paris. In his life of Gertrude More, Augustine Baker observes that she used one of his distichs 'as her Motto': 'Regarde your Call, / that's all in all'.[41] More herself refers to this verse while explaining the nature of contemplative life: 'the good state of the *interior* (and therby also of the exterior) proceedeth from the harkning to and following of the *Divine interior Cal, or inspiration*, the which to a soul capable of an internal life is, or ought to be as *al in al*'.[42] A slightly different version of this poem appears in a sermon delivered by Peter Salvin OSB (professed in 1632, d. 1675) to the Cambrai nuns on 'A sure footing to make true progresse in a

[37] MS 20 H 51, Archives Départmentales du Nord, Lille.
[38] The copyist drew on one of the many editions based on William Thynne's work: Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Workes of Geffray Chaucer Newly Printed*, ed. William Thynne (London, 1532), sig. B2r. She also used an early modern English translation of Tasso: *Godfrey of Bulloigne, or The Recoverie of Jerusalem*, trans. Edward Fairfax (London, 1600), 118.
[39] 'Tetrastika or The Quadrains of Guy de Faur, Lord of Pibrac', in *Bartas: His Devine Weekes and Workes*, trans. Josuah Sylvester (London, 1605).
[40] Augustine Baker, *A Spirituall Treatise . . . Called ABC*, ed. John Clark (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 2001), 18.
[41] Augustine Baker, *The Life and Death of Dame Gertrude More*, ed. Ben Wekking (Salzburg, Austria: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 2002), 26.
[42] Gertrude More, *The Spiritual Exercises of the Most Vertuous . . . D. Gertrude More* (Paris, 1658), 237, emphasis in the text.

https://doi.org/10.1017/bch.2019.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

spirituall course'. Salvin offers counsel on following divine inspirations and concludes by citing Baker's dictum: 'This is the way[,] walke in it, lett everie one of what state or condition soever he be observe his grace & be guided by it, everie one as god shall give them, lett this motto be ingraven with indeliable characters upon the door of our hearts. Observe your Call that's all in all'.[43] When Clementia Cary (professed at Cambrai in 1640, d. 1671) wrote the Paris constitutions, she included Baker's verse in the preface as a means of instilling Baker's spirituality within this new filiation: '[this] Legacy the Venerable Father Augustin Baker left you: Observe your call, that's all in all. that is, the spirit of your vocation must bee the life of all your actions interiour & exteriour, & all your actions interiour & exteriour must bee to conserve & increase the life of your vocation, thereby making our vocation secure'.[44] This short poetic phrase thus became a byword for the spirituality particular to the Paris and Cambrai convents.

Obituaries for two of the Paris house's most important prioresses accordingly cite this passage as a means of indicating their exemplary cultivation of the convent's mysticism. The notice for Justina Gascoigne (professed at Cambrai in 1640, d. 1690), who was prioress for twenty-five years, alludes to the Paris constitutions while praising her desire 'to imprinte in the harts of her Religious Daughte[r]s the true spirite of our holy Father St Benedict. This is to say that by an intire convertion of our maners we may become pure interne, contemplative livers … to this purpose is this Legacy left us by the *sayd venerable Father Augustin Baker. viz: Follow your call, thats all in all*'.[45] Teresa Johnson (professed in 1777, d. 1807) served as prioress during the French Revolution, and her obituary observes that 'She was of a most peaceful, cheerful temper, the life and soul of the Community, and filled with burning ardor and love for our holy Institute, Intern Prayer, and Contemplation … ever seeking the union of the Soul with God, and saying with Father Baker—"*Mind your call that's all in all*"'.[46] As Benedict Rowell has noted, the phrase remained current in the house well into the mid-nineteenth century, when one nun described it as 'Father Baker's trite saying … "Mind your call, it's all in all"'.[47] By then, this distich might be considered 'trite' because it was such a standard expression of the house's spiritual identity, something that every novice must have encountered as she studied the statutes. Yet while the Paris nuns maintained the spirit of

[43] MS 20 H 10, 476, emphasis in the text, Archives Départementales du Nord, Lille.
[44] Constitutions, f. 4v, Colwich Abbey.
[45] 'English Benedictines … in Paris', 90, emphasis in the text.
[46] *Ibid.*, 403, emphasis in the text.
[47] Cited in Benedict Rowell, 'Baker's Continuing Influence on Benedictine Nuns', in Michael Woodward ed. *That Mysterious Man: Essays on Augustine Baker OSB 1575–1641* (Abergavenny, UK: Three Peaks Press, 2001), 82–91, at 90.

https://doi.org/10.1017/bch.2019.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Baker's distich for two hundred years, over time they abandoned the letter and the meter. Although 'regarde' and 'observe' preserve Baker's iambic dimeter, 'follow' introduces a trochee (a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable) and 'mind' loses half a metrical foot (one syllable). This variance suggests that the rhyme is paramount, containing the essence of the verse: that the 'call' is 'all'.

Baker's verses also fulfilled another important function within these cloisters, serving as a potential starting point for the personalized meditations that underpinned his 'way of love'. One anonymous Paris nun seems to have transcribed a poem by Baker for this purpose:

> My only feare is to offende thee
> My joy in ever praising thee
> My grief to have displeased thee
> My hoape for ever to enjoy thee
> Ech other feare, hoape grief & joye
> shall not at all my peace annoye.
> then will my soule remaine most free to
> see & love thee in tranquillitie.[48]

Like other examples of Baker's verse, this poem eschews aesthetic sophistication by featuring irregular meter and a repetitious sequence of rhymes. The transcriber herself does not prioritize form, mistakenly disrupting the final rhyme by ending line seven with 'to' rather than 'free'. She follows the poem with an apparently original meditation that may explain this error, as it suggests that she was mainly interested in the opening distinction between 'offend[ing]' and 'pleas[ing]' God: 'Most mercifull Jesu, I thy poorest servant doe desire from the bottome of my hart to love thee, & to keepe my vowes promised to thee, & with all puritie to suffer whatsoever thou pleasest to lay upon me, *so that in my difficulties I may not offend thee*, which yet if I do through frailtie, corruption, negligence, or forgettfullnes, I protest that is not with my will but alltogether contrarie to it & to my desire & purpose, which is now wholie *to please thee*' (my emphasis). In the face of unnamed spiritual 'difficulties' related to her monastic vows, the writer finds that Baker's poem provides an opening for addressing God. Viewed from this praxis-based perspective, the poem's formal qualities are less important than its concise explication of the spiritual peace to be found in pleasing God.

Cambrai and Paris nuns also composed brief verses that prioritized aphorism over aestheticism, even if these poems do not always fully display Baker's commitment to humble versification. Gertrude More begins the 38th confession in her *Confessiones amantis* with a quatrain expressing her desire for unity with God in a compressed manner that resembles Baker's poetry rather than the rest of her verse:

[48] MS 22, 206, Colwich Abbey.

https://doi.org/10.1017/bch.2019.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

O Lord My God to thee I do aspire
And only thee in soule I do desire
No guift or grace how great s'ere it be
Can satiate her, who nothing seekes but thee.[49]

While this poem could function as an affective prayer in line with the extemporaneous aspirations recommended by Baker, it also provides the material for More's subsequent meditation within the confession itself: 'Lett my soule be wholie turned into a flame of divine love, that I may aspire and tend to nothing elsse but thy-selfe alone'. At Paris this tradition of short didactic poetry continued into the eighteenth century, as demonstrated by the writings of Mary Clare Joseph of Jesus Bond (professed in 1762, d. 1789). During a period of desolation, Bond was tormented by memories of earlier spiritual bliss and feared that she had somehow caused this reversal: 'my god was every where and in every thing . . . O my god this is all I desire if by my owne ignorance, or infidelity I have forfeited this happyness—pardon me for thy love'.[50] Eventually, Bond overcame this fear by embracing her suffering as an imitation of the Passion: 'lett me not terefie my self by looking to the bottom of the precipice on which I stand—but let me steadfastly fix the eyes of my soul on the[e] who holds me in thy arms and incompases me rownd on al sides. O my God I imbrace my Cross, then for the love of you whos life & death was on the cross'.[51] After this entry, Bond added a tercet in iambic pentameter that summarizes the turn in her attitude: 'Who would my jesus be conform to thee, / Must bear his cross, and that continualy: / and he who loves, will do it chearfuly'. The poem is written in a different ink, suggesting that Bond has taken the time to formulate a verse that encapsulates her epiphany—an impression cemented by a line drawn underneath the poem to separate it from the next entry, which expresses her resignation: 'O my lord pardon me all my ingratitud, and make me more faithful for the future. O my lord I ask not what is hard, or new, for you purchasd it before I askd it—and never refusd to grant it for this be you Lord blesd and Adord by all Creaturs for ever, prays thy unworthy clare'. This simple verse could easily be memorized to serve as a safeguard against despair during future moments of spiritual desolation, thanks in part to a repetitive rhyme scheme whose continuity parallels the uninterrupted suffering described in the second line. The few literary elements—alliteration and a verbal echo in the first two lines ('conform', 'cross', 'continualy')—similarly

[49] *Confessiones Amantis: The Spiritual Exercises of the Most Vertuous and Religious Dame Gertrude More*, ed. John Clark (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 2007), 125.
[50] Mary Clare Joseph of Jesus Bond, Meditations, MS 66, 100, Colwich Abbey, Staffordshire.
[51] *Ibid.*, 103.

https://doi.org/10.1017/bch.2019.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

emphasize Bond's epiphany. Like Baker's poetry, Bond's verse is not a prayer but rather an aphoristic expression of a spiritual insight.

A copy of Gertrude of Helfta's *Les Exercices de l'Amour Divin* (1672) owned by the Dunkirk convent reveals that English Benedictine nuns beyond Cambrai and Paris appreciated the didactic possibilities of short verse by Baker and others.[52] Borrowed in 1732 by Mary Joseph Sheldon, in 1742 by Barbara Sheldon, and at some point between 1776 and 1795 by Felicite Salcement, this book has been personalized by a reader who inscribed poetry with moral messages. The front pastedown contains two brief poems. The first is a couplet often attributed to Thomas á Kempis and popular among readers even today: 'I never found whatever way I took / true joy but in some corner with a Book'. The second poem on the front pastedown offers a more overtly religious message: 'eternal beauty but yet allways new / o god how late begins my love to you. / o may I love and serve you now the more / the less I loved and serv'd you heretofore'. This is a loose poetic rendition of St Augustine's famous sentiment in Book 10 of the *Confessions*, 'Too late am I come to love thee, o thou who art beauty it self both so auncient, and yet with all, so faire and fresh'.[53] The back flyleaf presents Augustine Baker's two versifications entitled 'St Bernards words of caelum [heaven] & cella [cell]' as if they were one poem:

> Short & easy is the way
> as doth holly Bernard say
> from a monks retired celle
> to the place where god dose dwell
> sure or never from a cell
> dose a soul desend to hell
> She that loves to keep her cell
> Shall at lenght [sic] in heaven dwell
> not so She that at the grate
> loves to prattell and to prate
> but rare or never from a cell
> dose a soul desend to hell.[54]

Finally, the back pastedown presents a couplet on God's steadfastness in a four-line format: 'o my soul chuse god alone / for thy frend / when all others fail / he'l never end'. What unites these four poems is their application to monastic piety. Baker's verse praises cloistered solitude as a means of attaining heaven, and it also conveys the counsel of a well-known spiritual authority, St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153). In its focus on turning to God anew, the Augustinian quatrain on

[52] Gertrude of Helfta, *Les exercices de l'amour divin* (Paris, 1672), Box T V 4, Douai Abbey, Berkshire.
[53] *The Confessions of the Incomparable Doctour S. Augustine*, trans. Tobie Matthew (St Omer, 1620), 523.
[54] See Baker, *ABC*, 23–24.

https://doi.org/10.1017/bch.2019.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the front pastedown is pertinent to the Benedictine vow of conversion of manners, and the poem on the back pastedown reiterates the primary purpose of convent life: to 'chuse god alone'. The Kempis couplet is less obviously religious in nature, but even it could be read as an endorsement of solitary reading, a key Benedictine occupation. By assembling such pithy iterations of cloistered piety in one place, the copyist expressed and even reinforced her commitment to pursuing a monastic vocation as a Benedictine nun. As at Cambrai and Paris, the transcriber demonstrates an interest in the devotional function of poetry rather than in its formal inventiveness or complexity.

Poetry and Ignatian Prayer: A Novena from the Dunkirk Benedictines

Within the Dunkirk convent poetry also functioned as a form of prayer, suggesting that it may have served a similar purpose at the three other Benedictine houses that utilized Ignatian forms of spirituality (Brussels, Ghent, Pontoise). Unlike the pro-Baker houses, these monasteries lacked any prohibition on rote prayer. Short poetry consequently gained special value as one potential means of activating the soul toward union with God, as demonstrated by the Dunkirk nuns' interest in verse associated with one particular novena (a prayer to be said over the course of nine days). In a spiritual miscellany written around 1700, Mary Bede Culcheth of Dunkirk transcribed part of a text entitled 'A Devotion to be practis'd in honour of the Infant Jesus, with A Novena in any particuler necessity during the year'.[55] The devotion begins with instructions on six steps that the soul can take to deepen its engagement with God: mental prayer, vocal prayer, mortification, intercessory prayer to Mary and Joseph, service to one's neighbour, and godly conduct. As its principal prayer indicates, this novena honours the holy family and seeks its intercession on behalf of the speaker: 'if you grant me the favour I most humbly crave of you, O most gratious Infant, I am resolv'd hereafter to beare you a speciall honour in the state of your Omnipotent Infancy. I'le serve, during life, your sacred Family, as a domestick servant, with hopes to experience its holy assistance & protection at my death'. Culcheth copied three short poems directly after the central prayer: 'O Jesus, Mary, Joseph, may I be, /Both hart, & soul, all yours /Eternally', 'O Jesus, Mary, Joseph, my desier / my hart I give you and my / soul entire', and 'Sweet Jesus, Mary, Joseph Blest / Grant us for ere with you / to Rest'. Culcheth's transcription disregards poetic form by displacing the final words of the couplet's last line into a third line, demonstrating an interest in the devotional nature of the verse rather than its formal qualities. Easily memorized and repeated by rote, these

[55] Mary Bede Culcheth, Miscellany, n.p., Box T V 6, Douai Abbey, Berkshire.

https://doi.org/10.1017/bch.2019.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

poems share an exhortative and performative quality linked with Ignatian spirituality, seeking to rouse the speaker's will to devote herself to the holy family. For example, the second couplet spurs the speaker to present her 'hart' and 'soul' to the holy family, underscoring this pious intention through poetic inversion ('my hart I give you'). Culcheth likely transcribed these poems into her miscellany because they offered a convenient means of petitioning the holy family and voicing her devotion to the infant Jesus.

This particular novena was clearly popular within the Dunkirk house and other Continental convents throughout the eighteenth century. A manuscript from 1741 that was kept at the altar of the Dunkirk chapterhouse contains a number of devotional exercises, including this novena under the title 'A practicall Exercise how to honour in perticular the Little Jesus in the monasteries of Religious weomen'.[56] In this text, the novena is preceded by guidance on how to spend the day in recollection on the infancy of Jesus, for instance suggesting that during recreation the soul should occupy itself with a poetic aspiration: 'My little Jesus, I'me entirely thine, and whish to languish with thy love divine'. After providing both the six-step process and the main prayer copied by Culcheth, the chapterhouse manuscript offers just the first two poems from Culcheth's miscellany: 'O Jesus mary Joseph may I be / both heart & soul all yours eternally' and 'O Jesus mary Joseph my desire /my heart I give you & my soul entire'. Meanwhile, Mary Agnes Jerningham (professed in 1745, d. 1807) of the Bruges Augustinians transcribed yet another variant of the text in her own spiritual miscellany, which is dated 1772. As the title of this version indicates ('A Novena before Christmas, to be begun the 16th of December'), by this point the novena was associated with Advent.[57] The language in Jerningham's miscellany has also been slightly reworked and modernized, as might be expected since she copied the novena seven decades after Culcheth. Jerningham's transcription begins with instructions to say twelve Ave Marias and three Pater Nosters, before repeating an ejaculatory prayer three times:

> Jesus, Mary, Joseph, be you Blest,
> in your Sweet company, let's take our rest.
> Joseph with Mary, Jesus come Dear love,
> Impart us all your blessings from above.

This quatrain expands upon the third poem provided by Culcheth, now seeking 'blessings' from the entire holy family. The long central prayer follows, and the novena concludes with a slightly reworked version of one short poem that appears in both the Culcheth miscellany and the Dunkirk chapterhouse manuscript: 'O Jesus, Mary, Joseph my desire, /

[56] Exercises of Devotion, n.p., Box T V 6, Douai Abbey, Berkshire.
[57] Mary Agnes Jerningham, Miscellany, n.p., Box T V 5, Douai Abbey, Berkshire.

https://doi.org/10.1017/bch.2019.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

To you I give my heart & soul entire'. Like Culcheth, Jerningham probably appreciated the novena as a set prayer that simultaneously sought the intercession of the holy family even as it moved the reader to offer herself to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Direct and simple in language that could be quickly learned by heart, these poems associated with the novena served devotional rather than aesthetic purposes.

This text's appearance in an Augustinian miscellany allows for a preliminary consideration of how membership in different religious orders shaped individual nuns' attitudes toward poetry. All three manuscripts emerged from cultural contexts associated with Ignatian spirituality. As previously noted, the Dunkirk house had an Ignatian orientation, and Culcheth herself had two Jesuit uncles (Thomas Culcheth, 1654–1730 and James Culcheth, 1665–1692) and three aunts who professed at Benedictine convents associated with Ignatian spirituality (two at Pontoise and one who preceded her at Dunkirk).[58] Jerningham's uncle and brother were likewise members of the Jesuit order (Francis Jerningham, 1688–1739, and Francis Jerningham, 1721–1752), and her cousin Mary Henrietta Jerningham professed at the Pontoise Benedictines in 1759. Yet despite these similar backgrounds, Culcheth and Jerningham joined convents that had very different attitudes toward poetry. As occasional verse by Anne Frances Throckmorton (professed in 1687, d. 1734) of the Paris Augustinians reveals, the English Augustinians showed more appreciation for the ways that complex poetry could advance monastic piety.[59] Similarly, Jerningham transcribed two lengthier poems into her miscellany ('A Hymn to Our Saviour Jesus' and 'The Ave Maris Stella'), demonstrating an interest in more sophisticated forms of poetry. In contrast, Culcheth's disruption of the novena's lineation reveals little interest in poetic form or its affordances. Like other examples of poetry from the English Benedictine convents, Culcheth's compilation reveals the operation of a literary system specific to the Benedictine cloisters, which privileged simple language that reflected the Benedictine virtue of humility.

Conclusion

As this brief survey of poetry in English Benedictine convents has attempted to show, the priorities that drove textual production in these institutions differed sharply from the principles underlying the secular literary system. Instead of pushing the formal potential of verse to its limits much as John Donne and George Herbert did, Benedictine nuns

[58] Mary Stanislaus Culcheth (d. 1704) and Mary Francesca Culcheth (d. 1717) both professed at Pontoise in 1677; Scholastica Culcheth (d. 1732) professed at Dunkirk in 1671.
[59] 'Poems in the Hand of Anne Throckmorton', in *English Convents in Exile, 1600–1800*, ed. Caroline Bowden, vol. 2, *Spirituality*, ed. Laurence Lux-Sterritt (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012), 449–60.

https://doi.org/10.1017/bch.2019.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

preferred to read and write more traditional forms such as couplets.[60] Similarly, they were uninterested in the biblical poetics and self-analysis that Barbara Kiefer Lewalski has identified as characteristic of Protestant poetics during the seventeenth-century.[61] Within the convent, literary aesthetics gave way to functionalism, which explains the prevalence of doggerel at English Benedictine houses. Avoiding literary tropes such as puns, imagery, and rhetorical devices in favour of a low and plain style that matched St Benedict's ideal of humility, Benedictine verse used rhyme and rough rhythms to distil spiritual insights or prayer into easily remembered aphorisms. While the Dunkirk convent used poetry for different reasons than the Cambrai and Paris houses, women in both settings incorporated doggerel into their spiritual lives because its pithy formulations could focus the mind while avoiding the potential distraction of artifice. Further exploration of the literary geography of the English convents will identify additional systems of textual production particular both to individual convents and orders, systems whose literary priorities will only broaden our understanding of what, why, and how early modern women wrote.

Such studies will help to reframe early modern literary history itself by drawing attention to other neglected traditions of writing. The plain verse favoured by Benedictine nuns has its roots in the didactic poetry of the mid-Tudor era, which C. S. Lewis famously characterized as the 'Drab Age', 'a period in which, for good or ill, poetry has little richness either of sound or images'.[62] Although Lewis attempts to present 'drab' as a neutral choice of words, his own teleological progression from the 'Drab Age' to the 'Golden Age' of Sidney and Spenser reveals an innate preference for literary works that display rhetorical sophistication. Yet so-called 'drab' literature continued to enjoy substantial popularity within early modern England well after the advent of Lewis's 'Golden Age', particularly within the realm of devotional writing. For example, the plainspoken verse of the Sternhold-Hopkins Psalter (1562) was so successful that its modern editors have described this text as 'the single best-selling book in early modern England', outstripping even the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer in terms of its print runs.[63] It was perhaps with such pious low-church examples in

[60] Helen Wilcox, '"Curious Frame": The Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric as Genre' in John R. Roberts ed., *New Perspectives on the Seventeenth-Century English Religious Lyric* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 9–27, at 14–15.
[61] Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 7–13.
[62] C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 64.
[63] *The Whole Book of Psalms Collected into English Metre by Thomas Sternhold, John Hopkins, and Others: A Critical Edition of the Texts and Tunes*, eds Beth Quitslund and Nicholas Temperley, vol. 2 (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval & Renaissance Studies, 2018), 505.

https://doi.org/10.1017/bch.2019.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mind that George Herbert memorably questioned the role of artifice in devotional verse: 'Who sayes that fictions onely and false hair / Become a verse? Is there in truth no beautie? / Is all good structure in a winding stair?'[64] While Herbert's poetry seeks to reconcile this tension between artistic 'fictions' and religious 'truth' through formal innovation, nonconformists took an alternate path by composing poetry that eschewed aesthetic ornamentation. The Benedictine nuns' rejection of traditional literary modes thus has clear parallels with the plain verse adopted by other religious dissidents, from the Fifth Monarchist Anna Trapnel to the Quaker Dorothy White. The preface to the Bay Psalm Book (1640), which was published for the Puritan colony in Massachusetts, comments directly on the spiritual benefits of such poetic minimalism: 'If ... the verses are not alwayes so smooth and elegant as some may desire or expect; let them consider that Gods Altar needs not our polishings'.[65] Although the English Benedictine nuns may not have shared the same confessional spirit as Trapnel, White, or the Massachusetts Puritans, the obvious similarities between their attitudes toward versification raise tantalizing questions about the relationship between poetry and piety more broadly.

[64] George Herbert, 'Jordan (I)', in *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2007), 200.
[65] Richard Mather, preface to *The Whole Booke of Psalmes* (Cambridge, 1640), sig. **3v.

https://doi.org/10.1017/bch.2019.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press