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ARTICLE

Women's Agency, Discernment, and Choice in the English Convents in Exile, 1600–1800

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Abstract

Studies of women religious during the early modern period have often focused on questions surrounding lack of choice, usually about whether they had been coerced to join a convent. This article argues that, in the case of the English convents formed in continental Europe after the Tridentine reforms, not only did most women opt to enter convents of their own free will, but that there was a further level of choice involved. Namely, women chose which convent they wished to enter, a decision process largely neglected by the existing historiography. It opens by considering the regulations the convents operated under as part of the Catholic Reformation, and argues that both the communities and individual women were involved in the decision process surrounding entry to convent life. The second section explores how women navigated any external influences, while the third section argues that spirituality was a key motivating factor for a woman choosing a community. In short, women were not just choosing to become nuns, but were exercising their own agency in deciding which convent to join. Committed candidates meant a strong community and, in the case of the English convents, it meant they could navigate the extra challenges of exile.

Studies of women religious during the early modern period have often focused on questions surrounding lack of choice, usually about whether enclosure was forced upon them, or whether they had been coerced to join a convent.[1] This article argues that in the case of the English convents formed in continental Europe after the Tridentine reforms, not only did the majority of women opt to enter convents of their own free will, but that there was a further level of choice involved. Namely, women chose which particular convent they wished to enter, a decision process largely neglected by the existing historiography. Moreover, the communities of women they wished to join were also involved in this decision-making process,

[1]For example, see Margaret King's assertion that 'the history of female monachism is at least in part the history of female imprisonment': Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago, IL, 1991), p. 86. See also Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in arms: Catholic nuns through two millennia* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), pp. 530–1; Silvia Evangelisti, '"We do not have it, and we do not want it": women, power, and convent reform in Florence', *Sixteenth-Century Journal*, 34 (2003), pp. 677–700; Mary Laven, 'Cast out and shut in: the experience of nuns in Counter-Reformation Venice', in Stephen J. Milner, ed., *At the margins: minority groups in premodern Italy* (Minneapolis, MN, 2005), pp. 93–110; Simone Laqua-O'Donnell, *Women and the Counter-Reformation in early modern Münster* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 23–33.

taking into account the candidate's vocational discernment in order to ensure a harmonious and strong communal life.

All Catholic convents had been banned in England following the accession of Elizabeth I to the throne in 1558. While the Bridgettine convent of Syon Abbey was the only expression of institutional female religious life to survive this period of reformation, it was forced into exile and eventually settled in Lisbon. Based in the Iberian peninsula, it was an outlier in terms of location to the main English conventual movement, which centred on northern France and the Low Countries. It was in this geographical region that, from the end of the sixteenth century onwards, twenty-three new English convents were founded in exile. Over the course of two centuries, nearly four thousand women entered these communities, the overwhelming majority of them English. In order to highlight the choices made by English religious in the early modern period, this article primarily focuses on those women who changed convents. It opens by considering the regulations under which the convents operated as part of the global Catholic Reformation. These rules were intended to ensure only those women who truly wanted to be nuns made their profession, but they also meant that each community made choices about whom they accepted. In other words, both the communities and individual women were involved in the decision process surrounding entry to convent life. The second section picks up on this point to explore how on occasion women withstood external pressure to join particular houses. Additionally, the section shows how lived experience of a convent helped women decide whether it was the one they wished to join. The third section explores how a convent's overarching spirituality and charism were the key motivating factors for a woman choosing one community over another. What frequently mattered most was a convent's alignment with a particular spirituality and how it was lived out. This sense manifested itself in some women's expressed desire to join a stricter, more observant community, whether that be in terms of ascetism or more zealous policing of engagement with the outside world. Ultimately, each individual made their choice in order to find the house that best allowed them to live out their vocation.[2] In short, women were not just choosing to become nuns, but were exercising their own agency in deciding which convent to join. This mattered for early modern conventual life because committed candidates meant a strong community and, in the case of the English convents, it meant they could navigate the extra challenges of life in exile.

The sources consulted for this article were largely generated by the nuns themselves, including genres such as obituary notices and histories of the convents from each community for which they survive. Such documents were created for internal use, helping to foster a collective identity as a community. Though the sources may contain some generic material, a growing number of scholars of early modern women religious have noted that the documents contain much that is particular to an individual, suggesting the general accuracy of such records.[3] Naturally, some

[2]This was the understanding that God called individuals to a particular state of life, such as monasticism. Early modern Catholic reformers applied this vocational culture to all Catholics, whether they were entering religious life or remaining in the world and opting to marry.

[3]See, for example, Barbara B. Diefendorf, 'Give us back our children: patriarchal authority and parental consent to religious vocations in early Counter-Reformation France', *Journal of Modern History*,

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convents were more meticulous record keepers than others, and even maintained the details of those who left the house for whatever cause. For that reason, it is sometimes only through the records of a woman's eventual convent destination that their backstory of previous attempts at convent life can be discovered. Moreover, it is worth bearing in mind that, as Laurence Lux-Sterritt has observed, convent life was not the first choice for all those who eventually professed. Some women had initially been destined for marriage before arrangements collapsed for reasons outside of their control, and it was only afterwards that they looked to professed religious life.[4] Nevertheless, as Nicky Hallett has commented on the biographies of the English Carmelite nuns at Antwerp, such convent sources 'unsettle the belief' that 'female choices were determined by the either/or of marriage or nunnery'.[5] This article, then, is not about how vocations developed, but the fact that these women were agents in the selection of which convent they entered and lived in. By tracking those who switched convents for whatever reason, it is possible to identify women making such choices.

I

Although the focus of this article is on women's choice of community, it is important to note that entry to religious life was governed by rules common to all Catholic convents in the early modern world. Moreover, it was not only the individual woman's choice; as Caroline Bowden has shown, the convents were selective in who they accepted.[6] This was both to comply with the strictures of the global church on testing whether a postulant had a genuine vocation and was not there simply because of external pressure, but also to ensure that only those judged suitable for community life were accepted. This last point was particularly important for the English convents due to their exile status: accepting an unsuitable member could not just upset the community dynamic, but could also lead to rumours of discontent that might damage the convent's reputation amongst lay people and potential benefactors. As such, a community voted twice when deciding to accept an individual; first on whether to allow the woman to be clothed after a few months of postulancy, and again after her year's novitiate, this time about whether to accept her to profess as a permanent member of the community. Such votes were cast at chapter meetings, when all the quire nuns of a house would gather to discuss the

68 (1996), pp. 265–307; Caroline Bowden, 'Collecting the lives of early modern women religious: obituary writing and the development of collective memory and corporate identity', *Women's History Review*, 19 (2010), pp. 7–20; Ping-Yuan Wang, 'Telling the truth about vocation: the death notices of the Visitandines in Brussels, 1683–1714', in Emily Michelson, Scott K. Taylor, and Mary Noll Venables, eds., *A linking of heaven and earth: studies in religious and cultural history in honor of Carlos M.N. Eire* (Farnham, 2012), pp. 129–45. For autobiographical elements within the chronicles of the Bruges and Louvain Augustinians, see Victoria Van Hyning, *Convent autobiography: early modern English nuns in exile* (Oxford, 2019).

[4]Laurence Lux-Sterritt, '"*Aut maritus, aut murus*": love, marriage, and the convents', The International Scholars of the History of Women Religious Association seminar, 11 Oct. 2023.

[5]Nicky Hallett, *Lives of spirit: English Carmelite self-writing of the early modern period* (Aldershot, 2007), p. 12.

[6]Caroline Bowden, 'Missing members: selection and governance in the English convents in exile', in Caroline Bowden and James E. Kelly, eds., *The English convents in exile, 1600–1800: communities, culture and identity* (Farnham, 2013), pp. 53–68.

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clothing and profession of those seeking to join the convent. Voting was anonymous, with ballots cast by paper or the use of peas and beans, with the candidate requiring a supporting majority to advance to the next stage. As is evident from the chapter books that survive, such as those from the Liège Sepulchrines and the Paris Augustinians, summaries of these meetings were recorded rather than full minutes.[7] Ultimately, entry to convent life was a two-way selection process, both the individual and the community discerning if they were a good fit for each other.

This discernment was vital to ensure the strength and survival of a community; all were careful about who they admitted, but it was particularly pressing in the case of the Carmelite houses, whose rule capped membership at twenty-one, meaning a few ill-advised admittances could greatly affect the cohesion of a community. Bowden has suggested three main reasons for why the English convents might not accept a candidate for profession: lack of dowry, health issues that meant they could not withstand the rigours of religious life, and general unsuitability.[8] Want of sufficient dowry could hamper what was deemed a true vocation to join the convent. For example, having been clothed in November 1651, Josepha Bentall left the Bruges Augustinians for England the following January 'by her own desire', but resolved to return for profession if she could secure the required funds. The convent has no further record of her.[9] Dorothy Acton, who had been clothed with the English Franciscans in 1656, was amongst the group that travelled to Paris to start the Conceptionist convent there in 1658, but left the following year to secure a dowry, never to return.[10] Health issues, the second category, feature prominently in the records. Julia Fitzgerald had arrived at the Bruges Augustinians in December 1739, with the aim of learning 'what a religious life was before she embraced it wch she came with a designe of doing'. Having been clothed and taken the name Henrietta, she was four months into her novitiate when the convent chronicler recorded that 'not having her health and many doubting of her vocation it was propossʼd to her parents (wch were then in towne) her change of air for her recovery as allso to prove if her vocation was good and solide'. They consented and she was sent to the Ursulines at Lille with the intention she would return once fully recovered. There is no further record of her in the convent chronicle.[11] Sally Farrell was clothed at the Bruges Augustinians in 1775 but was forced to leave in 1776 as she lacked health. She then went to the Liège Sepulchrines, but encountered a similar problem, before trying one last time at the Paris Conceptionists, eventually admitting

[7]See Durham University, Palace Green Library (PGL), Sepulchrine chapter book, CHS/D1/17; Westminster Diocesan Archives (WDA), Paris Augustinian chapter book.

[8]Bowden, 'Missing members'. For both convent and postulant checking that they were right for each other, see Laurence Lux-Sterritt, *English Benedictine nuns in the seventeenth century: living spirituality* (Manchester, 2017), pp. 25–6, 47, 83.

[9]English Convent, Bruges (ECB), MS CA, 'Annals, Vol. 1: 1629–1729', p. 62: 'Who Were the Nuns? Database', https://wwtn.history.qmul.ac.uk (WWTN), BA021. The Bruges Augustinian annals have been published in Caroline Bowden, ed., *The chronicles of Nazareth (the English convent) Bruges 1629–1793* (Catholic Record Society (CRS), vol. 87, Woodbridge, 2017).

[10]J. Gillow and R. Trappes-Lomax, eds., *The diary of the 'Blue Nuns'* (CRS, vol. 8, London, 1910), pp. 8, 10; WWTN, BF001.

[11]ECB, MS CX, 'Annals, Vol. 2: 1729–93', pp. 69, 70, 73, 75–6; WWTN, BA080.

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defeat in 1779 when she 'quitted our House not having health to be a Religious'.[12] There are also examples of Bowden's third reason for rejection – when the convents simply found a candidate unsuitable – such as Anne Fenne, who was clothed at the Paris Conceptionists in 1665 but the following year 'was put out of the habit we not finding her fit for this staite of life & soone after we sent her for England'.[13] A particularly striking example of this category is Ann Stevendale, a widow who was adamant she had a vocation as a lay sister. After a year on trial at the Bruges Augustinians, Stevendale was clothed in 1767, but the convent chronicler noted she secured this 'by importunity & fair promises, for her conduct whilst a Servant did not give satisfaction in regard of Religious duties'. Less than a year later, earlier than usual, the vote was held to decide whether to allow Stevendale to profess, the would-be canoness insisting on it because she was 'always strong in her own Ideas' despite the convent superiors advising her the life was not for her. The community judged she had not shown 'proper dispositions for a Religious State, being also of a hard temper', and she was not accepted. Stevendale was recorded as acting well after the news but experiencing 'a great struggle, & went from hence with much regret' two days after the vote.[14]

Any discussion of early modern convent life inevitably touches on the issue of women forced to become nuns. It is indisputable that there were cases of this both before and after the reforms of the Council of Trent, particularly in Italy, where the vested interests of wealthier families proved hard to break.[15] However, such cases created extensive paperwork precisely because they were not the norm, and there is a need to recover the stories of the overwhelming majority of women religious in the period. Equally, as Elizabeth Lehfeldt has observed, there remain scholarly roadblocks to properly understanding women religious, especially a pervading obsession that 'scandal and transgression must lurk somewhere around the corner', even in academic approaches to the subject.[16] It is indisputable that Catholic reformers took aim at any notion of a pressured vocation. The twenty-fifth session of the Council of Trent pronounced as anathema those who forced a woman into a convent, or were part of an unwilling entry, though simultaneously sought to protect a woman's

[12]ECB, MS CX, pp. 222, 224; PGL, CHS/D1/17, unpaginated, entry for 5 Jan. 1776; Gillow and Trappes-Lomax, eds., *'Blue Nuns'*, p. 174; WWTN, BA237, PC032. Martha Dodd was similarly rejected as a lay sister at two convents on health grounds at the start of the eighteenth century, in her case the Paris Augustinians and the Cambrai Benedictines: WDA, Paris Augustinian council book, p. 40; Cecilia Heywood and Joseph Gillow, eds., 'Records of the English Benedictine nuns at Cambrai 1620–1793', *Miscellanea VIII* (CRS, vol. 13, London, 1913), p. 68; WWTN, CB055.

[13]Gillow and Trappes-Lomax, eds., *'Blue Nuns'*, pp. 17, 18; WWTN, PC034.

[14]ECB, MS CX, pp. 185, 191, 195; WWTN, BA239.

[15]See for example, Jutta Gisela Sperling, *Convents and the body politic in late Renaissance Venice* (Chicago, IL, 1999), pp. 18–71; Mary Laven, *Virgins of Venice: enclosed lives and broken vows in the Renaissance convent* (London, 2001), pp. 22–38; Kate J. P. Lowe, *Nuns' chronicles and convent culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 230.

[16]Elizabeth A. Lehfeldt, *Religious women in golden age Spain: the permeable enclosure* (Aldershot, 2005), p. 219. For the roots of this attitude, see Anne Jacobson Schutte, *By force and fear: taking and breaking monastic vows in early modern Europe* (Ithaca, NY, 2011), pp. 23–51. See also Craig Harline, *The burdens of Sister Margaret: inside a seventeenth-century convent* (New Haven, CT, 2000); Craig A. Monson, *Nuns behaving badly: tales of music, magic, art, and arson in the convents of Italy* (Chicago, IL, 2010).

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choice to profess by declaring the same sentence against those who strove to prevent a desired entry into religion.[17] Thus, checks were put in place, which were observed by the English convents.[18] For example, candidates for religious life were examined by an authority external to the convent, such as the local bishop, who followed a fairly set formula of thirteen to fourteen questions to ensure that women entered of their own free will.[19] At the Brussels Dominicans, the profession vow included a statement that the candidate 'doe protest that by no force, compulsion, or feare I have entered the Order of S. Dominick, but, as I hope by the instinct of the Holy Ghost'.[20] A noteworthy case of these checks in action occurred at the Bruges Augustinians; having already been clothed as a lay sister, in 1722 Mary Hilton admitted at her examination prior to profession that she had always in fact desired to be a Gravelines Poor Clare, but they had no room for her when she first sought to enter religious life. The convent superior thus arranged for her transfer to that convent, where she professed as a quire nun in 1723.[21]

There is scant evidence of forced vocations within the English convents. One possible case is Lucy Fortescue, who professed at the English Franciscans in 1649 and was amongst the founding group sent to start the Paris Conceptionist house in 1658. However, on arrival at the new house she notably only 'took the Habit but would not make her Vowes of the order' unlike the others of the founding group, and made several extended trips to England, an unusual occurrence for an enclosed woman. By 1663, the Conceptionist annalist noted that she 'grew very discontented, pretending to be forced to Religion by her mother & that she was professed under age, this later we are sure was not soe, but for the first we cannot answere nothing', and she left the convent that year.[22] It is hard to draw precise conclusions from the case, whether Fortescue was put under undue pressure,[23] or simply knew what claims would get her out of her profession. Yet as Caroline Bowden has observed, what it does show is that convent authorities took any accusation of undue pressure seriously and diligently sought to prevent it.[24] Such an attitude is supported by the shock of the Bruges Augustinian chronicler when she recorded Ann Howard

[17]H. J. Schroeder, *Canons and decrees of the Council of Trent: English translation* (Rockford, IL, 1978), pp. 228–9. These rules also applied to men, yet it is women that dominate the scholarly literature; for further discussion, see Schutte, *By force and fear*.

[18]The English convents keenly adhered to Tridentine rules on convent life: James E. Kelly, *English convents in Catholic Europe, c. 1600–1800* (Cambridge, 2020), pp. 51–77.

[19]See, for example, PGL, Sepulchrine examination register for clothing and profession (1642–1808), CHS/D1/20a; WDA, Paris Augustinian diurnal, 4 Oct. 1698, 4 Mar. 1700. For a series of candidates at the Ghent Benedictines being examined, see Rijksarchief te Gent, Belgium, examinations for clothing and/or profession, B137, fos. 10v, 23r (Mary Clare Throckmorton, WWTN, GB228). See also Lux-Sterritt, *English Benedictine nuns*, pp. 66–7; Laurence Lux-Sterritt, 'Spirituality', in Caroline Bowden, gen. ed., *English convents in exile, 1600–1800* (6 vols., London, 2012–13), II, pp. 37–44.

[20]The Prioress and community of Carisbrooke, Isle of Wight, eds., 'Records of the nuns of the second order', *Dominicana* (CRS, vol. 25, London, 1925), p. 225.

[21]ECB, MS CA, pp. 386–7; WWTN, GP153.

[22]Gillow and Trappes-Lomax, eds., *'Blue Nuns'*, pp. 13, 14–15, 190; WWTN, BF093.

[23]For this argument, see Claire Walker, 'Exiled children: care in English convents in the 17th and 18th centuries', *Children Australia*, 41 (2016), pp. 168–77, at p. 171.

[24]Bowden, 'Missing members', p. 65.

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retrospectively reminiscing that 'her embracing a religious life was not her own choice having no other motive but ye will of her mother whome she fear'd if she did not'. Tellingly, Howard had still defied her mother's interference by electing to join the Bruges Augustinians rather than the Brussels Franciscans, and 'some time before her death she told one of our religious yt she did not now repent her being a religious, & if it ware againe to do, it should be her own choice'. Upset on her behalf was clearly felt by the chronicler, who concluded 'as she wanted ye grace of a real vocation, tis no wonder yt her religious duties was as burdensome and disagreable to her as her irregularitys was to us' and that her lack of vocation 'was wholly unknown to ye comunity tell after her profession or she would never have been professed here'.[25]

Yet focus on a small number of potentially coerced entries runs the risk of neglecting the more common experience. It is clear that some women were testing their vocations, attempting to discern whether a particular convent life was right for them. As such, some simply left after their trial period. Not all convents destroyed the records of these 'nearly nuns', as can be seen in several crossings out in the Liège Sepulchrines' chapter book and examinations records.[26] Examples from other convents abound, such as Helen Gage, who was clothed in 1624 at the English Franciscans, 'but finding herself unable to goe forward left it againe within fewe months of her owne accorde',[27] or Charlotte Eure, who got as far as being accepted for profession at the Paris Augustinians in 1708 but instead 'putt off the Habit of Religion, finding it too hard for her to settle in'.[28] An illuminating example survives in the hand of one of those who tested their vocation. Having entered the Cambrai Benedictines in 1662, Dorothy Radcliffe wrote to her father the same year saying that on arrival she had experienced 'a very great apprehension of their strict observance that I should not be able to contin in it', so was advised by members of the community to try instead the less strict Ghent Benedictines. However, they were unwilling to receive her, and she returned to the Cambrai house. She went on to confess to her father, 'The truth is I came not upon any true vocation to religion or my own inclination to yt course, but rather by ye suggestion of ye place of my dwelling', and had now realized in discussion with members of the community that 'a vocation from god is absolutly necessary for ye getting through wth ye difficulties of Religion', which she recognized she lacked.[29] In a further letter to her father, she explained that having tried the convent life enjoyed by her sisters, she found 'this course is so extreamly contrary to my inclination that it is impossible ever to have any content in it'. She asked him to help make arrangements for her departure and hoped he would not blame her for leaving 'that life wherin I should not only be unhappy through discontent while I live, but hazard my soule...by undertaking that I have not strength nor grace to performe'.[30]

[25]ECB, MS CA, p. 155; ECB, MS CX, p. 25; WWTN, BA107.

[26]PGL, CHS/D1/17; CHS/D1/20a.

[27]Richard Trappes-Lomax, ed., *Franciscana* (CRS, 24, London, 1922), p. 30; WWTN, BF095.

[28]WDA, Paris Augustinian diurnal, 14 June 1707, 20 July 1708, 29 Aug. 1708; WDA, Paris Augustinian chapter book, p. 47.

[29]Ushaw College, UC/P30/65b; WWTN, CB155.

[30]Ushaw College, UC/P30/65a. She subsequently married.

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II

As well as having to travel abroad, it is clear that some women had to overcome other significant hurdles to test if they had a vocation. Family opposition to a woman wishing to enter religious life was not uncommon throughout the global Catholic Reformation.[31] In the case of the English communities, the majority of candidates arrived at the convents with their family's blessing and assistance. Nevertheless, there were a small number of cases in which women had to overcome the reluctance of parents to support their choice to enter religious life. For example, Ursula Trevillian, before professing at the Paris Benedictines in 1667, had to withstand 'all the violence her father, & other Relations used to opposse & hinder her from undertaking that holy state'.[32] Likewise, Bridget More, who was clothed at the Cambrai Benedictines in 1629, had to overcome the reluctance of her father, who 'did fully designe she should Marry & settle in the world to the end he might live & dye with her she being the greatest comfort he had'.[33] Prior to entering the Poor Clares, Mary Ward similarly had to escape 'her father, who being passionatly fond of her, wou'd never give his consent for her being Religious, but thought of marrying her', while Mary Gough experienced the same attitude from her grandmother, both of them eventually entering in 1608 and 1597 respectively.[34] It is worth noting that it was not only general family displeasure that would-be nuns occasionally had to negotiate, but also opposition to particular convents, underlining that choice of convent mattered. For example, the Flemish local, Mary Basson, had made a vow of perpetual virginity after being inspired by the life of Rose of Lima, yet her parents were against her becoming a nun. Instead, she joined a 'congregation of deuout women who liued a very orderly & pennetanicall life', until her parents' deaths, when she was able to profess at the Antwerp Carmelites in 1652.[35]

Before considering evidence of women actively choosing between different convents, it should be noted that the national character of a convent was in itself a factor to consider. A critical mass of Englishwomen at the local convent of St Ursula's in Louvain recognized this motivation when they founded an explicitly English house of the order in the same city in 1609. With the Brussels Benedictines having been founded as the first English convent in exile only a few years before, their chronicler recorded that, 'those who came of Ingland sought rather to go into an Inglish monestery then to St Ursulas, so they plainly perceived they should hardly encrease if they remain'd among the Dutch nation', hence the motivation for founding the English house, St Monica's.[36] Although not explicit, that national motivation is also

[31]Diefendorf, 'Give us back our children'. Family interference was also a concern for male religious: see Thomas J. Santa Maria, 'Pedro de Ribadeneyra and the first ex-Jesuits: Jesuit anxiety about familial interference to vocational perseverance', *Catholic Historical Review*, 109 (2023), pp. 51–76.

[32]Joseph S. Hansom, ed., 'The English Benedictines of the convent of Our Blessed Lady of Good Hope in Paris, now St. Benedict's Priory, Colwich, Staffordshire', *Miscellanea VII* (CRS, vol. 9, London, 1911), p. 349; WWTN, PB089. Only her brother supported her and agreed to pay her dowry.

[33]Hansom, ed., 'Benedictines Paris', p. 365; WWTN, CB135.

[34]Monastery of the Poor Clares, Much Birch, Herefordshire, Gravelines chronicle (Gravelines chronicle), pp. 11, 68–70; WWTN, MW167, GP143.

[35]Hallett, *Lives of spirit*, pp. 215, 217; WWTN, LC003. Basson is recorded as being from Holland, meaning she may have been amongst the *kloppen* of the Dutch Republic.

[36]Douai Abbey, Archives of St Monica's, Louvain and St Augustine's, Newton Abbot, C2, p. 39.

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implied in the case of Elizabeth Coleman, who first entered a French Benedictine house at Douai, 'but not liking to remain there she chanced to come' to the Louvain Augustinians and professed in 1618.[37] Such a motive was not restricted to the exile English convents; for example, it lay behind the foundation of an Irish Poor Clare community in 1626/7 initially at Dunkirk (before a move to Nieuport) by Irish women who had been members of the English community at Gravelines.[38]

It is the surviving evidence of those who moved convent that reveals women determining which house best matched their vocation. Prior to being clothed, both the convent and the entrant had a discernment period of a few months to see if they were a good fit for each other. Naturally, some women decided a particular house was not right for them. For example, in April 1701 the Liège Sepulchrines allowed an unnamed woman to enter the enclosure who 'desired to make a tryall of our life, and if she liked it to continew whit us', which she evidently decided not to do.[39] Catherine Kingsley similarly had a period of trial at the same convent but concluded it was not for her; going to board at the Ursulines in Antwerp she paid several visits to the city's English Carmelite house at the encouragement of her brother, and found they were a more suitable fit, professing with them in 1725.[40] Though Catherine Windoe was strongly inclined to join the Carmelites, she first spent a few weeks with the Gravelines Poor Clares, where her aunt was a nun. Writing the story of her vocation, she recorded that though they treated her well, 'I could never be moved with any desire to stay there.' Despite her mother being keen she remain with her aunt, 'she left me to my own choise', and so strong was her desire to try the Carmelites that 'I thought them very rediculous, that would sometimes be asking me why I would not remain there, I gave them such short answers that they troubled me not much with it.' She was clothed at the Antwerp Carmelites in 1621.[41] Another example is Elizabeth Conyers who, prior to entering the Paris Benedictines in 1664, experienced doubts during her journey to the continent, which were brought on at least partly by 'the great invitations and oblidging civilityes she had receiv'd' from the other two English convents in the city, the Conceptionists and the Augustinians. The Benedictine abbess, Bridget More, allowed her to stay the night in enclosure to let her experience the convent; Conyers subsequently found 'that heavy weight wherewith a little before she had been so soarly opprest, to fal off'.[42]

Sometimes, the choice of convent came down to a woman's personal lived experience of a particular community. For example, Catherine Holland was raised a Protestant but was drawn to Catholicism during her family's time as refugees in Bruges at the time of the English Civil War. It was there she became acquainted with the English Augustinian convent in the town, though, 'at that Time I thought it a

[37]Douai Abbey, C2, pp. 166–7; WWTN, LA063.

[38]Bronagh Ann McShane, *Irish women in religious orders, 1530–1700: suppression, migration and reintegration* (Woodbridge, 2022), pp. 103–8, 126.

[39]PGL, CHS/D1/17, unpaginated, entry for 2 Apr. 1701.

[40]PGL, CHS/D1/17, 4 Dec. 1723; Hallett, *Lives of spirit*, pp. 131–2; WWTN, AC080.

[41]Hallett, *Lives of spirit*, p. 69; see also Katrien Daemen-de Gelder, 'Life writing II', in Bowden, gen. ed., *English convents in exile, 1600–1800*, IV, pp. 99–101; WWTN, AC137. Her aunt was Catherine Keynes: WWTN, GP176.

[42]Hansom, ed., 'Benedictines Paris', pp. 376–8; WWTN, PB020.

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miserable Life always to be locked up as in a Prison; That Manner of Life did not then please me at all, and I little thought, I was to be one of those, I thought them so unhappy'. She was clothed there in 1663.[43] Mary Petre had been clothed at the Bruges Augustinians in 1713 and was set to be professed before the family-funding for her dowry fell through, triggering a severe bout of mental illness in the novice. Having returned home and fully recovered, she wrote several times to ask to be readmitted, with the convent eventually deciding to allow it as she had been such a fine novice. However, before this could be put in process, she attended the profession of her two younger sisters at the Gravelines Poor Clares, and was evidently so impressed that she decided to follow their example. She entered the Gravelines Poor Clares in 1717 though the house's chronicler made no mention of her Augustinian past.[44] The curious case of Frances Berington seemingly shows one young woman realizing she had made a mistake with her choice of convent. In March 1721, she arrived at the Bruges Augustinians and was clothed in the June. However, after three months in the habit she claimed to remember that she had previously made a vow to become a Poor Clare. The chronicler noted, 'Her youth must excuse so odd a proceeding, and tis thought her vow might easily have been dispensed, but since she seem'd desirous to comply wth it, we had no reason to diswade her: therefore she again put on her soecular clothes' and entered the Gravelines Poor Clare convent in October of the same year.[45]

III

There were also more purely religious motivations for a woman to choose a particular convent. In many cases, a woman changed convent for reasons relating to the type of spirituality. These included structures of external authority, which helped shape the spiritual ethos of a convent. Shortly after Jane Lovel entered the Brussels Benedictines in 1608, rumours started to spread round the convent that the abbess, Joanne Berkeley, was intending to restrict access to Jesuit spiritual direction. In response, Lovel departed the convent the following year with the intention of establishing a Benedictine house in Louvain under Jesuit direction. Amongst those who left with her was Elizabeth Knatchbull, who had recently been clothed, underlining that for these women, the house's spirituality had been a major motivating factor for their entry.[46] This was not the only time the Brussels house was beset by arguments surrounding spiritual direction,[47] with a far greater conflict enveloping the convent in the following years, which resulted in the foundation of a Benedictine convent at Ghent in 1624 under Jesuit direction.

[43]Her account of her conversion is printed in C. S. Durrant, *A link between Flemish mystics and English martyrs* (London, 1925), pp. 271–305, quote at pp. 277–8; WWTN, BA106.

[44]ECB, MS CA, pp. 318–21, 336–7; WWTN, GP219.

[45]ECB, MS CA, pp. 384, 401, 403, 405; WWTN, GP033. There is no surviving evidence of the Gravelines Poor Clares recording her experience at the Bruges Augustinians.

[46]PGL, CHS/D8/21, 'The relation of ye holy and happy life and death of ye ladye Lucie Knatchbull; abbess and of her founding of ye English Monastery of Benedictines at Gaunt', pp. 4–8; WWTN, BB107, BB113; Colleen M. Seguin, 'Lovel, Mary [née Jane Roper], Lady Lovel (*c.* 1564–1628)', *ODNB*.

[47]See Jaime Goodrich, 'Authority, gender, and monastic piety: controversies at the English Benedictine convent in Brussels, 1620–1623', *British Catholic History*, 33 (2016), pp. 91–114.

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Another Benedictine house was founded in 1623, this time for those who wished to live under the guidance of Benedictine monks as part of the reborn English Benedictine Congregation (EBC), which had bound together the three male houses founded in exile. Thus, another option, offering a different approach to spirituality, was available to women wishing to enter convent life. Its impact can be seen, for example, in the case of Mary Anna Ayray. She was clothed at the Jesuit-leaning Dunkirk Benedictine house in 1670, but left that year for the Benedictine-guided Cambrai house. The Cambrai convent recorded that 'Her motive of removall from thence hither was ye desire she had to be in our Congregation & govern'd by ye order she profess'd.' She arrived in her Dunkirk habit, before changing into the Cambrai one at the quire door.[48] Similarly, Barbara Campbell petitioned to leave the convent of her profession – the Brussels Benedictines – to go to the Cambrai house in 1669, presumably to be under EBC guidance. However, she soon regretted her choice, though it was not until seven years later that the Brussels abbess agreed to reaccept her, and the Cambrai abbess and the monk-president of EBC granted permission.[49]

The Benedictines were not the only order to experience division over spiritual direction and authority. The Gravelines Poor Clares were riven by disagreement about whether they should be under the English Franciscan friars or the local bishop. This ultimately resulted in the foundation of a new house at Aire in 1629 under the authority of the friars; several nuns opted to leave Gravelines for the new house, preferring to be under English Franciscan spiritual guidance.[50] Of course, such dissent could have the opposite effect. Mary Knatchbull wanted to join the Ghent Benedictines but was prevented by her aunt, the abbess, because she already had three nieces in the convent, which was pushing at the boundaries of Tridentine rules on the number of one family permitted in a community. She thus tried out at the Gravelines Poor Clares but was so disturbed by the aforementioned clash about external priestly authority that she quickly left, by which time one of her cousins had died and she was able to enter the Ghent Benedictines in 1627.[51] In contrast, Elizabeth Martin had actually entered the Aire convent as a novice, 'where not finding what she expected, by reason she found them govern'd by the fryars, which she thought wou'd at last bring inconveniencys into the Community, she resolv'd to take courage, & leave them'. She returned to England but discerned she still had a vocation, and 'resolv'd to return to Graveline, or rather to goe, for she had never been there, but only heard they were of the same order, as those of Ayre, she being fully resolv'd not to go to a more easy Order, which was a great mark of her love to God'. Arriving in Gravelines in 1637, she found another who had been a novice with her at Aire, Ann Wesby.[52]

[48]Heywood and Gillow, eds., 'Records Cambrai', p. 51; WWTN, CB006.

[49]Downside Abbey, Brussels Benedictines obituary book, pp. 93–5; Heywood and Gillow, eds., 'Records Cambrai', p. 50; WWTN, BB033.

[50]Caroline Bowden, 'Les clarisses anglaises d'Aire-sur-la-Lys (1629–1799): stratégies d'une survie', *Études Franciscaines*, n.s., 5 (2012), fasc. 2, pp. 263–82.

[51]Anon., *Annals of the English Benedictines at Ghent, now at St Mary's Abbey, Oulton in Staffordshire* (Oulton, 1894), pp. 11–12; WWTN, GB118.

[52]Caroline Bowden, 'History writing', in Bowden, gen. ed., *English convents in exile, 1600–1800*, I, pp. 157–8; WWTN, GP188, GP285.

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In addition to external authority, it is also evident in this last example that choice of convent was significantly influenced by the type of spirituality practised, including outward signs such as its rigour.[53] For example, while the Benedictine houses tended to be more moderate, the Carmelites and Poor Clares were known for their ascetical approach. Indicative of this is the Gravelines Poor Clares' chronicler regularly commenting upon their meagre, poor-quality food as a sign of their commitment to poverty, including the occasion in 1609 when, despite some fish being on the turn, 'none were to be exempted from eating it' as they had 'bought it because it was cheaper then what was good'.[54] The daily life of all quire nuns was punctuated by a strict regime of communal prayer to cover the eight 'hours' of the Office, but on top of this were periods of intensive silent meditation, prayer, and reading alone in their cells, the length of such activities varying from convent to convent, the stricter discipline of the more ascetic orders covering every aspect of the day.[55] Some women desired such stricter observance, as witnessed by the fact that the Gravelines Poor Clares were the second most popular destination for women entering the English convents in exile. An inclination for a more disciplined approach rather than the one they were experiencing, led some women to change convent. A prime example of this motivation is Trevor Hanmer in the 1660s. Having separated from her husband with the intention that both enter religious life, she immediately visited the Dunkirk Poor Clares 'and was extreamly pleas'd with their Poor and Rigorous manner of living', before stopping off at the Bruges Augustinians and the Ghent Benedictines on her way to the Liège Sepulchrines.[56] The latter appealed to her because 'by their Regularity and Exact observance, [they] had justly gain'd themselves so great a Reputation,[57] both at home and abroad'. However, 'that which would have charm'd others, even at her first coming and entrance into the Monastry, gave little satisfaction to her', and though the community were welcoming, she immediately thought it was not the place for her, largely because 'so displeasing was it to her, to receive any Worldly satisfaction, after she had made a Sacrifice of all those Earthly Comforts which God Almighty had before bestow'd upon her'. Out of obedience to her confessor, she went ahead with her clothing having entered in 1664, along with her sister-in-law Elizabeth Warner and her husband's kinswoman Ursula Skelton. Nevertheless, doubts persisted and she found it a distraction that people wanted to talk to her at the grate, confiding to her confessor that 'she thought she was call'd to a more strict retreat and concealment, where nothing might draw upon her the praises, or admiration of others', which would grant her the opportunity to draw closer to God by 'exercise[ing] with more freedom the mortifications of an

[53]For example, Penelope Chapman explained that one of the reasons she chose to enter the Antwerp Carmelites in 1718 was that they owned no personal possessions and were only permitted to eat meat when they were sick: Hallett, *Lives of spirit*, pp. 107–8; WWTN, AC027.

[54]Gravelines chronicle, p. 20.

[55]Caroline Bowden, '"A distribution of tyme": reading and writing practices in the English convents in exile', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 31 (2012), pp. 99–116.

[56]A Catholic Gentleman [Edward Scarisbrike], *The life of the Lady VVarner of Parham in Suffolk in religion call'd Sister Clare of Jesus: to which is added an abridgement of the life of her sister-in-law Mrs. Elizabeth Warner, in religion Sister Mary Clare* (London, 1692), pp. 68–9.

[57]For the importance of reputation in terms of convent recruitment, see Kelly, *English convents in Catholic Europe*, ch. 1.

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austere life, which her present state did neither require nor even permit'.[58] Though her confessor was unsure, she continued to yearn for a stricter life, even asking him to explore whether she could join a female branch of the Carthusians, an order which maintained strict silence and observed severe asceticism; she thus remained 'absolutly fixt [on] her resolution, of leaving the Monastry where she was; to give more scope to Mortification, to which she found herself very efficaciously mov'd'.[59] Eventually, her husband, by then a Jesuit novice, along with the confessor, suggested the Gravelines Poor Clares, which appealed to her and her sister-in law, who insisted that 'she was sure, that God had call'd her to a stricter Order, and that his Power and Grace, was always proportionable to his Call'.[60] Thus, the three women departed the Sepulchrines,

> assuring them, that it was not for want of any Edification, or good Example in their House, that they remov'd to another; but to comply with those impulses, which they had receiv'd from God; to serve him in a stricter way of living; for which those Principles and Rudiments of Religious observance, which they had receiv'd there, had dispos'd them.[61]

All three are recorded in the Liège Sepulchrines' examinations book as 'went to be a poor Clare', leaving the house in 1666.[62]

There are plenty of other examples of women motivated to choose a stricter convent, such as Anne Cobb, who was clothed at the Paris Augustinians, where she had been educated. However, she soon left the convent, partly because she could not bear the music, but also because she was 'disgusted' with how much conversation was allowed with secular people, thus straining the rule of enclosure. After a stay with the stricter Lierre Carmelites, she decided that was the place for her and was clothed in 1670.[63] Similarly, Rebecca Pigott was clothed at the Bruges Augustinians in 1716 but shortly after 'began to think yt God call'd her to a more austere order, and she fixt her resolution to be a poor clare'; she entered the Gravelines house the following year.[64] Mary Howard felt a call to religious life after being reconciled to the Catholic church. The Benedictine monk who had received her suggested the Paris Benedictines but, in an example of a woman very much insistent upon her own desire for a stricter observance, she was 'unwilling to engage in a mitigated Order, her zeale & fervour making her desire & aime at a more strict & reformed one'. He thus recommended to her the Rouen Poor Clares, where she entered in 1674.[65] Another example is Alice Howard who, after a short trial at an unspecified Benedictine convent, professed at the Antwerp Carmelites in 1674 having been 'extreemly taken with our observance, particularly the Retirement Poverty and Generall Charity practisd in

[58][Scarisbrike], *The life of the Lady VVarner*, pp. 71–8.
[59]Ibid., p. 86.
[60]Ibid., p. 88.
[61]Ibid., p. 94.
[62]PGL, CHS/D1/20a; WWTN, GP303, GP302, LS202.
[63]Hallett, *Lives of spirit*, p. 204; WWTN, LC018.
[64]ECB, MS CA, pp. 334–5; WWTN, GP222.
[65]Bowden, 'History writing', pp. 146, 244–6.

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our Holy Institute'.[66] The Antwerp native Agnes Vivine Rosendell went to extreme lengths to enter the English Carmelite house in the city, breaking into enclosure through the turn; having previously been educated in a local convent, she found it 'did not yett in all respects express the perfection of religious Poverty', so decided that if she were to be a nun then 'she would procure to make choice of some such Order as wherein the Poverty of Christ...was more exactly and more strictly observed, for so quickly did she conceive that a Contrary course to this, migh [sic] be of some impediment to perfection'.[67]

Naturally, a woman's reason for choosing a convent could be more than just a desire for strictness, encompassing instead the whole ethos of a community. This likely lies behind the rather short explanation given by the Rouen Poor Clares' chronicler, who noted that Ursula Trivilian had previously taken the little habit at the Paris Benedictines before clothing with the Poor Clares in 1660: 'they lik'd her well, but she did not like them'.[68] Previous convent experience could also be very different, with women desiring to embrace a fully enclosed life of contemplation and devotion. For example, Helen Wigmore had been a member of Mary Ward's unenclosed order, but found 'no true content in that course' so joined the Antwerp Carmelites in 1627, electing to be a lay rather than a quire sister.[69] Similarly, Chrysogona Marie Wakeman had spent many years in Mary Ward's Company, 'but resolveing to be intirely Religious made choise' of the Antwerp Carmelites, professing there in 1635.[70] These two examples show an awareness of religious life, underlining that choices were not made randomly. Indeed, some women undertook serious research before deciding which convent to join. Lucy Herbert, 'having seen most of ye English Monastries and read ye rules and constitutions of many, made choice of' the Bruges Augustinians, entering in 1692, only emboldened by her family's objections that she would be far away and not know anyone, which 'proved a new motive to one that desired to leave ye world entirely, and if possible to be forgoten by it'.[71] Another example of careful judgements being made is Anne Worsley who, at the start of the seventeenth century, first considered the Brussels Benedictines, 'where according to nature I had most desire to be because they were English & in very good esteem', but then gave thought to the Poor Clares, though 'it was much forced and did not enter far & my mother would not hear of that, that I should think of so hard an Order'. After her mother's death, a local convent of Carmelites was founded in Brussels in 1607, 'wch I heard was very strickt, but all were saints. Hearing this praise (that all were saints in yt Order), I could think of no

[66]Daemen-de Gelder, 'Life writing II', p. 299; WWTN, AC063.

[67]Daemen-de Gelder, 'Life writing II', p. 129; Hallett, *Lives of spirit*, pp. 79–81; WWTN, AC106.

[68]Bowden, 'History writing', pp. 75–6; WWTN, RP185. As Trivilian was older than normal, she had to convince the convent superiors to accept her, refusing to leave the grate until they allowed it and offering to do all the hard work in the house.

[69]Daemen-de Gelder, 'Life writing II', p. 122; WWTN, MW160. For those who had ample financial support and the requisite skills, electing to be a lay sister rather than a quire nun was another level of choice within the convents. For another example, see Isabel Alcock in William Martin Hunnybun and Joseph Gillow, eds., 'Registers of the English Poor Clares at Gravelines, including those who founded filiations at Aire, Dunkirk and Rouen, 1608–1837', *Miscellanea IX* (CRS, vol. 14, London, 1914), pp. 54–5.

[70]Daemen-de Gelder, 'Life writing II', p. 143; WWTN, AC126.

[71]ECB, MS CA, p. 158; WWTN, BA101.

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other thought'. She thus determined on this course and sought to 'learn ye manner how to observe ye Constitution of the Order. This was my greatest care, for I was ignorant of all. I was carefull to minde [what] was told me & especially for meditation & had great care to observe in order all ye parts, tho I found some difficulty in it.' She entered the order in 1609.[72] Catherine Smith spent time as a pensioner at the Bruges Augustinians, where she considered her choice of convent in which to profess; she had sisters at the Gravelines Poor Clares and the Brussels Dominicans who were keen for her to join them. However, she learnt of the Antwerp Carmelites when a death notice arrived at the Augustinian convent. One of the canonesses lent her a book on St Joseph; she discovered Teresa of Avila was also a devotee of the saint, 'and informing her self more particularly of her Holy Order was so moved with it that she perferrd it to where she was and to all others'. The Bruges Augustinians thus recorded her departure for the Antwerp Carmel in 1695, noting ''tis true she had a very great inclination to be wth us, but was convinced yt God had call'd her from her infancy to be a Theresian, so she follow'd yt vocation', the chronicler adding tartly that the Augustinian house held 'no exception against her, but her want of portion'.[73]

Taken together, these examples show that women chose a convent because they felt drawn to one over another; in their language, it was a case of what best aligned with their vocation. Such a vocational pull is evident in the case of Elizabeth Wakeman. Feeling herself called to religion during her education at the Ghent Benedictines, she determined to become a Carmelite like her aunt. She thus visited the Antwerp Carmelites but while there,

> Suddenly found herself strongly touch'd to be a Benedicton, yea more and more, in so much [that] all the persuasive motions, to move her for St Teresia's order, she was resolved and did indeed with Great generosity of spirit civilly part with her Aunt, though she confessed the strife between nature and grace did even in a manner split her hart in pieces...yet the obedience to God Allmighty's inspirations mad[e] her break through all.

She thus returned to the Ghent Benedictines and professed on her death bed in 1642.[74] Margaret Pye travelled from Maryland, having been accepted to enter the

[72]Quotes from own account in Hallett, *Lives of spirit*, p. 44; also Daemen-de Gelder, 'Life writing II', p. 22; WWTN, AC140. Worsley subsequently became close to Anne of St Bartholomew (who had been a companion of Teresa of Avila), and later became prioress of the first English Carmelite convent founded at Antwerp in 1619 until her death in 1644.

[73]Daemen-de Gelder, 'Life writing II', p. 279; Hallett, *Lives of spirit*, p. 84; WWTN, AC113; ECB, MS CA, pp. 173, 178, 179.

[74]Lady Abbess and community, eds., 'Obituary notices of the nuns of the English Benedictine abbey of Ghent in Flanders 1627–1811', *Miscellanea XI* (CRS, vol. 19, London, 1917), pp. 33–4; WWTN, GB240. Her aunt was Chrysogona Marie Wakeman (AC126) and her sister Anna Wakeman (GB239). As Nicky Hallett has observed, some women 'chose the [Carmelite] convents because they already had relations there, sometimes over several generations'. This is not overly surprising given the exile nature of the convents. However, the opposite could also ring true, particularly when families lived locally, such as the case of Antwerp-born Joanna Catherine Van Murs, who entered the Lierre Carmelites in 1652 and attested that the 'chiff reason wch caused her to make joyces of this Monasterie was that, being in an othere towne, she should not be troubled wth many vssetts of her frinds, and kindred': Hallett, *Lives of spirit*, pp. 13–14; WWTN, LC068.

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Brussels Benedictines. On arriving in Antwerp, she decided to visit the English Carmelite convent and 'found so strong an atract for this hous that the thought of leaving it was like death to her'. After securing the prioress's agreement to accept her if she was not happy at the Brussels Benedictines, she headed to that house but 'nothing could content her' and she 'was ashamed to own her inclinations were quite for the Teresian Order'. She professed with the Antwerp Carmelites in 1752.[75] Another example is Gertrude Aston, who could not settle on a community to join. She first tried the Liège Sepulchrines because of previous health issues 'but could not injoy her health, nor haue any sattisfaction there, but all simed disgustfull unto her, and she was so very doull that she could not, for her life, learne to readd Latten'. She next tried the Louvain Augustinians, where her aunt, Lady Mary Weston, was a pensioner but 'she simed, rather, to be wholy avers from yt course of life'. About to give up on her vocation, she encountered a Carmelite friar and found his methods of mental prayer and spirituality suited her well, so she tried a Dutch Carmelite convent for a day, 'but she could not fancy them, haueing no languige, nor capssitey to learne it'. She finally found her place at the Lierre Carmelites in 1671.[76] Similarly, Catherine Burton had planned to join the Gravelines Poor Clares but felt drawn to the Antwerp Carmelites after dropping her sister off to be a nun there: 'I was very loath to change my resolution of being a Poor Clare. Tho my inclinations carryed me to be a Teresian, I thought ye other Order was harder and chose it on yt account.' Her confessor advised her she did not always have to choose the hardest course and she entered the Carmelites instead in 1693.[77] It was also a confessor who helped Teresa Vaughan reconcile herself to entering the Bruges Augustinians in 1708, after she was tempted on a visit to the Lierre Carmelites by their 'contemptable habit and ye solitude of ye place together with their kind invitation'.[78] These last few examples show the influence that a confessor could have on a woman's choice of convent. Such guidance often started in the domestic setting; missionary priests in England acted as chaplains to families, thus potentially influencing the household's preferences in terms of spirituality, while also having their own connections with certain convents and assisting with travel arrangements.[79] Yet these influences were not more than recommendations, and did not always suit the women involved nor chime with their own wishes, as underlined by the examples in this article of women choosing to change convent when appropriate.

Moreover, some women were more definite that their choice of convent was influenced by divine intervention. For example, Mary Windsor had the opportunity to

[75]Hallett, *Lives of spirit*, p. 124; WWTN, AC104.

[76]Hallett, *Lives of spirit*, p. 211; WWTN, LS008; for Weston as pensioner, see Douai Abbey, C2, pp. 565–6.

[77]Hallett, *Lives of spirit*, p. 149; WWTN, AC020; Thomas Hunter, *An English Carmelite: the life of Catherine Burton, Mother Mary Xaveria of the Angels, of the English Teresian Carmel at Antwerp, collected from her own writings and other sources* (London, 1876), pp. 97–101. See also Nicky Hallett, '"as if it had nothing belonged to her": the lives of Catherine Burton (1668–1714) as a discourse on method in early modern life-writing', *Early Modern Literary Studies*, 7 (2002), pp. 1–30.

[78]ECB, MS CX, p. 6; WWTN, BA209.

[79]See Kelly, *English convents in Catholic Europe*, pp. 21–50; James E. Kelly, 'Breaking the rule? English Jesuits and the female conventual movement in Europe, 1600–1800', in Thomas M. McCoog, SJ, ed., *'Hordes of locusts' or 'lyving angells': marking the 400th anniversary of the foundation of the English/British Jesuit province, 1623–2023* (Leiden, 2025).

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join Mary Ward's Company but 'she liked not the maner of life', the group not following the rules of enclosure. She was set to try the Brussels Benedictines next but on visiting the Louvain Augustinians on their patron's feast believed St Augustine 'suddainly put an inspiration into her mind to like of this place'. Thus, 'she felt herself vehemently mooved to kneel down & beg the place' when at the convent grate, and professed there in 1616.[80] In the case of Frances Burrows, she believed her profession as an Augustinian in 1597 to be down to a vision she had received during a period of discernment.[81] Yet behind such examples was each woman's sense of a religious calling by God to live as a professed nun, as in the case of Mary Charlotte Bond. The Bruges Augustinians' chronicler commented that after her clothing, she was 'in doubt and uncertainties concerning her settlement, having some reasons to believe she was moved by a particular call from God to ye order of Ste Teresa'. This was put down to a visit she had paid to the Carmelite house before entering the Augustinian one, and the prioress Catherine Burton prophesying she would join them.[82] As the Carmelites recorded, 'she did not find her vocation satisfyed in the habit she had taken' and she subsequently left the novitiate to join the Antwerp Carmelites in 1713.[83] Certainly, as Jaime Goodrich has shown in the case of the English Benedictines, nuns understood their vocation as a genuine calling, a stirring from God.[84]

It is also worth noting that choices could be less specific; sometimes it was simply about the order rather than a particular house. For example, Margaret Downes, who was clothed at the Antwerp Carmelites in 1621, had no doubt about her choice of order, writing in her own vocation account, 'Ther was noe meanes for me to attaine perfection unless I were a Teresian.'[85] Elizabeth Hone told her confessor, George Fisher, alias Muscote, that she wished to be a religious. He talked to her of the Carmelites and the Benedictines but it was his recommendation of a book about the Poor Clare saint, Catherine of Bologna, that meant Hone 'cou'd think of no other Order'; she arrived at the Gravelines house in 1629.[86] In her own vocation account, Anne Levesson wrote how, after she had resolved to become a nun, her confessor told her about the Carmelites: 'from that Instant I felt such a cordiall love in Generall to it that I could not endure to think of any other place but our Monastery'. Just in case she was not admitted, she decided she had better force herself to accept the offer of a place at the Gravelines Poor Clares 'but this thought was offten accompanyed with aboundance of teares' and she really considered it a last resort. When, in 1625, she learnt that the Antwerp Carmelites were willing to accept her, she recorded 'the unspeakable joy which this news caused me far exceedeth what I am able to

[80]Douai Abbey, C2, pp. 158–60; WWTN, LA300.

[81]Douai Abbey, C2, pp. 454–8; WWTN, LA046.

[82]ECB, MS CA, pp. 304–8.

[83]Hallett, *Lives of spirit*, p. 102; WWTN, AC015.

[84]Jaime Goodrich, *Writing habits: historicism, philosophy, and English Benedictine convents, 1600–1800* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 2021), pp. 90–1, 98–105.

[85]Hallett, *Lives of spirit*, p. 174; WWTN, AC041.

[86]Bowden, 'History writing', p. 136; WWTN, GP158. See Jaime Goodrich, 'Translation and genettean hypertextuality: Catherine Magdalen Evelyn, Catherine of Bologna, and English Franciscan textual production, 1618–40', *Renaissance and Reformation*, 43 (2020), pp. 235–61.

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express'.[87] That desire to join a particular order could mean repeated attempts in an effort to find the right convent to fit the choice. A Mistress Bishop had been a novice at the Aire Poor Clares, but decided she instead wanted to try the Rouen community in 1669, though they found her unsuitable, before she finally settled at the Gravelines house.[88] In contrast, Helen Bowes was adamant the Augustinians were for her despite both the Bruges and Louvain houses having severe doubts about her suitability in the mid-seventeenth century.[89] These last two examples again show the importance placed by the community on accepting only those they believed were a good fit.

Of course, there could be more individualized reasons to decide to change convent. Health-related considerations had to be taken into account when choosing a community. For example, the Louvain Augustinians' willingness to accept those with disabilities meant Anne Mary Vavasour professed there in 1633, having previously been clothed at the Brussels Franciscans but forced to leave two years before.[90] In another example, Margaret Mostyn was clothed at the Rouen Poor Clares in 1691 but departed the following year to take the habit at the Dunkirk Benedictines, before leaving them to settle at the Lierre Carmelites in 1693. The Rouen chronicler was fairly dismissive of her efforts, though did mention her 'being very scrupulous', a spiritual ailment common in the era of Catholic reform that saw the individual obsessively focus on the potential gravity of their sins. The Carmelites, though, recorded that the austerity of the Poor Clares had caused her temporary hearing loss and she had been advised to join the less austere Benedictines, before she settled at the Carmelites.[91] For Elizabeth Beazer, it was the health of the community rather than her own that led her to depart the Ypres Benedictines for the Gravelines Poor Clares in 1678; having previously been a candidate at the local Benedictine abbey at Nonnebosch near Ypres, she was 'unwilling to be exposed to the distraction of a new beginning', the English house there always struggling in terms of numbers before being turned over to the Irish.[92]

Financial reasons occasionally lay behind a change of convent, such as in the case of Anne Waldegrave. She did not possess the portion required to join the Bruges Augustinians, but the community's prioress wrote to the Liège Sepulchrines, and she was accepted there in 1709, presumably for a lesser dowry.[93] Similarly, in 1688, Mary Yates was forced to depart the Bruges Augustinians after her clothing as she did not possess 'her full portion'. Instead, she headed to the Brussels Dominicans, and professed there in 1690.[94] In the case of Elizabeth Browne, it was the financial situation of her convent rather than herself that led to a change. Having departed

[87]Daemen-de Gelder, 'Life writing II', p. 112; WWTN, AC084.

[88]Bowden, 'History writing', p. 121; WWTN, AD010.

[89]ECB, MS CA, pp. 9, 10, 52, 131; WWTN, BA029.

[90]Douai Abbey, C2, pp. 379–80; WWTN, LA288 and BF250.

[91]Bowden, 'History writing', p. 161; Hallett, *Lives of spirit*, pp. 191–2; WWTN, LC065. For scrupulosity, see Ulrich L. Lehner, *The inner life of Catholic reform: from the Council of Trent to the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2022), pp. 94–7.

[92]Hunnybun and Gillow, eds., 'Registers of the English Poor Clares at Gravelines', p. 98; Patrick Nolan, *The Irish dames of Ypres* (Dublin, 1908), p. 40; WWTN, GP025.

[93]ECB, MS CA, p. 267; WWTN, LS234.

[94]ECB, MS CA, p. 148; The Prioress, *Dominicana*, pp. 207, 228; WWTN, BD076.

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the local Benedictine convent of Bellefonds, Rouen, where she had professed in 1707, because it had fallen into economic distress, she had a brief stint with the Bruges Augustinians in 1721, where her relation, Lucy Herbert, was prioress. Browne then moved to a house of her own order in 1723, the Brussels Benedictines. However, she returned to the Bruges Augustinians a year later, citing her weak constitution and that she was 'always used to good fires in winter, was not able to pass without not to make use of ye stoves; and the Dames at Bruxelles having no common fire, not being willing to let her have one in particular'. She was offered the opportunity to return as abbess at her original French convent, but declined, with her and her brother, Viscount Montague, intending her for an English rather than a local house. Finally, she ended up at the Pontoise Benedictines.[95]

That leads to another category: those women for whom it is not recorded why they changed convent, meaning it is impossible to discern the reasons behind their choice. This includes Catherine Talbot, who clothed at the Ghent Benedictines before entering the Hoogstraten Carmelites in 1719, the latter house making no mention of her previous affiliation.[96] Clare Semmes had planned to enter the Bruges Augustinians, but was not keen on the confessor, suggesting spiritual motivations, so was clothed instead at the Pontoise Benedictines in 1765 before swapping to the Liège Sepulchrines for unrecorded reasons in 1766 and settling there.[97] Mary Stourton tried the Antwerp Carmelites, begged to be admitted to the Rouen Poor Clares as she passed through the town, but instead entered the novitiate of the Paris Augustinians, the Rouen chronicler noting she was 'of an unconstant nature'.[98] An unnamed candidate was accepted for a lay sister at the Liège Sepulchrines in 1715 with a list of provisos, including that she not be in the bakehouse, brewery, or kitchen, nor put to any great work in the washing, but was recorded as instead going to be quire nun at the Hoogstraten Carmelites.[99] On occasion, it is possible to speculate where no reason was recorded, such as the case of Ann Knoles, who entered the English Franciscan convent in 1630, before leaving for La Cambre Abbey in Brussels, a local Cistercian convent. This is likely explained by her mother hailing from a prominent local noble family.[100]

IV

One of the most revealing comments in the surviving material is about Elizabeth Skinner who, in contrast to those so far featured, had no interest in which convent she joined, just as long as she could profess as a nun. Skinner asked a Jesuit who ministered to her family, 'to chuse a cloister for her which he thought fittest. For she had

[95]ECB, MS CA, pp. 384–5, 392, 401–2, 405; WWTN, OB014.

[96]WWTN, HC061; Maryland State Archives, Hoogstraet collection of the Carmelite Sisters of Baltimore (MSA), SC 5366–6–1, vol. 1 of the annals, pp. 28, 44; SC 5366–2–2, 'book containing a relation of the religious deceased in our convent at Hoogstraet'; SC 5366–2–3, profession book, entry for her in 1720.

[97]ECB, MS CX, pp. 156, 161; WWTN, LS193.

[98]Bowden, 'History writing', p. 43; WWTN, PA162.

[99]PGL, CHS/D1/17, 27 Apr. 1715. This is likely Jane Frazier, clothed Aug. 1716, as the only other candidate, Sarah/Clara Whitbourne, clothed in Aug. 1715, had been trialling with the community in 1713, so too early: WWTN, HC067, HC026; MSA, SC 5366–6–1, pp. 24–6.

[100]Trappes-Lomax, ed., *Franciscana*, pp. 17–18; WWTN, BF145.

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no desire more to one place then to another, but was wholly indifferent.' He directed her to the Louvain Augustinians, where she professed in 1625.[101] That this is the only record of such indifference amongst the English convents testifies to how unusual it was and reinforces that the choices detailed in this article were genuine motivations rather than being doctored for communal edification. The overwhelming majority of women took their choice of convent seriously and were agents in that choice. Yet, as in the cases of other women religious in the Catholic Reformation, there could be external influences, whether from family or confessor, though this should not necessarily be interpreted as undue pressure; for example, reformers in early modern France urged parents and children to work together to discern and choose their state of life.[102] To overemphasize these influences is to miss the agency of women and the fact that their decision to join a specific convent was not simply dictated by social constraints and expectations. This article has provided abundant evidence that, even if there were other influences, it does not negate the fact that women – both the individual discerning which community to join, as well as those deciding whether to accept them – were agents in that choice.

Recent literature has recognized that lay people in the era of Catholic reform made devotional choices and picked spiritual affinities.[103] Indeed, Benjamin Kaplan has noted this phenomenon in both Catholic and Protestant contexts, observing that 'Christians in early modern Europe exercised agency and choice in religious matters.'[104] This article has argued that the same is true for women religious. It is not simply that women chose to enter religious life, but that they also selected which convent to enter. As Barbara Diefendorf has observed in the early years of Catholic reform in France, young people who entered religious life 'saw their vocation in terms of the more personal and internalized spirituality promoted by the Catholic reform'.[105] This same impulse motivated those joining the English convents in exile, their experience providing a window through which to better track the motivations of women religious in the global Catholic Reformation. Here were women actively exercising the new spirit of discernment[106] promoted by Catholic reformers. Indeed, recent historiographical analysis has highlighted the reform of vocation culture within the Catholic Reformation. It enkindled a renewed emphasis on choosing one's state of life, with the English convent experience fitting the road map of discernment through prayer, examining one's own motivations and the

[101]Douai Abbey, C2, p. 297; WWTN, LA233.

[102]Elizabeth Rapley, 'Women and the religious vocation in seventeenth-century France', *French Historical Studies*, 18 (1994), pp. 613–31; Christopher J. Lane, 'Vocational freedom, parental authority and pastoral persuasion in seventeenth-century France', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 69 (2018), pp. 768–84.

[103]Alison Forrestal, 'A spiritual inheritance? Family spirit, virtue and vocation in the *Vies* of the Lamoignon *dévots*', *French History*, 35 (2021), pp. 24–48. On the notion of lay vocation, see Robert Bireley, *The refashioning of Catholicism, 1450–1700* (Basingstoke, 1999), p. 176; Jotham Parsons, 'Vocation in seventeenth-century France: the Catholic ethic and the spirit of *Étatisme*', *French History*, 28 (2014), pp. 322–42.

[104]Benjamin J. Kaplan, 'The context of conversions in early modern Europe: personal agency and choice in the construction of religious identities', in Dikla Rivlin Katz, Noah Hacham, Geoffrey Herman, and Lilach Sagiv, eds., *A question of identity: social, political, and historical aspects of identity dynamics in Jewish and other contexts* (Berlin, 2019), pp. 315–36, at p. 330.

[105]Diefendorf, 'Give us back our children', pp. 270, 274.

[106]See Lehner, *The inner life of Catholic reform*, pp. 7–8.

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advice of a spiritual director.[107] However, this recent literature rarely considers the additional point that it was not just about choosing the path of marriage or religious profession. As this article has argued, there was a further, very serious choice to be made; namely, of which convent to join. It is clear, at least in the case of the early modern English convents in exile, that women chose very carefully and consciously. Ultimately, this article has argued for the recovery of early modern women's roles as active agents in the choice of convent they joined, with spiritual fit an important consideration in the majority of cases. Making the right choice was important for not only the individual, but also the communities they joined, particularly in the case of the English convents formed in exile. The individual's choice of convent and the community's selection of appropriate candidates mattered because they had an impact on the strength of an institution. In the case of the English convents, their location in exile made every decision more pointed as they had to overcome the problems of transnational recruitment; unlike other early modern convents, they did not have the pool of potential recruits in the surrounding locality to quickly draw upon if they got it wrong. As such, discernment by both the individual wishing to enter and the community considering whether to accept them was a mutual process; change of convent by a woman was not a sign of weakness or failure on the part of the individual or the management of these convents, but part of ensuring the best choice for all. Simply put, a community that was harmonious, with its members committed to a common life, was stronger. This was true for all early modern convents but especially for the English communities who dealt with the precarity of exile. That only one English convent, the Pontoise Benedictines, failed during the early modern exile period underlines that such choices were given their due importance.

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[107] Christopher J. Lane, *Callings and consequences: the making of Catholic vocational culture in early modern France* (Montreal, 2021), esp. pp. 69–87, 91–7.

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