Article:
Murphy, Emilie Katie Maria (2020) Exile and Linguistic Encounter: Early Modern English Convents in the Low Countries and France. Renaissance Quarterly. pp. 132-164. ISSN: 0034-4338

https://doi.org/10.1017/rqx.2019.493

Exile and Linguistic Encounter: Early Modern English Convents in the Low Countries and France

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The history of religious migration and experience of exile in the early modern period has received a great deal of attention in recent years. Neglected within this scholarship, however, is sustained discussion of linguistic encounter within these, often fraught, transcultural and transnational interactions. This article breaks new ground by exploring the linguistic experiences of religious exiles in English convents founded in the Low Countries. Most women within English communities in exile were linguistically challenged; focusing on the creative ways these women subsequently negotiated language barriers sheds new light on female language acquisition and encounter during this period.

INTRODUCTION

On 7 April 1623, a Benedictine nun in the English convent in Brussels, Ursula Hewicke, wrote a heartfelt letter to Jacobus Boonen, the Archbishop of Mechelen.[1] She described the ongoing

* The author would like to thank Caroline Bowden, Marie-Louise Coolahan, John Gallagher, Gabor Gelleri, Alisa van der Haar and Victoria Van Hyning for their thoughtful and constructive comments on earlier drafts of this

fierce and personal dispute between her Abbess, Mary Percy, and their confessor, Robert Chambers, by which 'they lose the authority due to them, and we living thus suspended'. Continuing, Hewicke emphasised how 'many inconveniences would have bin avoided that have been and are amongst us' if it had not been for 'wanting language to write or speak of to Superiors'. Closing, she explained:

> In the last Visitation I desired to make relation of a thing to the Vicar general [deputy to the Archbishop, and on this occasion the convent Visitor] which I could not doe by any interpreter, because our Right Reverend Ladie [the Abbess]... had commanded that we should not speak of it to any, but to herself and Ghostly fathers, under pain of mortal sin; therefore I did make petition... that we might have means to learn French, that by this time I might have been able to write or speak it to your Lordship but now I can doe neither of them.

As a result, Hewicke's letter was sent with the following instructions on the address leaf: 'Je desire treshumblement d'avoir Monsieur Colford pour l'interpreteur' ('I desire very humbly to have Mr Colford for the interpreter').[2] Gabriel Colford was a layman and father of a fellow nun, and he faithfully translated Hewicke's letter, and it was then circulated, alongside the English original, to the Archbishop.[3] The translation contains several markings indicating its reception by Boonen or one of his secretaries; notably, the line 'd'avoir moyen d'apprendre

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article. The research for this article was funded by the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP/2007-2013 / ERC Grant Agreement n. 615545).

[1] Ursula Hewicke to Jacobus Boonen, 7 April 1623. Archive of the Archdiocese of Mechelen, Regulieren Brussel, Engelse Nonnen, Doos 12/1. Hereafter only box number will be given. All letters unfoliated.

[2] All translations are the author's except where otherwise noted.

[3] Gabriel Colford's translation of 'Ursula Hewicke to Jacobus Boonen, 7 April 1623', Doos 12/1.

francoise' (to have the means to learn French) has been underlined.

Hewicke's letter was written during one of the most serious disputes ever to affect the English convents in exile, and the controversies were to last until the latter half of the seventeenth century.[4] The Brussels convent was under the spiritual jurisdiction of the archbishop of Mechelen, and their statutes granted varying amounts of authority to key office holders who were subordinate to him. Alongside the abbess (who was elected by the convent and held her term for life), the nuns were subject to the authority of various male superiors, namely: the convent's Visitor (who was appointed by the abbess and the convent, but they were all to obey his orders), the ordinary confessor (appointed by the archbishop, and who regularly heard the nuns' confessions), and extraordinary confessors (who could technically either be appointed by the archbishop or the abbess, but most were chosen by the abbess and heard confessions with her permission). Subject to multiple figures of authority, as Jaime Goodrich has argued, the convent was 'fertile ground for power struggles'.[5]

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[4] For more on the disputes see Emilie K. M. Murphy, 'Language and Power in an English Convent in Exile, c.1621 – c.1631', *The Historical Journal* 62 (2019): 101-125; Jaime Goodrich, 'Authority, Gender and Monastic Piety: Controversies at the English Benedictine Convent in Brussels, 1620-1623', *British Catholic History* 33 (2016): 91-114; Claire Walker, 'Securing Souls or Telling Tales? The Politics of Cloistered Life in an English Convent' in *Female Monasticism in Early Modern Europe: An Interdisciplinary View,* ed. Cordula van Wyhe (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 227-44 (at 235-36); Walker, *Gender and Politics in Early Modern Europe: English Convents in France and the Low Countries* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), esp. 70-72 and 134-147.

[5] Goodrich, 'Authority, gender, and monastic piety', 96.

Hewicke's complaint about the Abbess restricting access to interpreters and translators, their use deemed a 'mortal sin' because of the sensitive nature of the information that would have been given to them as a result, underlines the way that language barriers in the Brussels convent were a major source of contention during this period of conflict. With these actions, the Abbess was also actively undermining the decrees enshrined in their Statutes which explained the nuns had the right to communicate privately with the Bishop or the Visitor. This type of letter was to be kept secret from the rest of the community and this included the abbess, who was responsible for reading any other mail sent or received beyond the convent walls.[6] Percy was evidently highly concerned about knowledge of the community's disputes leaking beyond the cloister walls, and in so doing, Percy eliminated many of the nuns' ability to communicate with their non-English speaking male superiors, As a result, only those who could speak other languages had the power to air their grievances, and those with only English could not. Ursula Hewicke's letter demonstrates that significant linguistic concerns were ongoing in her community, and the example illustrates several key issues that I intend to address in this article. How did multilingual culture shape daily life for English women in enclosed communities in France and the Low Countries? Was it common for exiled nuns to feel linguistically challenged, and how were these issues overcome? What can responding to these questions tell us about cultures of translation, and about the linguistic experiences of religious migrants more broadly?

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[6] *Statutes compiled for the better observation of the holy Rule of the most glorious Father and patriarch S. Benedict* ed. Alexia Grey (Ghent, 1632), 8-9.

The history of religious migration has received significant attention in recent years and scholars have attended to the multifaceted ways that exiles' experiences were crucial to broader developments taking place within early modern society and culture.[7] Neglected within this scholarship, however, is sustained discussion of linguistic encounter within these often fraught transcultural and transnational interactions. Histories of exile and refuge usually acknowledge the disorienting effects of being in foreign lands 'amidst people of foreign tongue', but do not develop this any further.[8] Where languages are discussed, it is often either in the context of missionaries learning local languages in order to Christianise indigenous societies and weaken or replace their traditional cultures, or in the context of particular language-speaking communities establishing their own 'social and cultural enclaves amidst the local population'.[9] Despite the richness of these analyses, when thinking about the way religious migration influenced people and places, it is striking to omit the reciprocities inherent in foreign language encounter and exchange, and to not consider the ways in which this shaped the everyday experience of exiles.

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[7] See David Worthington ed. *British and Irish Emigrants and Exiles in Europe, 1603-1688* (Brill: Leiden, 2010); Geert H. Janssen, *The Dutch Revolt and Catholic Exile in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Timothy G. Fehler et al eds. *Religious Diaspora in Early Modern Europe: Strategies of Exile* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014); Jesse Spohnholz and Gary K. Waite eds. *Exile and Religious Identity, 1500-1800* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014); David van der Linden, *Experiencing Exile: Huguenot Refugees in the Dutch Republic, 1680-1700* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015); Nicholas Terpstra, *Religious Refugees in the Early Modern World: An Alternative History of the Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[8] Van der Linden, *Experiencing Exile*, 8.

[9] Emese Baliant, 'Anabaptist Migration to Moravia and the Hutterite Brethren' in *Religious Diaspora in Early Modern Europe* eds. Fehler et al, 138.

English convents in exile were founded explicitly for the preservation of English Catholicism, and foundation documents often contained requirements that members should be English in origin.[10] However, by focusing on the multilingual experiences of exiled English nuns, this article supports current scholarly efforts to correct research on the convents that has tended to view the communities and their language and culture as uncomplicatedly 'English'.[11] Caroline Bowden has drawn our attention to the ways in which the cloisters interacted with their neighbours as patrons and benefactors, and has argued that the nuns were 'changed' by the experience of assimilating different cultures (whilst remaining 'essentially English').[12] Other scholars have also been attentive to the points of contact between convents and their local communities, for example by exploring how the circulation of relics embedded English convents within international networks of piety.[13] Building on this research, this article argues

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[10] See comments on the 'national character' of the English convents in Walker, *Gender and Politics,* 38-40.

[11] See, for example, discussion of the 'Englishness', national identity and the influence of Counter-Reformation continental culture on English Catholic identity in essays by James E. Kelly, Gabriel Glickman, Earle Havens and Elizabeth Patton in *Early Modern English Catholicism: Identity, Memory and Counter-Reformation*, eds. James Kelly and Susan Royal (Leiden: Brill, 2016). At this point I should also note that for this article I have purposefully not considered the language skills of Mary Ward and her order of uncloistered sisters (modelled on the Society of Jesus) as it is the particularities of linguistic encounter for religious women that either were or became enclosed that I am interested in exploring here.

[12] Caroline Bowden, 'The English Convents in Exile and Their Neighbours: Extended Networks, Patrons and Benefactors', *Early Modern Exchanges: Dialogues Betweeen Nations and Cultures, 1550-1750*, ed. Helen Hackett (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 223-42; Bowden, 'The English Convents in Exile and Questions of National Identity, c.1600-1688' in *British and Irish Emigrants and Exiles in Europe, 1603-1688* ed. Worthington, 314.

[13] See Kelly, 'Creating an English Catholic Identity: Relics, Martyrs and English Women Religious in Counter Reformation Europe' in *Early Modern English Catholicism* eds. Kelly and Royal, 41-59. For the ways musical performances could also situate the convents within local and international networks see Emilie K. M. Murphy,

that by focusing on linguistic encounter we can see demonstrable changes occuring within the communities, as the women interacted with foreign language speakers, acquired new languages, or were forced to find other means to negotiate their language barriers. It has been claimed that the foundation of houses specifically for English women (who previously had to join foreign religious communities) 'solved language problems'.[14] Critiquing this, and by uncovering the ways that the nuns overcame linguistic challenges, this article reveals new perspectives on the inner workings of the nuns and their cloisters, and their relationship with the outside world.

This article provides a much needed complement to existing scholarship on language learning and linguistic encounter that has predominantly focused on the experiences of elite men.[15] A notable exception is the work of Michèle Cohen who has traced the ways in which competence in French throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries became associated with femininity.[16] As Cohen has shown, women's conversation in this period was highly

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'A sense of place: hearing English Catholicism in the Spanish Habsburg territories, 1568-1659' in *Sensing the Sacred in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* eds. Robin Macdonald, Emilie K. M. Murphy and Elizabeth L. Swann (London: Routledge, 2018), 136-157.

[14] Laurence Lux-Sterritt, *English Benedictine Nuns in Exile in the Seventeenth Century: Living Spirituality* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 6.

[15] See, for example, Jason Lawrence, '*Who the devil taught thee so much Italian?' Italian Language Learning and Literary Imitation in Early Modern England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

[16] Michèle Cohen, *Fashioning Masculinity: National Identity and Language in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1996). See also Cohen, 'French Conversation or "Glittering Gibberish"? Learning French in Eighteenth-Century England' in Natasha Glaisyer and Sara Pennell eds., *Didactic Literature in England 1500-1800: Expertise Constructed* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003) 99-117 and Cohen, 'Sexualising and Gendering the

regulated and the spaces for female language-learning, and in which female voices may be heard, were sharply delineated.[17] Although seeming to attend to the particular needs of female language learners, Peter Erondell's 1605 text *The French Garden…Being an instruction for the attayning unto the knowledge of the French tongue* exacerbates such demarcations. As Juliet Fleming explains, Erondell 'denies women access to the male world and confines them in the traditional sphere of home and family', and as John Gallagher contends, this text is 'domestic in every way: set at home and in the home, and denying women's ability to go abroad, in the city or in the world'.[18] The assumption both in Erondell's text, and in Cohen's subsequent analyses of French language instruction for women in the eighteenth century, is that if women were to learn French it would be in the domestic sphere (as Cohen has emphasised, 'girls learned French at home with governesses') for the simple reason that it was fashionable.[19] Yet, thousands of English women did travel to the continent during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to join newly established convents in exile, and they subsequently negotiated language barriers out of necessity. Their physical translation, in the

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French Tongue in Eighteenth Century England', *French Studies Bulletin* 31 (2010): 73-76. See also Jane Stevenson, 'Women Catholics and Latin Culture' in *Catholic Culture in Early Modern England* eds. Ronald Corthell et al (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007),

[17] Cohen, *Fashioning Masculinity*, esp. chapters 5 and 6. See also John Gallagher, 'Vernacular language-learning in early modern England' (Unpublished PhD Thesis, Emmanuel College, University of Cambridge, 2014) 94. Gallagher's monograph, *Learning Languages in Early Modern England* is forthcoming with Oxford University Press.

[18] Juliet Fleming, 'The French Garden: An Introduction to Women's French', *English Literary History* 56 (1989): 19-51 (at 19); Gallagher, 'Vernacular language-learning', 96.

[19] Cohen, *Fashioning Masculinity,* 84.

sense of moving from one place to another, affected literal cultures of translation within their communities.

The linguistic experiences of English nuns in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are uncovered in this article by combining insights gleaned from manuscript sources held in various convent archives around Europe, such as female authored translations and convent chronicles, with a case-study of the scores of letters generated by the Brussels Benedictine convent during a particular period of turmoil in the 1620s. In so doing, I argue that some convents certainly fostered nurturing environments for linguistically gifted nuns to undertake translations. However, by moving beyond the scholarship that has drawn attention to these few women, I provide a broader picture of linguistic competence. I demonstrate that language skills were rare and highly prized by communities due to the frequency and necessity of foreign language encounter. Finally, I focus on the specific processes by which nuns learnt languages and negotiated language barriers both outside and within the convent walls.

CONVENT CULTURES OF TRANSLATION

In recent years, significant work has been undertaken on the importance of English convents as sites of literary production and consumption, and as a result we have had our attention drawn to a handful of linguistically gifted nuns. Such scholarship has illuminated the vital role that English convents played in the translation of religious texts. For example, Marie-Louise Coolahan and Jaime Goodrich have highlighted the collaborative translations of convent Rules, Customs and Statutes undertaken by religious women and their male superiors in English and

Irish Poor Clare houses, and English Benedictine houses respectively.[20] Nuns are also known to have undertaken individual translation projects, which were then printed through the assistance of male superiors. A well-known example is the aforementioned Brussels Benedictine Abbess Mary Percy's (prof. 1600, d. 1642) translation from French of the *Abridgement of Christian Perfection* first published in 1612. In the 1612 edition, Percy signed the dedicatory epistle with her initials 'P.M.'.[21] A second edition was published in 1625, but this time the (nearly identical) dedicatory epistle and a new preface to the reader were attributed to the Jesuit Anthony Hoskins using his initials. As a result some contemporaries seem to have been unclear where the exact credit for the translation lay. To clarify matters the Benedictine monk and confessor to the Benedictine convent in Cambrai, Augustine Baker (1575-1641) penned a treatise *An Enquiry about the Author of the Treatise of the Abridgment and Ladder of Perfection*. In it Baker confirmed that the work

> was Translated, and Set forth in English by & under the Name of the Lady Mary Piercy... [but the] preface was so Translated into English, by Fa[ther] Antony Hoskins, of the Society of Jesus... the Residue (I mean, the whole Body of the Book) being of the Translation of the Said Lady Abbesse: whom the Said Father A. Hoskins did moreover somewhat Aid (as I am likewise Informed) in the Translation of the Said Body of the Book; and did Procure, or Help for the Getting

[20] Marie-Louise Coolahan, 'Irish Nuns' Writing: The Poor Clares' in *Women, Writing and Language in Early Modern Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Jaime Goodrich, 'Nuns and Community-Centered Writing: The Benedictine Rule and Statutes', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 77 (2014): 287-303.

[21] Isabella Berinzaga and Achille Gagliardi, *An Abridgement of Christian Perfection, Conteining many excellent precepts & advertisements, touching the holy, and sacred mysticall divinity*, trans. Mary Percy (St Omer, 1612).

of it printed, and was the First Publisher of it.[22]

Baker wrote the enquiry for the Benedictine nuns at Cambrai, and it is unlikely that he anticipated anyone but this community to read it.[23] However, others were made aware that credit for the majority of the translation lay with Percy because in 1628 the 1625 edition was reissued and Percy's authorship made explicit on the title page and in the prefatory material.

Although there are a few other translations by English nuns that entered the arena of print, the majority of female translations remained in manuscript.[24] A library catalogue of the books of the English Benedictine nuns of Our Lady of Good Hope in Paris compiled c.1690 provides evidence both for translation activity in the convents, and of the circulation of translated texts among other members of the Benedictine order.[25] For example, the catalogue includes the entry for Agnes More's translation of Jeanne of Cambrai *The Ruin of Proper Love and the Building of Divine Love*. More was at the Benedictine convent in Cambrai from 1625 until her death in 1656. Presumably when some of the sisters from Cambrai travelled to Paris to found a new convent in 1652, they took a copy of More's translation with them.

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[22] Downside Abbey MS 26551, *An Enquiry About the Author of the Treatise of the Abridgement and Ladder of Perfection,* 8-9.

[23] My thanks to Jaime Goodrich for sharing her thoughts with me on this point.

[24] For example, François de Sales, *Delicious entertainments of the soule*, trans. Potentiana Deacon (Douai, 1632).

[25] Jan T. Rhodes, 'The Library Catalogue of the English Benedictine Nuns of Our Lady of Good Hope in Paris', *Downside Review* 130 (2012): 54–86.

Other notable translators include Catherine Holland (prof. 1664 - d.1720) an Augustinian nun from the convent of Nazareth in Bruges, who 'so well employ'd her pen as to perpetuate her pious memory in this community by several pious books and saints lives which she translated from french and dutch into English'.[26] Fellow Augustinian and first Prioress of the Convent of St Monica's in Louvain, Jane Wiseman (prof. 1595, d.1633), was an invaluable asset for her community:

> she had her Latin tongue perfect & hath left us many homilies and sermons of the holy fathers translated into Inglish which she did with great facility.[27]

Cambrai Benedictine Barbara Constable (prof. 1640 - d. 1684), was another prolific writer, linguist and editor. She translated extracts from different sources and brought them together for the edification of her fellow nuns.[28] Constable provides insights into her rationale for the work through her prefatory material:

> tho: I perhaps make them speake ill of English, they were buried amonge many other things concerninge other subjects which perhaps made them not so sufficiently taken notise of as they deserved.[29]

She explains the process of translation in a collection of prayers she compiled, which were

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[26] *The Chronicles of Nazareth (The English Convent), Bruges 1629-1793* ed. Caroline Bowden (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press for The Catholic Record Society, Vol. 87, 2017), 181-2.

[27] Woolhampton, Berks.: Douai Abbey [DAB], Windeshiem, St Monica's, Louvain [WML] MS. C. 2, 369.

[28] Heather Wolfe, 'Dame Barbara Constable: Catholic Antiquarian, Advisor and Closet Missionary' in *Catholic Culture in Early Modern England* eds. Corthell et al, 158-188.

[29] Cited in Wolfe, 'Dame Barbara Constable', 168-9.

'collected out of diverse bookes as I met them for the most part not yet in our language'.[30] In her dedication of *Speculum Superiorum, Composed of diverse Collections* in 1650 to the convent's Abbess, Catherine Gascoigne (prof. 1625 - d.1676), she similarly explains that she has

> drawne these collections from amonge many other things which perhaps hindred them from beinge so well observed even by those they most concerned; as now they may being drawne apart from them and united together.[31]

Constable wanted to ensure that all nuns, regardless of their linguistic ability, could engage with the most recent devotional texts of the Counter-Reformation.

The landscape of Catholic piety in the early modern period is, as Carlos Eire has argued, 'difficult to imagine…without translated devotional texts'.[32] Female translators played an important role in this landscape, and the linguistic abilities of at least some of the nuns were known beyond their cloister. For example, Catherine Gascoigne and fellow Cambrai Benedictine Clementia Cary (prof. 1641 - d.1671) were commissioned to translate the works of their spiritual guide Augustine Baker into French for a local Benedictine convent, St. Lazare.[33] Excerpts of these translations may have been included in the 1651 publication by

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[30] Ibid., 169.

[31] Wolfe, 'Dame Barbara Constable', 169.

[32] Carlos M. N. Eire, 'Early Modern Catholic Piety in Translation' in *Cultural Translation in Early Modern Europe* eds. Burke and Hsia, 83-4.

[33] Jaime Goodrich, *Faithful Translators: Authorship, Gender and Religion in Early Modern England* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 169.

Antoine Civore of *Les secrets de la science des saints,* indicating the broader circulation of these texts.[34] Circulation of these texts beyond the walls of cloister meant that the nuns' reputations as linguists increased, and the women were happy to cultivate these reputations.

The question whether authorial reputation was at odds with the vows of humility, chastity and poverty taken by the nuns at their profession might lead to the assumption that when female-authored work was circulated beyond the confines of their particular cloister, that this was often unwillingly. As the Benedictine Potentiana Deacon (prof. 1608 - d.1645) stated in the preface to her translation of the *Delicious Entertainments of the Soul* when it was printed in 1632, she had never intended 'more than the use of a particular cloister through God, and her superiors have other disposed of it and exposed it to the public view of the world'.[35] However this should not be taken at face value. As Jaime Goodrich has argued, Deacon's translation was a way for her to purposefully shape public perceptions of the Cambrai house's spiritual practices.[36] By translating a text that supported Ignatian piety, she was implicitly rejecting the contemplative mysticism of Augustine Baker - her community's unofficial spiritual director. By ensuring the text was known to have been translated by a 'Dame of our Ladies of Comfort of the order of S. Bennet in Cambray', which was printed explicitly on the title page - Deacon was therefore not truly anonymous. Deacon ensured her text influenced the outside reputation of the convent by claiming to be representative of the convent's attitudes, when in reality the majority of the community supported Baker. Furthermore, her reputation as the text's translator circulated: Augustine Baker himself was well aware that Deacon had

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[34] Goodrich, *Faithful Translators,* 225 n68.

[35] de Sales, *Delicious Entertainments,* trans. Deacon, sig. a2r.

[36] Goodrich, *Faithful Translators,* 154-167.

translated the text, as she is attributed as its translator in a catalogue in Baker's hand of books held at Cambrai.[37]

All nuns used an individualised voice when composing prefatory material and by choosing to write their dedications in the first person they were gesturing with an authoritative design on their audience. The personal pronouns in these prefaces can be viewed as a form of self-authorisation, and as individuals, they were influencing the way their audience understood the translator and her motivations, as well as her community. In Alexia Grey's (prof. 1631 - d.1640) dedication to her Abbess at the Ghent Benedictine house, Eugenia Poulton (prof. 1604 - d. 1646), she firmly aligned the house's piety with that of the contents of the vernacular *Rule*. In doing so, she highlighted the Abbess's role as protector of the text and her responsibility to share its contents:

> Give me therfore leave, most Respected Madame, though after many ages, to lett this so holy a rule spreed her rayes abroade in our English tonge, under your ladishippes protection, that as you instill the love of it in our hartes, so you would make itt obvious to our Eyes.[38]

It is unclear whether Grey's role as editor of the translation was well-known to her contemporaries, but by signing her name in the preface she would become inextricably linked

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[37] Augustine Baker, *Catalogue of Such English Bookes as Are in This House Most Helping toward Contemplation*, Beinecke Library, Osborn MS. b 268.

[38] *The rule of the most blissed Father Saint Benedict patriarke of all munkes* (Ghent, 1632), sig. 3v.

to the text, and associated with its authorship for centuries afterwards.[39]

The convents' reputations as centres of translation circulated in the dedications of printed translations. It is striking that of the 127 English translations of Catholic devotional texts published from 1598 (the year the Brussels Benedictine convent was founded - the first new cloister specifically for English nuns in exile) to 1700 that were dedicated to specific individuals (the other 113 either did not contain dedications from the translator, had generalised epistles to the reader, or were dedicated to e.g. 'the Catholics of England'), more than a quarter were dedicated specifically to English Catholic exiled nuns. Not surprisingly considering the number of well-known Benedictine linguists, almost half of the 34 dedications were to Benedictines.[40]

The reputation of some convents for translation might explain why scholars have not looked for evidence of linguistic limitation, and lead to flawed assumptions about general comprehension, particularly regarding it means when we refer to nuns as 'Latinate'. Although some knowledge of Latin was required of all the choir nuns for performance of the divine office, this did not mean that the women were competent beyond their liturgical duties. Some

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[39] Jaime Goodrich unearthed evidence in 2014 of the manuscript circulation of the translation of the *Rule* and *Statutes*, thus complicating the attribution of Grey as translator. See her 'Nuns and Community-Centered Writing'.

[40] These figures arise from my survey of Allison and Rogers, and Clancy's editions of Catholic books printed in English from 1558 to 1700. A.F. Allison and D. M. Rogers, *A Catalogue of Catholic Books in Engish Printed Abroad or Secretly in England 1558-1640* (Bognor Regis: The Arundel Press, 1956); Thomas H. Clancy, *English Catholic Books, 1641-1700: A Bibliography* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1974).

women struggled to learn even the rudimentary Latin for the liturgy, such as the Antwerp Carmelite Ann Woolmer (prof. 1712 - d.1740), who was subsequently relieved of her obligations and was allowed to say the lay sisters' office:[41]

> She had not the obligation of reading the divine office on account that she was not able to learn Latin, but said the lay sisters office, tho allways assisted at great feasts in the quire … [She came to] Vespers and Complain [Compline] which she could say pritty well, joyning with ye quire.[42]

Widespread linguistic limitations can be discerned from the same sources that often draw attention to talented individuals, because by highlighting them it demonstrates their exceptionalism in the communities. As Victoria Van Hyning has argued, the Louvain chronicle particularly celebrated Latinity and women's education in both the convent and domestic settings.[43] Convent obituary books also celebrated rare linguistic talents. The obit book of Ghent Benedictines notes that one of Cecily Price's (d. 1630) 'rare qualities' was French;[44]

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[41] Lay sisters were usually from less-elite backgrounds than the choir nuns and entered the communities with reduced dowries. These women were exempt from choir duties in order to serve the physical and temporal needs of the choir sisters.

[42] Cited in Nicky Hallett's edition of Carmelite life writing: *Lives of Spirit: English Carmelite Self-Writing of the Early Modern Period* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 114.

[43] Victoria Van Hyning, 'Expressing Selfhood in the Convent: Anonymous Chronicling and Subsumed Autobiography', *Recusant History* 32 (2014): 219-234.

[44] 'Obituary Notices of the Nuns of the English Benedictine Abbey of Ghent in Flanders 1627-1811' in *Miscellanea XI* ed. (London: Catholic Record Society Record Series, Vol. 19, 1917) 13.

French was one of Catherine Thorold's (d.1634) 'good parts';[45] Dame Aloysia Beaumont (d.1635) 'spoke Latin' and translated several 'pious things into English' for the benefit of the community; [46] and Mary Southcote (d. 1641) was another who 'understood Latin'. [47] Highlighting the language skills of just four nuns in an obit book that detailed the lives and abilities of all of the nuns of the Ghent community from 1627-1659 (36 total, 28 choir and 8 lay sisters) proves that this was a particularly rare talent to be lauded. Widespread linguistic limitations do not make the convents any less centres of translation and multilingual activity, but rather points towards the broader importance of interpretation and oral cultures of translation that were vital to the communities.

ORAL CULTURES OF TRANSLATION

The translations produced in the convents by linguistically gifted nuns were read aloud at meal times and at communal meetings known as 'Chapter', which were held each week for administrative and instructional purposes. As well as reading from texts newly translated in the convent, some nuns were even able to translate devotional texts in foreign languages while reading them aloud, such as Lierre Carmelite Margaret Mostyn (prof. 1645 - d.1679) who according to her sister and fellow nun, Ursula Mostyn (prof. 1648 - d. 1700):

> would on festival days, and at other times; find out some pious historical Book; and read to the religious... with only casting her eyes on the Booke, she would deliver it word for word to the Sisters in our naturall language; and this in so smooth

[45] Ibid., 15.

[46] Ibid., 20.

[47] Ibid., 28.

a style, and with so great felicity... it was heaven to hear her.[48]

Margaret Mostyn was a rare talent in the convent, and in the same way that nuns such as Barbara Constable and Catherine Holland had done when they produced written translations for their fellow nuns, Mostyn's skills enabled the large proportion of her community that lacked language skills to aurally engage with the latest devotional texts.

Linguistically gifted nuns like Mostyn were also vital for the communities' daily interactions with locals beyond the convent walls, which indicates why their abilities were so prized within the surviving convent records. Due to their regular external interactions it was more common for community leaders, such as abbesses and prioresses, to have at least one other language. During a conversation with a merchant, the first prioress of the Antwerp Carmelites, Anne of the Ascension (prof. 1610 - d. 1644) is noted to be able to move easily between multiple languages, including Latin, without even noticing it:

> Upon an occation, she was speaking to an English merchant who to try in what perfection she had languages he, without her perceiving it, passd from English to Dutch French, Spanish and lastly to Latten, when after some discourse she was at a loss to answer readily, and so reflecting with herself said 'Why do you speak to

[48] Elizabeth Mostyn (in religion 'Ursula of All Saints'), 'What we particularly observed in our Reverend Mother of happy memory's constant practices in perfection and solid virtue'. Cited in Nicky Hallett's collection of autobiographical and biographical material about two bewitched seventeenth century English nuns, *Witchcraft, Exorcism and the Politics of Possession in a Seventeenth Century Convent: 'How Sister Ursula was once Bewiched and Sister Margaret Twice'* (London: Routledge, 2017), 109.

me in Latten for I cannot speak it?' He answered 'I see you can Rd Mother, when you do not reflect it is so'.[49]

This interaction is revealing not just of Anne of the Ascension's high multilingucal competence, and of her own lack of linguistic self-awareness, but also of the significant local polyglot community with which the convents regularly encountered. The time demands of frequent communication with those from outside of the convents meant that abbesses and prioresses usually employed linguistically competent nuns to assist them with their administration and correspondence. For example the Paris Benedictine Agnes Temple (prof. 1662 - d. 1726) 'spoke French very well' and was interpreter for Prioress Catherine Gascoigne before later succeeding her in her office as Prioress after her death in 1690.[50] Another known Benedictine linguist was the nun Christina Forster (prof. 1641 - d.1661), who 'spoke French excellently well' and was the official translator for the Abbess at the Ghent convent until her departure to help assist with the foundation of another community in Boulogne.[51] Forster's language skills were explicitly noted in the convent Annals as an important reason she was sent to assist with the new foundation.

Establishing a new convent involved liaising with local governors and magistrates, and there are multiple other examples of nuns specifically being sent to support new communities

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[49] Cited in Hallett, *Lives of Spirit*, 54.

[50] 'The English Benedictine Nuns of the Convent of Our Blessed Lady of Good Hope in Paris' in *Miscellanea VII* ed. Joseph S. Hansom (London: Catholic Record Society Record Series Vol. 9, 1911), 345.

[51] 'Abbess Neville's Annals of Five Communities of English Benedictine Nuns in Flanders, 1598-1687' ed. M. J. Rumsey in *Miscellania V* (London: Catholic Record Society Record Series, Vol. 6, 1909), 33

due to linguistic ability.[52] For example, the Benedictine Marina Beaumount (prof. 1637 at Ghent - d.1682), who could speak 'both Latin and French' was sent 'by reason of her language' to begin a new Monastery in Ypres by the Bishop.[53] When founding the new Augustinian convent of St Monica's specifically for English women from the Flemish community of St Ursula's in Louvain in 1609, language skills were singled out as useful skills for the nuns to have, particularly for those in roles that would require regular interaction with the local communities. The St Monica's chronicler, Mary Copley, explained that because Mary Best (prof. 1615 - d. 1631) 'had well the Dutch language', when she joined the new Augustinian community at Bruges she was to be made procuratrix.[54] As the Constitutions outlined, the procuratrix was to 'diligently and carefully wright up all that she receiveth or layeth out' and she was the nun who took care of 'all exteriour thinges', and liaised with the local Dutch speaking community to purchase items the community needed, such as food.[55]

Selecting convent officers more generally on the basis of language ability was not uncommon, as demonstrated in a letter from the Brussels Benedictine Alexia Blanchard (prof. 1612 - d. 1652) to either the Archbishop or one of his deputies with her recommendations for particular positions.[56] In her letter she recommended Renata Smith (prof. 1615 - d. 1664) for the position of infirmarian, with Thecla Bond (prof. 1619, d. 1655) to assist her in

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[52] Ibid., 37

[53] Ibid., 44

[54] DAB WML MS. C. 2, 343.

[55] DAB WML MS. E. 5, 15.

[56] Alexia Blanchard to Jacobus Boonen?, c.1628, trans. Gabriel Colford, Doos 12/3. (Original has not survived.)

communicating with the local Doctor.[57] She suggested Ursula Hewicke (prof. 1603, d. 1638), for the office of depositary (acting as treasurer or bookkeeper), and names Mary Persons (prof. 1608 - d.1642) to help her with the language.[58] What is interesting about this particular recommendation is that by the time Blanchard's letter was sent (around or after 1628) Hewicke was seemingly capable of communicating in French.[59] Although in early 1623, as we heard at the start of this article, Hewicke complains about her inability to communicate in French, the evidence of her surviving letters suggest that by the end of 1623 she has learnt enough French to write by herself - a point that will be returned to later. Thecla Bond and Mary Persons were highly proficient linguists. Bond was regularly called upon to translate her fellow nuns' letters in order to help them communicate with the Archbishop and his superiors.[60] Persons also translated a number of letters on behalf of several nuns in her community.[61] What this suggests, then, is that Blanchard felt the role of depositary involved such a high level of interaction with foreign language speakers, that the roles required an abundance of linguistic competence at hand.

Linguistic competence was also needed to attract patrons. In 1659, a year after the Boulogne Benedictine nuns moved to Pontoise, Anne of Austria, Queen Regent of France, visited the community. The Abbess, Christina Forster, 'who spoke the French language

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[57] Ibid.

[58] Ibid.

[59] See, for example, Ursula Hewicke to Jacobus Boonen, 2 September 1623, Doos 12/1; Katherine Thecla Bond to Jacobus Boonen, c. 1625/6, Doos 12/1.

[60] For example, Clare Curson to Jacobus Boonen, 1624/5, Doos 12/1. Scribal letter in Bond's hand.

[61] For example, Mary Watson to Jacobus Boonen, 1620-1630, Doos 12/3. Autograph letter in Persons' hand.

excellently well and had a very gayning behaviour and alloquence, sufficient to charme a less obliging princess, gayned soe much uppon that Queene' that she said that if there was anything that she could ever help with 'to give her notice of it, and it shold be donn'.[62] Many other patrons came from the local community, as exhibited in the financial records and accounts of all of the communities in exile.[63] These relationships were usually fostered from their attendance at the convent churches, or through the grating which separated nuns from visitors in the parlour known as the 'grille'. This mediation underlines the significance of orality in convent cultures of translation, where the nuns were most often heard but not seen. In exceptional circumstances the nuns were allowed to apply for special permission to break enclosure. For example, Prioress of the Augustinian convent in Bruges Augustina Bedingfield (prof. 1622 - d.1661) applied to allow builders into the cloister in order to expand the convent.[64] It is highly unlikely that these builders would have spoken English, resulting in the presence of multiple foreign language speakers regularly entering and exiting the convent while the expansion took place.

Occasionally, enclosure was broken by the nuns to go begging for alms. Although this was forbidden in Tridentine regulations, Victoria Van Hyning has uncovered evidence in convent chronicles that the Augustinian nuns in both Louvain and Bruges begged in the streets

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[62] 'Abbess Neville's Annals', 49-50.

[63] See, for example, the donations made from 'Monsieur Adrian Basson', 'Madame Anne Francise van Abbenga' and 'Monsieur Henry vander Barrge' in the Antwerp Carmelite Benefactors book for 1651. Cited in *Convent Management, Volume 5: English Convents in Exile, 1600-1800* ed. James E. Kelly (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013) 146.

[64] *The Chronicles of Nazareth,* 29.

when their regular sources of income had reduced.[65] To successfully beg it would have been helpful for the nuns to be able to speak at least some Dutch or French. The Bruges chronicle describes the experiences of two sisters sent out on the streets of Bruges in 1635:

> she [the Prioress, Mary Pole prof. 1622 - d. 1640] sent two sisters to the Abbey of Dunes, where they kept Solemn feast of St Bernard. The sisters were very charitably relieved, and sent home well loaden with flesh and bread. This encouraged our Reverende Mother to persevere a beggar; and she sent our sisters to several other places. Some relieved them, others at first spoke harshly to them, thinking we dissembled and that we were not truly in want, yet after a while we had many friends, and some advised us to put up a request to the town, declaring our necessities, and craving license to beg. To which the Town giving no answer, we presumed to take silence for consent, and continued beging. Nobody contradicting it. In a short time we had many benefactors who weekly gave us bread sufficient for our whole convent; besides also flesh sometimes, and other things. And at the end of this year we had as much Almnes in money as came to 276 florins.[66]

The chronicler vividly articulates the transcultural transformation taking place, as Van Hyning has explained 'in the eyes of their neighbours' who initially perceive the nuns as 'rich

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[65] It is not clear whether these nuns were choir or lay sisters. Victoria Van Hyning, 'Cloistered Voices: English Nuns in Exile, 1550-1800' (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Sheffield, 2014) 94. Van Hyning's monograph, *Convent Autobiography: Early Modern English Nuns in Exile*, is forthcoming with Oxford University Press.

[66] Cited in Van Hyning, 'Cloistered Voices', 97-98. From *The Chronicles of Nazareth,* 14.

foreigners, then as "beggars" and finally as "friends"'.[67]

As well as liaising with local traders and patrons, the exiled religious communities needed to communicate with their local Archbishop and his deputies on a regular basis. It was unusual for male superiors and civic officials in the Low Countries to speak much English (if they had any at all), which resulted in the use of translators and interpreters throughout this entire period.[68] In 1692 the Bruges Augustinians utilised the Italian priest and Rector of the Jesuit college at Ghent, Father Herman Visconti, as their interpreter when the Bishop visited the monastery on 22 March and it is clear that the nuns had some autonomy over this choice of intermediary.[69] The Ghent Benedictines were also very clear of their privileges to choose their own interpreter, as an event described by Abbess Anne Neville in her 'Annals of the five English Benedictine communities' makes plain. One evening in 1641 the Ghent community were advised that the Bishop would be with them in the morning:

> and that he had appoynted him his interpretor, speaking some litle English. This very much surprizd us, beein a short warning and a positive appoyntment of an interpretor, which was rather to be at the Comunityes choyce, the[n] by any other way of ordering.[70]

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[67] Van Hyning, 'Cloistered Voices', 98.

[68] Even at the end of the eighteenth century there was an official English translator attached to the Council of Brabant, and this officer helped organising the sale of convent property after 1794 when the communities began to return to England.

[69] *The Chronicles of Nazareth,* 87.

[70] 'Abbess Neville's Annals', 28.

When the interpreter arrived at the convent, the nuns refused to allow the unnamed cleric to enter, arguing that he did not have 'sufficient knowledg of the language' to help them with their particular issues. The Bishop subsequently sent 'Mr Hobrooke to be interpretor', but as he was a layman, and this did not suit the Ghent Benedictines either.[71]

> Then his lordshipe sent an Irish priest, Mr Dalton, the pastor of the great hospitall, a freind to the Community and a man without exception for abillity. Yet the Community remaind constant to the refusall, alleaging that they wold not quitt theyr priviledg of making theyr owhene choyce, for no person living. Mr Dalton, returning to the Bishope, he sent the Deane and 4 more of the chapter to examin our Rules and constitutions to see uppon what title we made so strong a plea for our selvs, to refuse whom his lordship named.[72]

The nuns 'imediatly gave them the Latin statutes to peruse, and poynted out the place where it gives the Community the choyce of tow [*sic*] Religious men to be present with the Bishope and assist in theyr behalfe in thes concerns'.[73] As a result of their protestations and interventions, citing the privileges awarded them in their statutes, they eventually had two of the Society of Jesus approved to assist in their interpretations with the Bishop - John Faulkner and George Duckett.[74] As Jane Stevenson has argued, the nun's knowledge of their Latin statutes was 'power'.[75]

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[71] Ibid.

[72] 'Abbess Neville's Annals', 28.

[73] Ibid.

[74] 'Abbess Neville's Annals', 29.

[75] Jane Stevenson, 'Women Catholics and Latin Culture' in *Catholic Culture in Early Modern England* ed. Corthell et al, 54.

The importance of having access to language skills was recognised both by the nuns themselves but also their male superiors and the local community. This meant that when Mary Pole was elected prioress of the new Augustinian convent of Nazareth in Bruges, the community's chronicler explained how she 'was very welcome to them [the locals], especialy the bishop there, being very glad they had chosen a superiour that cou'd speak the language for she had the French tongue perfect having liv'd some years in France before her entrie into religion'.[76] This statement shows that communications between the convent, particularly its leaders, and outsiders were frequent and significant enough that it was a relief when there was no need to have to find translators and interpreters.

NEGOTIATING LANGUAGE BARRIERS BEYOND THE CONVENT WALLS

Problems with external translators and interpreters were particularly acute in the Brussels Benedictine convent in the 1620s and, as I have argued elsewhere, the nuns' choice between, and employment of, collaborative authorial strategies with both internal and external translators for their correspondence gave the women authority over their letters.[77] The texts were vital avenues for the women to express dissent and raise concerns over the way their community was governed. Similar to the protests of the Ghent Benedictines who felt they had lost the right to choose their own interpreter to relay their grievances to their Bishop, the Brussels nuns' choice of translator for their letters was equally important, and their linguistic choices were inextricable from the religious politics of the community. As we saw in Ursula Hewicke's letter

[76] DAB WML MS. C. 2, 392.

[77] Murphy, 'Language and Power'.

where she requested the assistance of Gabriel Colford to translate her correspondence, issues within communities were often made worse due to language barriers, further underscoring the necessity of negotiating them.

After arriving on the continent the women negotiated language barriers in several different ways. As Mary Copley had explained in the St Monica's chronicle, Prioress Mary Pole had learnt the language during her time spent in France with her brother before becoming a nun. Several other women are known to have language skills thanks to time spent in the Low Countries before discerning a vocation. Augustinian nun Elizabeth Lovell (prof. 1621 - d.1634) is another noted by the Bruges chronicler to have gained language skills thanks to living with her grandmother 'in these countries she grew perfect in the flemish language'.[78] Bruges Augustinian lay sister Elizabeth Bartlett (prof. 1653 - d.1691) was said to have come 'from Bruxelles, where she had been bred up some years, and perfected in the flemish language'.[79] Louvain Augustinian Margaret Clement (prof. 1557 - d. 1612) is another example, as she had relocated with her parents to Louvain at the start of the reign of Edward VI in 1549 and was brought up 'learning both of the Latine and Greek tongue'.[80] Margaret had evidently absorbed the Dutch language culture that surrounded her, because at St Monica's in 1612 she is noted by her fellow nun and biographer, Elizabeth Shirley (prof. 1596 - d. 1641) as singing a 'Dutch

[78] *The Chronicles of Nazareth,* 10.

[79] Ibid., 31.

[80] DAB WML MS. C. 2, 4.

ditty' on her deathbed.[81]

Several other women acquired language skills during time spent on the continent before entering convents; whilst it is well-known that men travelled abroad to learn languages during the early modern period, female language-learning travellers were also not uncommon. According to Copley in the St Monica's chronicle, Helen Britton (prof. 1614 - d. 1652) had come overseas to visit her cousin 'Mrs Fortesckue' in St Omer at the time having 'no intention to religion but only to see these countries & learn French'.[82] Other women were sent to the continent to learn languages, Sisters Perpetua Best (prof. 1619 - d. 1630) and Mary Best (mentioned above due to her nomination as Procuratrix for her Dutch language skills) were sent by their father to Antwerp to 'live in these parts… to learn the language'.[83] Some parents sent their daughters specifically to foreign convents to learn languages. Before entering the Paris Benedictine convent in 1667 Mary Appleby's (prof. 1667 - d. 1704) grandfather thought to send her 'for some time into a French monastery to learn the lang[uage]'.[84] Elizabeth Blount was a school girl at the Augustinian convent in Bruges, when she was 'by her Parents orders sent to Deynes, a Monastry in Gant, to perfect her self in the french tongue' and it was here

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[81] Nazareth, MS A.III St Ursula, Arch.CXI, 'The Life of our Reverent Ould Mother Margrit Clement' by Elizabeth Shirley, 70. My thanks to Victoria Van Hyning for sharing her photographs of this manuscript with me. No autograph manuscript survives, but this early copy now held at the Augustinian Convent of Nazareth, Bruges contains corrections in Shirley's hand and as Van Hyning has convincingly argued can be considered authoritative if not authorial on the basis of her interventions. See 'Cloistered Voices', 41 n1.

[82] Ibid., 147.

[83] Ibid., 188.

[84] 'The English Benedictine Nuns of… Paris', 340.

that she 'declared her vocation to be a Benedictine' and professed at the English Benedictine house in Ghent in 1612.[85]

Sending children to foreign convents to learn languages was, quite strikingly, not a practice restricted to Catholics, and by the mid-eighteenth-century was common enough practice that it was used as a defence in a legal argument. In 1743, one Philip Journeaulx published a pamphlet articulating his own version of recent proceedings lately heard at the Parlement of Paris.[86] The case (which ultimately ruled against Journeaulx, despite his propagandist attempts in print) intended to resolve the hotly contested guardianship of two girls, Deodata and Elizabeth Roach, and the crux of the legal battle was whether the girls belonged to the French or English nation. The girls had been born in what was then Madras, to John Roach, a merchant and former major of Fort St George, on the south east coast of India. Major Roach had brought the children back to England, and not long afterwards Roach had sent them to the English Augustinian convent in Paris. He had asked his friend, Richard Quane, to support them while they were there. (Quane had gone bankrupt in London, and had moved to Paris. Roach had then lent him money to help set himself up again, and it was from this money that the girls were supposed to be supported). Roach subsequently died, and left his daughters a significant inheritance. Shortly afterwards several claims were made for the girls - Journeaulx, seemingly another friend of Roach, was made their guardian by the English courts. Around the same time, the French courts granted the wardship of the girls to an Irish woman named Mrs Macnamara, who claimed to be a kinswoman of Major Roach, and who had then

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[85] *The Chronicles of Nazareth,* 142.

[86] Philip Journeaulx, *Proceedings in a cause lately depending before the Parliament of Paris, in the nature of a ravishment of a ward…* (London, 1743).

promptly married the eldest daughter to Quane's son. This act was a ravishment, claimed Journeaulx, and was motivated solely to resolve Quane's ongoing financial problems. In the discussions over whether the girls belonged to the English or French nation, and as such who had the legal jurisdiction to appoint the girls' guardian, one of the arguments put forward was that as Roach had sent the girls to a convent in Paris he had intended them to become French subjects. A claim that Journeaulx denounced vehemently:

> Our English people send their daughters every day to France, to learn the language and to have French education. The convents at Calais, Gravelin and Boulougne are full of them. There they enter and go out as Protestants, and no body ever imagined that their Parents had the least Intention of giving them to France, by placing them in those convents.[87]

That this was not unusual is corroborated by the fact it was the subject matter of several contemporary novels.[88] These 'convent novels', as they have been dubbed by Ana Acosta, focus on the supposed threat posed by continental convents to English Protestantism and were written partly as a warning against sending Protestant girls abroad to the foreign convent schools.[89] This practice is remarkable, both considering the virulence of anti-Catholic

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[87] Journeaulx, *Proceedings in a cause lately depending before the Parliament of Paris*, 100.

[88] *The History of Indiana Danby* (1765); Frances Brooke, *The History of Emily Montague* (1769); *Anecdotes of a Convent* (1771); Phebe Gibbes (attr.), *The American Fugitive: Or, Friendship in a Nunnery* (1778); Anne Fuller (attr.), *The Convent, Or the History of Sophia Nelson* (1786); and Agnes Maria Bennett (attr.), *De Valcourt* (1800).

[89] Ana M. Acosta, 'Hotbeds of Popery: Convents in the English Literary Imagination', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 15 (2003): 615-642. See also Amy Vickers, 'The Threat of the Convent: Seduction and Imprisonment in the Eighteenth Century' (Unpublished UG Dissertation, Balliol College Oxford, 2013). <https://wwtn.history.qmul.ac.uk/documents/118331.pdf> Last accessed 5 August 2018.

sentiment in political arenas during this period and for the simple fact that sending children to Catholic schools or convents abroad had been illegal since the 1570s, and suggests the perceived lack of good language instruction in England for parents to go to these lengths.[90]

Some convents themselves sent promising novices to foreign communities and schools for language learning. Alathea Anderton (prof. 1658 - d. 1679) was a school girl at the Augustinian convent of St Monica's in Louvain when in 1657 she was sent to another community in Brussels. When she returned to St Monica's before her profession the following year she was noted to be 'much improved for she got both French and Dutch'.[91] This also happened at the English Carmelite convent in Lierre, when Mary Teresa Warren (prof. 1660 - d. 1696) was sent to a local school before her profession 'to learn the languiss of the cuntrey, a quality most nessisary for our house' and 'in a short time she spooke Duch parfectly will'.[92] In 1718 the Prioress of the Bruges Augustinians sent 'Miss Gifford' to the Ursulines at Lille 'that she might be perfected in the french tongue' (she had arrived in Bruges in 1710 with her nurse at just four years old and had joined the convent school).[93] In 1722 Mary Markham and Ann Poulton left the school at Bruges to 'go to two different Monasteries at Namurs, in order to be perfected in the french tongue'.[94] That the convents would send their young students and

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[90] For an extensive overview of anti-Catholicism in British history see Adam Morton's bibliography of anti-Catholic literature:

<https://antipopery.com/bibliography/> Last accessed 5 August 2018.

[91] DAB WML MS. C. 2, 610.

[92] Cited in Hallett, *Lives of Spirit,* 222.

[93] *The Chronicles of Nazareth,* 174.

[94] Ibid., 192.

potential novices away for foreign language instruction further underlines the way that language skills were qualities 'most nessisary' for the English houses.

It also calls into question the quality of the foreign language education on offer at the English convents themselves. Most houses had schools for young women, and as Caroline Bowden has argued, the intentions of the religious orders regarding treatment of the pupils varied.[95] For some, such as the Franciscans, the aim of schooling was to instruct them on the assumption that they would be entering the convent once they had reached the appropriate age. However the Augustinians and the Sepulchrines aimed to educate girls to be both good Catholic wives and mothers, as well as to recruit new members.[96] It is not currently clear whether these schools prioritised language learning, and in general curricula for the schools remain somewhat elusive. The Sepulchrines of Liege make reference to the subjects taught in their thirty page pamphlet *A Brief Relation of the Order and Institute*, published in 1652 to promote their religious order and their school, where they 'teach them all qualities befitting their sex, as writing, reading, needle-work, French, Musick'.[97] The Augustinian convent school in Bruges also are noted to have instructed their students in French and Latin, and yet as we have seen the convent frequently sent their scholars to foreign communities to learn languages.[98] It is

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[95] Caroline Bowden, 'Experiencing Schooling in the English Convents'. Paper presented at the 'Early Modern Orders and Disorders: Religious Orders and British and Irish Catholicism' Conference, University of Notre Dame London Global Gateway, 28 June 2016. An article arising from this research is forthcoming.

[96] Ibid.

[97] *A brief relation of the order and institute, of the English religious women at Liege* (1652), 54.

[98] Claire Walker, 'Exiled Children: Care in English Convents in the 17th and 18th Centuries', *Children Australia* 41 (2016): 168-177 (at 172).

likely that practices changed over time, depending on the availability of suitable instructors. Suggestive of the subjects they had taught in exile, at least in the latter part of the eighteenth century, after their return to England in 1795 the Dunkirk Benedictines (then at Hammersmith) advertised the curriculum of their restored convent school in the 1797 *Laity's Directory* as including the 'English and French languages' along with 'Geography, history, plain and ornamental work, drawing, dancing and music.[99]

More generally, however, in-house convent language provision seems to have been inadequate. In an appendix to his pamphlet, Philip Journeaulx clarified his earlier arguments by exclaiming that Major Roach had quite clearly never intended to settle the children in France on a long-term basis:

> For if he had had the least Design to settle them in France, he would not have put them into a Convent of the English Nuns, where generally they only speak English, and very little, or very bad French: He would have placed them rather in a Convent, where they would have been in a Capacity to have learnt the French language, and to have imbibed the French Manners and Education; but, instead of doing this, he sent them into a Convent of English Nuns, where, no Doubt, it was his Intention that his Children, who were scarce then the one more than six, the other more than five Years of Age, should continue to speak the Language they were designed to

[99] Cited in Denis Evinson, *Pope's Corner*: *An historical survey of the Roman Catholic Institutions in the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham* (London: Fulham and Hammersmith Historical Society, 1980), 19.

> speak hereafter, that is to say, the English, which is the Language familiar to the English Nuns.[100]

It would seem therefore that, in England at least, the English convents did not have a widespread reputation for good foreign language instruction.

The lack of language skills in the English Antwerp Carmelite convent prompted the Bishop of Antwerp to instruct the women to practice half an hour of Dutch every day, and a full hour during Lent.[101] The Bishop of Ghent also attempted to insist that from the early 1650s the Ghent Benedictine novices could only be admitted to profession once they were fluent in either French or Dutch 'so he could spare the translator and communicate directly with them'.[102] It is clear that neither of these demands from the Bishops made any long-term difference to the general linguistic competence of the communities; indeed in 1665 the Prioress of the Antwerp Carmelites asked for prayers to support the profession of a local lay sister with the explanation that:

> she is dutch and of the towen, but a fine woman well borne and seems to have a great vocation amonghest us. She do not want a forten as time are now, only her mother is looth to part from her now and on the other side tho' our foundation be

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[100] Journeaulx, *Proceedings in a cause lately depending before the Parliament of Paris*, 132.

[101] Cited in Pascal Majérus 'What language does God speak? Exiled English nuns and the question of languages', *Trajecta* 21 (2012): 137-152 (at 150).

[102] Ibid.

> for english yet if mother sub: should die we should be in great distress for langueig, yet we have no Dutch no more, and everyone else is not feit for bussnes.[103]

The Prioress feared that if the community's single linguistically competent nun died, the entire convent would be in 'great distress' due to their lack of language skills. It was therefore vital for the community to admit this Dutch speaking lay sister.

As I said above, it is likely that linguistic competence and practices varied between convents and over time depending on the availability of suitable nuns to act as instructors. At the Poor Clares convent in Gravelines, the first abbess Mary Stephen Gough (prof. 1597 - d. 1613) was especially keen for the choir nuns to have a perfect grasp of Latin for singing the divine office. As the chronicle notes, Latin grammar ('accidents') was learnt as part of their training: 'three or four that were most apt were put to learn their accidents, a Religious being appointed at certain hours to heare their lessons'.[104] Although, as Jaime Goodrich explains, this 'Religious' may well have been a priest, it is equally possible that more experienced choir nuns were teaching the novices Latin.[105] Although it is possible the Gravelines Poor Clares had Latin grammars to help assist them in their learning, it is worth pointing out that their instruction was explicitly aural, 'a religious being appointed… *to heare* their lessons'.[106] Other glimpses of

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[103] Ibid., 146-7 n49.

[104] Monastery of the Poor Clares, Much Birch, MS, *Gravelines Chronicle,* 36.

[105] Jaime Goodrich, '"Ensigne-Bearers of Saint Clare": Elizabeth Evelinge's Early Translations and the Restoration of English Franciscanism' in *English Women, Religion and Textual Production, 1500-1625* ed. Micheline White (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011) 85.

[106] *Gravelines Chronicle,* 36. My italics.

potential in house language-learning come from inventories of books known to have been owned by the communities; the Pontoise Benedictines had a copy of Cotgrave's French-English dictionary from 1632, and the Dunkirk Benedictines had a copy of the Latin language learning manual *Cordery's Colloquies* (1652) and a 1662 edition of Manuel Alvares' 'Introduction to the Latin tongue'.[107] The surviving library catalogue of the Cambrai Benedictines records that the convent held two copies of Alvares' *Introduction to the Latin Tongue* dated 1684 and 1686.[108] Such texts likely assisted the convent translation activity discussed earlier, but may well have supported the nuns' own language learning. The Latin texts were no doubt used to help support the learning of the divine office, and there is evidence that some women taught themselves these skills. For example, Mary Appleby at the Paris Benedictine convent had, according to their chronicle, 'an extraordinary capacity for learning, [and]…got by her own industry to understand perfectly wel both French and Latin'.[109]

Actions like this underline how pragmatically the nuns viewed the negotiation of language barriers; for female language learners on the continent the factors dictating which language to learn were highly practical, and ideas about linguistic prestige do not appear to have greatly influenced the women in the cloisters. All of the convents were located within cities containing multiple working languages and as Alisa van de Haar has demonstrated, the

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[107] Caroline Bowden, 'Building libraries in exile: The English convents and their book collections in the seventeenth century', *British Catholic History* 32 (2015): 343-382 (at 382); my thanks to Caroline Bowden for sharing with me her personal list of the Dunkirk books now held at Downside Abbey.

[108] Cited in Jane Stevenson, *Women Latin Poets: Language, Gender and Authority, from Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 374.

[109] 'The English Benedictine Nuns of… Paris', 390.

Low Countries during this period were profoundly multilingual. Although from the Middle Ages onwards a language border existed between Romance and Germanic languages (respectively south and north of the line in Figure 1), forms of French and Dutch were used frequently on both sides.

> A merchant operating at the Antwerp Bourse could find himself speaking Dutch at breakfast, French at lunch, and a mixture of the two at dinner, while hearing English, Spanish and Italian in between. Morever, each area within the Low Countries spoke its own dialect, further complicating the language situation.[110]

Although in the Low Countries, as in England, French was viewed as a 'tool for climbing the social ladder' in practice bilingualism was most common.[111] For English women in exile, therefore, whether the women encountered and learnt Dutch or French (or both) was simply dependant on where they had lived or travelled, which particular community they had spent time in, or who was available to support their tuition and which language they preferred.

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[110] A. D. M. van de Haar, 'The Golden Mean of Languages: Forging Dutch and French in the Early Modern Low Countries (1540-1620)' (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Groningen, 2018) 45. Van de Haar's monograph is forthcoming with Brill.

[111] Ibid., 63.

Figure 1: Map of the Low Countries with the language border indicated in red, and locations of the convents indicated with small yellow stars.[112]

[112] There were also communities in France not displayed on this map in Paris, Aire, Rouen and Pontoise. Ibid., 45.

NEGOTIATING LANGUAGE BARRIERS IN THE BRUSSELS BENEDICTINE CONVENT

Learning French was a vexed issue at the Brussels Benedictine house in the 1620s; surveying the hundreds of letters that were generated by the Brussels nuns during this period, there is evidence that linguistic competence increased among members of the community as a direct consequence of the women being prevented from using external translators.[113] By 1623 several nuns had petitioned the Archbishop for language lessons, for example Aurea James (prof. 1617 - d. 1669) asked Jacobus Boonen that 'sum order may be taken that those may learn french that desire it wherof my self is on[e]'.[114] In early 1622 Frances Gawen (prof. 1600 - d. 1640) asked Boonen for permission to use Gabriel Colford as her translator, and at the same time she requested that she be able to 'learn French from him'.[115] We met Colford earlier as he translated Ursula Hewicke's letter to the Archbishop that contained her request that she might have the 'means to learn French', although Hewicke does not specify how or from whom.[116] It is likely Colford was allowed to instruct the Religious that desired it at the grate through the convent grill as several nuns appear to have learnt French over the course of the 1620s.

After Ursula Hewicke petitioned Boonen for permission for language instruction on 7 April 1623, by 2 September she felt confident enough to write her own letter in French. The letter spans several pages, and she credits her new ability to the combined strength provided

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[113] Murphy, 'Language and Power'.

[114] Aurea James to Jacobus Boonen, 1622/1623, Doos 12/2.

[115] Frances Gawen to Jacobus Boonen c.1622, Doos 12/3.

[116] Ursula Hewicke to Jacobus Boonen, 7 April 1623, Doos 12/1.

by Boonen's encouragement, along with the unction of the Holy Spirit.[117] More plausible than Hewicke learning French entirely from scratch in less than five months is that she underemphasised her pre-existing skills in April. As the decade progressed, Scholastica Smith (prof. 1610 - d. 1660) was able to overcome the language barrier; in 1628 Smith sent a letter to the Archbishop in English, alongside a French summary in her own hand of the main points she had made.[118] Smith may well have had assistance from another member of the convent, but it is still a noteworthy departure from her actions in the early 1620s, when she used the services of external translators Gabriel Colford and Jesuit priest Charles Waldegrave.[119] From the evidence of surviving letters, Mary Vavasour (prof. 1616 - d. 1676) increased her language skills during the period, as she used John Daniel and Gabriel Colford as translators in the early 1620s, but wrote her own letters in French towards the end of the decade.[120] Finally, Katherine Paston (prof. 1613 - d. 1640) learnt French; after using John Daniel in 1622-3 she later sent her own letter and acted as a translator for Agnes Lenthall (prof. 1603 - d. 1651), Ann Ingleby (prof. 1612 - d. after 1632) and Mary Percy in 1628.[121]

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[117] Ursula Hewicke to Jacobus Boonen, 2 September 1623, Doos 12/1.

[118] Scholastica Smith to Jacobus Boonen, 2 August 1628, Doos 12/1.

[119] For example, Scholastica Smith to Jacobus Boonen, 1624/1625, Doos 12/1.

[120] For example, Mary Vavasour to Jacobus Boonen, 8 April 1623, Doos 12/2, trans. John Daniel; Mary Vavasour to Jacobus Boonen, 25 November 1628, Doos 12/1.

[121] Katherine Paston to Jacobus Boonen, 1622-3, Doos 12/2, trans. John Daniel; Agnes Lenthall to Jacobus Boonen, 31 July 1628, Doos 12/1, trans. Katherine Paston; Ann Ingleby to Jacobus Boonen, 31 July 1628, Doos 12/1 trans. Katherine Paston; Mary Percy to Jacobus Boonen, 3 August 1628, Doos 12/2, trans. Katherine Paston.

The nuns were predominantly instructed orally. This was due to the observance of enclosure when external tutors were used, and supported by the fact that speech and sociability were fundamentally embedded in language pedagogy more broadly during this period, as John Gallagher has aptly shown.[122] Oral instruction was indicated in the Religious 'hearing' the Latin lessons of the nuns in the Graveline Poor Clares convent, and it is also detectable in the Brussels Benedictine nuns' writing, as they developed creative forms of 'Franglais' in their letters to the Archbishop and his deputies. For example when Mary Persons translated a letter for Elizabeth Southcott on 24 April 1629, she created the word 'inexpecté' for unexpected.[123] Unable to find the appropriate word Persons created one that she thought sounded French. Ursula Hewicke used the services of an unnamed nun on the 19 June 1621 to help translate her letter - as she says in a French postscript 'I have used the help of one of our good sisters to put this into French'.[124] In a letter a few months later on 25 August 1621 (where she has most likely used the services of the same nun although she does not state this explicitly) Hewicke uses the word 'destourbier', which is not a French word but based on the context it is evidently meant to mean 'to disturb'.[125] Interestingly, two years later once Hewicke has mastered French herself, this word returns to her letter of 2 September 1623 and it is possible that the nun who had assisted her in 1621 had been helping her to improve her written skills.[126] Another potential explanation is that Hewicke had kept draft copies of her earlier letters to assist her in her language learning. Scholastica Smith's summary of her own letter in French that she sent

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[122] Gallagher, 'Vernacular language-learning'.

[123] Elizabeth Southcott to Jacobus Boonen, 24 April 1629, Doos 12/1, trans. Mary Persons.

[124] Ursula Hewicke to Silvester Verhaegen, 19 June 1621, Doos 12/1.

[125] Ursula Hewicke to Jacobus Boonen, 25 August 1621, Doos 12/2.

[126] Ursula Hewicke to Jacobus Boonen, 2 September 1623, Doos 12/1.

alongside an English copy may also been part of a language learning exercise within the convent.[127]

Other instances of Franglais occur when the women used English words when they could not find or remember the appropriate word in French. For example, a letter from Mary Vavasour from 14 February 1629 frequently uses the English word 'difficulties' instead of difficultés.[128] The English word 'difficulties' is used by Ursula Hewicke in her correspondence both when she used the unnamed nun as translator on 19 June 1621, and in her own letter from 29 October 1624, implying that Vavasour and Hewicke were instructed by the same unnamed nun. Gabriel Colford and multiple nuns all used the English word 'voices' instead of voix in their correspondence.[129] For example, both Colford and Mary Persons use the English word in their translations of letters from Frances Gawen and Maria Kempe (prof. 1619 - d. 1657) respectively in around 1622/3.[130] Colford does it again in his translation of Potentiana Deacon's letter in around 1624.[131] Agatha Wiseman (prof. 1603 - d. 1647) uses the word repeatedly in the letters she wrote on 26 November 1630, and again in 1632, and Persons uses the word when writing on behalf of the whole community in 26 March 1632, and again in her own letter from

[127] Scholastica Smith to Jacobus Boonen, 2 August 1628, Doos 12/1.

[128] Mary Vavasour to Jacobus Boonen, 14 February 1629, Doos 12/1.

[129] Ursula Hewicke to Silvester Verhaegen, 19 June 1621, Doos 12/1; Ursula Hewicke to Jacobus Boonen, 29 October 1624, Doos 12/1.

[130] Frances Gawen to Jacobus Boonen, c.1622, Doos 12/3, trans. Gabriel Colford; Maria Kempe to Jacobus Boonen, c.1622-3, Doos 12/2, trans. Mary Persons.

[131] Potentiana Deacon to Jacobus Boonen, 1624, Doos 12/2, trans. Gabriel Colford.

6 March 1638.[132] It is not a coincidence, I think, that the majority of these borrowed words and hybridisms often sounded like the words the women were attempting to find in French for their letters. As Gary Schneider has demonstrated, orality was vital to cultures of epistolarity, and these examples of Franglais in their letters firmly underscores orality's importance in the negotiation of language barriers.[133]

The significance of orality to the convents' multilingualism is evident from the surviving letters from Brussels that suggests more nuns had the ability to speak and read French than felt confident writing it, a supposition that fits with broader human capacities for language acquisition. As the Abbess Mary Percy herself said in a letter to the new Archbishop, Jacobus Boonen, on 8 September 1621:

> for as much as I myself cannot *write* in French, with the approval of your reverence I will write my letters in English to the Prior of the Carthusians, so that he puts them into Latin, which I assure myself he will do very faithfully.[134]

Yet we know that Percy can *read* the language, as she translated the 1612 *Abridgement of Christian Perfection* from French. Several other nuns apologised for their lack of written language skills, by adding statements such as 'J'euse escrit davantage mais je manque le

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[132] Mary Percy and Agatha Wiseman to Jacobus Boonen, 26 November 1630, Doos 12/2 (in Wiseman's hand); Benedictine Monastery of the Glorious Assumption to Jacobus Boonen, 26 March 1632, Doos 12/2; Mary Persons to Jacobus Boonen, 6 March 1638, Doos 12/3.

[133] Gary Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern England, 1500-1700* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005).

[134] Mary Percy to Jacobus Boonen, 8 September 1621, Doos 12/2.

langage extremement' - 'I would write more but I lack the language extremely' and 'Je vous suplie Pardon a moy ma mavaise francois' – 'I beg your Pardon for my bad French' to the end of their leters.[135] Providing rare insight into the linguistic competence of lay sisters (usually hidden in conventual sources) on 5 March 1629 one lay sister, Barbara Duckett, also complained to the Archbishop, and in so doing explained how she could speak a 'litle Duch' but 'can writ noe other than my owne language'.[136]

Foreign language speaking lay sisters like Duckett were vital to English convents in exile, as these women usually assisted in positions that involved some interaction with the local community. As Claire Walker has shown, in many convents the lay sisters were involved in a number of ventures within their local community's commercial markets. For example, lay sisters from the Louvain Augustinians provided a laundry service for local priests, monks and the laity.[137] The endeavours of these lay sisters, and of those elsewhere, would certainly have required foreign language encounter; in 1663 the Bruges Franciscans petitioned their local bishop asking him to allow them to admit two or three local girls, since the English speaking sisters 'are neither fit nor able to go to the market or do any other service because they do not understand the language of the country'.[138] When local women joined the English communities

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[135] Martha Colford to Jacobus Boonen, 18 January 1629, Doos 12/1; Alexia Blanchard to Jacobus Boonen, before 1625, Doos 12/3.

[136] Barbara Duckett to Jacobus Boonen, 5 March 1629, Doos 12/1.

[137] Claire Walker, 'Combining Martha and Mary: Gender and Work in Seventeenth-Century English Cloisters', *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 30 (1996): 397-418 (at 414).

[138] Cited in Majérus, 'What language does God speak?', 47. My translation.

there is also evidence that they endeavoured to learn new languages. For example, according to her convent biographer, the Lierre Carmelite Anne Lysens (prof. 1705 - d.1723):

> loved much more to speake English then her owne naturall Dutch, being very attentive when ever she did but hear the sisters speake aney words wch sounded, as she imagin'd, fine and not common. Those she would carefully retaine in her mind to bring out in the first occasions, tho' maney times so improper to what she was sayeing, with which she hugely deverted the community.[139]

Lysens's efforts and mistakes may well have amused the other nuns, but she persevered in negotiating her own language barriers through conversation - by listening and speaking.[140]

CONCLUSION

Ursula Hewicke lamented that 'many inconveniences' in her convent could have been avoided if it were not for lack of language skills. It is evident that Hewicke was not alone in feeling linguistically challenged, and that many members of English convents in exile did not have high levels of foreign language competence. English convents were nonetheless highly multilingual spaces and provided environments that encouraged the linguistically gifted to undertake translation projects. These projects were largely intended for the edification of their

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[139] Cited in Hallett, *Lives of Spirit,* 233.

[140] Mockery was a common experience for foreign language learners during this period. See, for example, the mockery of the speech of travellers returning from Europe in Hillary M. Larkin, *The Making of Englishmen: Debates on National Identity, 1550-1650* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), esp. 47-56; and the reception of an 'Italianate' Englishman: John Gallagher, 'The Italian London of John North: Cultural Contact and Linguistic Encounter in Early Modern England', *Renaissance Quarterly* 70 (2017): 88-131.

fellow nuns, but the reputations of convents as sites of translation activity spread beyond the walls of their cloisters. However the struggles that many exiled English nuns faced when trying to communicate in a language other than their own demonstrates that language problems were certainly not solved by the institution of houses for English women. As few as four members of the Ghent Benedictine community during a thirty-year period had more than one language, and yet living amidst speakers of foreign languages both within and beyond the convent walls profoundly shaped daily life. Due to the frequency and necessity of linguistic encounter, language skills were rare and highly prized by communities: convents recognized the need for language skills when founding new communities, promoting nuns to particular offices in order to engage with the local community, and communicating with their Dutch- and French-speaking superiors.

English nuns negotiated language barriers in a variety of ways. Some women had languages when they entered the convents; Margaret Clement time abroad meant she had absorbed local Louvain culture to the extent that she chose to spend some of her final living moments singing in Dutch. Others were sent to learn languages in foreign convents and schools, both by their family members but also by the communities themselves. Indeed, the practice of sending young women to religious communities abroad to learn languages was common in England and even among Protestants. Notably, the decision to learn French or Dutch was purely pragmatic, and based on the availability of suitable instructors. Although effective in-house instruction in foreign languages within the English convents themselves seems unusual, a case-study of the Brussels Benedictine convent during the 1620s suggests that some women were able to (and were increasingly compelled to) learn French in order to communicate with their male superiors. The women might have had access to grammars and conversation manuals, but it is likely that the process of this acquisition was predominantly

oral. This is evident from the oral quality of their letters (that included created words that sounded French) and the orality of convent cultures of translation more generally. A particularly tantalising case of oral acquisition is found in the example of the English-learning Dutch lay sister Anne Lysens, which also underlines the potential for further investigation into the ways in which other non-anglophone lay sisters learnt English during this period. Focusing on foreign language encounter and acquisition has provided hitherto unrecognised insights into the daily experiences of early modern English women in the Low Countries, and attending to the meeting points between different cultures and languages should become a fruitful avenue for future scholarship on religious exile and migration more broadly.

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