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‘ “Virgo becomes Virago”’: Women in the Accounts of Seventeenth-Century English Catholic Missionaries’

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In the account of his missionary work, the Jesuit John Gerard (1564-1637) famously explained how, after a few years of penury in ‘Mass equipment’, Catholic houses had become so well equipped that priests were able to set about their work immediately upon their arrival.¹ He recalled that in the last two years of his work (1604-06), he no longer needed to lodge in taverns but always found friendly dwellings to shelter him on his way. Most of these were run by women, whose prominence in the activity of harbouring was pointed out in many documents, including the minutes of the confession given to the Privy Council by the appellant priest Anthony Sherlock, who turned informer after his capture in 1606:

[Sherlock] grew into acquaintance with Lady Stonor near Henley-on-Thames and stayed with her three or four years, often saying mass in her house. Next he moved to Warwicks. and at Brailes and Welsford was with a widow named Margaret Bishop for two or three years. Then to Worcs., where he said Mass once or twice in the house of Lady Windsor and also at Mrs. Heath’s at Alchurch, at Hawkesley with Mr. Middlemore and at Tamworth in Warwicks. with Richard Dolphin two or three years. Then he was with widow Knowles at Ridware, with Mrs. Comberford at Wednesbury, with Mrs. Stanford at Parkington ...²

In the last three decades, historical and literary studies have drawn attention to the prominence of women in early modern English Catholicism, and many have attempted to explain it. John Bossy famously highlighted the fact that anti-Catholic laws had forced Catholic piety to retreat into the sphere of the household, where women traditionally held greater influence than in the wider public domain. According to him, English Catholic communities could therefore be seen as matriarchies.³ Alexandra Walsham argued that the high proportion of female recusants was a direct consequence of the penal system which, since it was based on fines and confiscation, focused upon the prosecution of men whilst it left housewives virtually undisturbed.⁴ Since then, important studies have revealed the multi-faceted nature of female involvement in seventeenth-century English Catholicism. Women were active in traditional activities such as charitable works extended to the poor, the sick, and to prisoners, motherly duties concerning the religious education of children, or housewifely responsibilities for the observing of Catholic practice in the household. Those were universal roles for Catholic lay women everywhere; yet the particular circumstances of the English mission demanded more radical engagement. Women were harbourers, procurers, organisers of networks, they catechised broadly, and effected conversions in their neighbourhoods; some even baptised newborns and, in the face of peril and emergency, undertook roles which blurred the boundaries between laity and clergy.⁵ Lisa McClain recently pointed out that the spiritual lives of Catholic believers in England depended upon flexibility; she highlighted that both men and women ‘pushed the limits of orthodoxy, all the while remaining within the rather flexible bounds of the multi-faceted interaction between the institution of the Roman Church and the needs of believers’.⁶ Thus, as priests worked for the preservation of the faith on English soil, lay women used their own skills with such success that they soon provided much of the secular infrastructure of the English mission. As

expediency replaced customary gendered specialization, some female recusants were, for the first time, allowed to play roles which would, in ordinary circumstances, have incurred the censure of the clergy. The constant state of danger and emergency which suffused recusant life in early modern England actually rendered the services of these women too valuable to be foregone by the missionaries.

The personal circumstances of the women involved in the mission were varied. Of those who were married, some benefited from the assent of their husbands, whilst others did not; others yet were unattached, widows or spinsters. Whatever the reasons for their prominence in militant Catholicism, Englishwomen were some of the Church's most active allies in its attempt to re-conquer the kingdom, a fact which did not escape anti-Catholic writers and which provided them with much material to speculate about the feminised nature of the Romish faith.⁷ Yet the information available to document the lives of Catholic laywomen in England usually stems from missionary accounts. For instance, the careers of harbourers such as the sisters Eleanor (1560-1626) and Anne Vaux (1562-1637?) and their sister-in-law, Elizabeth Vaux, born Roper (d. 1637?) are to be gathered from scattered information in the writings of John Gerard, S.J., notably his autobiography written in Latin in 1609 and widely circulated amongst Jesuit circles in the early seventeenth century.⁸ This also yields valuable clues on the activities of Anne Line (1567-1601), with whom the Jesuit worked. The reports written by Henry Garnet (1555-1603), the English Provincial, to the Jesuit General Claudio Aquaviva, also provide some interesting insights into the collaboration between missionaries and their female helpers.⁹ Some laywomen were even the objects of full-length biographies, authored by their chaplains and spiritual confessors. Such was the case of Margaret Clitherow (c. 1556-86), whose manuscript biography known as the 'Trew Reporte of the Lyfe and Martyrdome of Mrs Margarete Clitherowe', was written by her

secular confessor John Mush (1551-1612). This was soon printed and distributed as an abridged and more accessible version, *An Abstracte of the Life and Martirdome of Mistress Margaret Clitherowe* (Mesclin, 1619).¹⁰ The *Vita* of Lady Magdalen, Viscountess Montague (1538-1608) was written and published in Latin by her secular confessor Richard Smith in 1609, before its translation into English and its publication by Cuthbert Fursdon in 1627.¹¹ The biography of Dorothy Lawson (1580-1632), was written in 1646 by William Palmes, or Palmer (c.1594-1670), the Jesuit who worked as her confessor during the last seven years of her life.¹²

Because of their hagiographical nature, these clerically-authored biographies must of course be handled with great care if one is to use them as sources of historical evidence. In this field, historians of medieval or Protestant piety can provide a useful methodological model to avoid the trappings of hagiographic sources.¹³ Convincing studies have also reviewed the use of Catholic hagiographical works. Thus, writing about Clitherow's biography, Megan Matchinske evokes Mush's 'compromised construction' of the martyr's life without however rejecting his account wholesale.¹⁴ More recently, in their lengthy article on Margaret Clitherow, Peter Lake and Michael Questier demonstrated that traditional clerical hagiographies can yet yield relevant information and enable us to build a more precise picture of Catholic communities.¹⁵

In 2004, Colleen Seguin wrote about the 'ambiguous liaisons' of female penitents with their confessors in the English missions. She noted that scholarly studies had so far focused upon the impact of such relationships upon the Protestant imagination, and deplored the lack of analysis of 'what the bonds meant to the parties themselves'. Her superb article addressed that gap, although the Protestant interpretations of such male-female relationships continued to exercise a strong centrifugal pull away from the subjects themselves.¹⁶ The purpose of this

article is somewhat different, since it poses the question of the perceived roles of female recusants in the mission in the eyes of missionary authors; by re-reading some selected *Lives*, it hopes to tease out some of the salient features which are commonly found in such clerical accounts, and to assess the value they gave to women in the mission. The narratives show that women procured the conversions of their households, taught and catechised children, and generally acted as intermediaries between the people and the few priests at work in their neighbourhoods. On a more pragmatic yet crucial note, they reveal how wealthy women offered the mission a level of safety which was not to be enjoyed with male harbourers. They gave priests access to their considerable resources, whilst often escaping the full brunt of the penal laws; moreover, they used gendered prejudices to their advantage, playing upon the trope of the harmless female the better to evade investigation. Finally, this study argues that the examples of extraordinary women's dedication to their faith furnished missionaries with edifying models to hold up to the general Catholic community. These women were not consecrated nuns, they were not mystics, but they dedicated their lives to the survival of the mission; if they did not correspond to the ideal of the religious woman defined by the post-Tridentine Church, they offered a new model of female sanctity, one which was steeped in the world and served the purposes of the Counter-Reformation efforts in England.

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Clerical accounts show that, in the particular circumstances of a community under penalty, English missionaries formed frequent alliances with married women and mothers. As John Bossy showed, the anti-popery laws which drove Catholicism to retreat within the domestic sphere had critical consequences on the roles of women, who were the customary keepers of familial religious observance.¹⁷ Housewives, through their perpetuation of traditional practices, unambiguously defined their households as Catholic, which could

partially explain why women played what Bossy called ‘an abnormally large part’ in a community which he saw as a matriarchy.¹⁸

Moreover, Alexandra Walsham explained the important role of elite recusant women by pointing at malfunctions in a penal system which concentrated mostly on attacks against property and office-holding to punish non-conformity.¹⁹ Because wives had no property of their own, this system did not apply to them. With the 1610 ‘Act for the Administration of the Oath of Allegiance and the Reformation of Married Women recusants’, a recusant wife who refused to swear the oath was to be jailed without bail and it befell the husband to pay a fine of £10 a month (or one third of his estate) for her release. For each member of his household baptised or buried outside the established Church, he was to pay the sum of £100, and for each Catholic child, servant or guest dwelling in his house, a fine of £10. Since husbands, as the domestic wielders of authority, were expected to enforce conformity in their families, they bore the brunt of the law. Conversely, the inconsequential status of wives protected them, to a degree, from persecution; one could therefore argue that the English state’s patriarchal scorn for women as property-owners unwittingly contributed to giving females an advantage in recusancy. Since married women were freer than their husbands to become active recusants without suffering the full consequences of the law, they naturally became key players in the mission at large. In that context, priests would gain undeniable advantages from alliances with housewives.

The much-used trope of the family as a little Church took on a special relevance in the circumstances of England, where the domestic sphere was the only possible space for Catholic practice. It was not rare for a female convert to Catholicism to procure the conversion of her spouse and, perhaps more importantly, of their children. Although it was common practice for mothers to act as their children’s early teachers and catechisers, this role

became an advantage in the context of the mission. Thus, when Gerard wrote about one of his anonymous female converts, he congratulated himself upon the subsequent conversion of her three daughters, whom he secured 'with the mother's consent and help'.²⁰ The middle daughter contributed even further to the movement of Catholic revival since, upon marrying, she convinced her husband and became the centre of a thriving recusant household. In addition to the gift of herself and her three daughters, Gerard's anonymous friend also converted her own brother.

John Gerard appears to have valued his female allies partly for their interceding function. In his writings, he emphasised their roles as mediators, underlining how he gained the trust of entire families through his connivance with housewives. The conversion of a woman, to be celebrated in itself, appears to have been doubly valuable in his eyes since it was often the occasion of the children's conversions, even in households where husbands were conformists. Thus, John Mush reported that despite their father's Protestantism, Margaret Clitherow's children all grew to be staunch Catholics: her daughter became a nun at St Ursula's in Louvain in 1598, and her son studied joined the Capuchins in 1592, then the Dominicans. One of her stepsons also became a seminary priest in 1608, and the other died in Hull gaol, where he was imprisoned for recusancy, in 1604. Similarly, William Palmes noted that all twelve of Dorothy Lawson's children were sent to be educated in Catholic institutions abroad, with three daughters entering the holy Orders (one as an Augustinian canoness at Louvain in 1618, the others as Benedictines at Ghent in 1626 and 1631 respectively). Through such clerical accounts, mothers appeared as promising prospects, since they were the gateways to their households and precious allies in the securing of further conversions.

Yet this was far from the only asset to be enjoyed from such associations. Women influenced their neighbourhoods, sometimes through typically female networks, but often far

beyond those. William Palmes showed the intercessory functions of Dorothy Lawson, especially when she assisted other women in labour. In her duties as a midwife, she procured the usual cordials but she also made use of holy relics to bring spiritual comfort to the parturient woman and did not hesitate to baptise infants if she feared for their lives. Moreover, Lawson's work exceeded all-female social circles, since she catechised her neighbours regardless of their sex. Palmes noted: 'When any was to be reconcil'd thereabout, shee played the catechist, *so as I had no other share in the work but to take their confessions*'.²¹ This shows that Dorothy Lawson undertook all the tasks which a missionary would face, short of sacramental duties.²²

Palmes's narrative laid strong emphasis upon this aspect of Lawson's work, praising her skills for bringing about numerous conversions. He recalled that before Lawson's arrival at Heton, 'there was but one Catholic family in the parish or circuit; no church-stuff but hers, which was carried to several places upon necessity. Att her departure from thence [...] to heaven, there was not one heretick family, and six altars were erected for divine service'.²³ When she moved to St. Anthony's, Dorothy Lawson had the name of Jesus painted in large letters upon her house in such fashion that it was visible to seamen, who would then know where to go to seek Catholic relief.

Women could be at the source of new, thriving Catholic communities; this was the case also with Lady Magdalen, Viscountess Montague. Her critics bemoaned the destabilising effect she had on her surroundings: 'since the Lady Montagues coming to dwel at Battle ... religion in that cuntry, and especially in that towne, is greatly decayed'.²⁴ Richard Smith, her confessor, hailed this as one of his penitent's highest achievements, and chose to dedicate a large proportion of his biography to Montague's invaluable work as a furtherer of the faith. He recalled that she maintained an extended household of over eighty

people, 'to support them in the Catholic religion'.²⁵ As she had a chapel built in her house near Hastings, the entire neighbourhood could gather and a close-knit Catholic community was allowed to thrive. Smith reported:

such was the concourse and resort of Catholics, that sometimes there were 120 together, some 60 communicants at a time had the benefit of the Blessed Sacrament. And such was the number of Catholics resident in her house and the multitude and note of such as repaired thither, that even the heretics, to the eternal glory of the name of the Lady Magdalen, gave it the title of *Little Rome*.²⁶

Thanks to Lady Magdalen, a whole neighbourhood had access to religious instruction and services, and to the sacraments. This network was vast and socially diverse since the viscountess not only entertained members of the nobility but also extended her charity to the poor and the sick, whom she visited in their own houses and to whom she brought considerable relief.

John Gerard's writings reveal that the women of the Vaux family were also very active in the mission and undertook a myriad roles, amongst which those of facilitators, organisers, procurers and catechisers. Elizabeth Vaux, a widow under John Gerard's spiritual direction, turned her family seat of Harrowden (Northamptonshire) into a Jesuit base, building separate quarters for the priests on one side of the family chapel and erecting a separate wing for them, with private access to the property's gardens. Equipped with hiding holes, Harrowden became a true 'centre of operations'²⁷ where conforming Oxford graduates taught boys their secular topics while Jesuit priests undertook their religious instruction. Thus it was that a lay woman found herself at the head of a Jesuit College in England, enabling missionaries to educate boys before sending them secretly to Douai.

Elizabeth's sister-in-law, Anne Vaux (whom Gerard called the 'virgin'), was equally central to the organisation and activities of the mission. As Henry Garnet's life-long partner in religion, she organised annual meetings at White Webbs (Middlesex), a house she kept from 1600, and which served as the Jesuit headquarters. In the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot and during the nation-wide search for Henry Garnet, Vaux was put under arrest for her harbouring activities; yet when after over two years of imprisonment (between 1606 and 1608) she secured her freedom on account of her failing health, she immediately resumed her activities as a helper of priests. She joined her sister Eleanor Brookesby in Great Ashby and there, they harboured many missionaries until Eleanor's death in 1626. At that time, Anne moved to Stanley Grange in Derbyshire where she ran a Catholic school.²⁸ Sent by the Council in 1635 to investigate 'a school kept at the house of Mrs Vaux, called Stanley Grange, Co. Derby, where sons of persons of quality are brought up under the tutorage of the Jesuits'²⁹, Sir Francis Coke testified to the collegial nature of the house under 'the virgin's' direction. He wrote: 'There were beds and furniture for them in that little house to lodge forty or fifty persons at the least.'³⁰ Anne Vaux was still in activity in February 1637 and Stanley Grange remained a centre of Jesuit activity long after her death.

The clerically-authored *Lives* of recusant laywomen were written partly as testimonies of their commitment to the Catholic revival in England. Missionaries appreciated alliances with females in part for the access this gave them to families and extended social circles where women wielded great influence. However, the study of clerical accounts reveals that missionaries also valued their partnerships with women partly because they guaranteed a degree of safety which was not to be had with male harbourers.

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Women offered considerable advantages with regards to the safety of the mission, especially if they enjoyed wealth and social status. Indeed, if women were relatively sheltered from recusancy laws, they could be prosecuted as harbourers of priests. On that account, it was their social position which therefore provided protection against pursuivants. Noblewomen benefitted from the respect due to their rank but also to their sex, thus enjoying more latitude than noblemen did. This enabled them to take bolder stands in their dedication to the mission, as was the case for Magdalen Montague, whose involvement became more pronounced and more public after her husband's death. Her biographer, Richard Smith, insisted upon the concord between the Viscount and his wife, a marital bliss which partly derived from their common views upon their faith. In his study of the Browne family Michael Questier argued that Lady Magdalen's 'opinions were influenced by and subsumed under those of her husband while he lived'.³¹ Yet, as soon as she was widowed, Lady Montague became an uncompromising recusant; her staff at Battle Abbey, Sussex was soon exclusively Catholic. She had a chapel built, maintained three priests, allowed her neighbours access to their services and spent much of her money to secure the release of gaoled recusants.

Lady Magdalen's involvement in the mission far outreached the domestic sphere; her dedication to the faith was notorious, and she was even willing to have a printing press established in her house, thereby entering the public sphere of controversy and polemic.³² Yet if such women flouted English laws, their brazen militancy often went unpunished. Smith stressed that the Viscountess's noble status provided a degree of protection which she used to take the Catholic cause under her wing. In his thirteenth chapter, he gave examples of 'the admirable providence of God towards the Lady Madgalen', pointing out that her network (despite its notoriety) never came under threat.³³ As a prominent member of the aristocracy, Lady Montague enjoyed indulgence even on the part of His Majesty and when she became the

object of an inquest in April 1607, she benefited from letters addressed by the King's Council to the Attorney General ordering that there should be no proceedings against her:

For so much [...] as the Lady Montague, the wife of Antony Viscount Montague, deceased, is lately called in question for default of conformity in religion according to the laws of this Kingdom, in regard that she is a noblewoman, aged, and by reason of her fidelity in the time of Queen Elizabeth was never called in question, it pleaseth the King's Majesty that in her old years she be free from molestation.³⁴

Lady Montague was therefore one of the most valuable allies of the missionary priests working in Sussex, thanks to her social status but also to the respect and politeness due to her age and sex.

Cases such as this one exemplify the benefits to be drawn from associations with noble or gentle women, and clerical biographies abound with vignettes testifying to the same. Several are to be found in John Gerard's *Autobiography*, where the reader is told about the edifying endeavours of the Vaux women. As a known harbourer of priests, Lady Elizabeth Vaux was always under surveillance and, in the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot, Harrowden was raided. John Gerard recounted that, after enduring several days of fruitless search, she decided to placate the pursuivants by revealing the existence of one of the hiding places. This, she hoped, would lead them to conclude that the priest had escaped, since he was not found in the secret chamber. Yet, the raid was to continue for nine days in total, and Elizabeth Vaux was taken into custody to the house of Sir John Swinnerton.³⁵ While her social respectability spared her the common gaol, she would also use the rhetoric of femininity to gain further trust and respect from her judges. Accused of being privy to the

preparation of the Plot, she appealed to Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury (1563-1612), flattering his widely respected common sense, claiming that no serious plotter would ever entrust secret plans to a woman. She argued: 'I do assure your lordship that there are many that will receive such persons that will not put their lives and estates in the power and secrecy of a woman.'³⁶ She openly endorsed the patriarchal prejudices on female weakness and indiscretion the better to evade suspicion. Clearly, she used both her social position and her gender as a tool to get herself out of a life-threatening situation. As a woman, she hoped to appear innocuous enough to secure her release.³⁷ Then, as soon as she was free, she joined Gerard in London and set up another house there without delay.

The women who worked with missionary priests often manipulated traditional role-definitions whilst outwardly appearing to comply with them. Elizabeth's sisters-in-law, Eleanor Brookesby and Anne Vaux, also used their status as females of social standing to deflect pursuivants' zeal: Eleanor's house was the headquarters where Henry Garnet, in his capacity as Superior of the English Jesuits, held yearly meetings with his missionaries until 1600. Since she and Anne hosted these meetings, the future of the entire mission relied on their cool-headedness in the face of peril. This was put to the test several times but in his report to the Jesuit General, Henry Garnet chose to highlight one particular incident in detail.³⁸ He described how, in October 1591, government agents raided the manor during a secret meeting. Five Jesuits, two seminary priests and one layman retired to a hiding place whilst Eleanor Brookesby, their hostess (and therefore liable to prosecution for harbouring) hid in a separate one. Garnet reported how Anne Vaux used to her advantage the received standards of womanly modesty when, assuming her sister's identity, she boldly faced the searchers. Since the raid occurred in the early hours of the morning, she pretended she had not yet risen and demanded enough time to make herself presentable before letting the search

party in. This stratagem allowed the servants to conceal both the priests and the tools of their trade. She then welcomed the pursuivants, displaying humble hospitality; by offering food and drink, she appeared cordial and unthreatening, therefore showing she had nothing to hide.

Garnet's narrative bears all the signs of a carefully written account intended to have a great impact upon its reader. When reporting Anne Vaux's confrontation with the officers, Garnet switched to direct speech, a device widely used to increase the lively nature of an account. Hence, the reader becomes a witness to the unfolding drama, when Vaux is reported to exclaim: 'Do you think it right and proper that you should be admitted to a widow's house before she or her servants or children are out of bed? [...] Have you ever found me unwilling to open the door to you as soon as you knocked?' The dialogue shows that Vaux's coyness, and her evocation both of female decency and harmlessness worked as she hoped, when the officer replied: 'It's quite true. I've always had courtesy from this lady, and you can take my work for it that she was not yet out of bed.'³⁹

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In a mission where raids were frequent, Henry Garnet deliberately chose to dedicate several pages to this particular one. The question is why? I suggest that episodes such as the Harrowden raid give him, and other clerical authors of reports which would be circulated either in print or in manuscript form, an opportunity to pass on a clear message to their readers. Jodi Bilinkoff argued that around the 1750s, new Catholic models of saintly behaviour were developed, which focused less on contemplative virtues than upon apostolic involvement in the world and 'usefulness' to the Church.⁴⁰ But Frances Dolan showed that this shift occurred earlier in England when she demonstrated that the Catholic biographies of the seventeenth century developed a new sub-genre which had evolved from traditional medieval hagiographies to biographies of exemplary subjects which aimed to edify readers

whilst being steeped in the specific national context of English Catholicism.⁴¹ I believe that the clerical writings studied in this essay do belong to this sub-genre; although they have traditionally been used to reveal some historical detail about the lives of recusant laywomen, these texts can also be read as efforts to develop an alternative to the hagiographies of contemplative saints. A closer analysis of their literary form can throw light upon some of the reasons which moved clerical authors to write about certain women at certain given times, and in particular ways.

Garnet's representation of Anne Vaux sprang from the conditions of the clandestine mission in England; in a context where the Tridentine religious model of enclosed contemplation could not be followed by Englishwomen, Garnet seized the example of this selfless 'virgin' to suggest a new, more national model of holiness.

I've no idea with what patience ladies in Italy would put up with this. Here, we have been sold into slavery, and have become hardened to this sort of barbarity. [...] The virgin always conducts these arguments with such skill and discretion that she certainly counteracts their persistence [...]. For though she has all a maiden's modesty and even shyness, yet in God's cause and in protection of His servants, *virgo* becomes *virago*.⁴²

The particular situation of English Catholicism is pointed out keenly here, to suggest that the traditional archetypes of saintly behaviour valid in Italy do not fit the paradigm of the English mission. Through his choice of words -*virgo* and *virago*- Garnet portrayed Anne Vaux as an exemplary creature who combined the bodily weakness of the archetypal female with the unflinching courage of a true soldier of God. Indeed, it was through her active service to the Church that this otherwise un-extraordinary Catholic she earned her holiness.

It was not rare for the women who won distinction by their services to the Church to be depicted in such ways. Whereas on the Continent, women would choose to retire into a convent, this was not an option for early modern Englishwomen who did not wish to live in exile. Yet, if staying in England meant abandoning their hopes of the ‘perfect’ life of contemplation, it was a choice which was abundantly praised in clerical texts, in which it was constructed as a form of holy service to the Church. Laywomen’s involvement in the apostolate and the re-Catholicization of their country was hailed as their daily dedication to God. Henry Garnet described these women as ‘holy women [...] consecrated to God’.⁴³ His lexicon is loaded with meaning, since these women were in fact not consecrated in the Tridentine sense; yet the text constructs them as Brides of Christ who, despite not being nuns, became holy through active service in the mission.

After twenty years of collaboration with Anne Vaux, Henry Garnet was arrested on 27 January 1606, in the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot. His last correspondence with Anne shows a genuine bond of mutual trust and affection, but also a highly pragmatic working relationship where Garnet entrusted Anne with the continuance their work even after his death. He wrote: ‘If you can stay in England and enjoy the use of the sacraments in such sort as heretofore, I think it absolutely the best [...] and I do wish that, if it may be, you and your sister live as before in a house of common repair of the Society, or where the Superior of the mission shall ordinarily remain’.⁴⁴ Anne Vaux had hoped to become a nun; yet Garnet advised her to stay in England where her piety could find daily opportunities to manifest itself in action and where her skills were much needed. In his ultimate recommendation before his execution on 3 May 1606, Garnet thought it fit to reiterate his advice and pleaded with his ‘very loving and most dear sister’ to maintain her activities in the mission, for he believed she

would be most useful to God if she remained in the secular world to advance Catholicism in England.⁴⁵

The tension between action and contemplation was not new, nor was it specific to England, but in the circumstances of the mission, it acquired particular significance. John Gerard's *Autobiography* praised Anne's sister-in-law, Elizabeth for her choice to remain in England upon the death of her husband. In his narrative, he deliberately compared Eleanor to biblical figures: 'she decided [...] to fulfil as nearly as she could the role of Martha, and of other holy women who followed Christ and ministered to Him and His apostles'.⁴⁶ Henry Garnet compared Anne Line to Roman matrons and praised the woman who, he wrote, was known and respected by all under the name of Mrs Martha. In fact, in his correspondence to the General Superior Claudio Aquaviva (1581-1615), he himself referred to Line as Mrs Martha more often than by her civil name, and that it was under that name that she was condemned.⁴⁷

In death, 'Mrs Martha' became the embodiment of female dedication to the recusant cause in England. Sentenced for harbouring priests, she suffered martyrdom at Tyburn on 27 February 1601. Relics were recovered from her body immediately after the execution. Both Henry Garnet and John Gerard described her martyrdom, in typically hagiographical manner, although they served a slightly different purpose. This martyrdom gave them the opportunity to eulogise about 'Martha's' involvement in the mission, and to portray her as a simple laywoman who achieved holiness by renouncing the comforts of contemplative life for the toils of the mission.⁴⁸ The traditional simile with Martha and biblical women enhanced the holy nature of the Englishwomen, which shone through their dedication to the mission; it helped promote an alternative to the traditional post-Tridentine definition of Catholic identity.⁴⁹

In studies which have attempted to tease out of such accounts some fragments of accurate evidence of Catholic lived experience, the authorial voice has always been acknowledged as problematic. Yet if hagiographers can at times obscure historical facts, they can also reveal a surprising amount of information upon their context. Clerics chose to write about certain women at specific times as a means to disseminate messages which were especially tailored for the national circumstances of the English mission. This was true of Jesuit reports such as Gerard's or correspondence with the General such as Garnet's, which would be widely circulated for the information and edification of other Jesuits. Such texts were not 'private' in the modern sense, but aimed at publicising a new English model of sanctity to a broader readership. The same idea was all the more applicable to published texts such as Mush's *Life of Margaret Clitherow*, Smith's *Life of Magdalen Montague* or Palmes's *Life of Dorothy Lawson*. Although A.C. Southern introduced Richard Smith's *Life of Lady Magdalen Montague*, as 'the only one of Dr. Smith's eleven works which can be described as entirely non-controversial',⁵⁰ several enlightening studies have since then demonstrated that we should question this interpretation of female biographies as devoid of any controversial intent.

Claire Cross pointed out that Mush's biography was inscribed within the tradition of hagiographical writings but also within his personal polemical agenda in the battle between secular clergy and Jesuits, or in the debate on the occasional conformity advocated by Thomas Bell (c. 1551-1610).⁵¹ In times when the recusancy laws persuaded many Catholic to attend Protestant services, Mush's account is a clear condemnation of these Church Papists or 'lukewarm Catholics' whose company, he insisted, Clitherow 'lamentably disliked and loathed'.⁵² Mush's uncompromising stand and his defence of full recusancy appear throughout the text, and Anne Dillon argued that the prominence of this authorial voice makes

the *Trewe Reporte* as much a polemical treatise as it is the biography of Clitherow herself.⁵³ A similar intent is visible in Richard Smith's biography of Madgalen Montague, in which he recurrently praised her zeal 'not only in keeping but even in professing the faith of Christ'. Smith excuses his penitent's former occasional conformity, which he imputes 'to the defect of instruction [rather] than want of zeal. For when she understood it to be unlawful she did most constantly abhor it.' Smith underlined Montague's courage and her will to suffer 'whatsoever it should please God' in her endeavours for the mission.⁵⁴ When reminding his readers of the harshness of the penalties for recusancy, which could cost the Viscountess much of her fortune, he reported her reaction : 'If the King will have two-thirds of my estate I will joyfully live with the rest, and I thank God, who hath permitted me to enjoy it hitherto and now permitteth that it be taken from me for professing His faith'.⁵⁵ Smith resorted to direct speech to increase the impact of this declaration upon the reader; his intention was to make the scene as real and vivid as possible, in order to move Catholics who feared for their worldly possessions to imitate Montague, who served a crucial exemplary function.

Anne Dillon claimed that '[w]hether the figure which emerges from the text is an historically verifiable one, rather than "a creation of legend, myth and propaganda", is less important than her function'.⁵⁶ Peter Lake and Michael Questier have demonstrated that such texts do yield valuable evidence about the lives and social contexts of their subjects, and historians should not ignore the biographical nature of such writings altogether. However, I agree with Dillon that female subjects were precious to their clerical biographers since they represented 'a model of virtue which was humanly achievable'.⁵⁷ Similarly, without going so far as to say with Frances Dolan that inspiring models were *more* useful than documents describing what particular women really did', it seems clear that these models did play a crucial part in efforts to maintain and further English Catholicism.⁵⁸

In this ideal, laywomen were given a paradigm of Catholic perfection to which to live up: thus, all the accounts discussed in this essay emphasised the usual female virtues of humility, chastity, patience and charity. They all insisted particularly upon the obedience due to confessors and praised their subjects' utter reliance upon their spiritual fathers.⁵⁹ After extolling these typical virtues, however, biographers moved on to a more contextualised description of their subjects' zeal and constancy in the faith. They paint vivid pictures of the spiritual regimen they managed to maintain in their households. They detail a daily *horarium* which was akin to that of religious houses, in which time was carefully divided into long hours of daily prayer, meditation, frequent attendance to services and regular resort to the sacraments. The household itself was akin to that of a cloister, with rooms dedicated to specific saints, chapels, spaces for the catechizing of children, others for the private quarters of priests. Such accounts, therefore, showed laywomen who displayed exemplary fortitude in the face of peril and who, with courage, achieved a new spiritual ideal of holiness.

As Colleen Seguin and Frances Dolan have shown, this is one of the key aspects of these holy *Lives*: these were simple laywomen, occupied with the household duties and preoccupations common to all women at the time.⁶⁰ Margaret Clitherow and Anne Line were exceptions, since they actually became martyrs and saints, but the Vaux sisters, Magdalen Montague, Dorothy Lawson and countless others were not.⁶¹ Therein lay the message: if these women could manage a lifestyle of such high spiritual standard, so could every Catholic in England, man or woman. Thus, clerical biographies valued their female subjects as edifying examples to be emulated by all in everyday life. In such works, full recusancy becomes a new type of martyrdom in itself.

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The accounts written by missionary priests offer precious information about their authors' relationships with female helpers. They indicate that, in the context of the mission, Catholic women were granted a particular importance as maintainers of the faith, as facilitators and coordinators, even as agents in the network. The traditional divides between men and women and between lay and religious sometimes became redundant in recusant England. Clerical biographies show that, although not on equal footing with the priests, laywomen contributed to the success of the whole movement and were valued as assets to the mission. Because anti-Catholic penalties focused mostly on men, missionaries were shrewd enough to exploit the potential offered by women in England. Through them they could secure dwellings, finance their mission and utilise valuable social networks. Through them they were less conspicuous to the pursuivants, who often tracked down men rather than women. Through them they were protected by the prevalent notions which allowed ladies of social status a modicum of latitude. Thus their relationships with female helpers, although mutually rewarding and often deeply sincere, nevertheless found their source in a pragmatic rationale meant to further the re-Catholicization of England: female alliances were exploited partly because they offered unparalleled benefits.

One of these benefits was perhaps less immediately obvious than involvement in clandestine networks, yet equally as essential to Catholic life in England. At a time when readers were inclined to read the *Lives* of their contemporaries rather than those of the saints of the distant past, the need to connect with exemplars also called for more local models, specific to countries or provinces.⁶² Through their hagiographical accounts of female achievement, English clerical authors therefore sought to stimulate a sense of national or local identity and to establish a paradigm for English Catholic women to imitate, thereby increasing the numbers of female agents in the mission, with all the advantages they represented.

¹ Philip Caraman, John Gerard. The autobiography of an Elizabethan, Oxford 2006 (1st ed. London 1951), 40: ‘In nearly every house I visited later I would find vestments and everything else laid out ready for me.’

² Anstruther, Godfrey, Vaux of Harrowden, a recusant family, Newport 1953, 309-10; this is his summary of SP 14/18 n° 51.

³ John Bossy, The English Catholic community, 1570-1850, London 1976, 158.

⁴ Alexandra Walsham, Church papists: Catholicism, conformity and confessional polemic in early modern England, Woodbridge 1993, 78-81.

⁵ Roland Connelly, Women of the Catholic resistance: in England 1540-1680, Durham 1997; Christine Peters, Women, gender and religion in late medieval and Reformation England, Cambridge 2009; Marie Rowlands, ‘Recusant women 1560-1640’, in Prior, Mary (ed.) Women in English society 1500-1800, London, 1985, 149-180; Colleen Marie Seguin, ‘“Addicted unto piety”: Catholic women in England, 1590-1690’, unpublished PhD dissertation, Duke University, 1997; Claire Walker, Gender and politics in early modern Europe: English convents in France and the Low Countries, Basingstoke 2003; Retha Warnicke, Women of the English renaissance and Reformation, Westport, Conn. 1983; Diane Willen, ‘Women and religion in early modern England’, in Sherrin Marshall (ed.) Women in Reformation and Counter-Reformation Europe, Bloomington 1989, 140-166 .

⁶ Lisa McClain, Lest we be damned. Practical innovation and lived experience among Catholics in Protestant England, 1559-1642, New York and London, 2004, 9. See also her ‘Without Church, cathedral or shrine: the search for religious space among Catholics in England, 1559-1625’, The Sixteenth Century Journal 33.2 (2020), 381-99.

⁷ The fields both of historical and literary research have recently produced revealing studies unveiling the uses of gender in works of anti-Catholic propaganda and in the Protestant cultural imagination. See for instance Arthur Marotti, ‘Alienating Catholics. Recusant women, Jesuits, and ideological fantasies’, in his Religious ideology and cultural fantasy. Catholic and Anti-Catholic discourses in early modern England, Notre Dame 2005, 32-65 and Catholicism and Anti-Catholicism in early modern English texts, Basingstoke 1999; Claire Walker and David Lemmings (eds.) Moral panics, the media and the law in early modern England, Basingstoke, 2009; Frances Dolan, Whores of Babylon. Catholicism, gender and seventeenth century print culture. Ithaca 1999; Alison Shell, Catholicism, controversy and the English literary imagination, 158-1660, Cambridge 2006; Raymond Tumbleson, Catholicism in the English Protestant imagination. Nationalism, religion, and literature, 1600-1745, Cambridge 1998.

⁸ The first English translation of Gerard’s autobiography can be found in John Morris (trans), The life of Father John Gerard of the Society of Jesus, London 1881; this essay uses the more modern translation by Caraman, John Gerard.

⁹ See Anstruther, Vaux and Philip Caraman, Henry Garnet, 1555-1603, and the gunpowder plot, London 1964.

¹⁰ The lengthier version would only see its ways into print much later, when it was finally edited by William Nicholson as the Life and death of Mrs Margaret Clitherow, London 1849. This essay refers to the most widely used version, ‘A true report of the life and martyrdom of Mrs. Margaret Clitherow’, in John Morris, The troubles of our Catholic forefathers, London 1877, iii.

¹¹ This essay uses the version edited by A.C. Southern, An Elizabethan recusant house, comprising the life of the Lady Magdalen Viscountess Montague (1538-1608). Translated

into English from the original Latin of Dr. Richard Smith, Bishop of Chalcedon, by Cuthbert Fursdon, O.S.B., in the year 1627, London 1954.

¹² This essay uses the version edited by G.B. Richardson, The life of Mrs. Dorothy Lawson, of St. Anthony's near Newcastle-upon-Tyne, London 1855.

¹³ For Protestant studies, see Peter Lake, 'Feminine piety and personal potency: the "emancipation" of Mrs. Jane Ratcliffe,' Seventeenth Century 2 (1987), 143-65 ; Phyllis Mack, Visionary women: Ecstatic prophecy in seventeenth-century England, Berkeley, Cal. 1992; Megan Matchinske, Writing, gender and state in early modern England : identity formation and the female subject, Cambridge 1998 ; Debra L. Parish, 'The power of female pietism : Women as spiritual authorities and religious role models in seventeenth-century England', Journal of Religious History 17.1 (1992), 33-46 ; or Lyndal Roper, The holy household: women and morals in Reformation Augsburg, Oxford 1989.

¹⁴ Matchinske, Writing, gender and state, 53-4.

¹⁵ Peter Lake and Michael Questier, 'Margaret Clitherow, Catholic nonconformity, martyrology and the politics of religious change in Elizabethan England', Past and Present 185 (2004), 43-90.

¹⁶ Colleen M. Seguin, ' "Ambiguous liaisons"; Catholic women's relationships with their confessors in early modern England'; Archive for Reformation History 95 (2004), 156-85.

¹⁷ Bossy, The English Catholic community, 110-12

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁹ Walsham, Church papists, 78-81.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 190.

²¹ Palmes, The life of Mrs. Dorothy Lawson, 45, *my italics*.

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- ²² Dorothy Lawson acquired the status of a living saint, whose presence reassured mothers in labour and was held by her neighbours as a token of protection. See Alexandra Walsham, 'Miracles and the Counter-Reformation mission in England', The Historical Journal 46.4 (2003), 779-815, pp. 808-9.
- ²³ Palmes, The life of Mrs. Dorothy Lawson, 26.
- ²⁴ Letter dated September 1597, quoted in Questier, Catholicism and community, 218.
- ²⁵ Southern, An Elizabethan recusant house, 39.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.
- ²⁷ Anstruther, Vaux , 244
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 460
- ²⁹ State Papers Domestic, Charles I, vol. 294, item 74, July 1635, 303.
- ³⁰ Letter to Sir John Cocke, dated 17 November 1625. J.C Cox, Three centuries of Derbyshire annals, p. 286, as quoted in Anstruther, Vaux, 461
- ³¹ Questier, Catholicism and community, 209.
- ³² Southern, An Elizabethan recusant house, 44.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 52.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.
- ³⁵ Caraman, John Gerard, 197.
- ³⁶ Henry Foley, Records of the English province, London 1877-83, iv, 110.
- ³⁷ For a revealing analysis of female pragmatic stylistic, see Alison Weber, Teresa of Àvila and the rhetoric of femininity, Princeton 1990 and 'Little women: Counter-Reformation misogyny', in David Luebke (ed.) The Counter-Reformation. The essential readings, Oxford 1999, 143-62.

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- ³⁸ Report from Henry Garnet, Superior of the English Province, to Claudio Aquaviva, Superior General, Stonyhurst, Anglia, 1, 73, as translated in Anstruther, Vaux, 186-91.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 188.
- ⁴⁰ Jodi Bilinkoff, Related lives. Confessors and their female penitents, 1450-170, Ithaca and New York 2005, 6.
- ⁴¹ Frances Dolan, 'Reading, work, and Catholic women's biographies', English Literary Renaissance 3 (2003), 328-57.
- ⁴² Garnet to Jesuit General Aquaviva, 1593, as translated in Anstruther Vaux, 189.
- ⁴³ Anstruther, I, 190.
- ⁴⁴ Caraman, Henry Garnet, 423.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 368, H. G. to Anne Vaux before 5 March 1603. S.P.D. James I, Gunpowder Plot Book 2, no. 245.
- ⁴⁶ Caraman, John Gerard, 148.
- ⁴⁷ Garnet to Aquaviva, 11 March 1606, Archives of the Society of Jesus, Rome, Anglia 2, 172, quoted in Caraman, Henry Garnet, 278.
- ⁴⁸ Caraman, Henry Garnet, 281.
- ⁴⁹ See McClain, Lest we be damned, 5.
- ⁵⁰ Southern, Vaux, xiv.
- ⁵¹ Claire Cross, 'An Elizabethan martyrologist and his martyr; John Mush and Margaret Clitherow', in Diana Wood (ed.), Martyrs and martyrologies, Studies in Church History 30 Oxford, 1993.
- ⁵² Morris, 385. For similar comments, see 382, 386 or 398 also.
- ⁵³ Anne Dillon, The construction of martyrdom in the English community, 1535-1603, Aldershot, 2002, especially 289-92.

⁵⁴ Southern, Vaux, 41-42.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵⁶ Dillon, The construction of martyrdom, 281.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Frances Dolan, 'Reading, work and Catholic Women's biographies', 356.

⁵⁹ See Ellen Macek, '“Ghostly fathers” and their “virtuous daughters”: the role of spiritual direction in the lives of three early modern women', The Catholic Historical Review 90.2 (2004), 213-35 and Dillon, The construction of martyrdom.

⁶⁰ Seguin, '“Ambiguous liaisons”' and Dolan, 'Reading, work, and Catholic women's biographies'.

⁶¹ Of the thirty people who were executed as harbourers and helpers of priests under the 1585 Act, only three were women : Margaret Clitherow (1586), Margaret Ward (1588) and Anne Line (1601). For an in-depth analysis of the gendering of Catholic martyrdom, see Susannah Brietz Monta, Martyrdom and literature in early modern England, Cambridge, 2005.

⁶² Bilinkoff, Related lives, 104.