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# Beyond the Cloister: Catholic Englishwomen and Early Modern Literary Culture

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► **To cite this version:**

Laurence Lux-Sterritt. Beyond the Cloister: Catholic Englishwomen and Early Modern Literary Culture . E-rea - Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone, 2017. hal-01628966

**HAL Id: hal-01628966**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01628966>**

Submitted on 20 Jan 2018

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## E-rea

Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone

14.2 | 2017

1. Pastoral Sounds / 2. Histories of Space, Spaces of History

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### Jenna Lay, *Beyond the Cloister: Catholic Englishwomen and Early Modern Literary Culture*

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. ISBN-13 : 9780812248388 (hardback), pp. x + 243, £42,50

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#### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/5794>

ISBN: ISSN 1638-1718

ISSN: 1638-1718

#### Publisher

Laboratoire d'Études et de Recherche sur le Monde Anglophone

Brought to you by Aix-Marseille Université (AMU)



#### Electronic reference

Laurence LUX-STERRITT, « Jenna Lay, *Beyond the Cloister: Catholic Englishwomen and Early Modern Literary Culture* », *E-rea* [Online], 14.2 | 2017, Online since 15 June 2017, connection on 20 January 2018. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/5794>

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# Jenna Lay, *Beyond the Cloister: Catholic Englishwomen and Early Modern Literary Culture*

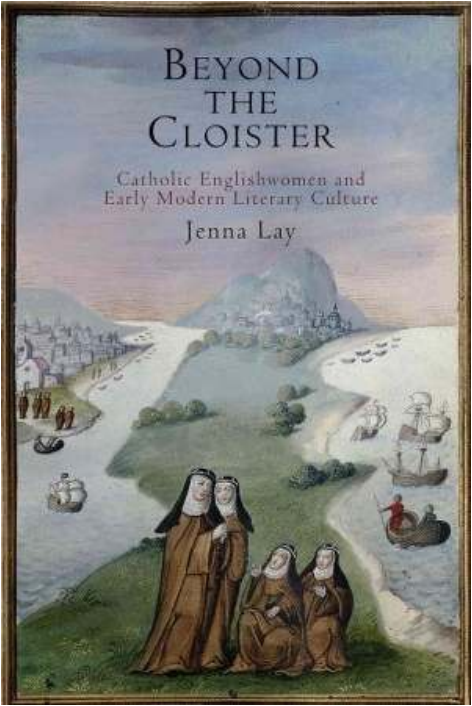
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- 1 The first striking characteristic of this monograph is the beautiful full-page illustration on the cover; 'Expelled from London' one of a series of original pictures which illustrate the history of the Bridgettine nuns who finally settled at Syon Abbey in Lisbon in the seventeenth century. Coupled with the title, *Beyond the Cloister*, the image has such a strong impact that readers might find themselves expecting to read mostly about the writings of English nuns in exile. This would be misleading, for in fact nuns are far from occupying centre stage in Jenna Lay's first monograph. As its subtitle indicates, the purpose of this study is much broader: its author aims to demonstrate that both nuns and Catholic women at large were more actively involved in English literature as has so far been presumed. Despite their sex and their faith, despite choices which point to a life on the margins, these women are, according to Lay, centrally important to a fuller understanding of early modern English literary production and diffusion.
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- 2 Overall the book makes a compelling case. I would have only a few reservations with elements of the introduction, which Jenna Lay opens with a case study based on a harrowing narrative of sexual (and class) violence. The perpetrator is George Puttenham, author of *The Art of English Poesy*; the victim Mary Champneys, who worked as a servant for Puttenham's wife. Lay posits that this Mary Champneys could be the same as the young woman who became a Bridgettine nun at Syon Abbey in 1569, after having been abandoned at Antwerp, alone and pregnant. With this preliminary hypothesis, Lay analyses the anonymous manuscript biography of Sister Champney, *The Life and Good End of Sister Marie*, in tension with Puttenham's *Art of English Poesy*. She sees in *The Life* of the young nun, which vindicates patterns of devotion and of writing about devotion, an implicit critique of Puttenham's theorizings on poetry, and their insistence upon courtly decorum and royal authority. At this juncture, the argument appears a little strained, especially since it relies in part upon the supposition that Mary Champney and Mary Champneys are indeed one and the same.
  - 3 In order to throw light upon the various ways in which 'confessional and gender identities are woven into the poetics of erasure undergirding the English literary canon' (1), the following four chapters of *Beyond the Cloister* offer subtle re-readings, against the grain, of some of the well-known texts of the period, alongside mostly unknown writings authored by contemporaneous Catholic women. The confrontation of these texts reveals that Catholic Englishwomen actively engaged with the literary production of their time. The book shows this by studying how they co-existed with it, were inspired by it, and often dared to refute it.

- 4 Chapter 1 demonstrates how writing by and about Catholic women co-existed, informed and reflected the social, religious and political tensions of their times. It offers a very ambitious analysis of the tropes of marriage, vowed chastity and virginity, which were at the core of so much English poetry in the seventeenth century. The discussion draws upon Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, Christopher Marlowe's and George Chapman's *Hero and Leander*, and William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, and compares the ambiguous status of the female protagonists to that of real-life recusant Margaret Clitherow. The chapter demonstrates that such characters' 'disruptions mirrored the social and political disruptions of early modern Catholic Englishwomen.' (56) Whilst Lay's micro-analyses are always subtle and intelligent, this first chapter feels, at times, a little laboured, perhaps because it is so ambitious that it strives to draw together elements that are disparate, or perhaps because John Mush's *Life of Margaret Clitherow* provides the single case study of a Catholic woman whose predicament can be seen to echo that of her literary counterparts. Maybe these misgivings would have been alleviated by a more strongly-stated expatiation of the reasons for choosing this corpus of sources, for instance.
- 5 In Chapter 2, the author most convincingly shows how Catholic women refuted some of the publications of their time. She analyses both John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and Thomas Robinson's polemical pamphlet, *The Anatomy of the English Nunnery at Lisbon* as emanations of an English Protestant culture which alienated both women and Catholics, thereby doubly excluding Catholic women whom they described as little more than the hapless victims of clerical ploys. She then offers an analysis of the rebuttal written, in manuscript form, by Bridgettine nuns of Syon; she shows that the nuns were both aware of the printed material which mocked them so cruelly, and keen to engage in the polemical field with undeniable literary skill. As such, they were 'participants in and shapers of early modern book culture' (p. 88).
- 6 Chapter 3 continues to develop this argument with an exploration of the various treatments of religious obedience in such diverse works as Thomas Middleton's *A Game at Chess* and Benedictine nun Gertrude More's *Spiritual Exercises*. The analysis engages the tension between obedience to religious superiors and personal conscience, and even if Lay does not claim a direct relationship between the two texts, one cannot help but wonder what presided to this choice. Why these two texts, and not others? Protestant publications flourished on this topic in the seventeenth century, whilst nuns themselves produced an abundance of writings on this most relevant of subjects of the religious life. It may have been useful to include a few more texts written by English Catholic women such as Barbara Constable, with whom Lay is particularly familiar, to strengthen her demonstration that the highly topical debate on the place of obedience in English religious and political life was much more deeply intertwined with that same debate in the Catholic Church—particularly with reference to religious women—than heretofore has been acknowledged.
- 7 Finally, to demonstrate the fact that Catholic and Protestant literary texts inspired each other, Chapter 4 takes the analysis beyond the cloister and into laywomen's literary communities. After an insightful discussion of what she calls 'Southwell's Devotional Petrarchism' (123), the author then shows how this multi-layered literary heritage infused the writings of Catholic Englishwomen at large. She does this through the example of the letters of the Aston-Thimelby family; she finds in Gertrude Aston's and Winefrid Thimelby's letters some convincing echoes of Southwell's Petrarchian poetics.

She also notices borrowings and references to other literary texts, mainly John Donne's Protestant poetics. Through such examples, she reiterates her argument that despite the evidence which points to the involvement of Catholic women in the literary production of the seventeenth century, their literary writings were 'more often represented as dangerous vectors of misdirected devotion, unproductive sexuality, and empty rhetoric than as sites of complex engagement with questions of faith, love, and language.' (142) This is corroborated by her last pages, dedicated to a study of Andrew Marvell's poem 'Upon Appleton House' and Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure*.

- 8 This monograph will be of most interest to specialists of literary studies since it clearly asserts that 'we must read monastic texts not only with an eye for historical fact and material witnesses but also with an ear for literary tropes and techniques' (88). The study of English nuns in exile has recently produced revealing historical studies, and Jenna Lay's book, alongside others such as Jaime Goodrich's, open up new avenues for various approaches to the study of the literary productions of Catholic Englishwomen.

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